

Flourish of Possibilities 9/16/18 at UUFO

SERMON (clean text)

Good morning, this third Sunday in September, a month of beginnings for many of us --Back to school, regular commitments, perhaps new projects.... It is the week after Rosh Hashanah, or Jewish New Year, began and we are in the midst of their high holy days, which end with Yom Kippur, the day of atonement which starts at sundown next Tuesday.... *Shana Tova!*

To repeat the first lines from John O'Donahue's opening words this morning,

"blessed be the longing that brought you here and quickens your soul with wonder."

Today let us wonder about possibilities....

Back in the middle of the sunny summer we have had, I met with Pat Lucey to discuss which of several lay lead services I might be interested in leading during this coming "church year." Being a woman who loves options and adventures, BUT whose eyes are often bigger than her stomach, I was very attracted to this topic of "possibilities" (and to other topics , so you will see me again this year).

Not only am I enthusiastic about many ideas and projects, but I also need to take time to be silent, do inner work, write in my journal, kneel at the altar of the weeds in my garden, walk along the river and look for herons, or share my doubts and discouragements with loving listeners in quiet places.

The reflective parts of my summer included several inspiring audiobooks, and soon after agreeing to be your speaker today, I was listening to the Irish poet John O'Donohue's introduction to his lovely book, *To bless the space between us.*

First I responded to his assurance that
“...to begin the day with blessing ... frames your day with light and healing and possibilities ...” O, thought I, these are guidelines I believe in!

— and then

I seized on another phrase — “A Flourish of possibilities” — to become the title of my sermon — what potential for some rich explorations!

However, only two weeks ago I found I had misquoted O’Donahue in my notes! His actual words are: ...”*we find ourselves vulnerable to a flourish of possibility* (The singular, not the plural noun) *and [he continues] suddenly we find ourselves negotiating a new threshold...*“ There I was, myself, at an unexpected and new threshold of sorts, feeling vulnerable to the possibility that I had misrepresented this wonderful poet and philosopher!

Initially I considered changing my title, despite the late date, but Wendy liked the misquoted words, and I decided to go forward with them, and their literal flourish, their extravagant abundance, of possibilities.

“A Flourish of possibilities“ IS a wonderful topic for this time of year! Let’s Think of both words as expansive — FLOURISH and “possibilities”... In different John O’Donahue’s words I invite you to see “... [your] *lives as voyages of discovery, creativity and compassion.*”

I wonder,
what ARE you considering as new directions, interests, different concerns;

where ARE you personally hoping to change, subtract or expand — even as summer harvests come to fruition and the days grow shorter?

Take a centring breath now and bring some of those possibilities into focus, Let your imagination flourish: BREATHE... what might be possible? we will be looking at those hopes (or anxieties) further through three different Lenses today:

The first lens is point of view: I choose the point of view that we are always good, (good not perfect), and doing our best.

The second lens is respecting questions, giving uncertainty some space — and leaning into “the I don’t know place.” I actually gave a sermon here at the UUFO about 17 months ago on what this can mean, which I intend to review briefly.

The third lens through which to look at “a flourish of possibilities” **is the power of deep listening and trusting our inward knowing.**

This is the basis of Quaker clearness committees, a powerful aid in decision making.

(4-15 mins)

As you know, I am a member of the Ottawa Friends Meeting, which means I am a regular “go to Sunday meeting (Quaker meeting) person,” though I enjoyed working with UUs for many years, & often call myself a “Quakertarian.” So my hope today is to share three short times of silence (or Quaker worship) with you during three flourishes of possibilities.

My plan is to preface each of those moments of quiet reflection with what Quakers would call queries, or searching, open questions, sink into the deep silence together, and then ask you to respond very briefly in different ways which I will specify.

I have great faith in the power of listening, so giving you these opportunities to listen to yourself and perhaps one another will also segway well to the Quaker concept of “clearness committees” — a useful tool for anyone dancing with possibilities, and the third lens which I spoke of.

Starting with the first lens, let’s look at “the flourish of possibilities” from the point of view that we are always good, (good not perfect), and doing our best.

As I thought about this season of transition, and the theme, I realized there are many KINDS of possibilities in our daily experiences related to our awareness of our past, present, and possible futures. Due to time constraints, I’ll only glance briefly at the idea of past possibilities. Basically, I believe what has happened in the past is indeed past, over, finished. Even if we wish a past situation had been different, or we had done X or Y in another way, we cannot change what happened. We can, however, lay potential fretful thoughts about the past to rest if we embrace the concept that everyone -Including ourselves- is always doing/has always done the best they/he, she, you or I could.

So with that very short gesture towards what has already transpired, and with an affirmation of ourselves and those around us as fundamentally good, let’s put our so-often-judgemental attitudes aside, and not criticize our previous activities, behaviour or ideas....

