

“Where Have I Not Yet Looked?”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, March 8, 2020

We walked down the path until it was no longer a path but a trickling stream. The water below us bubbled and danced through the stones and vegetation. On either side of us walls of stone and dirt rose above us. This tiny valley we walked through was rich with vibrant green trees and bushes, curious leaves poking out behind rough branches, stones which had lived through millennium now serving as dry ground for our wet, muddy shoes. Above us, blue sky with scattered fluffy white clouds. Around us, birds, bugs, all these living things eating and drinking and singing. And yet even with all of this beauty around me, sometimes I needed a gentle reminder from my husband to actually stop and look, and see all that was around me, to pay attention. What about where I had not yet looked? What about the cities of insects thriving and surviving beneath a single stone. The creatures that made their homes buried deep in this thick, sticky, mud. The bright blue robin’s eggs hidden in the thickets. These were the places I had not yet looked. And yet I wonder. Everyone pays attention to different things in the woods. I have an uncle who is an avid bird watcher, who would notice and delight in all sorts of birds I would never see, and a sister who wrote a thesis about frogs – I remember she took me to a swamp once and pointed out the camouflaged frogs my eyes never noticed. We need always remind each other, and respect, and learn and grow from these places we may not look; remind each other of hidden beauty. What beauty and wisdom is hidden, perhaps, in those places we may not look, in our disappointments, mistakes, or in solitude? This wisdom, like a camouflaged frog, apparent to many, like my sister, but not all. In nature we can’t see

everything at once, but we can be reminded of the beauty tucked away all around us, in all the places we may not think to look.

In exploring the wisdom of Buddhist teachings, we learn to find wisdom in what may be unexpected to some, in disappointment, in hardship, in not knowing.

Wisdom in Buddhism is known as “Prajna.” Prajna is understood to mean “intuitive wisdom” or “perfect knowledge” or “intelligence” or “deep understanding”; prajna is a knowing beyond intellect; a knowing beyond that which the human mind can comprehend. Prajna can be described as “letting things be as they are” or accepting change in life; living without attachment. Practicing prajna allows one to live a stress free life; allows one to experience the profound simplicity of life.¹

This stress on letting things be as they are; this emphasis on accepting change – this allows one to experience simplicity and experience non-attachment and the profound acceptance and understanding that comes with it – wisdom at its core. What about wisdom in disappointment?

We can garner the wisdom of Tibetan Buddhist teacher and meditation master Chogyam Trungpa, whose words we heard earlier. Who spoke of surrendering our hopes and expectations, about marching into disappointment, and making it a way of life. Can we surrender our hopes and instead lean into disappointment? Can we reflect on the irrelevance of our expectations? What wisdom this would entail, what space for us to breath, and an ongoing and inspiring way to continuously learn and grow and live of life of achievable, accessible

¹ <http://www.mindbodyvortex.com/meaning-prajna-buddhism/>

expectations. Trungpa writes, “work with disappointment, go into it, and make it our way of life.”²

We have further wisdom from a renowned Tibetan Buddhist Pema Chodron. Author of several dozen books, Chodron writes, “Letting there be room for not knowing is the most important thing of all. When there's a big disappointment, we don't know if that's the end of the story. It may just be the beginning of a great adventure. Life is like that. We don't know anything. We call something bad; we call it good. But really we just don't know.”³ Let there be room for not knowing, for we really just don't know; it just may be the beginning of a great adventure.

I think of my own path to ministry, riddled with disappointments and not knowing; disappointments that led to my calling and the rich, full life I now live. I always knew I wanted to be in a helping career, but faced years of discernment about what this career would ultimately be. I tried to navigate this deep desire through the medical field. I spent years pursuing nursing. And yet this led to disappointment. I struggled through the assignments and the practical work in the hospital and in a wave of disappointment decided to leave nursing school. So I tried studying occupational therapy, and again was met with disappointment as I understood that this was not my path; I was not studying what I was skilled in or even particularly interested in. So I decided to study what I was interested in and pursued a degree in Cultural Anthropology, without knowing what my career path would be. And yet an acquaintance helped me look under a stone, bringing to light that which I had not before seen, exposing me to an entire world of which I had not seen: Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian

² *Soul Matters Worship Packet March 2020*

³ *Soul Matters Worship Packet March 2020*

Universalism, to me, was hidden in the crevices, under the stones, something that I did not explore as a self-identified atheist - agnostic. And yet after entering my first Unitarian Universalist congregation, I soon knew I had found my calling.

I have learned to embrace disappointment, or at least to try, for so often as Pema Chodron writes, it can lead to a great adventure. To me this adventure is ministry! I created room for not knowing! Not the end of a story, but the beginning of an adventure. And yet the next chapter, the next adventure, may initially be hidden, perhaps amongst the mud or perhaps in a tangle of budding vines. If we march into disappointment, if we can embrace this, we can find that hidden wisdom, we can unearth that next great adventure, finding the possibilities beyond that looming disappointment. "It may just be the beginning of a great adventure."

