

Minister's Report

I enjoyed my time at the minister's conference and Annual General Meetings. I came back inspired and uplifted and hope for the future of what Unitarian ministry might become. There were many highlights including the inspiring anniversary service and sermon delivered by Rev Ant Howe, the tutor at Unitarian College. I am very impressed by the work being done by the new college. He and Helen Mason are doing an excellent job. It was also wonderful to see both Rev John and Rev Celia Midgely being made honorary members of the GA. Dot Hewardine was also honoured too. All have offered great service to the Unitarian faith. They have given their all, all their lives.

It got me thinking about how we who carry the flame today will live and the legacy we will leave for the future. At the "General Assembly Annual Meetings the keynote speech, the John Reilley Beard lecture was delivered by Roman Krznaric, an author and speaker, what you might call a modern-day public philosopher. He is the author of, amongst other books, of "The Good Ancestor." His talk was on this subject.

His book "The Good Ancestor" is a critique of short-term thinking. The problems with only thinking about our immediate time and place. This is the case on a personal level, but also in the public sphere. He suggests that our attention spans are shrinking at exactly the moment in world history when our actions and decisions will have the most profound imaginable impacts on future generations of people and potentially all of life on earth. This is not good, to vastly understate the situation. We are like people who are eating seeds that we should be planting, not because we are starving but because we are bored, anxious, and utterly addicted to instant gratification. We want what we want, and we want it now, patience is a virtue that has gone the way of the dodo. Our obsession with our time and place has made fed our self-centredness and shrunk our lives.

Krznaric suggests that our troubles both personal and collective is due to our short time thinking; that we need to be guided into long-term thinking; that our time horizon needs to be lengthened. That we need to be thinking about the consequences not only within our lifetimes or our children's lifetimes, but centuries out. This is the call that is issued by the Seventh-Generation principle, a philosophy developed by the Iroquois people that says decisions we make today should be beneficial and sustainable for seven generations. The way Roman Krznaric puts it is that we need a modified Golden Rule: "Do unto future generations as you would have had past generations do unto you."

This is perfectly exemplified in the question that he puts to the world, which comes under the books title, a provocative quote from the immunologist, Jonas Salk, inventor of the vaccine for polio. "The most important question we must ask ourselves is, 'Are we being good ancestors?'"

To be a good ancestor is to live fully alive in this life now, to love this time and place, yes to be fully present in it, to love honour and respect it, to cherish it, to be a bride or bridegroom to it. In so doing we might just become the good ancestors we would like to be. In so doing we become the ancestor of our own future. We create our present at the same time writing our legacy with each feeling, with each thought, with each action, with each word, with each breath. The legacy we leave is the one we live now. In so doing we become good ancestors.

Everything matters, how we live now matters, just as how those who lived before us mattered. All life is connected and interconnected, past present and future. So how we live today will affect what is yet to come. Let us do unto future generations as we would have had past generations do unto us.

Love and respect

Rev Danny

Dates

Tuesday 21st May at 11am “Our Common Search for Meaning: How to Be a Good Ancestor”

Extra Material

“Posing an Open and Generous Question” by Parker J. Palmer (Lois)

The following quote by Rainier Maria Rilke — from *Letters to a Young Poet* — is never far from my mind.

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will find them gradually, without noticing it, and live along some distant day into the answer.”

It reminds me to pay attention to the “big questions” I ask myself because they help shape the course of my life.

If I want a life-giving answer, I'd better ask a life-giving question, because “some distant day” I may find that I've lived my way into an answer — for better or for worse! A question like “How can I get even with those who have wronged me?” creates a very different life-path than “How can I best serve the needs I see around me?” or “How can I more fully enjoy the beauty of the natural world?”

A few years ago, as I entered my 70s, I began pondering a question I thought of as a good one: “What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to hang onto?”

But the more I “lived into” that question, the more uneasy I felt about it. So, I asked a few friends to help me explore my uneasiness. By the end of that session, my question had morphed into something better: “What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to give myself to?”

“What do I want to hang onto?” is a clingy question, with a whiff of desperation about it. But “What do I want to give myself to?” is an open and generous question. That question has taken me into places where I have found new life, and I’m grateful.

