

SUNDAY SERVICE "This Clay Jug"
UU Stockton, IL July 23, 2017

Chalice Reading # 608

Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains! All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars. The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels. And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water. If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:
Friend, listen: The God whom I love is inside. — Kabir

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned,
if you can know despair or see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you. If you can look back with firm eyes,
saying this is where I stand. I want to know if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living, falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love or the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.
I have heard, in that fierce embrace,
even the gods speak of God. — David Whyte

Now I Become Myself

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"Hurry, you will be dead before--"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!
The black shadow on the paper
Is my hand; the shadow of a word
As thought shapes the shaper
Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.
As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted by love.
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

Story: For ten years, every day, as a king sat in his audience chamber, an ascetic beggar appeared and wordlessly gave him a piece of fruit. Thinking little of it, the king gave the gift to his treasurer who tossed it over the wall into the treasure house. One day a monkey got loose and hopped onto the king's lap. Playfully, the monarch gave him the fruit. The monkey bit into it and a jewel fell out and rolled across the floor. The king and treasurer hurried to look in the treasure house, where they found glittering jewels in the pile of rotten fruit.

Sermon:

Many years ago, when my new husband and I were just setting up housekeeping in southern California, he came home from the grocery store one day with a large bag of artichokes, although neither he nor I knew at that time that they were called artichokes. We are both midwesterners; we know carrots, potatoes, beets, and peas, but these spiny things were mysteries.

"What are they?" I ask him.

"I don't know; I thought you would." says he.

"Never saw one. They're kinda scary. Why'd you buy 'em?"

"On sale — 10 cents apiece. I bought 'em all."

That made perfect sense to me.

"Do you think they're edible or just decorative?"

"They were in the produce department, so I think they must be edible."

So, we began to peel this odd-looking fruit, thinking that there must be something inside the rough leaves. And we tore off one leaf after another and another, until we reached the very center, which consisted of a few strands of fluffy stuff, nothing to eat, certainly. We looked at one another in amazement and piled all the remaining fruit into a basket where it sat on the counter for a week or so, looking weird but decorative.

Sometimes, the search for the precious something at the center takes us on strange adventures into the unknown. Sometimes we pass right by the meaty stuff in our hurry to get to the center. But the whole point of the journey, as illustrated on the cover of your bulletin this morning, is that you begin, and you follow **all** the paths, looping around each of the four quarters, sometimes veering close to the center, but not quite there, until you have followed **all** the loops and turns and completed the circle. As May Sarton wrote, “Now I become myself, It’s taken time, many years and places.”

When we set out to find the center of ourselves, the authentic self, it takes time, as Mulan says, “When will my reflection show, who I am inside?” When will the outside correspond to what lies within? Mulan knew who she was, inside, when she was very young. Some people do, like Yehudi Menuhin, the violinist, or Maria Tallchief, the dancer, who were born into families that understood and supported their gifts, though the world would not until they had devoted themselves to study and practice for many years.

Others go through their early and mid years, even their entire lives, without a glimmer of a clue what they want to do, what they have the patience and fortitude to study and practice — to ardently pursue, to become, or without knowing to whom or what they want to devote their work and their lives. On the other hand, many, many people just fall into the most available and ready work and then stay with it because of economic necessity. Alas for the society that does not encourage its artists, musicians, scientists and dreamers. Alas for the society that values and finances building towers and walls and machines whose only purpose is war — death and destruction.

Most traditions and most of the world's folklore suggest that we each have a deep way of knowing within us. It goes by many names: Intuition, Higher Power, Buddha Nature, Christ Consciousness, Holy Spirit. How and when do we contact this wisdom? And why is it that we so seldom contact it before we make a shambles of our lives instead of years later when we try to make sense of what the samhill happened.

