

Shower the Things You Love (in the Gorgeous Petals of a Rose)
February 26, 2023
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North Universalist Chapel

Barbara Massey lost her sister, Katherine, in the Buffalo shooting. So, as I said, I have a joy and a sorrow this morning. I have joy and sorrow about the story of a man who suddenly became violent, a man who, in a courtroom in Buffalo, NY...during Barbara Massey's victim statement before the sentencing of the teenager who killed Katherine and nine others people in a grocery store in the name of white supremacy. I have joy and sorrow about the story of a man who suddenly erupted in rage and lunged with power and fury at the young one who took those lives. I have sorrow because his heart is broken...and I'm with him, we're with him. Our hearts are broken too. And I also have joy, thank God, because, according to the news reports,

Massey was interrupted as a man lunged at the convicted mass murderer. He was restrained by court officers as the gunman was rushed from the courtroom. The Erie County district attorney later said the man would not be charged for the outburst.¹

I have real joy that the Erie County DA found the decency and the dignity not to condone but not to further penalize and punish at a time of such great tragedy and loss...and, so powerfully, the 19-year-old killer, himself, has openly apologized, for whatever that's worth. It's not yet possible for someone like me to know at this point. It's too soon to for me to tell, but he did say this. He said, "I don't want anyone to be inspired by me and what I did."

I wish times the miracles of ten brave and beautiful black lives that the killer had come to this understanding before he started murdering people. I wish that he could have been showered in beauty, surrounded by a circle of grace and gentleness.

Gather rose petals all around you—for strength, for hope, for courage, for safety. Everything is possible within a circle of gentleness.

Good morning and good snowy Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, February 26th and the title of this morning's reflection is Shower the Things You Love in the Gorgeous Petals of a Rose. I bid you welcome, one and all. Welcome to the seekers of spirit, bold or ever bashful in the quest. Welcome to the wanderers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the open ones and to the broken ones, blissfully imperfect, blessed and beloved, given in care and compassion for one another for one another, always and 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 again."

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https://www.democracynow.org/2023/2/16/headlines/buffalo_supermarket_shooter_gets_life_in_prison_without_parole_for_racist_massacre

Gather rose petals all around you...because everything is possible within circles of gentleness. Katherine Allen walked down the center aisle of the sanctuary, scattering rose petals. It was one of my fondest memories of the day that I was ordained. She scattered rose petals down the center aisle and when she got to the chancel, right about there, she made a circle. It wasn't just any circle. It was a specific one, a special one. It was the symbol of program called Circle. It was a powerful program. It was a repatriation program designed for people who were newly out of prison. It was a support system to help them stay out of prison.

We met on Monday nights. We'd sit in a circle to share a meal and talk. I loved it. Monday was my one day off but I always went. Circle was special to me, central to my theology and I think of them every time I sing.

Break out your hymnals, if you'd like, and turn to hymn number 155. The melody is on the middle line. We sing,

Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace
For all of us imprisoned, circle for release
Circle for the planet, circle for each soul
For the children of our children keep the circle whole

Lovely. Thank you. I think circles are special. What do you think? Would you agree? Joni Mitchell would agree. She sang about circles many years ago. Her words were, "Yesterday, I child came out to wonder." You know the song.

Caught a dragonfly inside a jar
Cheerful when the sky was full of thunder
And tearful at the falling of a star
And the seasons, they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captives on a carousel of time
We can't return...we can only look
Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round in a circle game

Round and round...on the carousel of time. Again and again, we return to the very same places...but they are not the same. They're slightly different. The places have changed a little bit...and so have we. We know this now. We learn this much from circles all the time.

And Harry Chapin would agree. He sang about circles as well. He sang about the power—and the magic—of returning. "It seems like I've been here before," he sang.

