

Worship Service
October 7, 2007
Rev. Clare L. Petersberger
We Are Each Other's Harvest

Opening Words

Let us settle into worship with words adapted from my colleague Richard Fewkes:

We gather in this place, thankful for the days that have been,
even those that have tried our souls; and hopeful for the days that shall be,
even those that shall demand of us the best that we have of faith and hope and courage;
till we have become one in all the seasons to come – from the summer autumn days of green and
gold and yellow, to the shining colors of fruition and harvest;
to the white wisdom days of winter where all things wait in patience for the change that shall bring
transformation.

My colleague The Reverend Rudolph Nemser expresses gratitude for this season in these words:

For the beauty of the autumn, brilliant skies, pale asters, dogwood leaves veined with purple,
smell of dusty decay not to be found another time, let us be thankful.

For places of peace and strength, sanctuaries of holiness, communities of caring, times of thought,
listening silences, let us be thankful.

For what we have to be held and shared, bread, wisdom, warmth, love – mysteriously reaching
another being, let us be thankful.

CHALICE LIGHTING

With grateful hearts, let us join in a responsive reading of words with which to light the symbol of our
liberal and liberating faith.

As the leaves of autumn light a blaze of beauty across the woodlands,

LET US KINDLE OUR LIGHT OF FAITH AND COMMUNITY.

May the goodness of the earth continue to sustain us.

MAY THE GOODNESS OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY CONTINUE TO SUPPORT US.

May we expect to see more light in what we've understood;

MORE BEAUTY IN ALL WE STILL ADMIRE;

More truth in all we've long believed;

MORE GOODNESS IN ALL WE'VE LEARNED TO LOVE.

READING

Our first reading is about the goodness of the earth continuing to sustain us, the goodness of friends and family continuing to support us and the discovery of more goodness in all we've learned to love.

This reading comes from a collection of sermons by my colleague The Reverend Max Coots who was minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Canton New York for 34 years.

As I look back, the child that I was lived out more good theology than he was ever formally taught – and probably was taught more good theology by example at home than by words at church.

I say it was "good theology," yet it wasn't connected to the word "God" – the far-distant word "God."

It was a growing sort of nameless understanding that was accumulated in ways peculiarly mine. It's hard to separate them, but I suppose they were things like the smooth, good feel of a horse chestnut in the palm of my hand in September;

a gradually emerging sense of belonging to this world that came to me through many walks in summer woods and spring and autumn fields; cold fingers that made even boys cry on the way home at dark dragging a sled that must have weighed a ton;

the smell of autumn leaves on fire; the box of Crayolas for pumpkins that did the orange in full-moon yellow, cat-black and brown turkeys as tall as Pilgrims;

the sense of pride adults could give when they admired a most admirable "ship" built with an oversized hammer, scraps of wood, and far too many nails;

the discovery of worlds beyond my time and place in books that someone cared enough to get me; and the many times and people and things that told me what the world was and what life was like.

The Max Coots on learning theology from the bible of days from the prophets of our neighborhoods and from parents and other un-godlike people who teach us what the world is and what life is like.

PRAYER/MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation which will be followed by moments of silence.

Be gentle with yourself and others.

We are all children of chance, and none can say why some fields blossom while others lay brown beneath the harvest sun.

Timing is essential to the art of living: knowing when to hang in there and when to let go, when to struggle and when to surrender, knowing how to recognize the seasonable changes of our lives.

Care for those around you. Their choices in life are no more easily made. Share the joy of those whose season is at hand. Take hope with those whose season will come.

And give. Give in any way you can. Give in every way you can. Give from your heart.
To give is to love. In moments of silence, may we be blessed with the wisdom of good gardens.

In sharing the harvest of our lives, may we discover that our lives have meaning and our hearts have peace. Amen.

READING

Our second reading is by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

Because truly being here is so much;
because everything here apparently needs us,
this fleeting world,
which in some strange way keeps calling to us.

And us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing.
Just once; no more.
And we too, just once.
And never again.

But to have been this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been at one with the earth,
seems beyond undoing.

And so we keep pressing on, trying to achieve it,
trying to hold it firmly in our simple hands,
Whom can we give it to?

We would hold onto it all, for ever...

Praise this world to the angel,
not the unsayable one,
you can't impress HIM with glorious emotion;
in the universe where he feels MORE powerfully,
you are a novice.

