“Words of Praise”
May 3, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Guest Speaker: Dr. Patricia Clark
Assisting: Rev. Bruce Bode

Poetry in Order of Service

> The secluded life of the mind beckons
> like a cave, and you step into
>   the darkness.
> The wedge of domestic comforts
>   must be abandoned –
> : goodbye, goodbye – I will miss you.
> : hurray! I’m leaving.
>   (Patricia Clark, from “Another Sunlit Interior,” My Father on a Bicycle)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

> We come together, compounded of the ancient elements,
> mud and fire within it we call life, vast waters, and something –
> the intangible substance of hope –
> out of which the human dream is made.
>   (Loren Eiseley)

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: For the holiness of every place where light is found, for the healing of nature and the understanding of fellow humans, for the insights of toil, and for the sanctities of birth and death:

CONGREGATION: For the ennobling graces of life we offer praise.

MINISTER: For this place and hour, where we leave behind old cares and pleasures, and

where all things meet and change and are renewed:

CONGREGATION: For temples, tabernacles, sanctuaries, and their celebrations, we give thanks.

MINISTER: For the revival of zest in living, for tides of life about us and within, for present happiness and strong desire, and for the songs of our ascending way:

CONGREGATION: For all that renews and strengthens our spirits we are grateful.

MINISTER: For the bright procession of memory and new images of hope, for our relationships of privilege and duty, for those long gone and for those near whose virtues bless us, for school and church and state, and for all worthful concerns of our days and years:

CONGREGATION: For history past, and for this history in which
we live, we give our thanks.

MINISTER: For the urgence in us to do and dare, to alter and effect, and for deep impulses of heart and hand, to work in the earth and recreate ourselves and our common life after patterns of righteousness beheld in mounts of vision:

CONGREGATION: For the dreams that arise in us, and for ever-renewing purposes and prophecies: our works and our dedications speak our gratitude.

FLOWER COMMUNION

Introduction

The well-known Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, has a meditation based on the short poem of a friend who died in Vietnam many years ago at the age of twenty-eight. The poem was found in his belongings after his death and it reads as follows:

> Standing quietly by the fence,
> you smile your wondrous smile.
> I am speechless, and my senses are filled
> by the sounds of your beautiful song,
> Beginningless and endless
> I bow deeply to you.

Who is it that is standing quietly the fence, smiling so wondrously? It is, perhaps, a girlfriend that the young man is in love with? Or might it be a bird that is singing a lovely song?

Actually, the one who is standing quietly by the fence smiling is a flower. In the flower the young man hears the song of creation and he catches a glimpse of that which is beginningless and endless, and he bows deeply to it.

The great scholar of world religions, Joseph Campbell, speaks of a tradition in India where a red circle is drawn around an object. This red circle might be drawn around any object – an odd-shaped stone, a singular tree, a lovely flower.

When you draw a red circle around an object that object becomes the center of your attention and the subject of a meditation. You are called to look at this object not as something that is useful to you, not as something that will serve you, but rather as something that belongs to itself and that is a miracle of being – something that has arisen from what is beginningless and endless. Who knows where it came from? Who knows how it happens to be? And yet here it is! – like a flower smiling wondrously.

As we just sang:

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour…
> (William Blake, from "Auguries of Innocence")

Today, in the springtime of the year, along with many other Unitarian Universalist congregations, we celebrate a Flower Communion – a simple ritual in which each person is invited to bring a flower to the sanctuary, to place it in a vase along with flowers that others have brought, and then in a simple procession to choose a flower that is different than the one you brought as a source for your meditation and reflection.

The Flower Communion Ceremony was introduced to the Unitarian congregations of America by a minister from the Czech Republic named Norbek Capek. At one time Rev. Capek led the largest Unitarian congregation in the world, a congregation of 5000 members in the beautiful city of Prague. That congregation was decimated by both World War II and the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia following World War II, and Rev. Capek himself was arrested, imprisoned, and died in a concentration camp in Dachau, Germany in 1942.

The congregation that he built still exists and is trying to re-construct itself, and the Flower Communion Ceremony that he started lives on in many congregations. When Rev. Capek would lead this ceremony he would offer a prayer of consecration for the flowers that were brought to the sanctuary.