Following that trajectory, we come to the present, and its flourish of possibilities -- right now! The same applies -- we ARE doing the best we can at this very moment! I confess when I first met this concept I was very resistant to it, but I’ve come to see that IF we

could do better at any particular moment, we would. I also have come to understand that our society lifts up the idea of “perfect” to our functional detriment, and when we think about doing our best with whatever handicaps we have, then we need to remember our essential goodness (even if sometimes it’s very frayed or distorted), and be gentle with ourselves and one another. Let us affirm our goodness, not perfection.

It follows that we get to choose whether to consider this moment, THIS point in time, with a hopeful, life-affirming attitude, a belief in the flourishing of human love and ingenuity, of our thinking, caring and creativity, **or** to be frightened and negative.

Before we can explore that more positive attitude, we may need to name the things that we are fearful of or worried about, and sooth that old primitive amygdala, the part of our earliest brain wired to fear all potential “tigers in the bushes“... It’s good to do that naming, whether by writing or talking to someone who will listen deeply and not give you advice, just loving attention... but that leads to Lens number three (and we’re not there yet!)

So here are the FIRST QUERIES I have for you today:

What would it take for you to choose the point of view that we are each good, (good, not perfect), and always doing our best? Where do you get stuck, contemplating this viewpoint? Can you name what gets in the way?

Let’s share a few minutes of SILENCE together next, to welcome and hold these queries at a deep inner level.

I will repeat the queries, and then we will

“Enter the generosity of silence“ as John O’Donohue describes it...

Remember, I will signal the end of our silence and you may (this first time, if you wish) write a few words of response down on the cards you have been given. You'll have lots more time to discuss this lens (and the next two) over coffee after the service.

The first Queries: What would it take for you to choose the point of view that we are each good, (good, not perfect), and always doing our best? Where do you get stuck, contemplating this viewpoint? Can you name what gets in the way?
[ca 45 seconds of SILENCE, then 30 secs to write...]

Next I want to look thru Lens number two, that of accepting confusion or doubt, and honouring questions and uncertainty, which I call "the 'I don't know' place," using a few passages from my book, The Heron Spirals.

[from my journal entry, November 1994 *A friend put*] a very useful name to my frustration about money, love and work. "So," she said, "You're in the 'I don't know' place." Somehow naming it is more honourable, makes the fact of my lack of clarity, of my anger about "WHY doesn't Way open?" less frustrating.

I'm simply there, in the "I don't know place." . . .

Then...after running round Mud Lake, [in Britannia, I wrote]

On a cold, raw morning, I assumed the herons had quite sensibly decided to go south,

but no -- I saw two: one standing mid-lake, and one near the road. Both were hunched into themselves, feathers fluffed out as insulation from the chilly damp.

Both of them ... were motionless long enough for me to stand and "be" with them. That yielded an awareness of being still and knowing God, whatever is going on.

More than a decade after writing [down those thoughts], I watched a video interview with an Orthodox rabbi who declared, *“Often the holiest place to be is the place of being stuck and not knowing what to do.”*

I was so stunned by his words that I had to run the sequence over and over again, to get my Quaker/Protestant head and heart to understand [the Rabbi] fully. He went on to explain that, *“Unlike other religions where beatitude and calm and certain faith are the core of the religious experience, [in Judaism] debate and uncertainty and challenge”* are central. He even said that for Jews, *“God revels in our struggle to make sense of our world and ourselves. . . .”*

What a radical attitude! To me, my “I don’t know place” has been a very uncomfortable if not hellish place, a state of mind to get out of as soon as I can.

But what if it is holy?

What if this Quaker process of “waiting patiently for Way to open” is not simply to be endured, but welcomed?

What a phenomenal, completely different point of view for me!

As a woman ... who almost relentlessly seeks stillness and a sense of [--- meaning] and purpose, can I shift my perspective to welcome my inner struggles?

At the very least, can I stop feeling that my inward uncertainty is somehow bad?

O Great Mystery, help [us] not only to “wait patiently...” but to enjoy -- even revel! -- in [our] human condition, to know [we are] engaged with the holy.

Before I share my second set of QUERIES with you, let’s recall my daughter Evalyn singing in our [recorded] prelude about *“The road*

ahead is never so straight, so I guess I'll keep going till I come to a bend..." - and then remember Joni Mitchell's words, sung so beautifully by Michel, "*Something's lost but something's gained in living every day. I've looked at clouds from both sides now...*"

So now here are the QUERIES for our second lens, as we look at our own flourishes of possibilities: What does it feel like to **Welcome** "The I don't know place"? To be comfortable with the opportunity to be vulnerable to the unknown? Can I accept that challenge is central to my life's possibilities?