So show him something simple which,
formed over generations,
lives as our own,
near our hand and within our gaze.
Tell him of Things.
He will stand astonished;
as you stood by the Rope-Maker in Rome
or the Potter along the Nile.

And these Things,
which live by perishing, know you are praising them;
transient, They look to us for deliverance; the most transient of all.

They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,
Within - oh endlessly - within us!
Who ever we may be at last.
Earth, isn't this what you want; to arise within us?
Oh Earth, What, if not transformation is your urgent command?

UNISON READING

In affirmation of hearing a voice that speaks to us of the deepest meanings,
let us join in a unison reading of another poem – the one by Gwendolyn Brooks:

That time we all heard it, cool and clear,
cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice.

The adult Voice forgoing Rolling River,
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge
and other symptoms of an old despond.

Warning, in music – words devout and large,
that we are each other's harvest:
we are each other's business:
we are each other's magnitude and bond.

SERMON

We Are Each Other's Harvest

Last Sunday I conducted a Vespers Service at Edenwald. And I spoke about the Jewish Harvest Festival of Sukkot which was celebrated between September 26th and October 3rd this year. I could not honestly speak of harvesting from personal experience. I had not planed any vegetables last springs. This is probably just as well. I had planted my late husband's canna lillies in April. In spite of my watering and perhaps because of this summer's drought, only one plant produced a blossom – just this past Thursday.

I had enjoyed fruits of harvest thanks to the Shankroffs. They brought some delicious home grown tomatoes to share with facilitators of Chalice Circles. So in the Vespers Service I focused more on the temporary shelters, the Sukkahs, in which the Jewish people are required to dwell during the week of Sukkot.

Reading about Sukkahs, I was reminded that the roof of the Sukkah is made out of leafy branches in order to provide more shade than sunlight during the day, but also openings for the stars to be visible at night. In other words, the roof is intentionally made for star gazing. And I was reminded of a story Owen Gingerich tells.

He grew up in a small town in middle America. One late summer, when he was five, at sunset the temperature in his parent's house still stood at over one hundred. So his mother brought cots outside for sleeping. Owen Gingerich remembers looking up at the sky and asking, "What are those?" His

mother answered, “Those are start – you’ve often seen them”. He responded, “But I never knew they stayed out all night!”.

After this conversation, his father bought him a fifteen-cent Rand McNally book entitled “Seeing Stars”. Owen Gingerich writes, “It’s full-page pictures and concise text opened a new world for me, one whose fascination has never dwindled.” And that new world, that universe, in Rilke’s words apparently needed him and kept calling to him.

What made this gift all the more remarkable was that Own Gingrich came from a family of Amish ministers who regarded geology and evolution “with some suspicion”. But Owen’s father nurtured his son’s curiosity about the stars. He helped Owen to “build a simple telescope from a mailing tube and surplus lenses from a local optometrist.” With their home-made telescope, they could see the rings of Saturn. And the gift of the book of “Seeing Stars” ultimately led Owen Gingrich to a summer internship at Harvard College Observatory assisting Professor Harlow Shapley.

Owen Gingrich questioned whether he should pursue the voice of the stars that beckoned him to Harvard. The motto of his Mennonite College was “Culture for Service”. What possible service could studying the stars offer? Owen Gingerich’s mathematics professor provided the answer. He told him, “If you feel a calling to pursue astronomy, you should go for it. We can’t let the atheists take over any field”. And Owen Gingerich did go on to a distinguished career as a professor of astronomy and the history of science at Harvard. He received a prize for excellence in teaching. And it is no wonder. He was the kind of professor who would use a fire extinguisher to propel himself out of the lecture hall in order to demonstrate Newton’s Third Law of Motion.

As a result of studying the history of science, Professor Gingerich learned how Copernicus and Galileo and Kepler had named things and transformed our understanding of our place in the universe generation to generation. But he also learned how they praised the unfathomable mystery that remained. And so in his retirement, Professor Gingerich kept his promise to his mathematic professor. He has been writing extensively, about the possibility that God plays an interactive role in the universe unnoticed buy not excluded by science. His point is that physics can answer certain questions. But metaphysics, what is literally beyond physics, remains a mystery.

