

The Measure of Our Days
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. I believe that the good measure of our days resides in our ability to makes the healthiest decisions based on the information to which we have access in the here and now.

Three examples come to mind:

1. the lesson of the muddy dog
2. the message of the larger church and
3. the value of the Long Beach Grand Prix...which happens today at 3:45, our time and 12:45 out west. "Drivers, start your engines" is announced at 12:38. Don't be late.

How I know this might surprise you. Today is Sunday, April 10th and the title of this morning's reflection is The Measure of Our Days. It's theology is anchored in the Book of Jeremiah, in the passage that yielded the about the Balm of Gilead.

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul

Its theology is anchored in Jeremiah but its music comes in part from Nat King Cole.

The very thought of you and I forget to do
The little ordinary things that everyone ought to do...
I see your face in every flower
Your eyes in stars above
It's just the thought of you
The very thought of you, my love

It is also guided by the poetry of Toni Childs who asks,

Where's the ocean?
Where's the ocean?
Where's the ocean for us and us?

Now, the good measure of our days may truly reside in our ability to makes the healthiest decisions but it order to know that our decisions are good, it is necessary for us to take deep breaths and enter into moments of reflection.

Sunset offers a moment of reflection, it seems to me. I think that maybe sunset is the truest measure of our days...not by how many sunsets we get but by how deeply we appreciate them.

Sunset is such a special time. The last light of the near star falls beyond the western horizon and another day is done for all of us. Who can we be...? Who must we be in order to know our beauty and to know our significance as the

coming darkness settles with the promise of tomorrow patiently waiting in the wings? With what 'yardstick' shall we measure the sunset? How will we judge our time, our most basic inheritance?

Sunset often returns me to an attitude of prayer. It often returns me to an awareness of our collective soulfulness. Tracy Chapman's music happens almost soundlessly in these times. I find myself singing her words, her melody...without ever thinking about it.

Don't be tempted by the shiny apple
Don't you eat of the bitter fruit
Hunger only for the days of justice
Hunger only for a world of truth
'Cause all that you have is your soul

I find myself singing these words and I'm glad because I think that she is right. How could it be otherwise? All that we have is the soul.

The value of life is not measure by the number of breaths we take. It is measured by them times life leaves us breathless.

"Blessings, come!" I've shared this story before, the one told to me by my friend and colleague, Bill Clark who used to serve in Provincetown. We talked about how powerful it is to truly proclaim our faith. I talked about prayer and yoga and meditation. He talked about his connection with nature. He told me the story of how he was walking in the woods, reflecting on his faith practice when he came upon a wide-open meadow of grass and flowers...and a woman, standing in the center of it all. At the top of her lungs, she was screaming, "Blessings, come!!!" And Bill was jealous, if I remember the story right. He was jealous that this woman was claiming and proclaiming her faith so powerfully.

There would be a period of silence and then, he would hear her faith claim resound again. "Blessings, come!" Bill didn't know what faith she practiced but it caused him to ask reflectively, "What would it mean for us, as Unitarian Universalist to claim our faith as passionately?" This is a great story for us to share in this, our fourth month of reflection on the seven principles—now eight principles—of Unitarian Universalism. The Fourth Principle encourages us to engage in the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Can there be a freer search for us than wandering into the wilderness, seeking the holy, demanding its presence? Can there be a more responsible search? The woman in the wide-open meadow wasn't imposing on anyone. It was Jesus of Nazareth who encouraged us to "heal the sick, feed the hungry, care for the weakest among us, and always pray in private." Can there be a better example than this woman in the meadow? It is important to raise these questions now, before the conclusion of Bill Clark's story, while the energy is still aspirational and romantic.

For Bill's story concludes with a twist. Amidst his juicy musings about the nature of our faith, amidst his deep reflection about the claims we have on it, something happened, something delightful. Upon the third and final faith claim of the woman in the open meadow came the 90-pound and playful golden retriever for which the woman in the meadow had long been searching. 'Blessings' was the name of her dog, her faithful companion, as it were.

I love that dog story. It leads straight into another one.

When I lived in North Carolina, I attended a traditional church. It was called the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship or, more affectionately, ERUUF. I also attended an experimental UU church that was lead by Rev. Chester McCall. It was called All Souls Church but it was tiny and unassuming. In fact, we met in the local YMCA, in a children's classroom. It was unassuming but there was still a formality to it. It had rigor.