James Hillman, author of "The Soul's Code," insists that every single person has a gift, but not every society is open or wise enough to have devised a use for every gift that its citizens bring to it. The wee gifted ones are so like the beggar in the story. Seemingly simple gifts are offered to the rulers of the family, the school, or the country, who do not judge them by their true value but rather by their commonness, and the shabby appearance of the one who presents them. No wonder so many people choose to go along with the crowd and ply whatever trade comes to hand that others will pay for. It's a sensible thing to do. But, Hillman warns, a gift unused and unrecognized, and thus dishonored, is likely to go rogue and express itself in wild, disorganized and possibly harmful ways — as an addiction, an obsession, a restlessness and wanderlust that keeps the people who are so afflicted distracted, unfocused and unhappy.

Perhaps that is why our society offers so many distractions, like the glittering, blinking lights of shops, pubs, video games, Facebook, and Twitter — because there is a ready market here for distractions. Who, in their right mind, and on the right path, would have time for these pursuits, and what are they distracting us from? From asking ourselves pertinent and impertinent questions about what the sam-hill we think we are doing with our "one wild and precious life." Wild and precious. That's a line from a poem by Mary Oliver, called "A Summer Day" from a collection of poems published by our own Beacon Press. In this

short poem, Oliver spends the day not accomplishing much, by the standards of output and efficiency, but accomplishing just what she needs to do.

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?
from *New and Selected Poems*, 1992
Beacon Press, Boston, MA*

Yes, well, Mary Oliver is a poet, and part of her job description might well read: pay attention, kneel in grass, do nothing, and be blessed. Then write praise-songs to the Beloved who brought you the grasshopper. Didn't the grasshopper fly into her hand in the same way that the jeweled fruit came into the hand of the king? Delivered fresh each day and worthy of attention, sitting-with, as the meditators say. . . and praise?

Now that I am employed only half-time, I can tell you for a certainty, that most people work too hard and too long, unless they are working within what David Whyte calls "the center of your

longing.” Who has the time to sit in the grass and just observe what goes on? Yet, this is precisely what is of most benefit in the hours of a day — the time spent just seeing what happens in the natural world, which also happens to be the real world.

But most people are either working full-time to earn a living or are busy at tent-making work, which is a phrase used to describe what the early Christian apostles had to do — make money by making tents or carpentry, or some such enterprise, and preach the good news on the side — moonlighting for the fun and love of it. And because they were “called.” Unless we set aside the time to just be and not be doing, the doing will take up all our time. Didn’t Northcote Parkinson write a book about that?

Years after my first encounter with an artichoke, I learned to cook them and even to devise a few tasty dips for them. And they held a lesson for me. Don’t wait to find the absolute center, because it does take “time, many years and places.” Taste what is there, in hand, all along the way, even though it looks strange or difficult. I think this is the way to follow all the loops in the labyrinth before approaching the center. And sometimes, along the way, we discover something about ourselves, what is contained inside this clay jug, when the clay jug is a metaphor for a person’s body and a person’s life.

I’m going to tell you how it worked out for me, because that’s the story I know best. But we could do the same perusal of almost any person’s life and make discoveries and see some deeper wisdom than our own operating. My hope is that you take some time to look at your own life in a similar way, not to lament nor yet to celebrate, but just to be with in quiet appreciation for all that was and is.

Here’s what I’ve learned and what I think:

When I was very young, just entering the first quarter of the loops in my labyrinth of time, I wanted to be a singer, because, well, Jeanette MacDonald. Oh, to be like her, so blond and pretty and singing with Nelson Eddy, as the scene fades. . . . The extent of my

ambition was to have what the movies showed was the result of being able to sing — universal approval.

Did I give a thought to why or for whom I wanted to sing? Did I want to study and work so that someone might find encouragement for their struggle, or someone might be comforted or chastened or set free from some affliction? No, my early wish was for myself only. Now, I take most of the blame for my young wish, but I lay some of it on my ancestors, too — those Druids and Bards whose task was to sing praise songs for the heroes and leaders of the people, who diligently passed the seed of song down the generations until — !! bang, it missed me entirely and landed upon my sister, Bette, then whoop-sa-daisy, bang — landed on Danielle! Okay, there is only one a generation, and I was not chosen.

