

Building up a World
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
Sunday, October 29, 2017

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

Work by Naomi Shihab Nye:

On Gathering Artists by Alberto Rios

Sorting by Twyla Hansen

SERMON

*Framers of the earth,
electricity made of dreams,
a song of colors yet unnamed,
who knows what to make of us?
writes the poet.*

A few years back,
at a small coffee house concert,
a singer-songwriter spoke of the oddity of being a musician as a profession.

*I make something that is just a little more than air – what we call music –
something intangible, something barely there.*

She spoke of trying to explain it to her father –
*you know, I take life experiences,
and put them into rhythm and nuance
to help connect the beauty and the harshness of the world
to the human soul – breaking hearts open to experience this life more fully.*

“okay” said her gruff, matter of fact father.
“But does it have health insurance?”

When it comes to following one’s own heart
and bringing into the world
the skills or gifts or talents you love the most,
there is always the wondering,
the questioning,
from within oneself
and from social or family expectations,
of how practical it is – how functional it is.

We question if we are good enough at it,
if we have what it takes
if we have the skill, the composure,
the right balance of technicality or innovation –
and often it comes right down
to one of the most persistent, difficult, deepest questions of humanity –
am I enough?

Good enough, smart enough, talented enough?

And as much as most religions,
at least at their best and most beautiful core,
offer an emphatic “YES! You are enough!”
the reason many keep coming back to church,
to the synagogue or temple, the mosque or cathedral,
corner coffee shop or kitchen table –
wherever their deepest spiritual conversations happen –
is because we need reminders,
we need companions,
we need co-creators
who say yes – you are enough –
what you create and offer to the world is enough
and we are all still growing, changing, and making mistakes –
and that’s okay.
So let’s take a few breaths, and make some music,
have some coffee
and begin to believe, over and over,
that mistakes and all –
we are enough.

In theological school, working with a classmate in summer custodial work,
it was one of our annual jobs to clean, scrub, and wax the tile floor
in the basement of the castle-like seminary.

After we did the initial deep scrub with the intense,
weaving back and forth at times beyond control the electric floor scrubber –
then mop rinsed, then mop rinsed again,
and set the floor fans for it to dry completely.
We ate our pizza – drank our beer, and moved to the final application – wax.

We made it part way down the hall just fine,
carefully spreading a thin layer of wax, little by little, slowly, delicately,
using the old rusty pail since modern plastic would deteriorate –
we won’t think about the fumes we had to breathe.

And then, it happened – we kicked the bucket.
Literally kicked the bucket of wax over.

It was full of wax –
which dries quickly and could ruin the floor if over applied.
We quickly jumped out of our laid back daze to crisis mode.

As my classmate Jake simply screamed “Oh my God! Oh my God!”
in the basement halls of the seminary, I yelled,
“what do we do? What do we do?”
And we were both thinking,
“My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

We grabbed our mops and quickly, carefully,
spread it all along down the long hallway –
thinning it out, trying not to step in it;
and instead of trying to stop it,
or grab towels to soak up this mistake -
we adjusted the plan –
like adding roller skates to the gap between the feet and the ground,
or a fantastic ruffled collar to the extra long neck –
we grabbed our magic brooms
and make that floor shine –
beaming with an unintentional amount of beauty.

That’s what happens sometimes.
In our attempts to live ordered lives,
in our attempts to follow correct methods and protocol
and time-tested best practices –
sometimes, we just screw up,
we make a mess
we kick something over,
something spills all over the landscape of our life,
and all of the sudden our moment, our work, our labor,
our sense of identity or vocation changes,
whether we planned it or not –
and if we’re lucky, we work our best and quickest and most carefully
to smooth it out and make it okay, even if it was not the plan,
and, just sometimes – it shines.

Maybe not how it was supposed to – but we do our best,
and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

We don't have to be perfect,
and we don't have to make things perfectly.
We don't have to be the best at
whatever it is –
what matters is if it is something we love –
some passion, some joy,
that makes our heart sing –
some way that we help build up this world –
in metal or wood,
in moments or music,
in the way we interact with others
or with the earth
or with ourselves.

We are co-creators of this world -
the small circles of our own lives
the wider circles of this interdependent web –
we are creators, crafters, laborers
for what this world has been, is, and could yet be.

Our skills are many, our tools are many –
and we need it all;
the tangible and the intangible,
the practical and the seemingly impractical,
which, in perhaps the deepest sense,
are the very things that practically save our lives
and give us joy and beauty and hope.

