

The Source of Wisdom
Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Reverend Elizabeth Stevens
March 4, 2007

Chalice Lighting

The Rev. Tim Haley

We light our chalice this morning
as a symbol of the eternal energy and creativity
that burns and moves in our universe;

that brings to us and all creation
wisdom, transformation, and renewal.

May we feel the heat of this eternal flame
in our hearts today.

Meditation

Ruah, Spirit of life, Holy breath,
in the silence, enter into our body and fill us with lightness and air.

Find the places where we are afraid...
help us to release our grip on the concrete, the known
and open to the healing and transformative power of love.

We accept that life—that our life—
will not unfold without pain, without struggle, without complications and loss.
Help us to trust our own resilience.

Ruah, Spirit of life, Holy breath,
enter into the places where we are grieving,
where we are angry at the injustice we see.
Grant us hope, and the courage to persevere
even in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems.

Peace, real peace, enters the world one person at a time,
one heart at a time,
one soul at a time.
Let peace enter us, now.

Let peace surround and suffuse us in this moment of silence,
for which we are truly and deeply grateful.

Readings: The first reading this morning is from Sophia: Exile and Return by Kathleen Granville Damiani.

First, to give you some context, this is from her abstract:

Sophia personifies wisdom, an ancient tradition concerned with integrity in the marketplace, politics, and royal court. Because the teachings were rooted in life instead of in doctrine, Sophia became problematical and was excluded from the religious formulations of monotheism...I compare Sophia's exile from mainstream religion to the alienation suffered by modern individuals...What is exiled in today's dysfunctional paradigm is the vital soul, the genius, or daemon. When we pay attention to it by taking our life seriously—as a mode of knowledge—we awaken its fire.

I believe that {asking} authentic questions about the meaning and purpose of life can radically transform the individual's life and that of society by disturbing the inertia of the status quo.

To take it a little deeper, this is from the book itself:

I used to think that Sophia said it all, that Sophia was the missing half of the Judeo-Christian God, or maybe even the real God, as in the missing God—that finally here was a divinity that expressed everything the other God was lacking: immanence, relatedness, humane qualities. For me, Sophia recalled the passion and vitality that does not turn away from life but rather is life's power—not just to grow and reproduce but to turn back on itself as joyful witness...

Now, however, as the circulation of Sophia loosens the bonds of belief, as the questions of clever, thoughtful people ask me, "why divine"—I have been forced to realize that if Sophia is anything, she demands to remain undefined or else reveals a succession of deeper and deeper meanings. She is...the personification of the refusal to become an abstraction or dogma...she is the guide and protector of the human impulse to understand.

Sophia is an image produced by the psyche to account for both the transcendent and the utterly empty, impenetrable aspects of life...Sophia appears to be the turning, twisting path of tension between the two: a journey which requires our attention, which quickens our emotions, our resistance and our passion to be crucified, penetrated, carved, molded, branded---maybe even fertilized—by life, according to a deeper, perhaps even cosmic design.

(Sophia: Exile and Return, by Kathleen Granville Damiani, p. 11.)

The next reading is a poem by Maya Angelou titled, "A Brave and Startling Truth."

It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth
And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

~ Maya Angelou ~

Sermon

Wisdom is deep understanding,
grounded in reality,
informed by our spiritual search
and our intuition.
Wisdom is refined in relationship with others,
and we can tell it is wisdom when it stands up to the tests of time and experience
and helps us (and those we share it with)
make sense out of life.

Wisdom is life lifted up and declared sacred.
We become wise as we allow our souls to be fired, molded, shaped
into vessels

which hold compassion, and deep understanding, peace, and love.

Wisdom is not the same thing as knowledge, or facts...
though discovering and coming to terms with reality is the first step in achieving wisdom.
In today's world, the process of searching for truth
often reveals multiple interpretations of the facts.
Wherever we go looking for information,
we always have to keep in mind the limitations of experts, writers, and journalists.

I learned in a class on journalistic ethics back in college
that it's impossible to report just the facts.
You have to make a story out of them.
Every journalist needs to find a "spin", an "angle",
story line that draws people in and keeps them engaged,
Journalistic ethics require the reporter to
hold a constant tension
between the need for spin
and the obligation to report truth and fact.

Unfortunately, these days it seems like many news reporters
aren't even trying to hold the tension between
reporting the facts
and telling THEIR story.

I find myself agreeing with blogger Josh Silver when he says,

Fox News continues to amaze us and propagandize many...owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, and run by far-right operative Roger Ailes, the network has figured out how to deliver rightwing-propaganda-dressed-as-legitimate-news into millions of living rooms every day using reactionary messages, cutting-edge graphics and a fast-paced infotainment format...But Fox is not alone. CNN, CBS, ABC, and NBC are not much better... 99 percent of the time Americans remain flooded with 24/7 celebrity, soundbyte and uncritical fare - at the expense of investigative journalism, government accountability, and informed political debate. ¹

I quoted Thomas Jefferson in a letter to the editor of the Kitsap Sun in defense of our Social Justice film series:
"Our liberty depends on freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost."
Which is why the state of our national media worries me-
and why we need to take everything we read with a grain of salt,
allowing for differences in perspective to influence what we would like to accept as fact.

