

Longing©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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adapted from a sermon preached May 23, 2004

I'm suffering from a bit of a writer's block this week. Can't tell you exactly why. Betsy Stoll's death was hard this week. She was working for the church at the time she was diagnosed with cancer, and all of the staff had grown to love her. So there's the grief, but I'm not sure that's the entire reason. We've been through grief before together and we know it is coming again.

I did everything I know to do to get the words flowing. I got on the treadmill and while I exercised, I watched the first part of the movie *Shakespeare in Love* as the fictional William Shakespeare works through his writer's block - I ended the movie just as he begins to write and write and write, but still I couldn't write. I meditated. I tried to empty myself so that the words would come, and still I couldn't write.

I thought of Tom Smith, former minister of this church in the 1960s, who is rumored once to have gone into the pulpit to declare that he'd already said everything he knew to say, and apparently he sat down again, end of sermon. A very tempting strategy for this morning.

But I thought of something else. Haven't I preached on prayer before? (Though my sermon title is *Longing*, I'd always intended it to be about prayer) Indeed, I had. May 23, 2004. I preached a sermon called *Pray without Ceasing*. Almost three years ago now. Some of you weren't even here then. Why don't I just preach that sermon and be done with it?

So, this morning, instead of fearing that I've told you this story before as I speak, I have no fear. I absolutely know I told you this story before. But, since I've changed since 2004, this sermon has also changed. I'm not preaching it verbatim, but borrowing liberally from my own words. I don't think you can call it plagiarism if you steal your own words. And I'm keeping the news context - what was going on, as you'll recall, in May of 2004 is the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Massachusetts. We'll see. I hope you it works. Here it goes:

Every secret wish and every desire, said Emerson, is a prayer. Desire, as in longing.

I have come to understand prayer, as Armstrong suggests, as the words used to cultivate awareness - to "voice to our neediness, our longing, our terror." . It can bring with it a thankfulness and sometimes, profound sorrow. Praying before a meal, for example, is a moment of intention. We *notice* the food we are about to eat in a way that so often we fail to do in our culture and in our homes. We *thank* the universe, or God, or the plant/animal

life itself we have sacrificed. *We recognize* that others are not as fortunate as we- that some in the world do not have food on their tables, and most do not have food in the quantity and quality most of us in this room enjoy. The act of awareness which comes with praying connects us with ourselves, with others, with the earth, and the universe. Ultimately, it can lead us to consider what food we put into our bodies and why, and maybe, even change our habits.

Prayer is something I have struggled with most of my life. It was not talked about openly in the Unitarian Universalist fellowships and churches I attended growing up. It was not done openly in my family - with the exception of an Edward Markham poem my dad turned into a prayer that we say when the family gathers -

There is a destiny that makes us all brothers. None goes his way alone. All that we send into the lives of others, comes back into our own.

To this day, you come to a family gathering with my dad's relatives, and you will be asked to hold hands and recite those words, struggling probably as we do with the gendered language, mumbling something like *Destiny that makes us all brothers and sisters, etc. None goes "their" way alone...*

They are comforting words, in my family, in part because, awkward or not, we have them in common. Kind of like "May faith in love and hope for community keep us ever growing and changing together. Peace." Not exactly poetic or smooth, but ours, tradition, and as such, meaningful. And this poem my dad revised was something everyone in the family could say - the Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Jews, and the Unitarian Universalists.

There is another kind of prayer, too, I think, which is also about awareness, but of a different sort - when I am anxious, worried, scared, prayer can serve to calm me - there are times when I am flooded by awareness of how I'm feeling, and *all of it* hurts. Prayer serves to calm me and remind me that this feeling, too, shall pass, or the events which precipitated my intense feelings will pass, that we have survived before, I have survived before and will survive again.

You heard a lot more praying from me March of 2003 when the US began bombing Iraq, in part, it was a way to deal with my own intense emotions around the events, and my own loss of control - not that the war was any worse or better than any other war, or any war that is currently raging across the planet, but this one felt particularly intense, in part because I knew how many of you were working hard to prevent events from taking place that did, and I am your minister, and I didn't know what to say to comfort you, and so I prayed. I also knew that some of you felt the war was a necessary response, and I am also your minister, and I didn't know what to say to you, and so I prayed. I was so desperate for words to pray that I even read you a poem attributed to poet, Mary Oliver that was sent to me over the internet. It turned out not to be Mary Oliver's and several of my colleagues reported having read it as well in worship that week, having made the same mistake. We were struggling so hard for words to say that would help in some way, any way.

Well, unfortunately, the war in Iraq has not ended and, in fact, its complications seem to increase each and every day. We are bombarded in the news by horrific images and terrifying stories which are very hard to integrate into our daily lives. We feel we have so little control over the events, and yet much of what is happening is done in our name - by leaders of a "democracy" whom we elected. I know how many problems there were with the election process, but, votes aside, many, many, many of us, our neighbors and friends and fellow citizens, did vote for the current administration and truth-be-told, we cannot lay all the mistakes made at the feet of our current president. That's just too easy and it's not that simple. (though if you ask me, I could tell you there are now 330 days left of the Bush administration)

My family of origin and my husband's family of origin have very different takes on this war - actually, war in general. General being the operative word. Stuart's family descends from army generals: three generations of military officers. My family, on the other hand, except my grandfathers, are liberal educator types: Intellectuals who debate in mostly abstract terms about such things as war and peace and non-violence, but who have little practical experience with war.

So, my husband, Stuart, and I come from different family backgrounds, and yet are equally disturbed by the news reports of Iraqi prisoner abuse by American soldiers. I'm sure you've not forgotten this. Yet, neither of us are naïve. We both know this happens. I have shared with you before that I survived a sexual assault, so that the things that are described as happening in these prisons are very real to me. I cannot deny that people are capable of such horrors. It is not terribly surprising to me that this has happened, even as it is still extremely upsetting.