One bright summer morning, I was preparing to go. I dressed well enough—a nice shirt, my best shorts... I tried to make myself pretty. I took Samori for a walk before I left. That's how we were. We'd often go for walks before I went to church. Samori was my blessing. She was my yellow Labrador. She was beautiful and perfect. She was an amazing friend to me.

Anyway, that particular Sunday morning, she jumped in a puddle of mud and then she looked up at me, surprised and proud of herself...as if to say, "Hey, Leon! Look what happens if I jump in a mud puddle!" She did that all her life and every time, it seemed to amaze her. I knew that I wouldn't have time to clean her up before church but that wouldn't be problem. I would leave her in the fenced-in, back yard. She'd be fine for an hour or two.

It was time to go. So, I called her and she came on my command. I turned back toward the house and I knew that she would follow. She always did. In fact, she always raced me there. This time as she raced by, the path was narrow where we were and she bumped into me pretty hard as she was passing. She left my right leg CAKED in mud. She ruined the outfit I was wearing.

I'm sure I cursed out loud. I was angry at my dog and she looked back at me, surprised and proud of herself...as if to say, "Hey, Leon! Look what happens if I rub my muddy body against you nice, clean church outfit!" I was broken-hearted. I knew I couldn't go to the All Souls church in the YMCA looking like this. Then, I thought, "Of course, I can. Samori is a blessing. Life is happening now and as it turns out, today life is muddy." I did go to church that day and I told that story at the morning check-in. I was deeply uncomfortable but it turned out to be an amazing day. It's amazing what we find when we allow ourselves to wander, when we allow ourselves to wonder about the world.

I've been amazed by how terrible the roads have been this mud season. It's left me breathless. Some of you, as well... I wonder if we get credit for that. I was breathless, for sure—driving on the dirt roads this year. Toughest in a generation, I hear. I was surely terrified—driving in all that quicksand, swallowing up my tires, mud caked full up to the shoulders of my all-wheel drive vehicle. Despite its power, I really thought that I might slide off of the road and wind up in a gully in the night...and sink and sink further down until the following morning. Or worse, sort of, to spin my knobby tires in desperation, sinking my car so deeply in the trenches that the undercarriage would come to rest, right there in the middle of the road blocking thru-traffic passage for everyone else in the area. If the measure of life is truly valued by the number of times life leaves us breathless, then the value of my life has increased seven-fold in the last six weeks. It takes your breath away sometimes, trying to drive through all that mud.

The roads are SO much better now. They've improved so much since I left town. I was away for a few days. I went out west to a conference in California. I just got back from Long Beach and I'm really so jet-lagged.

It was a very long trip home and I'm no longer used to traveling. The conference I went to ended with a two-hour Closing Ceremony. It was supposed to end at 11:00am, California Time. I would head to the airport soon after that. I got restless because the conference schedule had been so busy that I hadn't yet made it to the ocean.

Long Beach, California is about twenty miles south of Los Angeles. I went out there to attend a yearly conference that is called Finding Our Way Home. It's a retreat for religious professionals of color. It's a working retreat...with an emphasis on the word "working." I mean, we were free to skip out on anything we chose but we rarely did. The conference was quite moving. It was different from Ministry Days, the ministry conference that precedes General Assembly and it was different regional gatherings of ministers that I appreciate so much. This was a gathering of religious professionals, not just ministers. I love the work that ministers do when we gather rank-by-rank. We sing the song that is in our hymnal. It is hymn #358, if you care to follow along. We sing it as a processional, often at ordination and installation Services. We sang it at my ordination in April of 2012 and we sang it here at our installation years ago now. Almost always starting from the back of the sanctuary, we would all robe up and pray and then, we'd march in singing,

Rank by rank, again we stand
From the four winds gathered hither
Loud the hallowed walls demand
When we come and how and wither
From the stillness breaking clear
Echoes wake to warn or cheer
Higher truth from saint an seer
Come to all assembled here

Ours the year's memorial store
Honored days and names we reckon
Days of comrades gone before
Lives that speak and deeds that beckon
From the dreaming of the night
To the labors of the day
Shines their everlasting light
Guiding us upon our way

Though the years be hard and long
Still, we strive in expectation
Join we now their ageless song
One with them in aspiration
One in name, in honor one
Guard we well the crown they won

What they dreamed be ours to do
Hope their hopes and seal them true

I love this hymn but its poetry is so mired in empire. Its 'ranks' and 'guards' and 'crowns' compete with its purpose as a memorial, as the roots from which our winged dream takes flight. As we know, we do need both of these.