Take what you've read about the world
and sift through it to find what's most true
and most important.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how what we read can transform us and make us more capable of love.

I also read recently Lies My Teacher Told Me by James Lowen.
Have any of you heard of it? It made the best seller list.
It throws into question not just what we see on tv or read in the paper,
but much of what we're taught in school as well.

¹ : http://www.huffingtonpost.com/josh-silver/the-decline-of-us-media-_b_41897.html

Lowen points out some of the hidden agendas that the writers of textbooks...especially history textbooks...
have promoted in this country.
It's really true: history is written by the victors...
and their egregious errors,
their disregard of human life,
are glossed over
so that the story is pretty and heroic and very flattering to the powers that be
in the United States.

Nor are we the only country that molds our children's minds this way.

I spent the fall and winter of 1992 teaching English in Russia,
and I can tell you that their textbooks were incredibly biased.
Because the bias was different than the one in the textbooks I was raised with...
I couldn't miss it!

Whenever possible,
the textbooks portrayed the US and other Western nations...
as well as democracy in general...
in a most unflattering light.
They seemed to favor O Henry stories
about misery and poverty and cruelty and greed.
It was pretty wretched to teach,
especially since this was after the wall came down,
when my students practically salivated at any stories I told them about my life in the states.

Take what you've learned about the world
and sift through it to find what matters the most.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how what we learn can transform us and make us more capable of love.

As for trusting the experts,
having a doctor for a sister means I can't pretend not to know
that even medicine is as much art as science.
Every body is a little different,
and is likely to react differently to any given treatment.
Diagnosis can be challenging.
Divergent opinions are the rule rather than the exception.

The same could be said of just about any other discipline.

Environmentalists, physicists, biologists, ethicists...
You can't find anywhere a monolithic view of the truth,
a single interpretation of a given set of facts.

Everything depends on your point of view.

Take what you know about the world
and sift through it to find the parts
that change how you think or more importantly, how you act.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how what we know can transform us and make us more capable of love.

The human mind is amazing.

Sometimes even the most obvious facts
get obscured by preconceived opinions or biases.

Have you heard the joke about the dumb blonde and the construction workers?

A couple of construction workers are standing around a flagpole
trying to figure out how high it is,
when along comes a blonde, who asks them, "What are you doing?"
"We're trying to figure out how to measure the height of this flagpole."
"Hmm. I think I can help you with that," she says. "Hand me that wrench."
The construction workers, bemused, give her the wrench,
and she unscrews the bolts holding the flagpole to the base
and asks the guys to help her lower it to the ground.
They're befuddled! What does she think she's doing?
But they give her a hand, just to be polite.
Once it's on the ground,
she pulls a tape measure out of her purse,
measures the flagpole, writes down the measurement on a sheet of paper, which she hands to them,
and then helps them stand it back up and re-bolt it.
When they're done, she walks away with a friendly wave.

After she's safely out of earshot,
one of the guys says to his buddy,
"Just like a blonde, to confuse height and length."

Wisdom might begin with a search for the facts,
but it can't end there.
Facts need to be tested for bias
and also for relevance.
And most importantly,
you need to accept that there is always going to be more you can't know.

Take the what you observe in the world,
and sift through it to find beauty, awe, gratitude,
and a new sense of openness to possibility.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how what we see can transform us and make us more capable of love.

We also have to be careful not to draw wisdom unquestioning from doctrine.
Though there are wisdom writings in the old testament,
though Buddhists and Gnostics and most other religions have wisdom writings or stories,
at best, spiritual traditions point to paradox and ambiguity.
There is always room for interpretation.

There are those who would like to sell their doctrine, their creed,
as wisdom, as answer to all of life's problems.
But I would argue that life doesn't work that way.
Wisdom grows out of an active engagement in
and reflection on our own experiences.

Wisdom from the top down isn't wisdom,
it's mind control.

Which isn't to say that there aren't worthwhile ideas, stories,
and enlightening pieces in all of the world's religious traditions.

However, I believe that each individual has the right... and the responsibility...
to filter through facts, ideas, stories, and insights,
doctrines, creeds, theologies, mystical writings...
and choose which pieces are useful.

Always ask yourself, of any idea that you're considering,
"Does this help me live a better life, with more love and peace?"
If so, you're on to something.
If not, ditch it.

Theodore Giesel, better known as Doctor Seuss, who would have turned 92 this month
penned a poem, titled, "My Uncle Terwilliger on the Art of Eating Popovers."

My uncle ordered popovers from the restaurant's bill of fare.
And when they were served,
he regarded them with a penetrating stare...
Then he spoke great Words of Wisdom
as he sat there on that chair:
"To eat these things," said my uncle,
"you must exercise great care.
You may swallow down what's solid...
BUT...you must spit out the air!"

And as you partake of the world's bill of fare,
that's darned good advice to follow.
Do a lot of spitting out of hot air.
And be careful what you swallow.

Take what you have been taught to believe
and sift through it to find
meaning, purpose, insight and inspiration.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how what we choose to believe can transform us
and make us more capable of love.

