

“Empty Days”
A sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Reading: “Love Does That” by Meister Eckhart

All day long a little burro labors, sometimes
with heavy loads on her back and sometimes just with worries
about things that bother only
burros.

And worries, as we know, can be more exhausting
than physical labor.

Once in a while a kind monk comes
to her stable and brings
a pear, but more
than that,

he looks into the burro's eyes and touches her ears
and for a few seconds the burro is free
and even seems to laugh,
because love does
that.

Love Frees.

Special Music: “Ella’s Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock

Sermon

This summer a cat joined my home and family and so I have now joined the ranks of people who tell cat stories to illustrate their every point. Oh look, here’s one now: My cat has developed the habit of descending at random times (unusually inconvenient ones) and plopping herself on my lap, immobilizing me. A braver soul than I might just shoo her away, and of course I do this if I’m in the middle of something urgent or time sensitive... but her siren call to cease all activity is very persuasive, what with her being exceptionally cute. (And then there’s her practice of wielding her claws like the sharp weapons they are if I try to reach for something to do.)

I have come to realize and appreciate how unusual it is in my life to sit with empty hands and no particular purpose for any length of time. May Sarton, the great poet and writer, muses about

how wondrous this kind of emptiness can be: "I always forget how important the empty days are, how important it may be sometimes not to expect to produce anything, even a few lines in a journal. A day when one has not pushed oneself to the limit seems a damaged damaging day, a sinful day. Not so!

The most valuable thing one can do for the psyche, occasionally, is to let it rest, wander, live in the changing light of a room."

Maybe one of the reasons I so often find myself talking about Ms. Kat is that she helps me practice this "occasionally living in the changing light of a room" better and more fully than would be possible without her. Embracing emptiness is hard! There is so much pressure to produce and push to the limit. And not all of this pressure is in service of the superficial or vain; for me, our special music today captures so perfectly the urgency of a hurting planet and her people, desperate for healing and relief. As a religious humanist, I believe that the work of the world is ours to do. We (humankind) are the ones who have to make it right somehow. There's no God in the clouds who's going to wave a magic wand. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest," goes the refrain.

And it's not just a song. This is real life that Sweet Honey in the Rock sings about with their line "until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons."

We know from a 2012 study by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement that in this country alone every 28 hours a black person is killed by law enforcement. And we know that number is much lower for white people.

As much as I—maybe this is true for you too—hear this statistic and feel an immediate desire to be a force for change, it can be so overwhelming that sometimes I just shut down before I've even said or done anything. Roger and I try to practice what we preach (literally, in this case) and so during this month of exploring risk we decided to take one by writing an article for our newsletter calling for reflection and conversation about what was happening in Ferguson, Missouri in the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, by a white police officer. We hit send and what followed was a very loud silence. Two weekends ago, Roger challenged us all—including himself and me—to think about what the silence means.

Since then, I have had some really fantastic, eye-and heart-opening conversations with many of you and I'm grateful for each one.

One of the main reasons I love serving this Fellowship is that I am constantly learning from you! Yet I still think it's fair to say that in a majority white congregation in a majority white community in a majority white state, we don't always know how to take the risk to talk about (and act about) race and racism.

The more I thought about Roger's challenge, the more I realized that there are pieces of accountability work I want to engage. I want to risk more around anti-racism, like by paying

more attention to its urgency, even though my own life is relatively free of the kind of violence that happened in Ferguson.

There are actually two inspired-by-our-theme risks I want to take and I'll tell you about the second one in a minute. But this is the first: to open my heart more to the pain and violence of racism. Believe me, I know how humble and minuscule that is. I know that just caring in my heart is not the same thing as solving racism or even knowing how to address it. But I do have faith that being more present and aware is one small way of refusing to rest until freedom comes. Listening to our special music today is one way I personally can do just a bit of this. Whenever I hear this song, I think, "I want this to be about me! I cannot rest until freedom comes!"

But the world, we know, is more than just dreary suffering and so I also feel called to be present with that reality. The person who best names this tension is E.B. White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, when he says: "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world." And then he admits, "This makes it hard to plan the day."

I am not always sure how to plan my day either but, ironically, E.B. White's simple acknowledgement of that tension between enjoyment and improvement somehow helps to balance the two. This, I am coming to realize in the face of Roger's challenge, is the other risk I am feeling called to take: I need to keep learning how to say yes to both of these competing needs: saving and savoring the world. I do not want to be swallowed by sadness and fear. I want to demand from life joy, laughter, renewal and the kind of emptiness May Sarton talks about. I want my life to be part of the beauty I try to give back.

