

Shall We Save or Savor the World  
May 22, 2022  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, May 22<sup>nd</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is fashioned as a question: Shall We Save or Shall We Savor the World in which we live? It's not a trick question, really, but it's not a genuine question either. It's a koan of a question. It's a coincidence of opposites. To save something is to rescue it from threat or harm or danger. On the other hand, to savor something is to taste deeply, to the ends of dwelling in the enjoyment of it. Two different experiences that coincide within us every now and then.

What a tension that coincidence creates. How do we make sense of such things? There is that great Zen story about the man and the tigers and the mice. You may have heard it.

A man was walking across a field when he saw a tiger in the distance. He filled with fear and he ran but the tiger followed him. The man ran until he reached the edge of a cliff and thought that he was trapped until he spotted a vine growing over the edge of the cliff. He grabbed it and swung himself over the edge, hoping that this would mean safety.

The tiger came to the edge and snarled at him from above. While the man was hanging there, another tiger approached him from below. Suspended there between them, he thought to himself, "What could be worse?"

Just then, two mice scampered out and began gnawing at the vine that was his temporary salvation. As they chewed and as the man pondered his fate, he saw a juicy, red strawberry on a ledge before him. He held the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. Ah, how sweet it tasted!<sup>1</sup>

Two things were coinciding. The man was called to save and to savor life. What a tension that coincidence creates. Let's not choose between them. Let's welcome them both into our lives.

Welcome to the soft-spoken seekers of spirit and to the outspoken singers of life (masked and safely distanced in this time that is driving us crazy!). Welcome wanderers and worshipers, to the darkness and the light. Welcome are who are beneath the stars of heaven, given in care and compassion for one another, soul-level deep...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and consensus...held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds... To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together."

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[https://hinessight.blogs.com/church\\_of\\_the\\_churchless/2018/06/zens-tiger-and-st-rawberry-story-is-about-dealing-with-death.html](https://hinessight.blogs.com/church_of_the_churchless/2018/06/zens-tiger-and-st-rawberry-story-is-about-dealing-with-death.html)

What if it were a real question: shall we save or savor the world? Heaven only knows how we'd answer. I suppose that the cheeky way is to answer YES—yes, because the choice is an impossible one. Only in hell are we made to choose between things that require each other. We cannot be asked to choose between things like life, love, mystery, passion, beauty and vitality... We need them all...and when we have what we need, we must truly be in heaven—if we believe in heaven, I suppose. Not everybody does...among those that do believe, there is a tremendous range of variation. Where do you think you fall along this spectrum of belief? How is it that you believe in heaven? Or how is it that you don't? I asked Joan Columbus the other day and I got a spirited response.

As you may know, Joan Columbus, who's been a regular member here at North Chapel, is in the process of moving to Mexico. Joan is a wonderful artist—a talented painter—and a spectacular liver of life. I asked her what she thought of heaven and she told me but I'm not going to tell you what she said. She can tell you herself and I she does, check in with yourself about what you believe. Joan, would you take just a few minutes and share your feelings on the subject?

“Love you madly, right or wrong”  
That sounds like the lyric of this song  
Since that's so,  
I thought you ought to know  
That I love you, love you madly

“Better fish are in the see”  
Is not the theory for me  
That's for sure  
Just like I said before  
I love you, love you madly

If you could see that happy you and me  
That I dream about so proudly  
You'd know the breath of spring that makes me sing  
My love song so loudly

“Good things come to those who wait”  
So, just relax and wait for fate  
To let me see the day you'll say to me  
“I love you, love you madly”

—Duke Ellington

Against a sea of troubles and in the presence of a joyful love, we find our ways of saving and ways of savoring the sacred lives we lead and the sacred world in which we live.

I love the story about the man and the tigers and the gnawing mice and the strawberry. There is another story that I love—a true story, I believe—about a little

artist-girl who you might find inspiring, a precious girl who you might know and love and recognize.

There was a girl in elementary school who was working madly on a project in art class one spring afternoon late in the month of May. The little girl was passionate about what she was working on and a pile of crayons, pastels and colored pencils was gathering where she sat. The pile was mounting all around her, forming a fence line of sorts, a bunker of artistry in bud, a beacon of beauty becoming.

