

Introduction

I want to thank our church for the opportunity to make this presentation. It is gratifying to offer personal work, in the service of our community.

My co-presenter is Braden Young, well known to most of you. Braden's career as a collaborative pianist began here in this church when he was still a teen-ager. He is now recognized as such and with distinction by the University of Toronto. We wish Braden well as he launches a professional career here in Victoria.

Braden and I are attempting an open collaboration between a reader and a pianist. This is risky business – my reading and Braden's playing are largely improvised – a kind of jazz with one additional degree of freedom. Ours will be an impromptu conversation totally in the spirit of the dialogue by Erika Hewitt performed moments ago. I thank Braden profoundly for his musical skill and for his willingness to give this crazy idea a try. We wish also to thank Worship Associate, Liz Graham, for her creative suggestions and organizing skills.

Last month I celebrated a large birthday. From here on in it's "Put another log on the fire but don't look at the woodpile!" This is a visceral confirmation of what I know intellectually. Everything is in a state of becoming, nothing is permanent, "What is not waxing is waning". I am also mindful of the familiar saying extracted from the poem "Generation to Generation" by Antoine St. Exupery "We live not by things but by the meaning of things." These two mantras together reflect the 4th of our seven UU principles, the search for truth and meaning. In my experience we stumble across truth and meaning more often than we actively search for it. It's the surprise of tripping over what appears to be truth and meaning that energizes my poems.

If I seem unduly focused on perceived “truth and meaning”, I must admit that one can live a good and useful life without being overly concerned about “truth and meaning” as long as one observes a form of “Good Behaviour 101” as outlined for us by the remaining 6 of our 7 principles. Good Behavior 101 is a guide to living together harmoniously in the world of things.

Investing energy in the search for “truth and meaning” which ends, often as not, in challenging questions, opens us to uncertainty as we struggle to understand the world around us and to understand ourselves. This is why Unitarian Universalism, embraced fully, is a difficult faith. Socrates claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living. I find that harsh and would say instead that the unexamined life may be incomplete.

Holding to Good Behaviour 101 while accepting the uncertainty that results from a struggle to elucidate “truth and meaning” are worthy goals for a good, useful and complete life, one that admits possibility and avoids complacency. Art, that is to say shared insight, that matters comes out of this integration and can be as simple and profound as the dialogue of shared thought and feeling described in the reading we heard earlier. In this sense we can all strive to be artists. Art that matters is not a market-driven commodity; it is of its time, unfinished and ultimately perishable. So make it as you are able, share it, let it go.

BEAUTIFUL BLUE

Beautiful Blue,
spinning through a night of stars,
bathed in light that is the source of life,
constantly becoming.
The past is locked in your bones
where we can read the warnings in the hills,
though the future is screened from view
and will be what it will be,
permutations trailing to cold nothing
or perhaps rebirth.
Either way.

And we who are of you,
born of light and water,
are changing, too.
We have strewn our triumphs and our terrors on your surface
and your deeps;
they are part of your becoming as convulsions of your changes strike
and change us.
So be it.

Do we dream that we can choose
between fading as we wrangle in the smoking trash for scraps
or joining voices,
singing our time into the pulsing stars?
Oh beautiful, how beautiful, most Beautiful Blue!

(Draft 3, 21-04-16)

Choir

What precious scale or modulation
Could lead us from the key of grief to key of peace?
There are no new notes:
These stepping stones all have names;
We dance our tunes upon them
In our mayfly time above the water.

I am singing because long silence is complicity with darkness.
I am singing because I hear you singing, too.
Listening, we urge our thin voices to the vibrancy of harmony and dissonance.
Committed, we can reconcile both grief and joy
As notes in a far richer chord
That lasts one breath - but is not lost.

(April 6, 2002)

Lives Depend on It

“They’re loving it!” I say to Earl,
He pounding the keys and me reefing the squeeze-box
Like I’m wrestling down a bear.
The glow from the dancers lights our faces, sets the band aflame,
The groove locks in; band and dancers one,
A holy moment when the stars pour love
And the fiddles cry “Life! Life! Life!”

When the dance is done,
We sated lovers leave,
Knowing in the nights to come
We’ll wake, tumescent, smiling.

Ah, but where is the Music of Monday?
The players struggle with the score,
Bicker all morning on the placement of a note.
Fiddles still in cases. Dancers shiver in the square.
Toss the score!
Turn your faces to the sky,
Play whatever warms your cold, cold hearts;
Lives depend on it.

(20/11/2011)(15/12/2011)

Red Shirt and Purple Pants Dance the Blues

Red Shirt and Purple Pants they dance the blues,
intent upon each other and the song.

Late sun through the trees
dapples the grass where the breeze,
writes its random music for its pleasure.

A crawling baby arches, head upside-down,
peers backwards through his legs.

Mother smiles and we are pleased.

But Red Shirt and Purple Pants play dancing shoes
and keep their time to soulful blues .

Call and response:

wind buffets; sun-splashes scatter and regroup;
baby invents; and people laugh;
singer lays down a twisted line;
guitar riffs a bent comment.

A graceful summer evening spent
while Red Shirt moves with attitude and stops...

ceates the space...

into which...

Purple Pants twirls in complement

It's perfect,

this dance,

these blues.

(7/11/13)

The Road to Enlightenment is not Paved

The Road to Enlightenment is not paved
And good intentions melted on the Road to Hell.
That's why this world is so darn cluttered
With nasty types who vent their mean frustrations,
Denied apprenticeships below.
And if that weren't bad enough,
There's all these bodies, wordless,
Propped on pillows, staring at candles,
Like three-day bakers struggling to bring forth.