Once again let us "*enter the generosity of silence*" When my timer goes you may choose to either write down any short responses you want to remember, or to turn to someone near you and exchange thoughts for 30 seconds each. I will repeat the queries: What does it feel like to Welcome "The I don't know place"? To be comfortable with the opportunity to be vulnerable to the unknown? Can I accept that challenge is central to my life's possibilities?
[longer SILENCE followed by responses, written and oral]

In moving on to Lens number three, I'd like to know how many of you have ever heard of Parker Palmer's work, can I see a show of hands? [2-3 only]

Parker Palmer is the Quaker educator, author and activist who founded the Centre for Courage and Renewal in 1997 in the USA. The centre uses the "movement model of social change... the ancient movement to fulfill the human possibility, a movement calling us to embody what it means to be truly human."

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak* Palmer describes what the Quaker "clearness committee" model is. His own experience with it led to

the evolution of his more secular “circles of trust“ that are detailed in his later book, A Hidden Wholeness, and now they are facilitated all over the world.

Palmer says: *Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to [simply listen deeply, which will] help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out.*” [from The forward to his 2014 book, Let the Beauty We love Be what We Do]

In 2011-12 as part of my professional development as a Director of Religious Education, I was blessed to take part in a circle of trust series with a group of 17 people and a skilled leader who had trained with not only Parker Palmer but Thich Naht Hahn, the Buddhist leader. Our four weekend sessions were held at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study centre in Pennsylvania where Parker Palmer began his work, and as we moved through the seasons, each member in turn was the focus of a small group clearness committee. My experience was profoundly helpful: I arrived quite discouraged by the number of years it had taken to complete my fledgeling book, first called the Heron Journals, then the Heron Reflections, and finally The Heron Spirals, a Commonplace Book, THIS book! [hold up!].

It began as a concept around 1997, and circulated through a lot of publishers. By the mid 2000’s, I had mostly encountered rejection,

but suggestions for significant changes along the way, Plus I had worked full-time for two different UU congregations. When I finally had the part-time role I wanted, as DRE in Montreal, and had completed a manuscript I was pleased with, my son objected to some details, although I had aimed to keep my children out of the personal passages! For a year and a half I felt quite stalled....

Telling my small group of intent listeners about the hurdles I had crossed and my huge frustration about getting published was so affirming! I spoke into the quiet circle about the challenges of moving from writing for children to writing for adults, about the questions I had about using self revealing journal extracts, the difficulties of getting many permissions to quote other writers and singers, and more.

And after being so lovingly “ Heard,” I resolved anew to Persevere, and no sooner had I really made that commitment, than I was invited to be the keynote speaker at our annual Canadian Quaker meeting in 2013. That gave me a deadline and something to work for, and eventually, with a lot of prayer, editing and design help, and support along the way, I was able to self publish AND give a powerful lecture. Talk about “Way opening“!

If you were to use the clearness committee method, here are two of the touchstones Parker and his associates have evolved:

- 1. No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight. This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the “helping professions.” But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.*
- 2. Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help “hear each other into deeper speech.”*

There are many places you can go to learn more about these methods, and the touchstones, but our time together is drawing in, and so now I want to share with you my third set of QUERIES, followed by silent reflection.

Let me remind you of the possibilities you focussed on at the beginning of this talk, and encourage you to ask your own inward teacher, your own self:

What are the possibilities I am currently considering?

Where am I looking for — or do I need — more clarity?

What flourishes might I add to (or subtract from) those possibilities?

Can I trust way will open?

[Longer SILENCE, 1+ minute]

After this rich inward listening, please turn to share 30 seconds of your verbal response to these queries with the person on your left (as much as possible — if you're on an end, look for somebody left over to join up with). I will call time to ask you to switch, and then ask you to regroup promptly.

[SHARE 30 secs each in listening pairs]

Now we have looked at our “flourish of possibilities,” through three lenses:

Choosing a hopeful Point of View

Honouring the “I don't know place” and open questions

And

Sharing deep listening tools and trusting our inner knowing.

Here at our closing threshold I have three pieces of poetry to give you. First, from John O'Donohue's poem “To come home to yourself”:

*May all that is unlived in you/
blossom into a future/
graced with love.*

The second comes from Mary Oliver’s poem “When death comes“, after which I will sing a kind of poem called “spirit of the wind” — I invite you to join in with as you grasp its easy format (we will practice the chorus together, and this will be our second hymn today, skipping the one listed in your Order of Service).

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music
in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence...

[PAUSE....

SING]

SPIRIT OF THE WIND

CHORUS: Spirit of the wind, carry me! (X-X percussion)

Spirit of the wind, carry me home! (X! percussion)

Spirit of the wind, carry me home, to myself! (no percussion)

1. Spirit of the moon, let many seasons bloom
Spirit of the sun, make us all-ll one

2. Spirit of the earth, let me know rebirth
Spirit of the land, hold me in yo-ur hand

3. Spirit of the river, flowing life giver
Spirit of the sea, make us all-II free

4. Spirit of the heron, hold me past all bearing
Spirit of wide wings, lift our hearts to-oo sing . . .