For example, Owen Gingerich wonders, when we Americans learned that the evacuation plan of Hurricane Katrina “left behind the elderly, the bedridden, the lame, mothers of infants, the poor without easy means of transport”, why were we appalled? He writes, “Was this not simply Darwinian natural selection at work – the survival of the fittest? Where does altruism come in?”

Professor Gingerich observes, “E.O. Wilson recognized (as had Darwin before him) that altruism poses a problem for philosophy of purposeless evolution...” And Professor Gingerich concludes, “Altruism may well pose a question without an answer – or rather, possibly without a *scientific* answer derived from observation of the animal kingdom. It just might be that the more convincing answer lies in another arena and has to do with those God-given qualities of humanness which include conscience.”

Owen Gingerich first learned about altruism because his mother pulled his cot out into the yard when he was five and he saw the stars stayed out all night; and his father gave him the gift of Rand McNally’s “Seeing Stars” and helped him to build a telescope; and his mathematics professor gave him the gift of affirming that his service to humanity could come through wondering about humanity’s place in and service to the universe. We are each other’s magnitude and bond.

Although I did not build a Sukkah this year, I did spend time in my yard last week. On Thursday, I saw a solitary hummingbird among some red flowers. So I went to refill the feeder with sugar water one last time, to provide a harvest for the hummer so that it would have plenty of energy to migrate to Mexico! But getting to the feeder proved to be a challenge. At least three bees were happily sipping away at its openings. As I went to get the hose to flood the feeder I wonder what Eva Crane would advise. She died this summer, at the age of 95, and the heading of her obituary read “The Acclaimed Queen of Bee Researchers”.

Eva Crane was one of two women to complete a degree in math at King’s College, London, in 1935. She went on to receive a master’s degree in quantum mechanics. She was awarded her Ph.D. in nuclear physics from London University in 1941. She began to lecture in physics at the University of Sheffield in 1941. The next year she married James Crane, a stockbroker. As a wedding present he gave her a box. Inside the box was a hive of bees. While a swarm of bees may seem like an unusual wedding present, the year was 1942. Mr. Crane hoped the gift would be useful in supplementing their meager wartime sugar ration. But it did more than that.

As in Rilke’s poem, where the world of things point to a much deeper meaning, this gift literally transformed Eva Crane’s life. She joined the Sheffield Beekeepers Association whose elderly male members told her, “You’re a beginner for the first 20 years’. She subscribed to a magazine about bees. And when her husband left the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, Eva Crane gave up teaching physics to devote her time to the study of bees. By 1949 she began editing the non-technical magazine “Bee World”. And then she started the first scientific journal on bees. One of Eva Crane’s best books on bees, was published when she was 87 years old.

She also founded a research association “to increase awareness of the vital role of bees in the environment and to encourage the use of bees as wealth creators”. To foster the research association’s mission, she traveled all over the world, visiting at least sixty countries and, when necessary, arriving by dugout canoe or dog sled.

She discovered the ancient Babylonians had used honey to preserve corpses. In a remote part of Pakistan, she discovered the use of horizontal hives such as she had only seen in excavations of ancient Greece. She helped women in Vietnam to increase honey exports. And her research on Russian bees led the US Department of Agriculture to import Russian bees in 1901 to help bees in Louisiana to become mite resistant.

We are each other’s business.

Here, a gift meant to create a little sweetness, during a wartime sugar shortage, completely altered the direction of one person’s life for the next sixty-five years.

Eva Crane said of her husband’s wedding gift, “this curious passion for a small insect can transcend barriers of politics, race and language, and bring strangers together as friends.”

I tried to keep that in mind as I sprayed water on top of the hummingbird feeder and ducked as the angered bees flew away from the flood I was creating. Washing the feeder, I was reminded that Rilke was right, that we live in the world of things which are more than simply objects because they hold within them deeper meanings.

For the feeder, itself, had been a gift from colleagues when Tom and I moved into our home. They knew, from our conversations, the joy we took in catching sight of hummingbirds. So their gift was

more than a glass container with a red plastic top with yellow flowers and plastic perches to feed the birds. It represented something greater, something deeper, something more enduring – like love.

Re-hanging the feeder, I thought about the children's stories the four of us had talked about writing. And I was reminded of the gift that had transformed the life of a 20th century British travel writer who was one of the first European women to travel to remote areas in Turkey and the Middle East.

