

## A House of Faith, Hope, and Strength

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 13, 2022

Mary Oliver asks us:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?<sup>1</sup>

Last week we reflected on this. How do our individual faith beliefs inform how we interact with the world around us? How can we each craft full, meaningful, fulfilling lives, based on all we hold sacred? What we each do is emblematic of the world we want to live in. Let us not waste a moment.

I imagine a world of peace and redemptive love. Where we are called to save the world one small act at a time, just as the young child tossed individual, dying starfish into the sea that would revive them.<sup>2</sup> Or the world where we know each small thing we do will make a difference – just as the small parrot, charred and mangled, saved a world on fire one drop of water at a time.<sup>3</sup> Or the reminder not to let all the evil and hardship we may often feel immersed in change who we are, just as peace activist A.J. Muste stood on his own with a single flame in front of the Whitehouse.<sup>4</sup>

I lift up words from the poem Colleen read us earlier: “How do we renew our faith when so much is falling apart?”<sup>5</sup> And, beloveds, so much is falling apart. And yet our faith is renewed week after week when we enter these walls either physically or virtually. It is in moments like this when I remind us: we may not know where we are going, but we do know that we will get there together. And we can do that because we thrive together. We are in the church where we can do that faithful work – where we can embody this ideal world and receive the strength to create and maintain all that is good and just and loving. On this Stewardship Sunday we reflect on the generosity we can offer this institution that does so much. Giving becomes a spiritual practice, a way to live our values in the world. The poet wrote: “Maybe faith is more about remembering our longing for what we love and who we want to be.”<sup>6</sup> What better community to remind us of what we long for and inspire us to be all that we want to be than our faith community, here, at Channing Memorial Church.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

<sup>2</sup> “The Starfish Story” adapted from *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley

<sup>3</sup> From *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends, and Jataka Tales* by Rafe Martin

<sup>4</sup> Words by Frederic and Mary Ann Burssat

<sup>5</sup> Unknown author, Soul Matters March 2022 Small Group Packet

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

And so that child saved one starfish at a time amongst tens of thousands, questioned by a man who said those efforts were pointless and meaningless. I reflect on the wisdom of that child so innocent and good, “It made a difference to that one!”<sup>7</sup> Is this not reflective of our faith? Is that not all the difference in the world? If we can offer love to one who faces hate, we toss them in the ocean to be revived. If we provide sustenance to one who has very little, we save them from those harmful sun rays that would serve to smolder them. If we treat the stigmatized with respect their parched bodies are rehydrated. I wonder if that man’s faith was renewed as he understood the importance of those simple acts. There is nothing inconsequential about saving a single life. Let us live in a world where we are that child, and our church is that ocean.

Or that little parrot, who had the ability to fly out of the flames but saw she left the world behind her to die as she did so. She, instead of fleeing, doused herself in water so that drip by drip as she returned again and again to fly over the raging forest fire, she could put out the flames. Ultimately, the animals were saved.<sup>8</sup>

Again, a story that highlights our values and our faith and all we strive to do. We are called to do that next best thing no matter how minute it may feel. This is how a world is healed. Justice work is achieved one act at a time. Faith renewal may be a practice of simple, small, recurring prayers. I think of a moment when all I did as a hospital chaplain was to color pictures with a sick woman each morning, and she told me these coloring sessions gave her the strength to simply get up when her world was filled with pain. We have all done small acts of goodness and we can all continue to do this. When we see the horrors in Ukraine we may think, “what can I possibly do?” We can vote pro-democracy. We can adjust our lives to the consequences of increased gas prices, knowing that our sacrifices are aiding an end to a war. We can donate objects and money to the cause. In the walls of our faith home, we offer prayers of peace. Here, at this church, we foster the strength to do these small acts, and we offer the hope and reassurance that they will, indeed, matter.

