

Not to Weary in Well Doing
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Readings

from “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” – a speech by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., given in Memphis, April 3, 1968

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've *seen* the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

from “The Old Man’s Calendar” by Rev. Ebenezer Gay (1781)

Remembering how old we are, let us wholly, and more closely, follow the Lord to the end of our lives – hold on our way of faithful obedience, and not be tired by the length of it, and be weary of well doing. We should take heed that we suffer not decays of grace with those of nature; but, while our outward man is perishing, our inward man be renewed day by day. Our diligence should be quickened, our zeal promoted, and even by, our bodily weaknesses, as they intimate the time of working our salvation is short.

Sermon

Rev. Ebenezer Gay, our third minister, in his sermon “The Old Man’s Calendar,” preached on his 85th birthday, began his sixth of seven sections with words you’ve just heard. I’ll repeat just the first lines:

Remembering how old we are, let us wholly, and more closely, follow the Lord to the end of our lives – hold on our way of faithful obedience, and not be tired by the length of it, and be weary of well doing.

Well, as we heard in the first reading, fifty-one years ago this April, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., though about fifty years younger than Gay was when Gay

preached his sermon, had a presentiment – realistic, given the many threats – that his life might not be long.

King knew how old he was and he knew how uncertain his longevity was; and somehow he did not “weary in well doing” and withdraw to a comfortable life in seclusion from our nation’s or the world’s troubles. He did not “weary in well doing” – quite the contrary. Indeed, he was in Memphis when he spoke the words we heard, in Memphis to support yet another campaign for justice and equal rights, in Memphis where the next day he was shot and killed.

How did King manage not to weary? And how might we manage not to weary in our own well doing, no matter our age – whether well doing in the midst of the busy householder’s life of the middle years or well doing during the latter chapters of our lives, when we might feel ourselves losing some of our youthful energy, physical strength, abilities?

Well, it seems to me that much of what Ebenezer Gay had to say on this matter remains relevant to our lives today – the centuries between his and our lives matter not.

We heard Gay’s words. He enjoined his listeners, especially his more aged listeners, to “follow the Lord” to the end of one’s days.

Now, this theistic, Christian-based language, which was also Martin Luther King’s, may or may not be ours. But it is easily enough translated into a variety of religious or humanistic languages:

Follow the Lord?

How about aligning with the Tao, the eternal Way of nature and of life?

How about following the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, including right speech, right action, right livelihood all in the spirit of the two supreme virtues in Buddhism: wisdom and compassion?

How about listening to and heeding the call of conscience, however we understand the source of that inner voice?

How about honoring, in the spirit of our own Unitarian Universalist Principles, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, democratic process, goals of peace, justice, and world community, and the interdependent web of life?

Okay then, translations made... still the question: How do we manage to live lives in such ways – to “follow the Lord” or “align with the Tao” or follow the Eightfold Path or heed the call of conscience and our principles?

Well, what did Gay suggest? Just a little later in his sermon he encouraged his congregation to “converse with God in secret, by reading, meditation, and prayer.”

He went on: “We should not deprive ourselves of the benefit of public ordinances of worship, so long as we are any ways capable of giving our profitable attendance.” In other words come to church! Gay was, after all, a preacher, and encouraging regular attendance at church might be considered part of the job description, but his admonition ran deeper than that; he was affirming that Sunday gathering for worship was good for the soul, replenishing to the spirit.

In any case, the point in all of this is that one way or another (and we each have

our way) we can't be always doing (even well doing!) – we will exhaust ourselves, deplete our resources. So we must replenish ourselves if we don't wish to “weary in well doing” – or any kind of doing for that matter.

To begin with, in the spirit of Gay's admonition, the ancient practices (in all traditions) of meditation and prayer by whatever names and in whatever form offer powerful, tried and true, ways we can do this. Yet whether formal practice of some sort or informally finding time to reflect, to ponder, to be silent, to absorb the lessons of nature, to be together in an old Meeting House... we renew not with ever-increasing busyness, but with some retreat, some stillness, stillness which will allow our inner well to re-fill from the universal well-springs of life, stillness which will eventually remind us that even in apparent solitude we are actually not ever alone – we are part of the larger community of life, King's inescapable network of mutuality.

For me the replenishing happens during a morning run, reading of ancient texts, meditation; replenishing happens too in gatherings such as this or in a circle in the parlor where we engage in conversations about things that matter... that might help us lead lives that matter.

But whatever our practice, the space and time we give ourselves to align with deeper well-springs of life and love so that we might not weary in well doing, is at the same time space and time in which our hearts may open to the world's suffering (because we *are* part of the community of life), and in particular to whatever part of the world's suffering most breaks our hearts... and which additionally (and importantly if we don't want our broken heart to immobilize us) may help us to discern the particular gifts we have to offer to help to alleviate some of that suffering.