Roots, hold me close
Wings, set me freee

Spirit of Life, please tell me. How best can we measure our days?

We didn't sing Rank by Rank at the working retreat in California. We sang many other songs but we did not sing this one. We sang songs that would bring blessings and we brought heaven down to earth. We asked heaven to touch the earth and it did. It was beautiful being there. I was very appreciative right up through the Closing Ceremony but I got restless because I hadn't touched the ocean. So, I set out to touch the sea. It was just about a mile away. So, I figured I could walk...but I was wrong. And, probably, you would never guess why in a million years.

I thought that I could walk to the ocean. You can see from the hotel. I thought I could walk but I was wrong...because there were racecars in the way—Indy Cars and Formula Ones from all over the place.

This weekend, right now, is that Acura Grand Prix in Long Beach, CA. I never new what a colossally big event the Grand Prix actually is. The racetrack went around the Long Beach hotel where we were staying. The streets were lined with concrete barriers and metal fencing for safety. I stole my way into the staging area for the racecar drivers and their crews. I thought that maybe I could find a way through to the water but I was wrong. I went through a bunch of security checkpoints. I just smiled and walked confidently. No one gave me any trouble. I just pretended that I knew what I was doing. I'm quite sure that they didn't care. It was clear that they were screening for west-bound, fast-car thrill-seekers and not for me. I was an East Coast, ocean-seeking, liberal-faith minister. I think that they knew that I didn't pose a threat.

When our eyes met, I thought to ask them, inspired by the poetry of Toni Childs.

Where's the ocean?
Where's the ocean?

But all they could do was point. They knew exactly what I was up against.

I tried my best to get to the sea but I just couldn't make it happen, not through the concrete and the metal of the automotive maze. In my last attempt, when I was cutting behind an industrial lighting station and I slammed my shin into this metal strut that supported the heavy equipment. It was 92° and I was dress for 53° and I couldn't figure out a way past the concrete barriers and the metal fencing that stood between me and the sea. When I hurt my leg, I just took it as a sign and I went back to the hotel and caught the end of the Closing Ceremony.

Many of us have died since the last time that we gathered—seven of us, actually. Among them were Reverend Hope Johnson (who I have long admired), Elandria Williams from Knoxville, TN (who was fairly young when she died) and my friend from North Carolina, Rev. Chester McCall from the All Souls Church, the one that met in the children’s classroom of the old YMCA.

As the conference was ending, I gathered up their memories and I took their stories with me as I left. I checked out of my room. I made arrangements to get to the airport and then, I got the news. It had happened. The news that I had been waiting for had come. Melinda Yalom, my dear friend from my five years in Silver Spring...she texted me with the breakdown. It was very simple message. She wrote,

Finally – it’s done!! 53
to 47!!! So Glad!!!

That was all I needed. Right away, I started writing a letter. I started writing a letter that I may not ever send. I had been thinking about writing this letter for couple of weeks. I wrote this...

Dear Justice...Ketanji Brown Jackson,

Thank you for your grace. Thank you for your composure and for your grounded dignity...dignity in the face of such bitterness. What measure of strength is required of a woman these days—to suffer frauds and fools, to put up with pretense and grandstanding, to endure the attitudes and the platitudes of wee-dressed men and their anxiety. I wish that my dog, Samori, could bless them all with cakes of mud. Good heavens and thank God for who you are. Let them go, if you can. It is so exasperating but it does not belong to you. I’m sure that you know all of this already. Maybe of moments like these, the poet William Shakespeare wrote,

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey nonny, nonny.

He wrote,

Sing no more ditties, sing no more
Of dumps so dull and heavy.
The fraud of men was ever so
Since summer first was leafy.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny...

Oh, I wish you such lightness of spirit on this good, good day. I send such buoyancy, such joy, such hopefulness. May nothing bring you low because we need you. We really need you now. Gravity forever wants to bring us down but grace resists. And so, we rise, we rise, we rise.

The morning sun still rises...over horizons and in us. And thank God that it does. We need the light...and the darkness that follows. The two of these are linked. We need the power of the rising sun to love our way into the morning. We need the beauty of the sunset to measure our days. Through wound and weakness, we rise to heal, to heal the sin sick soul.

