

Unity Church of North Easton - Sermon for March 16, 2008

by Cathy Adler

Zooming into Life: Seeing the Lightness in Winter, and the Marks of Makers all around Us

Good morning!

I had originally determined to write a great and profound sermon not based on my life, but on my great thoughts. However, in trying to mine those thoughts, I found I could not separate them from my life, and frankly, they were not all that great. So, this humbling exercise led me to just telling you some simple stories and my life's experience – such as it is. I am honored to have you bear witness to them with me this morning.

I graduated from college – quite a while ago – with a degree in Biology from a Jesuit College in Ohio. While working my way through school in various jobs in various hospitals during the day, I fell into one that gave me a first career and changed the way I look at the world since then.

While working as a ward clerk one summer at the Cleveland Clinic, one of the Nurse Practitioners suggested to me that I might be interested in Histology. Histology is the study of cells – that's the cells that make up every part of your body, not the cells in an Excel spreadsheet (for those of you accountant types in the congregation today...).

Since I had been somewhat of a 'lab rat' in school and done some work in this field, I decided to try it on at the St. Vincent Charity Hospital School of Histotechnology. In this type of clinical lab, anything that is taken out of a person – either from a surgical procedure or from an autopsy – to determine a diagnosis - finds its way to the Pathology lab. In our case, we actually had a dumbwaiter that ran between the surgical suites and the morgue – we were right in the middle.

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Each piece of tissue was carefully prepared, embedded in either paraffin wax or plastic, and cut into thin ribbons of sections that were microns thin - thinner than a human hair. Depending on what you were trying to confirm, there were hundreds of special stains to choose from to help make an accurate diagnosis – the result of which would determine how a patient would be treated, or would identify their cause of death.

For those of you who might be cynical about hospitals, please know that I was taught immediately in handling these sometimes tiny bits of tissue – to never lose sight of the person they belonged to. That was lesson one.

After a relatively short time, I could identify just about any 'bit' and tell you where it came from – liver, lung, etc. – just by looking at it as I took it off the dumbwaiter. Ah, but the next part of my education was at the light microscope.

There, you could literally zoom into life, by magnifying things 1000 times! It was like being Superman – able to see a critical underlying structure that was invisible to mere mortals but part of all of us.

Later, my career moved into Electron Microscopy which was like running a space ship – sitting in a dark room, at a huge console, and focusing electron beams onto even tinier pieces of tissue and identifying structures by the shadows they cast onto photographic plates – kind of like Plato.

OK, I might be stretching here, but that Jesuit school made me take 18 hours of Philosophy, which I now apply freely wherever I want to.

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I spent a lot of time in those dark rooms over 12 years in several clinical and basic research labs, and I never walked out of one of them without an honest awe of what I saw, and occasionally un-nerved because I understood the meaning of what I saw to the person awaiting the diagnosis from the Pathologist. There were so many lessons at 20 something.

In retrospect, part of what I was seeing could be described as the web of life; those things that broken down to their basest elements are the 'bits' common to everything – not just every human but every *thing*. And this was very concrete – I needed to apply no philosophy here.

The obvious lesson for me was that whenever you think you absolutely know something – think again, look a little deeper, suspend your judgment, stay open to the possibility that you can be moved in another direction, you may learn something you're supposed to – maybe see things quite literally in a different light, or just see the light itself.

This perspective has served me well. I still often think that I'm right, but I'd be much worse without this theme in my life. It makes me step back, then try to zoom into life at a deeper level – into the level where there's stillness.

Open to the possibility of awe, or at least subconsciously open enough to be startled by it.

Once I learned this lesson, I saw it everywhere. Once I realized that the deeper I looked into something through my microscope, and found no bottom to the well of new information/structure, I also found the concept of eternity or infinity much easier to accept. I can't honestly say understand it, but I accept the possibility of it.

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For some seemingly unrelated reason, at some point I began thinking about the depression that people talk about feeling in the winter. Feeling like everything is dead, and that somehow in the spring, things spontaneously come back to life. Darkness to light.

When you're a kid growing up in the Heartland, in a small post WWII bungalow suburb at the mercy of lake-effect snow in winter, you find winter exciting - all that snow to tunnel under and fall comfortably into.

As you grow older - maybe partially because then you had to drive to work, get places - unless you're going skiing, you start to look at winter a different way, especially in places where there are obvious seasons. The cycles are extreme and we relate them to our own life cycles, and this reality of shedding leaves and hiding green blades of grass reminds us of our own mortality.

Now what I am about to say is not groundbreaking - so to speak - is not even original, but maybe that makes it more likely to be true! Getting back into my spaceship, I say, take another look. Get out of your own way, and take another look.

If there is a gardener of any sort in this congregation listening or later reading this, you understand, don't you?