For though we can't do everything, we can do one thing. And then another.

Dr. King's own spiritual life was of course rooted in his Christian faith and practice, his own reading and study of scripture, theology, philosophy, his private times of prayer, and certainly also including “the public ordinances of worship” in community... often lifting up the simple yet enduringly profound messages of the Hebrew prophets and the teachings of Jesus:

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, heal the sick.

All of this: study, prayer, returning to ancient prophetic wisdom... replenishing to his spirit, orienting his life to service, to blessing life, with his life's gifts.

And though King had times of retreat, needless to say he did not do his work of well doing alone. He was ever in community, community that held him even in his own times of trial. Whatever else keeps us going, we also do need each other in order not to weary in well doing.

In 1966, for example, King went to Grenada, Mississippi to support the efforts there to integrate the public schools. One morning he could not be roused out of bed in his motel room, he was so exhausted, depleted. Andrew Young had the inspired idea to bring in a young folksinger who was also part of the movement to sing fresh energy into him. Young pushed past the group of aides into King's room, this young folksinger by his side. And Joan Baez sang "Pilgrim of Sorrow."

The song begins by naming the feeling of being alone and without hope that sometimes overtakes us – names that sometimes even friends can't offer consolation because "they have troubles too" and concludes... "that's when I heard of a city called Glory and I try to make that city my home." For King, maybe one way of understanding, experiencing that "city" was as the community of faith and love that he was so much a part of.

King rose and met the day.

In other words, whatever else brings us renewal, whatever else helps us not to weary in well doing... companions, friends are also essential.

Well then, this year, as we mark Dr. King's birthday, in what ways are we – remembering how old we are, however old or young that might be – moved in the spirit of King to seek to heal suffering or to seek justice and peace and ecological sanity without wearying in our well doing?

Now, as we heard, King was aware of the possibility, even the likelihood, that his life might be cut short. But his primary concern was not with the length of his life, long or short; it was with the shared fate of his community of brothers and sisters, the fate of our nation, the fate of the world. In other words, he had managed to let go to some significant degree of ego, of selfish striving, to let go into wider circles of concern, compassion, and love.

Can we do this too? Naturally enough we have concerns about our own personal fates, but not wearying of well doing means also letting go into concern for wider circles of life: for our families and neighbors to begin with, but also for immigrants at the border, for any who suffer, for the fate of the planet, concern for the possible death of the living systems on which we depend.

And just because the loudest voices on the national stage are (for now) self-serving, dissembling, even hateful, this shouldn't quiet *our* voices, must not weary us. Quite the contrary.

Here's how I'm thinking of some of this. I'll probably be fine over the rest of the years of my life, however many or few, able to live a pretty comfortable middle class life shielded from much of the world's suffering should I choose to ignore it, or unless global disaster comes even more quickly than some fear.

But – two things.

First, what a sadly small way to live!

Second, what about my children and grandchildren? Our grandkids at their current age are utterly oblivious to the national and global challenges we face. Their innocence of all this breaks my heart.

So among my many motivations, it is *their* lives that bring me to continue, for example, to write about climate change and to try to live with as small a carbon footprint as I can manage, as well as to contribute to organizations on the front lines of this and other issues. Remembering as Dr. King once said, that “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

And I am inspired in what little I do (and shamed by what little I do) by folks like our own Green Sanctuary Team, many of whom are among our elders, choosing to use this chapter of their lives in service to life; and not wearying in their well doing, not to the outer eye anyway. All of them understanding, as we all need to learn more deeply, that the crisis of global climate change is not just about the so-called environment. It is a crisis of justice, since the poorest of the poor, often those of color, people already living at the margins financially or literally at the edge of rising seas or encroaching deserts, who are first to be affected, even devastated, by climate change.

One hesitates to pretend to know how Martin Luther King would engage in relation to climate justice, but it is hard to imagine him *not* engaging, and engaging fiercely in this context on behalf of “the least of these,” on behalf of life.

We *will* sometimes weary. We will sometimes find it hard to get out of bed even to do our daily work, much less to help neighbors in need, much less to find some way of engaging in the monumental issues of our time – whether climate change, immigrant rights, racism, and on and on.

But we do know how to allow the universal well-springs of life to re-fill our own inner well – whether through personal practice, shared worship, or by reaching out to a friend, or by being that friend.

Let us keep on... together... perhaps with the spirit of Mary Oliver’s enduring words in our hearts: What will we each do, however many or few our years, with our one wild and precious life?

Blessed be.

Amen.