

"Home Movies"
A Sermon by Rev. Charles Blustein Ortman
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT
March 23, 2014

READINGS: ANCIENT & MODERN

Our first reading is Chapter 52 of the Tao te Ching. It is written by the ancient Chinese sage, Lao Tzu and translated by contemporary Taoist scholar, Stefan Stenudd:

The world's beginning is its [parent].
To have found the [parent]
Is also to know the children.
Although you know the children,
Cling to the [parent].
Until your last day you will not be harmed.
Seal the openings, shut the doors,
And until your last day you will not be exhausted.
Widen the openings, interfere,
And until your last day you will not be safe.
Seeing the small is called clarity.
Holding on to the weak is called strength.
Use the light to return to clarity.
Then you will not cause yourself misery.
This is called following the eternal.

Our modern reading is an excerpt by the prophetic contemporary writer Annie Dillard, from her spiritual reflections on nature found in her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.

SERMON: "Home Movies" Charles Blustein Ortman

I'm pretty sure that the year was 1958, give or take a little, not much. My father had just acquired our family's first Kodak Brownie 8 movie camera. The Brownie 8 had already been around for a few years, having gone on the market in 1951. But we never were the first on our block to have any technological sorts of things. 1958 wasn't all that many years since we'd got our first television set. And now we had a movie camera; that was something!

But at the age of eight, I wasn't altogether sure just what that something was, how I should respond to it, or how I was *expected* to respond to it. I do remember, very well, the first filming session we had with the Brownie 8. It was staged out on our front porch. I'm not sure if my memory has been more informed by the actual experience of that day, or by the numerous times over the years and decades after, when I would be reminded by the historical record as it was projected on a tripod, foldout screen, set up in our living room.

Not many years ago, one of my sisters (I was one of ten children) had a couple of hours of those old home movies copied to VHS format. Several of us gathered at her house to re-witness the performances of our childhoods. Now though, we got to watch ourselves on widescreen TV.

Together we watched our histories. There were birthday parties and holidays, graduations and weddings. There were new babies being brought home from the hospital; some were younger siblings and some were nieces and nephews. There was a lot of footage of all of us ice-skating on the large outdoor rink that spread out over our own and our neighbors' backyards. Because ice-skating was probably the one single activity that we all enjoyed, those skating movies provided the best chronicle of our growing up years.

One of the most highly treasured film segments was some footage that my father took in the fall of 1960. An enormous motorcade, complete with fire trucks, squad cars and police motorcycles – all with sirens blaring – brought presidential candidate John F. Kennedy to my hometown, Rock Island, Illinois. The parade route came down a throng filled 17 Street, right in front of our house! My father had stood with his Brownie 8 camera on a rise at the front edge of our lawn, and just as Kennedy's convertible passed by, only a few feet in front of him, he yelled loudly, "Hey, Jack!"

The future president instinctively turned to see who had called. He smiled, his famous broad smile, right into the lens of the camera. He waived with all of his vim and vigor. We watched and re-watched that home movie of President Kennedy turning, smiling and waving to us countless times in the years to come.

But already have gone far afield of that first experience, the one out on the front porch that I wanted to tell you about. My recollection of it goes like this... Late in the afternoon of a pleasant summer day, I walked into our living room. The front door stood open and, through the screen door, poured in the excited squeals of several of my younger sisters.

"Come out, come out," they shouted. "Dad's got a movie camera! He's going to take pictures of us and we'll all be in the movies!"

I sure didn't want to miss out on such an historic event, so of course, I joined them. My father was standing out in the yard, still fidgeting around, orienting himself to the camera. He hadn't started filming yet. The younger kids were running back and forth from one end of the porch to the other. I just sort of hung out with my brother and a couple of our older sisters. Finally my father announced, "Okay, I'm ready. Here we go!"

Now, you need to understand that I had been the object in my father's lens on numerous occasions before. One of the things I'd learned from such sessions, perhaps foremost among my siblings and rather painfully I might add, was that, if my father had a camera pointed at me, I'd better not – under any conditions – move... not a single muscle. So when he proclaimed, "Here we go," the eight-year-old me stood perfectly still in the middle of the porch. Everyone else was mugging, and waving, and walking or running around.

"You guys are going to get it," I muttered as loudly as I could, while trying hard not to move my lips. "You better stand still or this isn't going to go well."

"Don't be silly," they laughed. "These are moving pictures. You're supposed to *move*. You're not supposed to just stand there." I looked out towards my father, trying to read any clues that might be helpful in avoiding his wrath. He didn't seem to be even slightly dismayed by the total breach of usual picture taking decorum.