There is a school of thought...it's called "Theosophy"...
which holds that there is an undercurrent of divine wisdom
running through all spiritual traditions,
and that the human task is to, in each age,
refine our ability to discern that undercurrent
and live in harmony with it.

Theology comes from the root words "theos" or God and "logos" or words...
it is words about God.

Theosophy comes from "theos" as well...and from "sophia,"
which is the greek word for wisdom.

You find a number of different understandings of Sophia...
of wisdom...
as you read through Gnostic writings,
Kabbalistic writings,
and the wisdom writings of the Old Testament.
In some traditions,
Sophia is the feminine aspect of 'logos', or word,
or the feminine counterpart to the Christ.

Sophia as an archetypal symbol
invites us into relationship with the divine feminine...
and points us at ways in which archetypal male qualities
and archetypal female qualities
are both needed for balance.

In Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind,
the authors, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule
articulate "the ways of knowing that women have cultivated and learned to value...
ways which we...believe are powerful but have been neglected and denigrated
by the dominant intellectual ethos of our time."

Those ways include listening for the inner voice,
and searching for the authentic self.
They also involve entering into relationship...
with authorities and experts,
and with one another.
Women in search of wisdom find it almost always
in connection.

The power of deep listening, and of being heard...
the power of hearing another's truth,
another's story,
these are a part of finding wisdom as well.

In speaking,
in listening,
and in learning together,
we give one another what my colleague the Rev. Roberta Finkelstein calls
"lenses of discernment,"
mirrors to reflect back our understanding of ourselves,
lenses to focus and pare away the "air," the "chaff,"
the understandings we have
that are getting in the way of growth, of love, of transformation...

Most often, the understandings that most get in our way
are under-valuations of our own gifts and wisdom.

Take what you feel and what you hear.
Sift through it to find comfort, motivation, and transformative power.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how relationships can transform us and make us more capable of love.

Everyone here has had to face suffering and uncertainty,
difficult times...
a scary medical diagnosis, family trauma, accidents and disasters,
loss and death.

There is in our culture an unhealthy tendency
to run away from the facts...
to distance ourselves from death,
from suffering,
from people who remind us of our own vulnerability to pain and loss.

Abandoned, we have little choice but to run away from our grief...
often with the help of pharmaceuticals.

Unfortunately, keeping a stiff upper lip...presenting a happy face...
pretending that everything is okay even when it's not...
all of these habits take a huge toll on our spirits.
and limit our capacity to make sense out of life.

Denial builds a blockade on the road to wisdom.

The piece I quoted from earlier—Sophia: Exile and Return by Kathleen Damiani
is wisdom literature that grows out of her own encounter with suffering
following her husband's violent and unexpected death.

Later in the book she writes,

Often, our inner suffering is not welcome in the world. A person experiences a kind of zone of silence that is imposed by others to create a safe distance. The person feels a pressure to keep quiet, so she has to live in a world split between the inner pain and the routine world where only certain topics are welcome.

Often we are in situations that violate our integrity, which make us aware of dishonesty, posturing, inhuman treatment of others. We want to understand why there is pressure on us to conform to a code of silence regarding certain injustices...

To notice this pressure is the first step. Then we have to choose to separate from it. To watch what happens next begins the exciting adventure of Sophia's path. Everything slowly begins to change right before our eyes. Like a fault-line during an earthquake, the earth begins to...split before our eyes. It is a terrifying path, Sophia's, but the only one which radically alters the landscape of hopelessness. The not-so-simple act of separating out from the pressure to conform to soulless situations reverses the world. (pp. 212-213)

The other day, I spent time with a woman who is in the midst of a real medical ordeal.

She looked tense and pale, and it was obvious to me that she was hurting.
As she began to talk about how she felt...and it took a little prodding,
because she's got a little "stiff upper lip" in her,
the color came back to her cheeks,
her face and shoulders relaxed,
and she began to come back to herself,

just for a little while.

In the easing, in the moment of compassion and deep listening,
I felt something shift in me.
I changed, and a new call stirred in my heart.
Expect, sometime in the next year,
to hear a sermon on the state of health care in our country.

Take your suffering, your fear, your anger.
Sift through them to find where they are putting up barriers that keep you from love...
and keep love from getting in to you,
and then lower the barriers.

Wisdom grows with our awareness of how suffering can transform us and teach us to be more capable of love.

Here is some wisdom about pain and suffering:
if there is a reason for pain,
it is that because we all experience it, we identify and are affected by pain and suffering that others share.
Because we are affected, we are inspired to care for each other
and to work for justice.
That is a good thing, a worthy outcome.

Maya Angelou writes,
When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

The "it" we are coming to is wisdom...
Wisdom is our awareness of all the ways in which life transforms us and makes us more capable of love.
Though it takes great patience and perseverance,
As we are transformed, we are able to slowly transform the world.

Wisdom is life itself...lifted up and declared sacred.
We become wise as we allow our souls to be fired, molded, shaped
into vessels
which hold compassion, and deep understanding, peace, and love.

So be it, and blessed be.