Freya Stark wrote, "An imaginative aunt who, for my 9th birthday, sent a copy of *The Arabian Nights* was, I suppose, the original cause of the trouble". Like Max Coote, a book that a relative cared enough to get her, led Freya Stark to discover worlds beyond her time and place. She went on to write "Unfostered and unnoticed, the little flame so kindled fed secretly on dreams. Chance, such as the existence of a Syrian missionary in my home, nourished it; and Fate, with long months of illness and leisure, blew it to a blaze bright enough to light my way through labyrinths of Arabic, and eventually to land me on the coast of Syria at the end of 1927."

Freya Stark does not share in that autobiographical piece that her parents separation mandated that she journey between them. It was then that she began to write letters describing what she saw on her travels. Nor does it describe the garden business she ran in order to earn money to learn Arabic and Persian. But it does give a clue why she chose to learn Arabic and Persian – because of a book that was much more than an object that held within its cover the promise of a wholly different culture and life.

She traveled through Syria, Persia, Iraq, Palestine, and southern Arabia. During the Second World War, she was stationed in Egypt to counter Nazi propaganda. She and eleven other people started a public relations campaign. Within two years, they had reached 100,000 Egyptians who became part of "the Brotherhood of Freedom" to help England win the war.

She wrote, "This is a great moment, when you see, however distant, the goal of your wandering. The thing which has been living in your imagination suddenly becomes part of the tangible world. It matters not how many ranges, rivers or parching dusty ways may lie between you; it is yours now forever." What became hers, was the discovery that people are altruistic all over the world.

We are each other's harvest.

She found the Beduoin nomads will give their last drop of water to strangers. And, equally significant, she discovered that they never "interrupt another in conversation. They never get excited and shout at each other. They don't mind a circle of 10 or 20 people, quite quiet and silent, who haven't anything much to say." She observed, "these pleasant pauses are so agreeable that one is inclined to get into the habit, and it isn't the thing at all in an European drawing room".

I have been thinking about how the gifts received by Owen Gingerich, Eva Crane, and Freya Stark transformed their lives – opening their minds to new ideas to explore, their hearts to new friendships, their souls to greater appreciation for the gift of life.

Can you identify a similar gift in your own life that showed you who you were or who you might become, or what life was like, or how the world might be?

When I thought about my answer, I came up with the gift of a book. When I was 16 my mother gave me Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. There is a scene in it where the protagonist Phillip is sitting in an outdoor café with an older artist, Cronshaw. Two men come through the café selling

oriental rugs. Cronshaw tells Phillip “The meaning of life is in those rugs.” I took this Rilkean philosophy to my mother and asked “What does this mean that the meaning of life is in those oriental rugs?” She said, “Finish the book”. I did. As well as a few others in the intervening years and I’m still searching for the meaning of life – in an oriental rug or otherwise.

And when have you given a gift that has changed a life like the books or the box with the hive of bees?

I’ve been thinking about life transforming gifts, ever since receiving an email from the Unitarian Universalist Association this week announcing that their advertising campaign in TIME magazine has begun. The email subject line read, “Are you ready for visitors?” Are we? Do we appreciate that like the *Seeing Stars* book Owen Gingerich received from his father, we offer people the gift of being able to ask “big questions” and arrive at their own answers without fear of rejection or ridicule?

Do we appreciate that like the box Eva Crane received from her husband we offer people the sweet gift of caring in a world that desperately needs it?

Do we appreciate that like *The Arabian Nights* book Freya Stark received from her aunt, we offer people the gift of trusting that all people can be persuaded to do justice and love mercy?

Are we ready to receive the new ideas, the passion, and the vision of a world made fair with all her people one that newcomers have to give us?

What, if not transformation, is our urgent command?

May the example of the curiosity, creativity, and courage Owen Gingerich, Eva Crane, and Freya Stark received from simple gifts inspire our own. May we intentionally welcome newcomers and receive their wisdom, friendships, and commitment.

And in so doing, may we mutually discover we are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.

CLOSING WORDS

And now we take our leave. Before we gather here again – may we each be surprised by the gifts that surround us; may each of us be enlivened by constant curiosity – may each of us bring happiness into another’s life; and may we remain together in spirit till we meet again.

Go now in peace.