This is all intensely political and at the same time intimately personal, and that's a meeting point about which the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh often has wise and practical thoughts. This is how he expresses a sentiment I find similar to the exaltation of the empty day: "If we are carried away every day by our projects, our uncertainty, our craving, how can we have the time to stop and look deeply into the situation—our own situation, the situation of our beloved ones, the situation of our family and of our community, and the situation of our nation and of the other nations?"

I suspect that the Unitarian Universalist Association slogan-makers were influenced, at least indirectly, by this Buddhist sensibility when they created a publicity campaign for Unitarian Universalism that we use here at the Fellowship: "Nurture Your Spirit, Help Heal Our World." It's in bumper sticker form tacked up on a bulletin board in the front lobby's Welcome Table, a nice reminder in a busy space.

After all, most of our spaces are busy most of the time. That's not bad. There's nothing wrong with having full lives and full days...unless it's so constant that we never get relief from it to contemplate the epic questions of life, about mortality and justice and those topics so big that they don't always fit into daily life when it's so full. And then the question becomes, how do we build in a little emptiness now and then?

So, if giving in every once in a while to my cat's aggressively loud purring wherever she happens to find me and just sitting still while my mind wanders nurtures my spirit, then taking time for that might actually help me heal the world. Maybe I can't, like, heal it completely before lunch. Probably—no, definitely not! But I have noticed how much easier it is to stay centered no matter what the day might bring me if I have some spaciousness inside as a kind of spiritual buffer.

That kind of rested space can help us balance the ferocity of Sweet Honey in the Rock's demand. If we're rested in body, mind and spirit, then when it's really important, like "when the killing of black men, black mothers' sons is not as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons," then we have the energy and the passion and the commitment to not rest. Here's an example that explores this further:

Cathy Rion Starr is a friend of mine from seminary and one of the co-ministers at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Hartford, Connecticut. She too has struggled to balance enjoying the world with improving it.

She shared with me, and gave me permission to share with you, that when she went to a vigil recently that honored the life of Michael Brown, she was asked to close it with some kind of prayer or reflection. "I asked everyone to do two things," she reported, "first, to get connected with one another. I asked them to talk to a couple people who they didn't know before they left for the evening. Because we need one another, and we are stronger together."

Then she invited those gathered to sing our special music today, "Ella's Song," which is named for Ella Baker, an important civil rights organizer. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."

And then she had to hurry home from the vigil, the one where everyone pledged in song to not rest until freedom comes, because she needed to write a sermon about keeping the Sabbath. And she couldn't help but laugh—and even poke fun of herself on Facebook—because those two ideas (rest and no rest) seem pretty contradictory when held side by side. Which is it that we are supposed to prioritize?

For Cathy, keeping a Sabbath (allotting one day for total emptiness) actually gave her (in her words) "energy to face this broken world and continue working to build a world of abundant love and justice." Just as she feels it is important to show up to vigils when something unjust happens, so too does she prioritize the practice of sustaining herself, of finding (as she puts it) a "way back to center, to renew and re-connect with the source of love," whatever that might be for her. Or for me, or for you.

So what does the burro from the poem that Dan read earlier in the service say to us here? For me, that burro is a reminder that all creatures experience their own tension between work and rest, enjoyment and improvement, savoring and saving. Even the burro contends with heavy loads on her back and sometimes just with worries about things that bother only burros. And even she makes time for rest, in the form of a pear and a monk's kind demonstrations of love.

And now that we have come around to poetry, which is probably my favorite language to express the precarious yet powerful balance of Ella's Song's fierce urgency with May Sarton's prescription for gentle emptiness, I offer one more poem in closing. Nancy Shaffer wrote it. It's called "Offering for Grief" but I think of it more as an offering for rest, for empty days. It is, incidentally, what I imagine my cat is saying when she plops on my lap:

Look! I have made this bowl
for you, this large dark blue one
with lilies etched across the bottom,
around the sides.

I have cleaned this box for you,
lined it in soft brown wool.
Have set it here, by the stove,
warm.

You could lie under the mulberry tree
at the edge of the garden,
wait in the grass for lacewings and evening.
Or lie on the bed, light falling near.
Sit on the bureau.

What I mean to say is:
I will make a place for you.

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