The other night I dreamed both routes were open,
Asbestos asphalt and fresh-Zambonied ice.
Heck, there were free roller-blades and skates at the
neon-lighted portals
And folks were whizzing off in both directions.

Soon there was just me,
Alone here on Innisfree,
With my bean patch and my honey bees,
And the trout in the lake,
And no one tugging at my soul.
So I poured myself a cool one
And was settling back to watch the puffy clouds
Perambulating through the blue
When disappointed skaters burst into the clearing,
Chucking their roller-blades and skates
Into the nearest bushes and the lake,
Having learned that the goldurn roads were circular.
And I was disappointed, too,
But glad in the end to have the company.
So here we all are again, our dreams unravelling,
I never was that much for travelling.

The First Black President of China

The kid says to me
with complete conviction
what he plans to be when he grows up.
He plans to be selected as
The First Black President of China.
The kid don't say a lot.
so when he makes a statement
I know he's thinking hard
and it's my turn to figure out
what that could mean.

We know there's schemers somewhere,
ambitions big as countries,
eyes as cold as daggers
and fatty sucking lips.
But if folks knew what's in that small boy's mind
they'd go for him for sure.
'Cause he'd declare in proper Chinese Style
"Take day off – go to beach!"

And folks would frolic in the water,
share ice cream,
sit together, watch the sun set rosy.
Lovers would find each other,
dreaming of birthdays.

Next morning, tasks resumed and light of heart,
our old rock keeps spinning off in space
while The First Black President of China
smiles benignly on its precious load
of life, sweet life.

(November 2014)

Cat In Sunlight on Christmas Day

Through the kitchen window
a fall of sunlight pools
across the patterned carpet
where the cat,
alert to all that changes,
sprawls among the radiant woven roses.

Shepherds, Magii, we are told,
followed light,
but hesitated at its edges,
not understanding what it could mean
to step forward from the shadows.

The old cat, enlightened fully,
purrs a while, then sleeps.

(December 27, 2008)

Active Pass

I will let my line down into the water,
not seeing or sensing,
but feeling,
waiting until the moon and tide
have gathered the sea to fulness.
Then, if I, we, are worthy,
a messenger in the form of a silver fish
will slash and flash its meaning,
and my racing heart and trembling hands,
my only guides to understanding,
will once more implore a silted mind
to let the sea sluice in,
to wash it free to drift
in cool salt dreams.

(June 6, 2005)

Drifting

The wind fell away, leaving
the sails slack and useless.
Oh how I longed to hear
chuckle of the bow-wave,
feel zephyr's pulse on helm.
But ripples gelled to glass.
Lulled by warm October days,
we let her drift and I
leaned back, allowed the sun
to soothe my disappointment.
Moon-tides pulled and twirled the boat,
sun and moon together
calling to the joy within
the unexpected still.
There, in a notch between
blue islands, Baker's
icy fang showed clear,
promising winter and
renewal of catastrophe.

(8/10/2012)

Enough

I read somewhere
That if you could tease apart
The coils of code embedded in a single cell,
That strand would stretch a zillion miles, CGU, CGC, CGA, CGG, AGA...
A veritable bible with its discursive stories of the ancients
And the meandering narrative that leads to a creature
Equipped to glimpse the face of God
But wilful enough to cut loose from the anchoring questions.

These rocks on which we stand today
Are themselves replete with stories from the start of time
For those who care to read.
We gaze into the wind and sea
Where a myriad of elegant assemblages
Pursue the slow and graceful dance of long elaboration
In which every participant is honoured in the fulness of its time
As once we were and pray might be again.

That word “enough” comes repeatedly to mind
Like a frond of kelp revealed and hidden by the passing waves,
Sometimes a question, sometimes reproach,
Sometimes an exaltation.

Two people, not yet old but no longer young
Stand on the rocks in their wind-stirred wedding clothes.
They have passed this way before, known disappointment, loss.
Their resolve to love each other as they find themselves today, tomorrow,
Breathing, scuffed, hopeful,
Brings us close to tears.
We feel the presence of a music climbing to a sweet resolving chord,
Enough.

(July 2006)

An Offering (for Jim Bull)

From my glass, I pour some wine into the sea,
wine from the earth and sun,
that with time, skill and other life
reveals the spirit dwelling in all things.

The sea, from which our elements are drawn,
waits for their return, over and over again.

I do this to acknowledge my acceptance
of all that life has brought and will bring to us,
sentient fragments of that greatness
we are honoured to perceive.

(2/9/2015)

There Will Be Beauty At the End

Clouds prowl the hilltops;
They are the colours of bruises.
Golden light
Finds the whiteness of three soaring gulls.
Whose circlings trace a script upon the clouds.
“Mene, mene...” or “Peace, my friend.”?
Though I can’t tell, I apprehend
There will be beauty at the end.

(27 April, 2014)

One Sunday, as we were heading home from Church, it was threatening rain. As we drove alongside Pat Bay we could see purple clouds over Mt. Tuam. the sun was shining from the SW and the light struck some soaring gulls that we could see against the dark clouds. I could believe they were writing something on the clouds, maybe a blessing because they were so beautiful. I was reminded later (and looked it up) of the Bible story of Balthazar's feast where the king of Babylon and his court witness a disembodied hand writing a cryptic message in Hebrew on the wall, "Mene, mene tekel uparsin", which was translated by Daniel to mean "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting." Blessing or warning, who can tell?