

Thought for Contemplation: "This day ...I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Deuteronomy 30:19

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

March 8, 2020

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION 9:00am & 11:00 am

CHALICE LIGHTING

May this chalice,
Always remind us
That there is enough love in this world
To hold everyone,
And that we are here to share it.

Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP *These Are the Days* by William R. Murray

These are the days that have been given to us;
Let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives;
Let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder;
Let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us;
Let us make them stories worth telling to those who come
after us.

HYMN My Life Flows On In Endless Song #108

SHARING OUR JOURNEYS Peter Reed

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: Crossing a Creek by Martha Courtot reader: Barbara Murray 11:00am

Crossing a creek
Requires three things:

A certain serenity of mind,
Bare feet
And a sure trust
that the snake we know
Slides silently underwater
Just beyond our vision
Will choose to ignore

The flesh
that cuts through its territory,
And we will pass through.

Some people think crossing a creek
Is easy,
But I say this –

All crossings are hard,
Whether creeks, mountains,
Or into other lives

And we must always believe
In the snakes at our feet
Just out of our vision

And we must practice believing

We will come through.

OFFERING

READING: *Why I'm Hopeful, Because believing is an act of rebellion* by Guillermo Del Toro
Why I am Hopeful...Because believing is an act of rebellion

By Guillermo Del Toro (Oscar winning filmmaker)

Optimism is radical. It is the hard choice, the brave choice. And it is most needed now, in the face of despair- just as a car is most useful when there is a distance to close. Otherwise it is a large, unmovable object parked in the garage.

These days, the safest way to appear intelligent is to be skeptical by default. We seem sophisticated when we say we don't believe and disingenuous when we say we do.

History and fable show nothing is ever entirely lost. David can take Goliath. A beach in Normandy can turn the tide of a war. Bravery can topple the powerful. These facts are often seen as exceptional, but they are not. Every day, we all become the balance of our choices- choices between love and fear, belief or despair. No hope is ever too small.

Optimism is our instinct to inhale while suffocating. Our need to declare what needs to be, in the face of what is. Optimism is not uncool; it is rebellious ad daring and vital.

The writer Theodore Sturgeon once said: "90% off everything is crap." That also means "10% of everything is worth the damn effort."

And so it goes, time after time, choice after choice, that we decide to leave a biography or an epitaph. Look around you now and decide between the two. Inhale or die. *Published in Time, February 18-25, 2019*

ANTHEM

SERMON

Choosing Life

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

I was fifteen. It was 1963. Every Saturday morning, I would take the subway down to Harlem to volunteer working for CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. Some days I'd take a clipboard from the pile, and a list of names and addresses of families whose children attended a local school- a school we had identified as substandard, about which we were organizing a school shut-down, essentially a time-limited targeted boycott. I'd go knocking door to door. Many people invited me in and listened to my passion. Some even agreed to keep their children out of school for the shut-down.

Other days, I take a ream of flyers about some neighborhood meeting we would like folks to attend, and I'd go trotting after these tired working folks who were trying to get their Saturday shopping done, pressing a flyer upon them while telling them how important the meeting was.

In those days, the organizing center of the civil rights movement, was the black church. The neighborhood meetings were in black churches. And so, over the course of the next couple of years, I found myself often in the black church. I was going to meetings and rallies, and they always included a spiritual dimension. That's how it was. It was the spiritual, religious dimension that powered the movement, that inspired the vision and infused the courage that empowered the people. Stories of Moses, of the exodus from Pharaoh and slavery, of David defeating Goliath, of Esther who stood up to the king and saved her people, and of Jesus, who aligned with the poor, the outcast, the powerless, and whose message of affirmation was never able to be vanquished. These people, in the black church in America, who had been held powerless for centuries, had hope. They had experienced the dangerous crossing of creeks, and they crossed anyway...to get to freedom then, even as they are doing now. They spoke of finding a way out of no-way. And they did.

I still hold that lesson, as a guiding lesson of my life. It is not just about the struggle of African Americans. We all have struggles, personal and social, physical and emotional, private and political. And we struggle in a context. As Del Toro noted, we have :

Our need to declare what needs to be, in the face of what is. We still don't have racial justice. We still don't have peace. Social inequities are real and larger. Government fails us. The environment is under siege. And our country is in the troubling state of continuous distrust of one another. You know these things. Things that could discourage.

And, you know other things as well. You know that there *is* such a thing as justice. You know that an international bill of human rights exists to which people and governments can be held accountable. You know that in the throes of the Great Depression, our country responded with establishing Social Security. You know that in this country we have replaced our leaders when they have become corrupt or despotic. You know that we have solved difficult problems before- created pathways for citizenship, made discrimination on account of identity illegal, eradicated polio, and contained HIV.

