

I Am Alive

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, February 4, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

What the Heart Cannot Forget by Joyce Sutphen

Heart by Dorianne Laux

Affirmation by Assata Shakur

SERMON

“Write down five words that describe your identity”

the presenter said to us -

“it can be related to your job, your family, your interests or passions, it can be your personality or work ethic or approach to relationships – five words that describe the core of who you are.”

What words to choose?

What words of family – husband, father, son...

What words of career – preacher, pastor, activist...

What words of identity – millennial, Midwesterner...

well, who am I kidding – not Midwesterner - southern Minnesotan...

So I put some words down

and then they said, “now...cross one off”

And we had to decide – what was least central to who we were?

“Now look at your list, make any changes...

and cross another one off.”

Oh no – I could see where this was going.

It got down to three – minister, husband, father –

“cross one off.”

then, no offense to all of you, but minister flew right out the window – and I was asked to choose – husband, or father.

And that’s the moment where the heart breaks open.

And remind yourself of what is at your core.

And you try to say – well, these are all part of an integrated whole, I can’t fully separate these.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, true - whatever – but for this exercise – too bad.

That’s the point – the take a hard close look at your identity,

about culture and family and work and passion –

to get right down to the heart of the matter.

What words would you choose, what words would you cross off,
and then – how might that practice
that painful, clarifying practice -
impact how you live?

It takes courage to simplify a life
because it causes you to make choices and decisions
about what is truly, actually,
the most important thing, or things, to you –
to know your limitations and your gifts;
to know what is calling your heart
and find how you can live in constant rhythm
with your deepest held values
and make them come alive
in the constraints and realities of every day life.

It might not mean changing careers,
even if you have that privilege and choice –
it might mean how you do your work
or how you live your identities
more fully, more authentically,
and infuse them with the values you hold dear:
justice, inclusion, compassion, hope, resilience, love.

Naomi Shihab Nye says it this way,
*I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.*

Where in our lives can we center down,
filter out the distractions
and find our core,
and our courage,
to speak plainly and act plainly
with our deepest convictions.

*The heart shifts on its own accord, writes poet Dorianne Laux,
it can skip like a child,
or be an empty room –
its chambers can go on and on, either to orchids or to the smell of burnt toast –
it can close its doors and curl in,
a heart of cement, bricks, boards – dusty and unreadable –
hard-headed, heart of coal, making wrong turns -
or it can be harmonica, tinsel,
hands full – etched deeply with history,
heart of gold, heart of the child of a choir –
with its feet up reading scores...*

Hearts do that.
Souls do that.

They are shape-shifters
impacted and sideswiped by whatever forces are floating
through the fragile air of our lives –
broken apart by grief or loss or pain
mended together again by love and compassion and good friends.

And no matter if it is something good, or something bad,
whether you are forced to cross something off the list of who you are
or are blessed to add something to the growing list of who you are
the impact of that
is like putting your finger to your wrist,
to your temple,
feeling the pulse and the miracle
that you woke to the day
that your existence is magic –
nothing like a shift of the heart
to remind you –
you are alive.

I was at a birthday party for a very young niece, 1 year old.

Maybe you can picture this -
the adorning family gathering round
for opening gifts –
wrapped boxes or bags filled with tissue paper.

And it's almost like one of the first experiences
of family-style coaching –
There is a certain age when a young child
begins this Olympic-like family sporting event
by taking the tissue paper out
and then becoming fixated and enthralled with the tissue paper.
And once past the tissue paper
then they just love the bag, or the box,
or whatever packaging
and you see all the different personalities in the room
revealed in the process –
the type As wanting a good order and tracking system
of cards first, from whom, read them aloud,
and then move into the package.
Or the free spirits simply cheering the child's whims on...
but inevitably someone says,
“there's more”...”keep looking”...
And in the coaching, and in the gift itself –
we realize quickly –
we all have many layers –
and as beautiful and fun as distractions can be –
if we keep searching, deeper,
we might just find something more.