"What the heck," I thought.

And so our very first home movie was of this frolicking, carnival-like scene on our front porch. All the other kids were running this way and that, having a grand old time. For all eternity though, in whatever digital format the video might eventually be saved in, my role in that first home movie is that of an eight-year-old child of the 1950s, complete with crew cut and a multicolored striped T-shirt, standing perfectly still for a long time, only eventually daring to raise my one arm into the air, and wave at the camera by flexing my hand open and closed. Being shy was never really a part of my nature, not even as a child. But trying to stay out of trouble, now that was a passionate pastime.

Some of you here are around my age, or as unlikely as it may seem to others, are even older than I. I wonder how remarkable your early experiences of home movies seem to you now. For many of you who are younger, there is likely no period in your life that's passed without video recordings as a part of it. For all of us though, there must've been some kind of premier performance – a first time when, through some version of home movies, we started to become aware of how we appeared to the world around us. I wonder if for you, as it was for me, that was something of a daunting experience.

Seeing ourselves in videos is an odd and unnatural experience in many ways. Throughout all the ancient religions, even the gods were unable to see themselves in action. For untold millennia, humankind has acted in the world in ways that have included reflection on the impact of our actions. But for only the past 50 or 60 years that has been mixed significantly with more attention being focused on the impact of our reflection, the impact of our image, as it has been captured through the lens and recast into moving pictures. I suspect that this has ramped up humankind's struggle to distinguish between things and the appearance of things.

What might be in the mind of an eight-year-old child, stepping into a new age of experience, where the old rules no longer apply? Home movies give us some significant evidence that previous experience will have a lot to do with how we embrace new experiences in our lives. If the past has been fraught with danger, the approach likely includes a fair amount of trepidation. If it hasn't been so dangerous though, then perhaps our approach has a greater capacity for confidence.

Things versus the appearance of things; trepidation versus confidence – seems that these are significant dynamics along any path toward spiritual maturity. We are in a continuous process of everything being new – all the time. If we aren't experiencing that to be so, I suspect we aren't paying close enough attention. None of us has ever been here, in this very moment, before. And

that is something – that I believe – is always true. Given our permanent status as initiates in life, how is it that we might learn to focus on the essence of our experience and not get all tangled up in the appearances of our experience? How is it that we might learn the lessons of our past in order to face our future... with the greatest of confidence?

Back in our Montclair congregation, we have a group of primarily Senior Citizens, who gather for a brown bag lunch and conversation two Wednesdays of every month. It's a great group and I feel rather privileged to be a regular attendee for these gatherings of good-spirited, thoughtful and often humor-filled exchanges. When our Senior Lunch Bunch met at a recent session, one of the members, a relatively spry 92 year-old Horst Hoyer, suggested a topic for the next gathering. "Let's each answer the question, "What is the most important thing that you've learned?"

Great question! Everybody loved it and came to the next session, prepared to share some incredible learnings that they'd gleaned along their journeys. When septua-, octo- and nonagenarians start talking about the most important things they've learned in the course of their lives, there are some very rich lessons to be shared. It was wonderful just to sit with them as they shared their treasures.

But the gift of Horst's question was even richer for me. It became the genesis of a two-week odyssey that I suspect and hope will play a significant role in all my remaining years of ministry, even the remaining years of my life.

My first response to his question began with the thought – how can there be any one thing that is most important? I've learned a lot of important lessons along the way. I've learned how to be unfazed by the roving eye of the video camera. I've learned how to endure some of life's more brutal moments and how to walk with others as they learn their own capacity for endurance. I've learned to hold someone's hand while they've lain quietly, or sometimes not so quietly, on their deathbed. I've learned so many things for which I'm grateful. How could I possibly pick one single thing?

Finally, I realized that I needed to step back and choose something more on a meta-level, something large enough to incorporate all or many of the other lessons. So I started to think about some words that provide a recurring theme that are a part of many of my sermons back in Montclair. The words came back to me, like an old song that will sometimes visit one's psyche and run on continuous loop for hours or even sometimes days. The words "awe, gratitude and service," began to turn over and over in my thoughts. "Awe, gratitude and service."

Eventually those words emerged in a phrase that I believe does represent the most important thing I've learned in my life. That is – for me, the examined life, the intentional life, the life of integrity, is one which includes a discipline, a spiritual discipline of being open to and engaged in the practice of awe, and gratitude, and service. I shot up in the middle of the night, one night, and the thought that woke me was simply this – the greatest of these... is gratitude.