...I can't remember when
But I have this funny feeling that we'll all be together again
No straight lines make up my life, all my roads have bends
There's no clear-cut beginnings and so far, no dead-ends
For I've met you a thousand times, I guess you done the same
Still, we lose each other, it's just like a children's game
As I find you here again, the thought runs through my mind
Our love is like a circle, so let's go 'round one more time

Because all my life is a circle

They both knew...Joni and Harry...that when you gather beauty everywhere around you, all things become newly possible.

I just bought a new book about forgiveness. I haven't read it yet but I'm fairly certain about the theme. I have this intuitive sense sometimes—deeply inside of me—and I'm learning to trust my feelings more and more. The title of this new book is...Forgiveness—An Alternative Account—so, call me crazy, but I am fairly certain about its theme.

This book is written by this Harvard professor of Christian Morals. He looks pretty nice. He starts off his book with stories about the gestures of forgiveness that were offered immediately following the tragedy at Mother Emanuel, the AME church in Charleston, South Carolina. Nine were killed in prayer and the shooter was forgiven...at the arraignment...by some, not all, of the families that lost loved ones on that terrible day—June 17th in 2015. The arraignment took place only two days later. Only two days...

I sometimes struggle with forgiveness. I often struggle with forgiveness. I all-the-time struggle with forgiveness. I do not believe that I am always capable of it. It is sometimes beyond me...and I shared this shortcoming of mine—if it is a shortcoming—with my former minister in North Carolina. He was very helpful to me back then...more than a decade before the tragedy in Charleston. The Reverend Arvid Straube. Such a delightful man. He looked at me sternly and lovingly and said, "Forgiveness happens in its own time. Our job is not always to forgive. Our job is to always make ourselves available to the possibility of forgiveness. Our job is not to foreclose on it, not to foreclose on ourselves, not to foreclose on one another...but to face our sorrow and our grief...and to allow our hearts to be broken...open."

I hated hearing that. I am not proud of that but it is, at least, partly true. When I'm shattered, when my heart is broken, I close in on myself. I cradle my heart. I carry my heart like water...with both hands. In fact, I gave myself that nickname and then, wrote a song about it.

Carries a heart like water,
Hold on with both hands

I close in and I cradle. I do not open to forgiveness. In fact, I do the opposite—secretly believing that if I don't forgive, if I refuse, I can stave off the pain that's coming my way...which never works, I always fail but, you know, most times, I don't even notice...because I'm cradling, because I'm so closed off, I don't even notice the day.

Angers linger long inside the evening
It keeps the sun from rising in our eyes
Don't think we can take the sun and sky for granted
Without some deeper compromise

I didn't like what Arvid was saying. I resisted what he was telling me...because, deep inside myself, I already knew that he was right...but I didn't have the strength

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of spirit to act on what I knew. Not like those brave souls in Charleston. Not like Nadine Collier, the daughter of Ethel Lance who was killed. She forgave the shooter. Not like Bethane Middleton-Brown, sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor who was killed. She forgave the shooter...which simply cannot be done...without a practice of faith that makes all things possible. It can't be done without a circle of beauty. So, gather rose petals all around you—for strength, for hope, for courage, for safety. Everything is possible within such circles of gentleness.

My joy and sorrow this morning was about a man in Buffalo who could not forgive (a man I do not judge) and the courtroom that lovingly understood him and didn't make things worse. In the liner note of *Forgiveness*, the following words appear:

[*Forgiveness*] explores a complex, moral terrain that too often serves as a salve to the conscience of power rather than an instrument of healing and justice. [The author explains] that forgiveness is simply the refusal of retaliatory violence through practices of penitence and grief. It is an act of mourning irrevocable wrong, of refusing the false promises of violent redemption, and of living in and with the losses we cannot recover.

Oh, my God. That sounds so hard...but we do what's hard and that's what makes us beautiful.

There is something deeply big-U Universalist about this, the decision not simply to penalize and to punish. As you remember, historically and theologically speaking, it was the Universalist who championed the idea of universal salvation. In other words, all of us are getting into heaven so live your life accordingly. As it is above, so may it be below...and the tool for that powerful process, the main engine is forgiveness.