From “Plants that Speak, Souls that Sing: Transform Your Life with the Spirit of Plants”
By Fay Johnstone (Carolyn, Frances)

Treating nature as a teacher.

"One of my favorite ways of connecting with nature consciousness with a question to solve is to go for a walk, either alone or with my dog.

"Next time you have something on your mind, perhaps a decision that you need to make or solution that you need to find for a problem, take yourself on a walk out to a green space for a minimum of 20 minutes. Hold your question in your heart with an intention to be shown the solution.

"While you walk, keep your attention on your heart space and open your eyes, ears and all your other senses, both physical and invisible, to the nature around you. Be open to finding the solution to your challenge — or at the very least a new perspective on it — while you walk.

"After your walk check in with yourself and see how you feel now. Has anything shifted? How does your problem look now?"

“We Rise Again in Lines of Promised Land” by Parker J Palmer

My dad grew up in Waterloo, Iowa. Some of my loveliest summer memories come from the annual pilgrimage my family made to visit my grandparents, Jesse and Jennie Palmer, née Parker — which, in case you were wondering, is how I got my name! Fifty miles northeast of Waterloo, there’s a beautiful hilltop cemetery overlooking a “sweet especial rural scene,” to steal a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins. For

seven decades, I've loved visiting this peaceful place — full of old trees, old headstones, and old stories — where some of my ancestors are buried.

The rolling Iowa countryside, with its gentle risings and fallings, is alive with feeling for me. Several generations of people I loved — people who gave me life — lived and died on this land.

Several years ago, those feelings came together in a poem about life, death, and the intimate connection between earth's body and our own.

“Promised Land”

by Parker J. Palmer

We and this green and supple land
Created by caress
From darkness drawn by Lover's hand
In chaos stroked with tenderness
Evoked from naught the sensual line
And loving bodied forth
These human-torsoed turns of earth
That lie here naked, unashamed
Echoing the earthy shapes
Of our own sculpted frame

This downy, downing nape of neck
This jointed shoulder, rising breast
This languid belly of a hill
This darkling, moist and fertile dell
This lank and sloping plain of thigh
And wind through grass a lover's sigh
The grass that greens and overgrows
Earth's body and ours in repose

We die caressed by Lover's hand
We rise again in lines of promised land

“People Who Came Before Us” by Chrissy Bushyager

“We all carry, inside us, people who came before us.”
—Liam Callanan

“He was just like me!” my teenage son, Kaleb, exclaimed as he wandered around the barn. We were visiting my 95-year old grandma in western Pennsylvania. Kaleb had asked if he could look around the barn and grandma said, “It’s all junk down there, but you’re welcome to it.”

The “junk” was tools and supplies that my grandfather had saved over his years of working in coal mines and farming his land. Pap died in 1994 and his barn had stayed mostly undisturbed, though tractors and machinery had been sold off years ago.

Kaleb is one of those kids who has always wanted to figure out how things work. When other kids were smiling and waving at their parents on a carousel, Kaleb was staring straight up at the mechanism that made the horse go up and down. He’s taken over my shed to build a woodworking and metalworking studio. He salvages things and finds ways to build what he needs with those items.

In Pap’s barn, he connected with an ancestor who encountered the world in a similar way. Kaleb marveled at the hand-crank drill press and shelves that Pap had built from salvaged wood and cinder blocks. He wondered aloud about specific things that would have been used in the mines and on railroads. He showed me an ax with a blackened handle and said, his voice filled with quiet reverence, “Look, he made his handles just like I do.”

Pap was reluctant to throw things away. My mom said, “He always said this stuff would be worth something someday.” And yes, some of these old tools have monetary value, but the greater value was in the deepening of my son’s identity as he felt this connection across generations. It was the value of the time we all spent, four generations of family sitting on my grandma’s porch, reminiscing together about my grandfather.

Thank you, Pap, for seeing the worth in these everyday things. I wish you could have spent time with your great-grandson in person. The two of you would have built amazing things.

Prayer

God of our ancestors, may we find the ways in which we can connect across generations. May we see the worth in our everyday things.