Meanwhile, there is life to be lived, and way led on to way, into the second quarter. This time reminds me of a line from “Zorba the Greek,” The Englishman asks Zorba if he has ever married. And Zorba says, “Am I not a man? Of course I’ve been married. Wife, house, kids, everything ... the full catastrophe!” Well, same thing — full catastrophe. I married a man who, honest to whatever gods you want to name, looked better than Nelson Eddy, and he was musical! When we acquired a piano from my cousin, he sat down and plunked a few keys and found a few chords and before the week was out, he was making up tunes, both hands, all ten fingers.

Had I ever inquired whether he was agreeable to me, or whether I was good or agreeable to him? No I thought outer beauty was an indicator of something equally wonderful inside.

Alas, we did not get along or ever learn to get along, though we were both uncommonly stubborn and stuck it out for 17 years. Meanwhile, we created five beautiful and amazing children who made our lives more complicated and also more worthwhile.

On to the third quarter when I finally realized that I had kiboshed every thing I tried to do. It might be time to do something entirely different — maybe get serious about education. My Bohemian

Uncle had told me years earlier that education is a ticket to a better life, and at last, long after he was gone and would not see that his advice was good, but too early, I was considering that he might have a point. So I betook myself to Rock Valley and Rockford College, Taught school for a few years, discovered the UU Church and fell deeply, madly in love with theological/spiritual freedom and endless discovery. In the church library I found Joseph Campbell's life-changing book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that offered a fresh perspective on the question that the poet poses, whether there be one god or many. Betook myself to Meadville/Lombard Theological School and The University of Chicago to see if I might apprentice myself to ministry in this church.

By then, my children are with their father, I'm 42 years old, doing graduate work at a world-class Divinity School. I'm way over my head! But if I've learned nothing else, I've learned to persevere, so I plod on. I left school in 1980, for ministry in Boise, Idaho, promising I would send the final paper soon. Did I? No, I returned to Meadville on sabbatical and graduated, 10 years late, 1991. Well, when did I ever do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time? Never-hardly-ever.

Now, looking back at the beginning from near the end and center of the labyrinth at my mixed up but quite wonderful life, I see some things that were not apparent then. One: It's a very good thing that I did not get the gift I wanted in the beginning, because I would have gone mad with pride, with ego. I had enough trouble with selfishness as it was. Two: I see now that the beautiful sound I longed for — both to hear and to pass on, was the sound of story and the hidden gem of truth in the stories. Three: What I thought was an impediment — my lack of musical talent, was really a re-direction, a road-sign, a protection, and long-learning to let go, and go on and wait and see. It taught me to deal with disappointment and the word "No."

In other quarters of my circle, I learned that one can choose badly and still have some good outcomes despite oneself, can fail miserably, be lost and overwhelmed, and still find uses for every

wrong turn, every mis-step. It's an odd karma. I think the theological term for it might be redemption.

Now I'm beginning to see what is in "this clay jug," Now my outer life matches my inner dream of being a praise-singer, but I have to embrace my limitations and agree to just tell the stories of the ones who bring us wisdom or poems, or beauty, or joy. To tell you over and over that the world is mysterious, and beautiful, and always unfolding new life out of the old, that inside, you may find pine mountains and seven oceans and music from invisible strings, things yet to be discovered or created and brought forth in humble hands.

Closing Words

How has your life been blessed with encouragement and necessary re-direction?

How have you dealt with the consequences of love, or despair, or finding the center of your longing?

What are you doing; what have you done with your one wild and precious life? What is your story? — Rev. Armida Alexander

Prayer for Freedom From Suffering

- **Buddha**

*May all beings everywhere plagued
with suffering of body and mind
be freed from their illnesses.
May those who are frightened
find new courage,
and may those who are bound
by tyrants or old habits of mind gain freedom.
May the powerless find energy,
and may people everywhere
learn to befriend one another.
May those who find themselves in
fearful places of violence or oppression--
and all children, the aged, the unprotected—
and everyone who struggles for life*

*be guarded by beneficent angels,
and may every being swiftly attain Buddha-hood.*