We do what's hard and it makes us beautiful but we can't just jump in with the big dogs. We have to start out small...with the realities of our own lives, the most direct means by which the sacred is revealed.

I want to tell you a story about two cheating students I taught in Pittsburgh. It was a survey course. There were hundreds of people in the class. These two students turned in the same paper and hoped I wouldn't notice but I did. One student got an A and the other student got a D—nearly a failing grade. I called them both in to the same meeting and returned their papers to see how they would react. Both students accepted the very different grades that they were given for what was essentially the same pirated paper. They didn't complain. They couldn't complain—not without admitting that they had cheated.

The victor who had received the A was smug and self-possessed. The loser who had received the D was indignant and disempowered. I observed their moods and commented on what I saw. Neither student reacted. The funny thing was that I had removed the cover sheet from both papers and switched them. So, the cover sheet on which the "D" grade was written corresponded to the paper that struck me as the original work and the cover sheet on which the "A" grade was written corresponded to the paper that struck me as the one that was plagiarized. So, the students' feelings were doubly displaced. Neither noticed my sleight of hand...until I led them to it—slowly, I must admit—them, they figured out what I had done. I

took perverse pleasure in my slow and deliberate speed. I'm sorry that I took pleasure but I did.

Just as they were beginning to catch on, I said, "It seems to me that one or both of you have cheated on your papers. It seems this way to me because these papers. So, now you have a choice. You can both accept your respective grades and I will report you both and the Honor Council will decide your fate—necessarily unfairly but I will not intervene in defense of either of you or you can rewrite your papers but you'll have to knock them out of the park. I will still report you—I am not at liberty to do otherwise—but I will support you both through the student judicial process."

I can't remember what happened exactly. I just know that there were no lasting consequences. The lesson was learned. Words got around. I was satisfied with that. It's fun to play tricks on students every now and again. It's fun being a trickster.

Years later, when I was teaching at a different school, it happened again. This time, though, the joke was on me. In the first week of class, I switched the names of two of my students by accident. It was very early in the semester and neither student felt comfortable correcting me...out of some weird, professorial respect. The weirdness went away quickly but they continued letting me call them by the wrong names. Now, we were digging into serious issues—contemporary racism and structural oppression, civil war and civil rights...civil disobedience and cultural peace, modernism and postmodernism and snobbiness and genuine insight. The classes were great but they were often interrupted by fits of nervous laughter that I didn't understand...until I was return their midterm papers. The two students whose names I had confused had received different grades on their papers—one excellent and one average. So, finally, they both fessed up. The joke wasn't funny anymore...at least, it wasn't funny for one of them. I felt so embarrassed but they were light-hearted about it. I guess it's fun to play tricks on the teacher every now and again. It's fun being a trickster. It goes both ways, I guess. I think it was karma for the perverse pleasure that I had taken watching my cheating students squirm back in the day. What goes around comes around...so, shower the things you love in the gorgeous petals of a rose. Send beauty into the world and it will surely come back to you.

Do you know the story of Dr. Oliver Sacks? You may have come across his name. He is the author of a book entitled The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat. I love the title...and I have to admit that for years, I thought that this was a children's story, one about a man...semi-successful, big ego (annoyingly big), workaholic, under achiever, late-bloomer...husband, father...but his attention was never in the present. He spent most of his time worrying about the future and regretting the past...not that I or any of us are like this guy at all.

[Law and Order chime] The following is a semi-true story. The names have been changed to protect the lives of the innocent. These are their stories.

So, this guy that I'm talking about, the one in the story that I imagined...he was increasingly estranged from his children and increasingly estranged from their mother, so much so that after many years of this casual neglect, he began to treat

his wife just like an article of clothing...to be worn at appropriate times...to be put on and to be taken off as the occasions required. To be strategically dipped below one eye, to be worn tightly for inclement weather and to be gently tossed aside once it had served its purpose.

My imagination runs away very quickly sometimes. This was one of them. I figured I didn't have to buy the children's book because I already know the story. I didn't know how I knew it. I figured I had heard it a few times over the years. Has anyone read this book? [] It's not a children's story at all, is it? This book has a different origin than the one that I thought I knew. In the words of the author, Dr. Oliver Sachs, himself,

In 1983, a friend and colleague asked me if I would join him in giving a seminar on agnosia, the peculiar inability to recognize anything, including faces. At one point, during the seminar, my colleague asked if I could give an example of a visual agnosia. I thought of one of my patients, a music teacher who had become unable to recognize his students or anyone else visually. I described how Dr. P [his patient] who pat the heads of water hydrants or parking meters, mistaking them for children. And about how he had even mistook his wife's head for a hat. [Sachs said] I had not thought of elaborating my thoughts on Dr. P up to this point, but that evening, I wrote up his case history. I entitled it The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and sent it off [to a magazine]. It did not occur to me that it might become the title story for a collection of case histories.

The book became a best seller. It was a popular success. For many, many years, I am sad to say, I mistook the real meaning of The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat. For many, many years, I have been stuck in my illusions. I'm only coming out of my illusions now...because the world is finally beautiful enough for me to allow myself to be more fully known, warts and all.

Is this world yet beautiful enough for all of you? ...or are you broken-hearted, cradling your fragile heart like water with both hands? Or do you feel both of these ways at once?

I wonder if we can try something together. I wonder if we can gather rose petals all around us—for strength, for hope, for courage, for safety. I wonder if we can cast a circle of deepest beauty within which everything is newly possible. Now, in order to try, I will need two, brave volunteers—one elder member of North Chapel and one who is relatively new (and it's ok to volunteer as a couple, if you'd like). The important thing is that you have to agree to represent the congregation as a whole.

1. Select
2. Would you please sit in these chairs?
3. Would you please accept this stole of North Chapel over your shoulders, uniting the two energies of the church (the new and the seasoned).
4. Now begins the circle of beauty ritual

Strength

Clara places a lavender petal in the hands of the volunteers.

Lavender is the sign of purity, silence, devotion, serenity, grace, and calmness. Lavender is a kind of purple and purple is the color of royalty and speaks of elegance, refinement, and luxury. Please accept these energies into your lives. Please allow yourselves to be showered in beauty.

Barbara tosses lavender petals over the heads and shoulders of the volunteers.

Hope

Clara places a yellow petal in the hands of the volunteers.

Yellow is the sign for happiness, hope and spontaneity. Yellow can signify caution as well as brightness. It can signify the light of a brand, new day. Please accept this beauty into your lives.

Barbara tosses yellow petals over the heads and shoulders of the volunteers.

Courage

Clara places a deep red petal in the hands of the volunteers.

Red is the sign of danger and red is the sign of courage. It symbolizes heat and activity; passion and sexuality; anger, love, and joy. Please accept this beauty into your lives.

Barbara tosses deep red petals over the heads and shoulders of the volunteers.

Safety

Clara places an orange petal in the hands of volunteers.

Orange is the sign of optimism and energy, excitement and adventure. Orange is the symbol of great creativity. Please accept this beauty into your lives.

Barbara tosses orange petals over the heads and shoulders of the volunteers.

Forgiveness is a circle of beauty that we can cast around ourselves in order to prepare for the best in life. We can learn in ways that are richer than what penalty and punishment makes available to us. We can grow from this...and we can allow our growth to help us to recognize the beauty that is everywhere around us...it can help us to not mistake that beauty for anything less than spectacular.

So, gather rose petals all around you—for strength, for hope, for courage, for safety—for everything is possible within such circles of gentleness. So,

Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace

For all of us imprisoned, circle for release

Circle for the planet, circle for each soul

For the children of our children keep the circle whole

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.