Our faith calls us not to let the hardships and evils and the hate we are surrounded with change who we are. The poet wrote, “We must remain faithful to the fight not because change is guaranteed but to ensure that we are not changed.”<sup>9</sup> To the world around us we offer all the hope we can. But inside each of us, we have that willpower and determination to remain loving, kind, compassionate and just. A.J. Muste stood outside the Whitehouse in protest with a single candle, knowing full well that an unaccompanied man with a solitary flame would

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<sup>7</sup> “The Starfish Story” adapted from *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley

<sup>8</sup> From *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends, and Jataka Tales* by Rafe Martin

<sup>9</sup> Unknown author, Soul Matters March 2022 Small Group Packet

create no major change to the country, but instead filled with a relentless determination not to be changed by the world around him.<sup>10</sup>

Channing Memorial Church offers hope. Each starfish tossed in the water, each drop of water descending upon a forest fire, each solitary candle that reminds us of who we are – these are acts of hope. Hope for ourselves, hope for our faith, hope for the world. This is the world I want to live in – a world where hope keeps each person persisting no matter what. A world of peace, love, and justice. And this is the world we strive to create each time we join together as a faith community. And it is easiest to have hope when we feel at peace and yet hope is most critically needed when we feel, instead, despair or anger or frustration – when we feel the world is collapsing around us. And the beautiful thing about hope – its persistence. It will always be there if we look for it; it is always tucked away inside of us. And here, together, is where we can be reminded. When we need to renew our faith, we come here. Right now, let us breathe together!

We live in a faith community where we can work towards the poet's exclamations:

"It can be better!"

"More is possible!"

"I need to believe that goodness is real."<sup>11</sup>

I invite us to look at a care-givers love, or the devotion of first responders, or even that first crocus poking through that crusty earth hardened by the harsh elements of winter and tell me that goodness is not real.

Last week we spoke of faith as the wings of a bird, keeping us alive and in the air even if the branch we were resting upon breaks and we begin to plummet.<sup>12</sup> And what keeps those wings pumping? Our spiritual practices. So, I invite us into a practice of gratitude. What, in this moment, can we be grateful for? I invite you to think of all the faces of those in our community, all those little boxes in gallery view. We join together in common values, not common beliefs, covenanting to be with one another on our spiritual journeys. Can we be grateful for our Sunday mornings together? Joining together for hope and spiritual sustenance, collecting what it is we need to carry us through the week, orienting ourselves for all that may lay ahead. Prayer, music – this offers us each so much. Let us pause to think of all we are grateful

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<sup>10</sup> Words by Frederic and Mary Ann Burssat

<sup>11</sup> Unknown author, Soul Matters March 2022 Small Group Packet

<sup>12</sup> "The Avowal" by Denise Levertov

for in this church. (I know we've got Soul Collage, Men's Group, Clearing Group, Soul Matters, Book Club among others...) Here, we know, goodness is real.

I see Stewardship as an overlap of hope and gratitude. We give in thanks of all that is, and we give in anticipation of all that can be. Giving money allows us to reflect upon and commit to that which shapes our life and gives us meaning. We are feeding that church which, in turn, feeds our souls. When we give to the church, we give a little piece of ourselves. The church becomes an ocean to cast a starfish. The church becomes that water we use to put out forest fires. The church is that solitary candle that reminds us to stay true to ourselves. And the church needs funds to survive and thrive. It is the generosity and dedication of each one of you that keeps our church prospering. And we are doing great! Not only have we come through the pandemic, we have flourished!

My husband Eric and I have considered our own pledges for this upcoming year, and we have decided to increase what we give by 50%. We are grateful for all this church does to feed our souls and inspire our work to bring love to the world. And we are hopeful. We are so excited to see this church in a new home, filled with all of those who are so near and dear as well as those new members and friends not yet with us. We give to the church which, in turn, gives so much to us.

I wonder, "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"<sup>13</sup> Grounded in my faith, I plan to go out into the world and love fiercely! That is my calling. And all that I plan to do is grounded in my faith – all I plan to do is fed and sustained through this church we call home. So what do I plan to do? I plan to give, as generously as I can, and I hope you are able to give generously as well.

May it be so, and Amen

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<sup>13</sup> "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver