

“Walk in Beauty”
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Unity Church–Unitarian

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CALL TO WORSHIP:

There is a wholeness in each of us and a beauty that travels with the wholeness. There is a beauty in each of us and a wholeness that accompanies the beauty. By being alert to the qualities of wholeness and beauty in ourselves and in others, we help each other along the way. Hear now, a conversation between Piglet and Pooh.

“At first as they stumped along the path which edged the Hundred Acre Wood, they didn’t say much to each other; but when they came to the stream and had helped each other across the stepping stones, and were able to walk side by side again over the heather, they began to talk in a friendly way about this and that, and Piglet said, “If you see what I mean, Pooh” and Pooh said, “It’s just what I think myself, Piglet,” and Piglet said, “But, on the other had, Pooh, we must remember,” and Pooh said, “Quite true, Piglet, although I had forgotten it for the moment.”

Come let us worship together.

READING: *from My Grandfather’s Blessings* – Rachel Remen

Blessings come in forms as simple as the greeting commonly used in India. On meeting even a total stranger, one bows and says “Namaste”: I see the divine spark within you. Here we are too often fooled by someone’s appearance, their age or illness or anger or meanness or just too busy to recognize that there is in everyone a place of goodness and integrity, no matter how deeply buried. We are too hurried or distracted to stop and bear witness to it. When we recognize the spark of God in others, we blow on it with our attention and strengthen it, no matter how deeply it has been buried or for how long. When we bless someone, we touch the unborn goodness in them and wish it well.

Everything unborn in us and in the world needs blessing. My grandfather believed that the Holy has made all things. “It is up to us to strengthen them and feed them and free them whenever possible to find and fulfill His purposes for them” he told me. Blessings strengthen life and feed life just as water does.

READING: *The Buddha’s Last Instruction* – Mary Oliver

“Make of yourself a light,”
said the Buddha,
before he died.
I think of this every morning
as the east begins
to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first

signal — a white fan
streaked with pink and violet,
even green.
An old man, he lay down
between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything,
knowing it was his final hour.
The light burns upward,
it thickens and settles over the fields.
Around him, the villagers gathered
and stretched forward to listen.
Even before the sun itself
hangs, disattached, in the blue air,
I am touched everywhere
by its ocean of yellow waves.
No doubt he thought of everything
that had happened in his difficult life.
And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazes over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire —
clearly I'm not needed
yet I feel myself turning
into something of inexplicable value.
Slowly, beneath the branches,
he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of the frightened crowd.

READING: All Will Come Again — Ranier Maria Rilke

All will come again into its strength:
The field undivided, the waters undammed, the trees towering and the walls built low.
And in the valleys, people as strong and varied as the land.

And no churches where God
Is imprisoned and lamented
Like a trapped and wounded animal.
The houses welcoming all who knock
And a sense of boundless offering
In all relations, and in you and me.

No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond, no belittling of death, but only longing for what belongs to us
and serving earth, lest we remain unused.

SERMON: Walk in Beauty — Rob Eller-Isaacs

The French impressionist painter Edgar Degas is best known for his attempts to capture grace in motion.
Unlike his contemporaries Degas was not drawn to landscape. Despite extensive classical training which
might have directed him toward portraits of the nobility and of their homes and follies, his primary subjects
were women doing laundry, bathing, or practicing ballet. He painted circus performers and racehorse jockeys.

He painted life in motion. A few years ago the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts staged an exhibition of his work entitled "Degas and America."

At the very center of the exhibit, set among familiar pastel images of dancers leaping and bronzes of young girls dressed for their first encounters with the disciplines of dance, a large unfinished oil caught my eye. Because it was unfinished one could see the way Degas had struggled to refine the work. The dancer is set off-center in the frame to reinforce the sense that she doesn't know anyone is watching. Her right arm descends from her shoulder in perfect repose, bent slightly at the elbow and then at the wrist, each finger floats downward toward the stage.

But far above her fingers, in the upper left hand corner of the canvass there is a ghostly image of another arm; or rather of the same arm in an earlier rendition. Degas thought at first his dancers arm should emerge straight from her shoulder as if to repulse an attack. But it was wrong. He could feel it. And so he drew her arm again a few degrees beneath his first attempt. And then he made a third and a fourth and a fifth attempt until he finally found the place he had been striving toward, grace in motion, an exquisite repose.

"If you see what I mean, Pooh" and Pooh said, "It's just what I think myself, Piglet," and Piglet said, "But on the other hand, Pooh, we must remember," and Pooh said, "Quite true, Piglet, although I had forgotten it for the moment." We are always forgetting it. We are always forgetting the place that Eliot called "the still point," the place of exquisite repose. We are always forgetting that life is grace itself in the sense of its being unearned. Seen from far off our lives are truly "briefer than a kiss," but for those with eyes to see each life is a moment of grace.

It is hard to remember. You and I are burdened by a million messages of avarice and greed shouting out that we are ugly, saying we are less than whole and offering all kinds of products which promise to help us to convince ourselves that we are beautiful. But beauty is not painted on, beauty is realized, beauty is fulfilled. Beauty, to paraphrase Aristotle in his great work on Ethics is not simply a quality to be perceived by contemplation it is, in fact, the source of all action toward the good. Let's pursue this notion a bit further. From Aristotle's perspective beauty is the still point, the source, the starting place, the posture of grace. We know it when we see it. When we, ourselves arrive there it always feels like coming home.

The greeting "namaste" conforms precisely to this understanding. When I bow before your radiance, (namaste) when I salute the light within you, (namaste) I am saying that I see beneath the surface of your skin. I'm saying that I see how you are sprung from beauty just as trees spring up from water and from seed and fertile soil. "When we recognize the spark of God in others, we bow on it with our attention and strengthen it, no matter how deeply it has been buried or for how long."

Do you see how this deep understanding of beauty conforms to our faith's view of human nature? We believe each child is born whole and holy and that every child deserves to be nurtured as though he or she was born one more redeemer. And yes, we know some people are so damaged that even love can't help enough. But nonetheless we bless and try to hold them close despite the damage done. Our optimistic view of human nature may not in the strictest sense be true but it is the best thing we can do to tip the balance of the world toward hope and love.

To bow in greeting is a habit of the heart. It is a way of moving through the world practicing the fine art of repose. When we meet we pause, just for a moment, look into each others eyes and say, "I see you there. I see your strength and your nobility. I see God's radiance in you. I see your promise and your beauty." I want to live that way. I want to remember the radiance...

It's a matter of practice you know. Virtue doesn't come to us unbidden. Virtue calls for cultivation. We humans have our needs. When we're young our needs can often drive us to distraction. Spiritual maturity

comes gradually as we replace habits driven by our hungers with habits chosen in pursuit of faith. In the third act of Hamlet, the young prince counsels his mother attempting to help her redirect her lust:

Assume a virtue if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat
Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
For the next abstinence, the next more easy;
For use can almost change the stamp of nature.

It isn't that countering old self-destructive habits with new more healthy ones creates the state of being we are calling beauty. New habits neutralize the negative effect of old need-driven ones but practice only brings us to the threshold of spiritual well-being. One still needs to move through that threshold. One still needs to step through the gate, to leap into motion, to risk letting go.

Degas studied Renaissance drawing and painting in Florence. He practiced for years to perfect his technique. He developed all the disciplines required. But all his education, all his effort only brought him to the threshold of his art. He had to erase and paint over that one arm again and again before it would serve as an image so perfect that my eyes a hundred years later could follow it down to the still point where everything is stripped away but beauty. I stood in front of that brave unfinished painting and I wept. I want to tell you why. It wasn't that the work was incomplete. I love to be with art that's still in motion, art ostensibly unfinished. It wasn't that I sensed how frustrated he must have been as he guessed wrong again and again. It felt much more like grief or like the sure release of long-awaited rain.

The perfect gesture leads us to surrender to the moment so that we finally fall like autumn leaves descending down to rest on that which Tillich calls "the ground of being."

"Make of yourself a light," said the Buddha
before he died.
...he might have said anything,
knowing it was his final hour.

"Make of yourself a light," he said. In those final moments the Buddha remembered. He called the radiance to mind. He remembered.

Even before the sun itself
hangs, distracted, in the blue air,
I am touched everywhere
by its ocean of yellow waves.

Every morning in the dark before the dawn I remember Buddha's last instruction. "Make of yourself a light." The purpose of practice is to help us to remember. This is what happens when art is actually achieved. A painter stands before an empty canvass. He dips his brush in paint and he begins. A composer looks down at the blank staff sheet she's placed there on the table. She draws a treble clef and she begins. Maya Angelou is fond of saying that each of us composes our own lives and that together we compose the life of the community. She right; And I would add that we compose from memory.

Degas knew he had his dancer's arm just right because he had seen her perfect gesture on the stage. He remembered. Spiritual maturity comes with long years of practice marked by moments of illumination, moments when we get just a glimpse of the wholeness we hope for, moments when we remember that all life, even ours is born of beauty. Though we may have to paint our lives over again and again, though we are always starting over, faith and practice teach us our own beauty until in time we welcome "all who knock" and embrace "a sense of boundless offering in all relations and in you and me." Our task then is to compose ourselves and then together, you and I with all the neighbors we have yet to know, to make of our community a light to kindle hope and memory among the nations.

May it be so and amen.