

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County
HAPPY NEW YEAR,
MESSIEURS FINNIGAN AND MASLOW
The Rev. Cynthia Barnes Johnson
January 1, 2017

Here it is, a brand new year arrayed before us. How do we live attentively and bravely and authentically and lovingly in a year in that invites us to reexamine our own priorities in a hurting world? How do we help one another with the living of all 365 days of 2017? We're going to ask Michael and Abraham, but before that I want to remind you about a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon from November 1998.

In this cartoon, Calvin and Hobbes are looking at the newspaper. Calvin observes, "These are interesting times." "We don't trust the government. We don't trust the legal system. We don't trust the media, and we don't trust each other! We've undermined all authority, and with it, the basis for replacing it." Hobbes, the tiger, looked pensive as he said, "'Interesting' is a mild way of putting it. And Calvin chortled, "It's like a six-year-old's dream come true!"

Interesting times. Challenging times. Hard times.

Good Poems for Hard Times begins with an introductory essay by editor Garrison Keillor. [CBJ: He gives this definition of the purpose of poetry...]

"The meaning of poetry is to give courage. A poem is not a puzzle that you the dutiful reader is obliged to solve. It is meant to poke you, get you to buck up, pay attention, rise and shine, look alive, ... wake up and die right.
... what really matters about poetry is the miracle of incantation in rendering the gravity and grave and beauty of the ordinary world and thereby lending courage to strangers. This is a necessary thing."

Poem: "Afraid So" by Jeanne Marie Beaumont from *Curious Conduct* © BOA Editions, Ltd., 2004.

Is it starting to rain?
Did the check bounce?
Are we out of coffee?

Is this going to hurt?
Could you lose your job?
Did the glass break?
Was the baggage misrouted?
Will this go on my record?
Are you missing much money?
Was anyone injured?
Is the traffic heavy?
Do I have to remove my clothes?
Will it leave a scar?
Must you go?
Will this be in the papers?
Is my time up already?
Are we seeing the understudy?
Will it affect my eyesight?
Did all the books burn?
Are you still smoking?
Is the bone broken?
Will I have to put him to sleep?
Was the car totaled?
Am I responsible for these charges?
Are you contagious?
Will we have to wait long?
Is the runway icy?
Was the gun loaded?
Could this cause side effects?
Do you know who betrayed you?
Is the wound infected?
Are we lost?
Can it get any worse?

My question:

What is our country going to be like after January 20th?

The reason I know the date of that Calvin and Hobbes "It's like a six-year-old's dream come true!" cartoon is that I preached a sermon about FEELING CURMUDGEONLY that Sunday, September 13, 1998, at the First Unitarian Church of Oklahoma City. It was the week McGuire hit his 61st and 62nd home runs. It was a week I had grave concern for our nation, the week the House of Representatives was deciding whether to impeach Clinton or not. I said these words that morning:

...that the real issue was not whether Clinton behaved badly but whether he committed high crimes and misdemeanors that are grounds for impeachment. I wish I felt more confident that partisan politics would not drive the decision making in the House of Representatives.

This upcoming week will infuse us with the adrenaline of crisis even as it begs us not to rush to judgment. It will be a week that asks us to integrate our minds and hearts and spirits. It will be a week that asks of us more wisdom than six-year-old Calvin's delight in a chaotic universe.

Michael Finnegan. "an unboundedly long song, which can continue with numerous variations until the singer decides (or is forced) to stop..."

We need to keep on keeping on. Unboundedly. We need to be resilient and dedicate quality attention to being participatory citizens of our democracy and its aspiration of liberty and justice for all. Unboundedly.

...[My] senior year of college I did my practice teaching in an elementary school in Grinnell, Iowa. I had two supervising teachers, both fifth grade teachers. From one of them, I learned excellent techniques in a supportive environment. From Miss Marquart, I learned something else.

I was twenty-one years old. The students were ten or eleven years old. I had some trouble with classroom discipline, in no small measure because I wasn't clearly a grown up in my own mind. One morning I asked Miss Marquart for help, "What do you do when the children make you laugh? How do you regain control of the classroom?" Miss Marquart drew herself taller and said, "The children have long since ceased to amuse me."

Miss Marquart is a good example of someone for whom FEELING CURMUDGEONLY could also be seen as a spiritual crisis. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke to his disciples: "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted. (Matthew 5:17) It is easy for us to think that it was appropriate that Miss Marquart retired that spring from teaching because she had lost her savour for children. Who among us would wish for any child a teacher who had stopped finding pleasure in children? (Note; in the fifty-plus years since that happened, I have increasingly felt more compassion for her than I did way back then.)

In that sermon I quoted a columnist in the New York Times Magazine who offered insights about whining:

What is whining? Whining is the free-ranging expression of anxiety about things you either cannot or should not do anything about. It is complaining at a rarefied level: Mozart writing to his father about playing for some philistines in a cold room, say, or a put-upon Naomi Campbell

declaring to room service, "All I want is a simple cookie," the night before meeting Nelson Mandela...

While protocol suggests that in the presence of real tragedy, you have to stop the whine-a-thon (for one minute at least), listeners must also be discerning. Faced with compulsive whining, you should remember that there is only one thing worse than trivializing someone's whine, and that is suggesting a solution.