So before we come forward to select a flower from these vases, let us join together in a unison reading of Rev. Capek's "Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers" found in your own Order of Service. Let us pray together saying:

Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers (in unison)

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection, and devotion to thy holy will. May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike. May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts. May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that, whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world. Amen.

The Processional

Now I invite each of you to come forward in silence beginning with the back rows and coming down the outside aisles. We have extra flowers in case you did not bring one. And if you did bring a flower, please select a flower that is different from the one you brought – one that attracts you – and then return quietly to your seat up the center aisle. After everyone has selected a flower and returned to their seat, we will stand and sing the four verses of hymn #8, a hymn whose words were written by Rev. Capek. May I ask those in the back of the sanctuary to now please come forward down the outside aisles to select a flower.

Patricia Clark is Poet-in-Residence and Professor in the Department of Writing at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. She is the author of two books of poetry: *My Father on a Bicycle* and *North of Wondering.* She has also co-edited an anthology of contemporary women writers called, *Worlds in Our Words*.

Patricia's roots are in the Pacific Northwest, where she graduated from the University of Washington (in economics), going on to receive an MFA in English and creative writing from the University of Montana and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Houston. Currently the Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Patricia Clark was invited with two other poets to open the Library of Congress's noon reading series in Washington, D.C. in fall 2005.

"WORDS OF PRAISE"

Whenever I return to the Pacific Northwest—as I did on Friday from Grand Rapids, Michigan where I now live—I often go through a time of reflection. On the plane I was reading Turkish writer and Nobel prize-winner, Orhan Pamuk. He mentioned writers he admires who traveled extensively in their lives, ones whose lives then become intercontinental, especially Chekhov, Nabokov, and Naipul. Pamuk, in contrast, has spent his life in Istanbul; in fact, he lives in the same building (an apartment building that houses, or used to house his grandmother and numerous aunts, uncles, and children—besides him and his brother & parents) where he grew up.

That caused a moment of recognition for me, though it is one that's been building slowly over the years: that I'm one of those writers of exile. You might say that exile is a little strong—after all, I'm still in the U.S.—but it's the feeling connection that is right, and I understand Pamuk's discussion of it. Some writers are fueled by staying in the same place, seeing the same city streets and buildings. He is. Other writers cannot stay in the

same place where they grew up. I can stay in the same place now, but it couldn't have been here. My seven siblings (all but one, plus me) stayed in Washington—in Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, Kent, Kingston—and when I reflect on what drew me away there are probably multiple answers, but one of them is poetry.

Maybe I was a mystical child—I was raised a Roman Catholic—I have to admit I loved the stories that nuns told about saints and sinners, martyrdom, crowns of thorns. I loved Benediction and the Stations of the Cross. I played a nun once in a grade school play (also a knight once, and had a sword in a sheath) and I was well aware of the importance that priests and the nuns spoke of—about getting "a call." (This was long before cell phones so that wasn't what they were talking about, of course.) The call to be a priest or a nun might come to any of us. My mother was from a large Catholic family, and I knew this from her, too.

So I wanted a call—it sounded important!—but it didn't come in that way. Early on I knew somehow that nunhood was not for me. My Catholic girlhood affected me, though, and I believed in getting a call, that liftoff to what sounded like rapture—and later it did come for me: for poetry. Reading it—Dylan Thomas, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost—I was transported. Early on I sense that this was a subject or area of knowledge not easily exhausted. It had "scope" and I gravitated toward it. I think of the sister arts to poetry as being music & the visual arts—even more than storytelling or narrative. Lyric poetry was what called to me, and of late I've seen how often it is that poems that move me are linked with praise.

Praise: I started by thinking—well, praise is simple, hardly worth defining. Praise involves celebration; good things said about the world, about the people around us. Praise is pointing out virtues, the positive. Almost immediately, though, I began to change my views. If you look up "praise" in the venerable Oxford English Dictionary (the OED), you'll note that as a transitive verb (that is, one needing a direct object) the first meaning listed is "to set a price or value upon; to value, appraise." I wonder if praise, then, is a setting apart, a seeing something clearly—not just to honor, but to appraise; in other words, to gauge its worth. The gauging may precede the praising.