My take on it, you might imagine, is that this is the slippery slope we slide down when we engage in war at all. My husband's take, however, is different. From his family's military background, I have come to appreciate the very real "rules of engagement" that members of the military learn, the intentional teaching of duty and honor of country, and how devastating this abuse is to the notion of honorability instilled in soldiers from their training. This abuse challenges the very notion that soldiers fighting for their country are engaged in honorable acts. I had to quit listening to the radio news first thing in the morning that spring of 2004. I would be half-awake listening to news reports that described this incredible prisoner abuse in excruciating detail, and I decided that enough is enough. It is important to be well-informed. However, it is not necessary to listen to the news first thing in the morning in order to be well-informed. I was feeling assaulted by the news because I had forgotten that I have a lot of control about when and what I read and listen to. So, I began to wake up to the sounds of ocean waves, and turn on the radio only when I was ready to pay attention to the news.

I was delighted then that spring when I turned the radio on, prepared for the graphic descriptions of prisoner abuse, and instead I heard stories of loving couples who years and years after they had committed themselves to one another, were able to finally get legally married in the state of Massachusetts. What a delight and a relief.

Now, I know that even while these couples are getting legal recognition for loving relationships, bombs are exploding in other parts of the world. The one does not change the other. But a bombardment of information about events over which our control seems so limited, is only overwhelming.

This is one reason you may have noticed, that I don't consider it a part of my job to address whatever issue is in the news any particular week. You don't need to come to church for that - you have access to breaking news from too many sources. I consider it my job to remind you that every week that there is a gap between what we want the world to be and how it actually is. We know that innocents die, abuse occurs, poverty consumes lives, children are undernourished, our planet is dying, and we know that nature is full of miracles, human creativity is abundant, and our power is limitless, if we can gain the courage and skill to unleash it. We have more control than we think we do.

That gap is what led me to title this service *Longing* - because it seems we are always longing for something better. Prayer can be an expression of that longing.

I consider it my job to let you know that, regardless of wars, poverty, environmental devastation, and even wonderful blessed events like the granting of basic human rights to two people who love each other, - my job is to let you know, regardless, that the earth spins around the sun, that nightfall is followed by day, that people before us have felt the despair of a broken world, and that, more importantly, people before us have found the courage to make changes that can positively impact the course of events.

I know it feels sometimes like we're losing: That all is lost, that there is no hope for humanity when people can abuse people in the way we hear in the news and sometimes experience in our lives, but it is simply not true. Sometimes, it is easier to think that we have no control. It lets us off the hook. There's nothing to do, so we quit trying.

When actually, the truth is harder, even than that, to bear. Everything we do matters. People do not abuse people in the way that has been uncovered in the news, except by a brokenness that we rarely dare to admit. Therein lies the human tragedy. They, our soldiers, are not monsters or fiends or even, unfortunately, that aberrant. They are human beings who lost perspective, trying, probably, to do what they thought was right. They were taught that compassion would interfere with their job, and so they objectified and dehumanized the enemy to such an extent that they felt their abuse somehow justifiable - and that sounds suspiciously like terrorism?

We long for a different world. Every secret wish and every desire, said Emerson, is a prayer. As a religious descendent of Emerson, I take that seriously, and if prayer helps me come into deep awareness of the world, and soothes my own response such that I can act responsibly and with integrity, then that is enough.

I may not be able to do too much about the hurt soldiers and hurt prisoners and the hurting system which allows abuse to occur, but I have quite a lot of control over my own ability to be cruel. I can pay attention to the hurt around me and respond carefully, thoughtfully,

and with compassion. I can listen to the news when I am ready to listen, and turn it off when I need to pay attention to other important matters. I can soothe my own emotional response, and grapple with it, and take care of it, and tame it, in a way, so that I don't misplace my anger and hurt others needlessly, or act precipitously.

. It is easy to fall into the belief that there is a conspiracy against us - a conspiracy to keep us from that awareness - distracting us with detail and information, media, and meetings and activities and people. Prayer can be a way to say STOP. Slow down. Think. Feel. Understand. Be. Breathe. Then, and only then, act. Vote. Write a letter. Make conscious choices about your consumption. Make amends. Say you're sorry and mean it. Say, "I'd like to try that again." "I didn't *really* understand what you just said."

It seems so obvious listening to the news, that the soldiers who abused prisoners should have known how wrong their actions were. but the truth is, they did those things. Now it is left to us to understand how it can come to that, so that we can learn to make better choices in the lives we control - our own.

What I learned to love about the psalms like the one I read this morning is the articulation of such deep, desperate, and hopeful emotion. The words of the psalms put voice to our neediness, our longing, our terror." I never liked the enemy language - in the psalms there is always an enemy at the door ready to defeat us - but once I began to understand the psalms as giving voice to our *feelings*, rather than an analysis of *events* - I get it. Sometimes we do *feel/like* there are enemies - even if we understand theologically that they are of our own making. I love the language of longing in the psalm:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. ²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Where is your hope, your rock, your comfort? How do we give voice to our deepest worries and transform them into our greatest work on earth? Prayer is one way to cultivate that awareness. My soul longs for wholeness as the deer longs for water.

I pray today for all of us: You and me and the people of Iraq and the people who make up our government, citizens of the entire world, the victims and the abusers, and the survivors, and our children. I long for us to notice, to be thankful, and to recognize that the world is not now as we can yet make it. I pray for awareness and wholeness and the integrity to move forward. I intend to pray without ceasing. Amen.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.