Pema Chodron further writes, "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."⁴ Have you ever experienced lingering disappointment? fear? Sadness? Anxiety? Clinging to us, grasping our minds and captivating our hearts and souls, these hard emotions, difficult feelings, may we accept and learn from them; we need accept and learn from them if we want to release them from our grasp. Let these things teach us, provide us this powerful wisdom, and through acceptance and understanding enhance our lives.

These profound Buddhist teachings, integrated into the lives of many, and to others, wisdom yet to explore.

And this flows into Celtic wisdom, apparent to many and novel to others. Let's explore a new understanding of the negative. We heard the words of John O'Donohue earlier, we need a new

⁴ *Soul Matters Worship Packet 2020*

way of understanding and integrating the negativity we encounter. Where have we not yet looked? O'Donohue asks us to befriend the negative; not to see it as destructive. Things can become trapped, just as Pema Chodron wrote. "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know." O'Donohue writes that when we encounter something immoral we become harsh and try to remove it. In this attempt at removing, it instead becomes trapped. It becomes trapped – confirming the negative ways we view ourselves; hindering our ability for growth like a thing behind bars. O'Donohue writes, "There is a strange paradox in the soul: if you try to avoid or remove the awkward quality, it will pursue you. In fact, the only effective way to still its unease is to transfigure it, to let it become something creative and positive that contributes to who you are." Let it become something creative and positive that contributes to who you are. Take pause to think of what is pursuing you. Instead of confirming these negative beliefs, let us accept them- and in acceptance, create something positive. Like a person trapped after being cruel to a sibling, either harboring this or learning compassion.

An this Celtic wisdom O'Donohue writes about taps into many places we may not have looked; not just accepting and living with the negative. O'Donohue writes extensively about the Celtic wisdom that comes from that often overlooked place of solitude, and that which is tucked away in our souls.

Solitude can be precious and connect us to our own deepest belonging. It allows us to find that which dwells within; find those things hidden inside of us, things we may have tried to find externally; we need seek within, and within our solitude, find that which we may try to fill with other places or people, by buying shoes or cars or chasing other external commodities instead of looking within. In this solitude each one of us can find wisdom, can find illumination and

warmth. This is where some believe our soul is: a beautiful mystery. We need to listen to this void or we will always be on the run, driven from refuge to refuge. Only through solitude and connecting with our inner selves can we truly understand our own beauty; in our solitude we can find treasures we have been searching for externally. It is this wisdom in the connection that is inside, that can leave us fulfilled and content. O'Donohue writes, "If you have trust in and an expectation of your own solitude, everything that you need to know will be revealed to you."⁵ We need not go outside ourselves but connect within, with what Celtic wisdom understands to be the soul. In Celtic belief this soul connects us to the spiritual world, the eternal. In Celtic wisdom, as O'Donohue writes, "The soul is in the middle ground between the separation of the air and the belonging of the earth. Your soul mediates between your body and your mind; it shelters the two and holds them together."⁶ No matter what our understanding of the holy, we can still take pause and treasure whatever this is within us, whatever connects our body and mind, whatever sustains us and offers of strength. Not external, but this sacred internal. This sacred wisdom, like a bright blue egg, hidden in the thickets.

What about the wisdom found in mistakes? What about those mistakes we try to hide in a crevice found amongst the stones? Mainstream culture is steeped in perfectionism – of hiding our mistakes, of being ashamed, of punishing ourselves for our mistakes, and for demanding and expecting perfectionism from those around us. I wonder of a different way of viewing this demand for perfection. I invite us to reimagine mistakes as crucial elements in learning and

⁵ John O'Donohue *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, pg 112

⁶ *Ibid* pg 97

obtaining life sustaining wisdom. Philosopher Daniel C. Dennett writes, “Mistakes are not just opportunities for learning; they are, in an important sense, the only opportunity for learning or making something truly new... The chief trick to making good mistakes is not to hide them — especially not from yourself. Instead of turning away in denial when you make a mistake, you should become a connoisseur of your own mistakes, turning them over in your mind as if they were works of art, which in a way they are.”⁷ A connoisseur of our mistakes, collecting them as works of art. I know sometimes one may experience a hidden voice trapped in one’s head, collecting and tallying and archiving one’s mistakes. Perhaps being overly hard on oneself or others when less than perfect work is produced, when we make those inevitable mistakes. Instead those mistakes turn to learning, to compassion, to understanding, to a new knowledge, to self-compassion. These are tangible things like learning how to ride a bike after scraping a knee, or a scientific innovation arrived at after extensive trial and error; this is mental and emotional as we recover from a failed relationship or re-think our parenting. “Nothing ever goes away until it teaches us what we need to know.” In this way we flip a stone submerged in mud. Instead of hiding we expose to the light and learn and understand.

If I ever return to that little valley I explored, stepping from stone to stone as the dirt walls rise above me, I’ll pause and look in those unexpected places. What beauty and wisdom can I find if I pause, and in the stillness watch the earthworms or centipedes crawl. What wisdom could I gain in taking a long look at the clouds? We can all lean into and learn from disappointment or mistakes; let things go and be kind to ourselves; find sacred wisdom in the solitude and take

⁷ *Soul Matters Worship Packet 2020*

time to connect with our souls. Let us all pause and examine these places we may not always look.

May it be so, and Amen.