Awe requires that we pay attention to our lives, that we pay attention to each other and to the universe around us. That we are *here*, that any of this is *here*, is truly amazing and beautiful and awesome! Sometimes it is also tragic, and painful, and nearly unbearable. But all of this is *here*,

and because it is, we are. And that we *are* – even including the pain and suffering of our lives – *that we are*, is amazing, and beautiful, and awesome. To be open and engaged in awe, is to pay attention to our lives and to be aware of each other, of the world and of the universe around us.

From the experience of awe, it is a short step to gratitude. We've done nothing to merit our being and yet here we are. If our hearts are filled with awe, how can they not be filled with gratitude for the experience of being? Sometimes in the midst of grief or of great challenge, it's hard to be in touch with gratitude, but even then gratitude, or the vision and the hope of gratitude, can so often pull us through the transformation we need to undergo in order for us to learn to live with our grief and are challenges.

So if our response to awe is gratitude, it is another short step from gratitude into being open and engaged in service. If we have been given all that we have, all that we know, all that we have ever aspired to, how can we help but to respond with service to *THAT* which has been so generous to us? And since we can't know who or what that source is, our service is called to that which we do know – our service need be to those with whom we share the planet and with the planet itself.

Gratitude is the keystone, the central point. It is the bridge that leads from awe to service, and back again from service to awe. Gratitude is the middle space on the bridge. Being grateful means that we are paying attention, that we are being aware. Being grateful is engaging with integrity in doing our part as co-creators of this amazing world, giving back to the universe, which has given us everything. Gratitude is the birthplace of the religious pursuit towards faith, and hope, and love.

I can't tell you how many times over the years people have said to me, "I wish I could have the faith of a devout Christian (or sometimes Jew or Moslem). I wish I could believe that there was a safety net, like the loving arms of Jesus, that I could fall back into, that would hold me, like it holds those who have such faith. But I can't believe in those things and so I can't have that kind of faith."

The truth is, people who have such faith, at least the ones I know, don't come by it easily. They've worked to develop that faith. They've worked to develop it over the course of their lifetimes, so that it might be there when they need it. And even then, perhaps especially then, it has been tested.

I'm not saying we need to learn how to mug for the camera. I'm not saying we need to try to believe in any theology that is someone else's. I am saying that as Unitarian Universalists, we need to believe what we have to believe because it is what we have found and what we find to be true.

As near as I can tell, a truth which is as universal as anything else I have found along the way, is that the practice of gratitude yields a grace that is capable of enabling us to transcend any challenge, any difficulty, with confidence triumphant over trepidation, with authenticity triumphant over any illusion of integrity. If the past has been fraught with danger, our approach

to what lies ahead likely includes a fair amount of trepidation as well. If we come prepared though, if we come prepared – then perhaps our approach has a greater capacity for confidence.

Awe, and gratitude, and service, and the greatest of these is gratitude.

In the face of illness or injury – let our answer be gratitude. In the face of financial loss or the loss of a job – let our prayer be for gratitude. In the face of the loss of a loved one or our own impending death – let our guiding light ever be gratitude. Let our gratitude not be a mugging for the camera, nor of being frozen in fear that we might not get it right. Let our gratitude be versed in the daily practice, the spiritual discipline of an orientation to that touchstone, which leads us from awe to service.

So that even, if like one of the great losers of all-time, Job, we would lose nearly everything that mattered to us, we would not have lost our most precious connection, linking our lives with the universe and the world around us – we would not have lost our gratitude. What greater, more fulfilling way, might there be for any of us, than to draw our final breath in this life, with our hearts filled with gratitude – for what has been and for what still is? If we are willing to work towards a faith like that now, I trust it will be with us – somewhere, somehow – in any of our darkest moments to come.

“Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery... We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.” (Annie Dillard)

If you could (and indeed you are the only one who can), how would you script the authentic home movie of *your* life? 13th Century German mystic, Meister Eckhart, said, “If the only prayer you [ever] said was thank you – that would be enough.” And so, may our proper praise, our proper response to the stories that are our lives ever be, a simple and heartfelt prayer... of gratitude, of thankfulness.

CLOSING WORDS — Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

“The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”

BENEDICTION

May the prayers of our hearts and the songs of our lips shared in this holy hour of worship, be with us now in all the days to come. As our worship is now ended, our service begins.