

The In Between

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Good morning. It is good to be here with you today. I'm not a total stranger to worshipping with you. This is my third time being here. The first time was when I brought my 95-year-old mother. We sat right over there. Her spirituality most resonates with Unitarian ways. When I was around 12 years old my mother and father attended the Unitarian Church in Canoga Park, California. That church lay in the heart of a white, suburban, middle class city. The year was around 1964. My first introduction to what I understood a Unitarian to be about was when the pastor of their church had his house bombed for his active role and leadership in the civil rights movement. But I remember what an impression the bombing of that minister's home had on me, even back then. It signaled to me that being a person of faith, of taking steps to do the right thing, of knowing yourself connected to a greater truth and to a greater community, comes with risks. So, it's in keeping with that spirit that I am glad to be here with you today for the third time.

A couple of weeks ago I was back here for the second time on my own. I thought I would come and check out the lay of the land, especially having learned just a few days before that Reverend Patrice was submitting her resignation. I called her when I learned that fact and asked if she would rather schedule another time for me to be your guest preacher. "Oh, no," she responded, "I would just love for you to preach, just as we agreed." Okay then. I'm good with that.

I felt welcomed here by your worship leader Margie connecting with me this past week, and by that woman who came up to me a couple of weeks ago. She introduced herself, welcomed me; to which I responded with who I was and a United Methodist minister, that in fact part of my motivation for being here that day was to get a little bit of the layout of the land. "Oh," she stated, "I used to be a Methodist, but I just couldn't deal with all that original sin stuff. So, I 'm a Unitarian!" "Well," I replied, "I was a Unitarian when I was younger and became a Methodist!" We both laughed. It's in that kind of recognition, that greeting and laughter, that I feel something of a kindred spirit being here with all of you.

It's also in knowing and feeling grateful for my friendship and collegial relationship with Reverend Patrice that I'm glad to be with all of you. In the months I've gotten to know Rev. Patrice I learned that she and I both attended the same seminaries; each of our home seminary being part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. I don't meet that many clergy, especially in the South, whose graduate work was in California, let alone Berkeley. I took some of my classes from the very same Starr King Unitarian School as she did. The one class I remember taking at Starr King was a class on creating worship environments. So, it is with a real appreciation I feel this morning for the care and intent that has gone into the beautiful artwork that graces this sanctuary.

When I was here a couple of weeks ago. I stayed after the service for the Q and A time. I heard, I felt, your questions. And I saw in your faces her responses. When I left this room that day and drove home, I wondered how I would meet this day. What could I say, what words might I offer, that might find their echo in you? And

then it came to me. It seemed to me that two weeks ago you had just taken the first steps into what I would call, "The In Between." And that is the title of my offering to you today.

I'm aware that in your church polity, unlike we United Methodists who are under appointment by a bishop, you all go through a time of discernment, of some soul searching if you will, hopefully you will, before calling a new pastor to lead you, to work beside you, to inspire you. It's a time without certainty. It can be a time without limitations, which can be a good thing or a not so good thing.

And so, I thought, "Hmmm, I wonder if anyone ever preached on this subject before." So, unlike my early days in the pastorate, I turned to Google of course! Indeed, the title has been used a good number of times. In fact, the first sighting in Google of such a title is for a movie on Netflix. It's about Spain on the brink of civil war, a Madrid dressmaker follows her lover to Morocco, loses a fortune, and ends up as a spy for the allies. Now, I can't promise you that by the time we all leave here this morning you are going to be so entertained, but what I want to offer you is a way to begin thinking about this time

The first thought I would have you consider in this, **Don't Worry**. Thomas Jefferson once said, "How much pain have cost us the things which have never happened." I think it a very natural response for most of us to worry when not knowing for sure what is yet to come. Some of us worry better than others, but as the Reverend Don Shelby once preached, "The greatest price we pay for worry is loss of the magic of this present moment. If fear of tomorrow or the day after tomorrow consumes us, we will miss the possibilities of today." ¹

The other night, over a dinner of not so great sushi, I asked a good friend of mine, a doctor of clinical psychology, with a very successful practice, as well as lecturing throughout the country, what insight he might have for when people enter into a time of being in between stages in their lives. He stated, "Studies show that we tend not to be very good predictors of the future, which can be anxiety-producing or disappointing when things don't go as we expect, but also can be anxiety-reducing when we recognize that potentially what if negative events actually didn't occur either."

In fact, Rev. Shelby tells of one person, awakening to how dingy his life and world had become because of his worrying, made a worry table. Analyzing how he and other people worried he concluded about 40% of worries never happen, 30% are about past decisions that cannot be altered, 12% were about criticism (most untrue) of us by others, 10% about personal health that only cause our health to grow worse with worry, and only 8% were legitimate concerns that need our attention."²

We are not good predictors of the future, which can cause us to worry. But boy, I do want to be able to predict, especially about my health as I age. Just the other day I got an email from Ancestry. Com saying that if I upgraded by DNA package, I could get indicators for those diseases I might be most susceptible for. I emailed by doctor. "Hello there, good doctor. So, I've done the whole ancestry thang. And now I'm able to upgrade my results (79% English, 17% German, 2% Irish/Scottish, 2% Swedish) to include predictors for my health which I would then forward those indicators to you. What do you think?" To which he replied, "So English = you will have bad teeth and gout, German = propensity to alcoholism, Scottish = we know you like wearing kilts, Swedish = who knows really?"