Every piece of this fabric that we weave
is part of building up this world –

It isn't about the *what* – it is about the *how* -
how we use our time and resources, our energy and skills,
because how we do whatever we do,
how we infuse our heart into whatever task or creation it is,
matters -

to write an article
to smile at a stranger
to really listen to a patient
to sing
to make a really good cup of coffee
to knit love into thread
to notice how the sunlight comes through the trees
to make an engine run again
to keep learning
to make the floor shine for the thousandth time
to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's and change the font,
to send another email and answer another call
to plant the seed
to knead the dough
to stuff another envelope
to stock the shelf
to start the conversation
to fold the sheet
to hold the hand
to wipe the nose
to dry the tear
to do things well, to fail, to let go, and then, when you are all done, to do it,
the best you know how, over and over again and again.

With these hands

writes Nancy Wood,

I have held a bird with a broken wing.

With these hands I have [held]

my children in the sun.

With these hands I have made

a house of living earth.

With these hands I have worked

a field of growing corn.

With these hands I have learned to kill

As much as I have learned to live.

These hands are the tools of my spirit.

*These hands are the warriors of my anger.
These hands are the limitations of my self.
These hands grow old and feel
unfamiliar walls
As they reach out to find
the world I used to know.*

My grandfather has been a creator his whole life –
in some of the most tangible ways.
Fixing engines and flying planes,
weaving and fitting pipe and venting through walls and flooring of homes
like a jigsaw puzzle,
building a business in a small town,
and in his spare time,
in an ever-expanding garage,
restoring old cars.

Mostly Fords, but a couple of Chevys, you know, to be inclusive –
A 1928 plumbing pickup, a 1929 Roadster, a 1930 Station Wagon
A 1918 Chevy touring car and a 1936 Chevy pick-up.

A couple of them he restored from old frames found in river beds –
and the others he found plans for, ordered rare parts,
and put it together himself – piece by piece,
the engine, the frame, the painting – all of it.
I learned to drive stick shift in the green 1928 pick up when I was 16,
probably to the horror of my mother,
but Grandpa kept a cool composer
as I repeatedly stalled it on the small highways surrounding Winnebago, MN.

Up into his 90s, as my grandma and his spouse of over 60 years died,
he was building a push and pull model-A engine airplane.

I think it was what sustained his spirit through the grief –
knowing that he would likely never fly it.

Even when asked, he would say,
“well, I’m over 90 –
*I don’t really care if its safe,
I just want to see if it works –
so if I can get it over to the airport,
and get the engine running,
well, I might just accidentally take off.”*

Picture him amid the rust—

writes Twyla Hansen

*hand tools, jars of screws,
bolts, half-useful wrenches—
assembling miniature farm
wagons, windmills, trains,
as if one day he would return.*

*his last unfinished project, [the poet writes]
a sea-faring ship,
its instructions and pattern carefully numbered and folded—
the glued, carved, and sanded basswood—
as if he sensed this full-blown
final creation
might help him sail across that ancient sea.*

Our creations –
tangible and intangible,
outlast us.

More than the cars or the plane,
what was created
was an experience
of sitting in those antique cars as a boy with my grandma
as I pretended to drive her to New York, or, more often
in deep hope, pretended to drive her to the Dairy Queen,
never leaving the garage –
it was grandpa creating the car,
and grandma creating the playful moment
for me to find joy and love.

What was created were memories, a narrative,
of who were my people
and that we worked hard
and things were meant to be used, not gathering dust –
what was created,
more than the objects,
was the story of a person and a people –
not some perfect creation and was placed in glass,
but something that could interact in the real world,
kicking up dust,
stalling on the highway,
taking us on a journey –
holding within them more than just passengers –
holding dreams and love.
What we create, together,
changes the landscape,
it changes the narrative,
it changes the experience
of what it means to be alive,
what it means to be human,
what it means to love, and grieve, and hope.

You have a toolbox –
we all do.

What is in it?
What tools, skills, gifts,
what passion, hopes, dreams,
what is ours
to give to this world?

What life, what world, are we creating?

Whether it is in some paid profession
or in the garage or the garden or the pub
at the end of the day –
whether it has health insurance
or is something that floats there in the air,

whether it is intentional
with detailed plans and clear guidelines, carefully numbered and folded,
or it is a bucket that got kicked over and spilled over everything
and all of the sudden
you needed to turn that mistake into something beautiful –
we are creating
memories and stories
moments and narratives
imperfect, flawed, beautiful.

We are builders, planters, growers, tenders,
of our own and the dreams of our ancestors;
our very lives
are unfinished projects,
with plans we have drafted and written
and edited and scrapped and started over a thousand times -
worked on and tinkered until our last moments,
to carry us across some ancient sea.

And there, among the rust of other creations,
and the blank page of what yet might be,
what are the tools in our hands,
just waiting, ready,
longing,
to be put to work –
to build something,
beautiful enough,
joyful enough,
simple enough,
to hold you,
and to hold what you are,
just now,
becoming?