She was really into her project. It was as if each texture and color and contour has something really important to say...and the little girl was the artist in the middle of all of this, creating without pretense and without the barest hesitation.

The little girl was “in the zone,” as they say, and her teacher soon took notice. Not wanting to disrupt the process, the teacher strolled casually through the classroom as their time together was nearing its end. She encouraged her students to finish up what they could before the time for art was over...and everyone heard her and listened, even the little girl, even though she continued disappearing behind the fence line...the ever-increasing mountain of art supplies.

As the other kids were cleaning up and putting things away, the little girl increased her efforts. She doubled down, knowing that her goal was near at hand. So, this fence line, this bunker of artistry, this beacon of beauty becoming...the mountain of crayons, pastels and pencils all around her...it just kept growing. It was marvelous to see that kind of passion in a little kid. It lent to the room an air of extra loveliness and light.

The teacher, who was softly-slowly approaching the little girl from behind, was finally close enough to peer over her shoulder at the image that she was drawing—brilliant, brazen, bold, breath-taking, abundant, brave, beholden... The teacher could see these qualities clearly but she could not see the image. It was amorphous. It was ambiguous. It was mysterious to the eye of the mind but, nevertheless, something jumped within the heart of the art teacher. Something leapt within her. She was inspired by what she saw.

The teacher saw only the suggestion of an image. She saw only the hint of something trying its best to emerge from the colorful madness. Then, the teacher asked, “What are you drawing, my dear? What have you been working on?”

And the little girl said something marvelous. She said, “I am drawing a picture of God.” It was stunning. She answered the question without irony. She was so matter-of-fact about it that it seemed contrary to her own creative passion. They say that ‘opposites attract’ and at that moment, it was clear that they do because opposites coincided within this one passionate, little girl.

Without pretense, passion or prejudice, the little girl said that she was drawing a picture of the holy! Through her art project, she called out the name of her God. She said so herself. It’s astonishing, sometimes, what comes out of the mouths of babes...

So, the teacher was surprised. She was taken aback a little bit but she gathered herself quickly enough. The teacher said, as gently as she could, “You know, drawing or painting or sculpting the image of God is a tall order for any artist. It was challenging for the best of us—for Masaccio, Blake and Titus... It was hard for Michelangelo.” The little girl just kept drawing. The teacher was trying to talk

her down a bit but the girl resisted. The teacher tried again. So very cautiously, she said, “You know, no one truly knows what God really looks like anyway.”

Those words made the little girl chuckle to herself. She responded to her art teacher without missing a beat. She said, “Don’t worry. They’ll in a minute. [] I’m almost done with my work of art.”

That little girl was really just like heaven here on earth...and that little girl was just like you and just like me. It was Cornel West who would often call occasions like these expressions of “radical Christianity.” Explaining this religious concept, he would say, “The kingdom of God is within you and is everywhere around you...and everywhere you go, you carry a little piece of heaven.” It seems like it would be helpful to know this as we save and as we savor the world.

I find this idea reassuring. I don’t think of myself as a radical Christian but I’m rather fond of Cornel West. I like what he is saying. I like the idea that there is something special inside of me. I like the idea that there is something just as special and just as sacred within us all.

I spent most of my youth believing that we had to die to get into heaven. I thought of heaven as the place that we go when life it over—well, where most of us go...if we’ve been good enough and if our applications are reviewed and accepted by the appropriate committees. I grew up thinking of heaven that way, even though I was raised Unitarian Universalist. I had a gnawing anxiety that—maybe, for some reason—I wouldn’t get in...or if I did get in, it would be by the skin of my teeth, some of my dear friends wouldn’t. That’s how fear distorted my sense of the holy when I was younger.

When I was in elementary school, I was precocious, not unlike that little girl in art class...and if you’re like me, you may have been precocious, as well. When I was in middle school, I entered a phase in which I was more anxious and more afraid. I feared that I might lose something that was dear to me...and, of course, I did. I lost many things that were dear to me and I survived somehow...just like everyone else I know. I can’t quite say that I overcame my fear but I came to understand it differently. Not all of us choose this path but I did. My fear and anxiety came to have less power in my life. They softened into grace somehow...and if you’re like me, maybe yours did, too.