When I think of this time in between for all of you I would invite you to avoid the temptation to predict the outcome for when you will eventually be on the other side of this in between time. One way to avoid that temptation, is on occasion during your discussions, your reflection of your life together as a community, a congregation, forget yourself if but for a moment. Take one's ego out of the equation. It may be one of the most loving things you can do in the time in between.

I can remember the first time I got behind a driver's wheel of the family car. The driving instructor turned to me and said, "The first time most people get behind the wheel of a car they try to drive down the road by focusing their eyes on the pavement just where it meets the hood of the car. The car will go down the road swerving from side to another. If you do not want to go down the road looking like you have had too much to drink you must focus your eyes not on the hood of the car but a good 100 yards ahead of you. Aim your car by looking at what is down the road and not at the road."

I've always remembered those words by that instructor. It seems to me that they are as applicable to this time as they were my first time behind the wheel. When we make this time not so much about me as about we, you will be looking more down the road rather than at the road, at past hurts, past resentments, at dreams or wants unfulfilled, or the anxiety and worry of not being able to predict your future together.

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And that leads me to the second thought I would ask you to consider this morning, **Develop a Selective Memory**. In his book, Happiness Is A Choice You Make, Lessons from a year among the oldest old, John Leland set out to learn from six elders, ages ranging from 85 to 101, what contributes to a person's happiness, about what makes a good life. One of the important findings revealed by his year with the six elders was that they applied selective memory to their lives. They "all minimized the hardships in their earlier lives, even if they were struggling with the last chapter." Experiments have been done to verify this propensity for selective memory. In one such experiment participants were showed "...a series of images and asked to recall as many as they could. Older people remembered nearly twice as many positive images as negative ones; younger people remembered positive and negative images equally well." The explanation for this is that "...older people favored images that pleased them in the moment, while younger people stored all the information away for future use. In another experiment, participants were shown pairs of faces, then a flashing dot where one of the faces had been. They were told to press a key when the dot appeared. Old people responded faster when the dot appeared in place of a happy face; young people responded at the same speed for happy or sad faces. This suggested that old people not only remembered pleasing information better, but also registered new pleasing information more fully in the first place."³

I'm not at all suggesting to you this morning that you should welcome severe memory loss, for indeed that can be a horrible thing for an individual, as well as for a community, a church, a nation. But what I do want to lift up for you is that developing a selective memory of the good that you know and have experienced in and of this place can be, as John Leland points out, "...the better part of wisdom". He states, "...in old age you lose nothing by forgetting the grudge." And wisdom, Leland concludes, "leads to better decision-making and more realistic expectations, less disappointment when things don't work out."⁴

As you enter this time in between, do so with the wisdom gained by not holding a grudge, a disappointment, a failed outcome, but selectively remembering the joy, the purpose, the thing that brought you here and finds you here still. The decisions you will be asked to make will then lead to a better outcome, a renewed commitment, affirming not only who you are today as a congregation that welcomes LGBTQ worshippers, that struggles with our own white privilege and inherent racism, that is a voice for those at the border separated from loved ones, but also, it is about who you will become and are called to be. When wisdom steps up into this time, as my dear psychologist friend reminded me over that sushi dinner, “What has been learned in psychology in reducing anxiety about the future, one shouldn’t so much as concern oneself with making the right decision, but do right by the decision you make.”

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Finally, you are about to enter some familiar territory. This isn’t your first rodeo, I know. But neither is it a place of certainty. You are about to step into a time of not knowing, the time in between. It has already begun.

It’s rather like that stormy night in which a little boy quivered under the bed covers, frightened by the thunder and lightning that is all so common here in Florida. The rain beating against his window the little boy cries out in the darkness, “Mommy, Daddy, come here! I’m scared!”

From the next room his parents shouted back, “Now, remember what we have always told you. Be brave! God loves you and God will take care of you.”

To which the little guy, silent for a moment, shouts back, “I know God loves me and will take care of me, but right now I want somebody who has skin on!” Somebody who has some skin on. That’s who is seated here today.

To have some skin on is to be committed to others. It means, and I paraphrase here the words of Alan Jones, former dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, of not only coming home to oneself, (the journey is about that) but coming home to others as well. “Many of us,” he states, “find belonging to a community of like-minded people sustaining and comforting.” But it also means; however, understanding that the relationship is not to a group of like-minded, but to the whole human race: the ugly along with the beautiful, the failures as well as the successful, the brilliant along with the moronic. This realization, far from being sustaining and comforting, can be at first threatening.⁵

Mommy, Daddy, We’re scared. Come here! Be brave! Be brave as you’ve entered this in between by being skin on for one another, not worrying, selectively remembering who you are, not only to one another, but to the whole human race. It matters. So be it. Amen.

Footnotes/References

1. Reverend Donald Shelby was a pastor at Santa Monica First United Methodist Church. I subscribed to his sermons, which I found most helpful in my own sermon preparation.
2. Ibid
3. Happiness is a Choice You Make, Lessons from a year among the oldest old, John Leland, page 36.
4. Ibid, page 44.
5. Soul Making, The Desert Way of Spirituality, Alan Jones, page 112