Did those of you who might not read The Old Farmer's Almanac know that "March is sugaring season? The sap gatherers are busy among the maples. Steam billows round the clock from the sugarhouses. For a couple of weeks, people all over northern New England turn out to take their share of the woods' bounty of maple syrup and sugar." Not so dark. Not dead.

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Gardeners might, better than some, also understand the difference between a nourishing hibernation and death. They understand that whether it is a bear or a bulb, hibernation is time when we lose superficial sight of the “thing”, but the “thing” is as alive as when it pokes its head or leaf out in spring. You can still feel the heartbeat in winter.

Gardeners might understand Indeed. May not even believe in death. I'm not sure I do any more.

They understand that the essence of the flower, or, yes, even a nice zucchini, is there whether or not you see it above the ground. It's even more than the seed.

The view of the flower is something you carry with you – the ‘something’ that gives you a sense of awe, startles your attention – the same sense of awe that I felt in those dark rooms, tooling around inner space.

The truth is that once you see it, however you get to see it – once you become aware of it, you should not let it go. William Blake told us it that was possible:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour

If heaven in a wildflower, what about the heaven in you? What about the heaven, the light, that you bring here today? The light that doesn't dim in winter. It's clear that you are more than even you with your brightest smile.

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And what about the night winter sky. You might aim your face toward the sun in summer, but in winter, do you search the skies at night for shooting stars? Do you make a point of finding the dates for the Taurid, Leonid, Andromedid, Geminid, Ursid, or Quadrantid meteor showers?

Do you gather up your friends and children bundled in fleece and wool, thermos your hot chocolate with the mini marshmallows, select just the right lawn chair, go find a spot relatively free of ambient light at a time possibly deep into the night, or at wee hours of the morning, and watch as your sacredness recognizes the sacredness of the cosmos? More light.

There is a Nepali and Indian word becoming popularized lately. The word is Namaste. People now use as sort of an informal “hello’ – you will even see t-shirts with smiley faces that say “Have a Namaste!”

It is great for us to create a global culture, but we have to be careful not to lose the beauty in the real meanings of words or rituals as we bring them into the west.

This word, Namaste, it means “The sacred in me recognizes the sacred in you”. It’s not recognition of the form that your spirit takes – it’s recognition of the spirit itself. It’s recognition of your light. You are the light.

Sitting there in the middle of a dark field at 4:00 in the morning, your light shines as a star into the night sky. The stars watch *your* trails of light and recognize themselves.

This is us in the “grand scheme of things”.

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But what about this particular day? On this Palm Sunday? Is it just a bittersweet day for Christians? This day when Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly, knowing full well that this week would end with the end of his life? The palms laid at his feet on this day would be in ashes by Friday. "Remember man that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return".

Take another look. Easter Season really is part of the ritual to remind everyone that regardless of what happens to physical form, whether it is ridiculed or praised, nourished or tortured, whether it is hibernating in or peeking through a frozen ground, the light that is the essence, integral to the web of life, cannot be dimmed. You and it, and everything, are the light.

And what *about* you on this day and in this building? You are part of the whole – the unity – Unitarians – regardless of whether you've signed the membership book or not. You share your life with the essence in the wooden and spirit angels right here.

Along with them, you are leaving your marks, maybe in subtle ways, but that's OK. Sometime you have to zoom into life to find those marks.

I am often awestruck by the beauty of these LaFarge windows, even when the sun is barely on them; that's an easy mark to find. Did you know that when the windows were restored, the lead between the pieces of glass was saved as much as possible? Want to know why? Because someone had the appreciation of the maker's marks.

Consider the hands that held the tools that made very specific marks upon the leading, and the people who looked at those marks and counted them as important as the window itself. That is one of those startling moments.

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Someone recognized ALL the light.

Maybe someone following you here in another generation will need to zoom into life to find your mark – but it will be there.

Underneath the paint in the front of the church is a brightly painted stencil – part of the original century plus design. Your hands in brush strokes join theirs here in the church and in Holly House every time you add a coat of paint to something.

Are you sitting in pew #9, where the armrest was modified to accommodate a very tall Hobart Ames in the early 1900s? I am sure he's happy to see you. Wonder who's original seat you're sitting in? Go into the vestibule at the back of the church sometime and read the pew plot.

What other hands have reached up the rope in the steeple to help you ring the bell?

Who smiles on you when you fix the doors or clean the kitchen, or polish the brass and bronze?

How many young lives have been touched by their elders here to form consciences that grow up to improve the quality of life for someone else?

What other happy cooks are stirring the pots and making the coffee at your side for meals and Social Hour?

How many hours of effort were added to yours to lovingly give – ANYTHING.

The gifts you have given in support of the congregation and to save this church are innumerable. Today, the one's that came before you no doubt, say "welcome" and thank you".

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There is love in the mortar here. There are soul marks all around.

Eckhart Tolle says that:

“The great arises out of small things that are honored and cared for. Everybody’s life really consists of small things....”

Namaste.

Amen