There is some suffering on that path of growth and change. It isn’t easy. It’s arduous. In fact, the challenge that growth imposes can be daunting. It can make stagnancy (or even, regression) seem more appealing. And we’re seeing this now, this regression, with respect to our attention to the needs of the Earth, with respect to war in Afghanistan and Yemen, in Syria and in Ukraine, with respect to domestic terrorism in houses of worship and grocery stores in American cities like Charleston, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Buffalo, New York.

Growth is very hard. It’s challenging against a sea of troubles. Yet, this challenge provides a paradox, a contradiction that gives us energy. Against a sea of troubles and in the presence of a joyful love, we find ways of saving and we find ways of savoring the world in which we live.

To do this, we might have to let go of the past a little bit. Life is different for us now...and it will be different moving forward. Sometimes it will and sometimes it won’t be easy for us to deal with the changes. As much as it would be nice to ‘get

back to normal' as soon as possible, we are already different than we were before. We will 'get back to normal' at some point but we will be different when we return. We are already different. Devastatingly, a million of us are gone and we really don't know how to deal with that. A good way will emerge over time but right now, it's too soon to tell. This is a shattering time and we are, all of us, deep in the throws of it.

There is a poem about secret lovers in Paris that speaks of the devastating losses of the heart. Looking back anxiously on their private encounter, the poet asks,  
Did we see too much, say too little  
Stepping over every dark thing...

And this is possible for lovers. It's possible to step over the dark things when they happen on a personal level. We call friends for comfort, ask elders for guidance, seek wisdom from teachers... We heal ourselves and we take the time we need for recoveries...

Deeper in the poem, it gets harder. We get into the entanglements and the contradictions. The poet, Jonatha Brooke, writes,  
Framing his face with my hands in the doorway  
I try to decipher the friend from the foe in his eyes...  
Did he hear too much, say too little?  
Could any year recover what we lost in these...?

There's a question for us to consider as we imagine 'getting back to normal': Can any year recover what we've lost in these? The poet doesn't answer the question. She continues on, defiantly...she writes,

I walk with my head held high and naked in the sun  
Claiming these streets for myself  
I walk with my head held high  
and naked in the sun  
Claiming these streets for myself

Paris.

Getting through great challenge is so much harder when it's less personal, less secretive, less private, less subject to the powers of denial. When challenges are private, one can savor the strawberry in the midst of threat and harm and danger. When the challenges are public, the savoring happens against a din of anxiety. Finding power enough to savor life is hard when we are in the throws of saving life. What tension this creates, for we are forced to make a choice and this is the hell of it. We do not always choose to hold these things in balance. When we don't, we fray along the edges and we fight when things break down...when we are all walking with heads held high, claiming the same streets for ourselves. We fight when we all imagine ourselves to be the leading player in the poem, when we are all the heroine in the streets of Paris...with no man-lover-enemy-other to reduce and antagonize. We fight when we have no 'moral of the story' to exclusively possess and be right about.

And yet, it is still possible to meet life's challenges together as one. It's just that we've never done it this way before. We don't have a practice. We don't have the muscle. We don't have a habit. We don't have the training. There's no common method and no regular way. On this nearly pathless journey that we've undertaken these last few years, there are so few signposts guiding us. It is so hard to find our way. It's frustrating.

We work so hard to gain an answer and a place to rest the soul  
But we're easier to anger and we're harder to console

Savor the strawberry. Savor life. Savor the whole, wide world. We can save it better with our love that we can with anxiety.

Dr. West said, "The kingdom of God is within you and is everywhere around you...and everywhere you go, you carry a little piece of heaven." We carry within us the heaven that resides in the sweetness of the strawberry. We carry within us the heaven that resides in the color of precocious, creative art.

So, what do you think? Do you believe in heaven? Do you take responsibility for the little piece of the sacred that is within you? May we savor that piece of heaven that is within us all...and through our love, save our lives for creative and for joy. And may we save that piece of heaven that is within us all...and through our life, save love and strawberries.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.