What measure of strength is required of a woman like you these days? How much must she take? How long us she endure...now that the walls that once contained her are finally fallen to the ground? ...now that the ceiling glass that kept her from her heights has been thoroughly shattered? I'm not surprised that some men are anxious at the very thought of you. Some men are anxious but not all. Not Senator Durbin and not Senator Booker...and not Senator Romney. He's doing good work for his party now, joining Senator Collins from Maine and Senator Murkowski from Alaska. He is doing good work for men. Those three crossed the aisle. The three of them, together... They voted for you...and so did I...and so did we with our hearts, so many of us across the country...and from so many different backgrounds...and so did my mother. She voted for you. And my dear father, he would have been so thrilled.

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected president... I was living in St. Paul at the time. I watched the news at an election party that was supposed to go on all night...but didn't because the results had been quite clear.

I made a phone call that night. I called my Dad. He was at home with my mom in New Jersey. I was sort of in disbelief somehow. I didn't know that I would feel that way...not until it had happened. For all of my spiritual optimism, part of me, surprisingly, did not expect to see an African American president in my lifetime. Most of me did but there was part of me that didn't. Did I think it was possible? Yes. Truly, I knew that it was. Did I hope to see it? Yes, of course. But did I expect to see an African American president...? I wasn't sure so about that. And I didn't know that I wasn't so sure until I heard the breaking news...in early November, back in 2008.

So, I called my Dad in disbelief. We didn't say anything on the call, not after we exchanged hellos. We just sat there on the phone with one another, not saying anything at all. The two of us just sat there in our silence and in our wonder...and then, after a while, we said our goodbyes. Then, we went on with our days. I wish that my Dad was alive again so I could call him up on the telephone right now. We could exchange hellos again. "Hey, LD!" I can hear him say...and then, we could just sit there on the phone, not saying anything. We could both just sit there in our silence...and wonder.

This is a such tricky moment in the world...with the ongoing war in Ukraine, the attacks of Roe v. Wade, the attacks on critical thinking and how we theorize about race, the attacks on who we are as sexual beings... And all of this, of course,

in the context of the baseline and growing dangers of climate change. Things are really complicated in our little world turned upside-down. How do we make sense of all of this? What 'yardstick' can we use? What scale? What probe? What measuring tape can we use to size this ocean?

I was at a conference this week that took place in Long Beach, CA. It was a gather of religious professionals of color from all over the country. Susan Frederick Gray was there. She is the president of the UUA. Rosemary Bray McNatt was there. She is the president of the Starr King School for the Ministry. And Elias Ortega was there. He is the president of Meadville Lombard Theological School, our UU seminary in Chicago.

Elias and I were having lunch outside of the hotel as the auto racing crowd was assembling. It was an odd mixture—UU professionals of color and the Grand Prix racecar types. Doug came over to the table. Doug was deep in the mix of auto racing. That was clearly his deepest passion. He was also deep into the mixed drinks scene. That was clearly another of his passion. Rev. Dr. Elias and I were talking about this tricky moment when Doug arrived and joined us uninvited. He was pretty drunk and fairly crazy with all of his Grand Prix energy but the tenderness of his spirit was plainly visible.

Our conversation didn't go that well. We just didn't have that kind of time but the time that we did have was sacred to me. Singular. I suspect that never again will I be sitting with the president of a UU seminary contemplating the great crises of our world and be approached by a passion-crazed and saucy Formula One enthusiast near the beach in southern California. But as we try to take stock of our lives, as we strive to take the measure of our days, should we not bear witness to the abundance that is available to us? I couldn't get to the ocean but the ocean came to me. Elias Ortega brought me there...as did Doug, the auto enthusiast with his habit of midday drinks...and Rosemary did and Susan...and the security guards in the staging area...and Hope Johnson, Elandria Williams and Chester McCall who passed away... And Samori brought the ocean to me, my yellow Labrador retriever...and Blessings brought me there as did Bill Clark who shared the story. All of these together taught me the lesson of the muddy dog, brought me the message of the larger church and showed me the value of the Long Beach Grand Prix...which happens today at 3:45. Drivers, start your engines because life is happening right now. Perhaps, our days are measured by how aware we are of all of this, measured by how mindful we are of the blessed here and now. "Where's the ocean for us and us? The ocean's here." Perhaps, the ocean of our awareness is the balm we need.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.