Feeling curmudgeonly, having lost our savor, whining -- these are all phrases that describe someone who is feeling pretty judgmental about the world and its inhabitants... That long-ago Sunday 18 years ago,

I found myself lamenting the decline in television journalism...annoyed that national network news programs had shortened the news segments, increased advertisements, and had an irritating number of plugs for other television programs on their networks.

I went on from lamenting the deterioration of journalism enumerating...other things: the decline in feminism in young women, the size of type in the new telephone book, the poor service I experienced in banks recently, how flying isn't as much fun since planes got too full -- and the increased incidence of grit in spinach in salads in restaurants! Suddenly, I thought: I think there is a theme here!

I realized that the impulse to set oneself up as the arbiter of standards in the modern world leads to an increasing withdrawal into some romanticized past. I realized that I didn't want to be the kind of person rooted in a distortion of yesterday when all children behaved better, back before grades and SAT scores had been inflated, back before people developed the habit of living beyond their means through credit card debt. But whatever the distinctive content of our lamentations -- and I expect that your list would be different from my list -- I realized that feeling curmudgeonly can become a way of life.

And that was then, that reflection back in 1998 about feeling "merely curmudgeonly." My symptoms these days are similar, but the threshold of my distress is much greater. I worry not only for myself but for other people, people I know and love and people I don't know. Not only do I worry, I despair.

My sense of well-being has plummeted -- in spite of Al's modeling equanimity and his wise counsel about how to recover my sense of well-being. I am trying to regain my equanimity.

I want to enjoy every day, to do something useful to someone else every day, to experience the goodness of life: through things I value most in my life: being simpatico with Al; reading and/or thinking and/or writing daily; really seeing the beauty of the earth having access to creative thinking and/or doing, being connected with people near or far; laughing, -- and, preferably, a good hair day...

A friend told me once about her therapist's observation that people have one of two world views. Either they believe that the world is a good place where bad things happen. Or they believe the world is a bad place where good things happen. I suspect that people in this second category, the people who believe that the world is a bad place where good things occasionally happen, probably spend a large amount of effort constructing an armor for protection because it would be too scary to walk around feeling vulnerable in an unsafe world. But what should we do if we are living in an unsafe world?

Maslow. Look at your Order of Service to see Maslow's model. I believe that all of us are at risk of feeling shakier/being shaken when our Safety Needs for Security and Safety are destabilized.

Our Deficiency Needs must be satisfied before we can thrive in those higher three levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This is true for you and me. I think my malaise and fear are why my life has lost some of its savor – because I am afraid of the future of my country and the world.

My first draft of our Christmas letter was 8 ½ pages long.

Eventually it ended up 1 ½ pages long, a document called "Christmas Letter More Measured.

The election stunned us. I fear for our democracy, for the planet, for public schools, for women's health including reproductive choice, for compassion, for racial justice, for our hearts to be open to welcoming the stranger. I fear for my country. And I mourn the loss of a friend because of the election. How do we/they bridge the gap between Us and Them?

Recently, my Advent sermon contained these words:

*"Besides people to love and people to love me, it is essential that **my life be connected to larger purposes and deeper truths**. This has to do with my ministry, but it is even larger than that. It is nothing less than Micah's words that resound deeply inside me: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Another way I sometimes hear the words: "What does Life call you to be: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with all that is Holy."*

How do we knit and purl a better America, a kinder America, a land of more opportunity and more justice and more love? I'm working on it. I'm trying, I'm trying. Many of you who receive our Christmas card are, like us, the loyal opposition for the next four years. We must not be silenced in our despair. Which causes and organizations are most in need of the contributions of our time and money?

But we must all figure out about that next step to join hands and walk the journey, together. Breathe. Smile. And, yes, we hope you will have an extended Winter Solstice/Merry Christmas/Happy Holidays/Happy New Year. Maybe I'll hit the play button to hear Louis Armstrong reminding us, "It's a Wonderful Life."

Dick Smythe conversation: we must live with hope. A few days ago I found words on a Christmas card that I'm trying to emulate: "Looking forward, we have already begun to act on two of our New Year's Resolutions: to double down on our contributions to organizations that will be working overtime for the next four years and to become more politically active. We also pledge to focus on the positive and enjoy life. As Garrison Keillor said, "Get back in touch with old friends. Take up hiking. Read history." Let us all choose our variations on that list.
hope is unacceptable.

Feeling curmudgeonly is a spiritual issue. To use Robert Frost's image: when we detect in ourselves something that needs to be changed, we stand before two roads diverging in our yellow woods...

We have a choice when we stand at those crossroads. Being aware that we make choices in the absence of certainty is part of being human.

The Buddhist sector of my brain loves these words:

"Unconditional Love" Dharmavidya David Brazier
Tricycle, The Buddhist Review, Summer 2013

What I have discovered that is of supreme importance, however, is that I now have a sense of being one who is loved by the universe. Imperfect, limited, and vulnerable as I am, the sun still shines upon me, things do work out, wonderful conversations take place, and the grass grows without any help from me. I grow old and my teeth fall out, but I am more comfortable in my skin than I was, and in consequence I do not feel so critical of others, because we are all in the same boat. I have not learned great compassion, but I have acquired fellow feeling. I have not learned to bestow blessings on the multitudes, but I do feel more blessed.

We do not radiate the unconditional love that we read about in holy texts ourselves, but, inadvertently, we often reflect it. All the little loves that make our life what it is are sparks that fly off from a cosmic wheel that is much greater than ourselves. We do live in the midst of an unconditional love that we can never fully comprehend. We can be grateful for that.

Happy New Year!