We could succumb to apathy or despair. Or we can choose to believe we have alternatives and will come through, that. A way can be made from no-way.

In 2003 I met Gina.¹ She was a member of the congregation I served, as were her parents, her siblings and several of her nieces and nephews. Gina was 60 years old, had just retired from her full-time job because of knee problems, and lived with her parents. Gina had Downs Syndrome.

When Gina was born in a small city outside of Boston, in 1943, there were no services for children born with Downs Syndrome, nor were there support services for their parents. Gina's family was on their own. They were not highly educated people. Her dad had immigrated here when he was a child and now had a small construction company he had started on his own. But they valued education. When Gina turned six, they registered her for first grade. The school refused the registration. They said that Gina had special needs that could not be accommodated in a regular classroom, and there were not enough children with special needs to justify hiring a special needs teacher. So, Gina just would not be able to go to school. This was unacceptable to her parents.

"Tell me," Gina's father pushed. "How many special needs children would you need to enroll, to justify hiring a special needs teacher?"

¹ Not her real name, which I changed to respect her privacy.

The school superintendent shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't sure. Dad insisted on a number, and the superintendent gave him one. Gina's Dad then went and put advertisements in the local papers in the city and neighboring towns, asking for people with young special needs children they would like to enroll in elementary school to contact him. Eventually he generated the minimum number that had been given to him, and he returned to the astonished superintendent, who then noted that they had no money to get those children from far flung places transported to school. Gina's Dad figured out some workaround so that there were sufficient children whose families agreed to find a way to get them to school and so, in this small city, in 1949, there was a special needs classroom for Gina and other young children.

Gina made it all the way through school, with the support and encouragement of her parents, siblings and her church. She graduated high school. Everyone was proud. And then....and then. What was Gina to do? She couldn't sit home and do nothing? Her parents knew that wouldn't do. And she could not find an appropriate job. Once again, her Dad kicked into creative high gear. He created what we'd now call a sheltered workshop that had jobs Gina and others like her could do. It grew into a successful business manufacturing some useful product. Gina was happy. She had friends and co-workers. She was

productive and contributing. She was earning money and could make choices about spending it. She went places with her friends. And she lived in safety, with her parents.

When I came on the scene as their new interim minister, her parents were once again in creative high gear, trying to conceive of a healthy, sustaining retirement life for Gina, one that would continue after they could no longer take care of her. And I was as confident as were they. As much as there were obstacles, they saw opportunities.

Del Toro says:

Optimism is our instinct to inhale while suffocating. Our need to declare what needs to be, in the face of what is. Optimism is not uncool; it is rebellious and daring and vital.²

Gina's Dad never thought of himself as rebellious, but he was a committed optimist. In the face of others' disbelief, he declared what needed to be, which was different from what was. And drawing from the metaphor of today's poet, he kept crossing those creeks, despite the snakes, believing that they would come through.

² Guillermo Del Toro, Why 'm Hopeful, *Time*, February 18-25, 2019.

We always have choices. And, we have visions, powerful visions of life as it could be, and how we should be in it. And it is never easy. The crossings are difficult. Discouragement is natural. Despair, on the other hand, as Del Toro noted, is deadly.

We live in difficult times on so many levels. We struggle on a personal scale with compromised health, frustrating relationships, disappointing jobs, to name a few. And there are difficulties in our larger communities, local, national and international that seem intractable. It is possible to get lost in feelings of powerlessness.

I had to chuckle and take comfort from Theodore Sturgeon's observation:

90% of everything is crap. That also means 10% of everything is worth the damn effort.³

So, not only do we always have choices, we get to choose which of the things that disturb, rankle or upset us are, in Sturgeon's words, crap, and which are really worth the effort.

It's not just about optimism. It is about discernment and wisdom. It's about having a solid grounding and perspective different from the

³ Theodore Sturgeon, quoted by Guillermo Del Toro, *ibid.*

culture's, one scaled larger than the narrow view of corporate quarter's earnings, or our child's chances of getting onto the team, or even getting the promotion we desire. It's about values, knowing what they are, perceiving when they are at play, and understanding when they are threatened.

It is about holding to the vision, the vision that helps you feel open, expansive, welcoming, loving and healthy, and holding to it more fiercely than to anything else.

It's about love, and about courage, and about practicing believing we will come through.

It's about choosing life, that we and our children might live.

Choose life.

May it be so. Amen and blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN Just as Long as I Have Breath #6

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)