We are a layered people
encumbered by things cast upon us
by family, by culture, by our own selves –
we are a layered people
stuck in the midst of a swirling storm
of political climates and newsfeeds and misinformation
and prejudice and fear and a lack of understanding –

we are a layered people –
like rings on a tree or like an onion
or a wall covered in paint or wallpaper over years, decades, centuries.

Layer by layer, we are built;
it is what makes us who we are –
and yet – there is something at the center.

It can feel vulnerable to peel away all that exterior protection –
and yet and still,
more often than not,
when you look a little deeper
and closer to the beating center of your self
you find something more true
and deep and lasting
at the core – cordo – meaning courage, cordo meaning heart.

I am magic writes the poet Assata Shakur
Life and all its good and bad and ugly things
scary things which I would like to forget
beautiful things which I would like to remember –
the whole messy lovely true story of myself
pulses within me.

You are your collective self.

And this brilliant and beautiful invitation
to own and recognize and realize the fullness of who we are –
means not taking ourselves, and this task of working our core
so, so, so seriously all the time.

Sometimes the pulse of life and this work can feel a little intense.
Like recently on the show *Blackish*,
the children ate high-sugared cereal which was unusual for them
and one of them said
“I can feel my heart through my eyeballs”
and then ran out of the room.

Unless there is some levity in life, some moments of humor and humility,
this type of soul-searching core-curating work of the spirit
can send one feeling that the pounding of the heart
is more like an edgar allen poe writing than a graceful invitation –
it can send you running right out of the room.

Part of being rooted in our own identities
is being playful,
where the heart puts its feet up,
plays the harmonica,
and sometimes, perhaps more regularly than we often like to allow –
to laugh at ourselves.

Maybe some of you say this recently –
Surly Brewing Company in Minneapolis posted a *Welcome to Minnesota* message
for those travelling to Minneapolis for the Superbowl.

I feel, as living in Minnesota my whole life, it's okay for me to share a few in jest –
poking fun at Minnesota culture...so just a few:

Hotdish, not casserole.

You'll engage in a conversation about the weather with a native Minnesotan. We literally cannot help it. It's a compulsion. We got a ton of snow last week, but it was nothing like the Halloween Blizzard of 1991. See? We're already doing it.

If you get to a 4-way stop at roughly the same time as another driver(s), your best bet is to just abandon the car, get out, and walk to your destination, as who gets to go first will never be resolved by conventional means.

And the article, hoping to humorously welcome people to Minneapolis, goes on about pop and soda, passive aggression, the true home of the Juicy Lucy, how many Minnesotans say “Ope” when we accidentally bump into people, and a brief history of our built-over stadiums, including a polite request to not mention how many super bowls our own team has been to.

Because it's important to make fun of oneself, sometimes –
to take things, when it makes sense and isn't unintentionally
bashing or alienating someone else, a little light-heartedly.

And, even in their sarcasm, they take a moment – simply stated but deeply
profound, about meaning and identity and pride in something important; they said:

*Please enjoy First Avenue. It's an old Greyhound bus station.
Prince and some other local kids made it a church.*

Whatever is the core –
beauty, compassion, love, god, spirit, resilience –
then a courageous life is about
what the old hymn says
every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart – I will pray
or I will pause, or I will take a breath, a moment,
to remember who I am and who I am trying, every day, to be.

Every time I feel the spirit – sings the old spiritual –
cased in language of a people longing for freedom of the body
while at the same time singing the truth of the freedom of their soul
in the present moment.

Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray

stirred by whatever source of wisdom of love or truth or beauty
I will feel the spirit, the breath and pulse of life itself moving within me
to say something I have been afraid to say,
to do something I have been afraid to do,
to take one more step, say one more prayer,
so that I might center down again
and feel the pulse of the miracle of being alive
and remember what values,
what identity, what hopes and dreams
course through my veins –
I will pause and breathe and give thanks
and sing a song of who I might yet become.

Because the thing is,
all that courage asks of you
is to be bold enough,
strong enough,
willing enough,
to feel and to know your own pulse
and all of you that is coursing in your veins
as miracle enough
to give you life.
Again and again and again –
because you are magic.

May it be so, and Amen.