I've detected a variety of ways praise works in poetry—gradations of difference in tone or method—that shows the speaker or the poem (not always = to the poet) behaving or sounding somewhat differently in each case.

My first point is that sometimes praise comes, quite curiously, out of a struggle. As with any kind of literature, it is trouble (struggle, tension) we often find interesting. My first exhibit is a poet of long-ago in America—did you know that the first American poet ever to be published, 1650, (though her book came out in England) was Anne Bradstreet? Here's her poem:

Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House
July 10th, 1666

Copied out of a Loose Paper

In silent night when rest I took
For sorrow near I did not look
I wakened was with thund'ring noise
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.
That fearful sound of "Fire!" and "Fire!"
Let no man know is my desire.
I, starting up, the light did spy,
And to my God my heart did cry
To strengthen me in my distress
And not to leave me succorless.
Then, coming out, beheld a space
The flame consume my dwelling place.
And when I could no longer look,
I blest His name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was His own, it was not mine,
Far be it that I should repine;
He might of all justly bereft
But yet sufficient for us left.
When by the ruins oft I past
My sorrow eyes aside did cast,
And here and there the places spy
Where oft I sat and long did lie:
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best.
My pleasant things in ashes lie.
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy table eat a bit.
[poem ends 24 lines later]
Farewell, my pelf, farewell my store.
The world no longer let me love,
My hope and treasure lies above.
--Anne Bradstreet (ca 1612-1672)

Coming from England to the American colonies, Bradstreet left a life of privilege for the raw wilderness of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. When her house burns down, and she loses many of her material possessions, it must have been a devastating loss. Her poem tells the story of the fire, from the cries of alarm to her view of the hire, and later how eye couldn't help but linger on favorite places in that ruined dwelling. In the 17th century, creative work was done—as was most work, if not all, and all of life—for the glory of God. Thus to be true to her calling as a spiritual woman, Bradstreet must needs praise

God and His will for the burning of her house. She does, as we see, but what endears me to the poem much more than that is the human qualities, the vulnerability, that the struggle expresses for Bradstreet. And it is precisely the lingering over the details of her lost house that express that sorrow. The lines given to the house far outnumber those about the will of God. Anne Bradstreet tries to be a good Puritan woman, and succeeds, but the poem records her struggle.

Her struggle is in the split self: between an obligation felt to praise something (in honor of God, of a person, of a birthday or an anniversary or other event) and the true feelings of the writer.

My second point is that praise is not simply a listing of the glories of the world. In fact, to my mind praise includes any detailing that is seen clearly and sharply—a city street, an empty parking lot, a train in the metro station, a cat that steps into a flowerpot, a note about plums left on a refrigerator door. When we see clearly & sharply, using our god-given eyes, isn't that a glory? But it doesn't end there. When we are drawn out of ourselves, by that kind of charged seeing, do the boundaries of our selves, our egos, dissolve just a bit?—Seeing in itself is a celebration—independent (to my mind) of what is described. Here's one example (of many I could choose) from Emily Dickinson.

A Narrow Fellow in the Grass

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—did you not
His notice sudden is—
The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn—
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
of cordiality—

But never met this Fellow

Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—
--Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Now maybe snakes are not your thing, maybe you're as frightened by snakes as the speaker in this poem appears to be. Still, I hope you are enticed by the description of it—the "narrow Fellow" she meets, or finds, one who looked like a "Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun" who next—in an instant—"wrinkles" and is gone. Recently I stumbled across a snake in my Grand Rapids backyard: really, no one has described snakes any better than Dickinson. The writer lingers with pleasure, perverse pleasure perhaps, in describing the snake. Again, as with the Anne Bradstreet poem, I detect a note of struggle as the poet widens the poem's scope to later life occurrences, how she knows others of "Nature's People" and likes them very much—but this Fellow—shiver—causes, always, "Zero at the bone." Is that a temperature? centigrade/Fahrenheit? or is it a blankness, a round empty zero of terrifying nothingness? Take your pick. Dickinson will not resolve that for us; this poem of hers (as many others) ends with a dash.

My third point is that praise—through that close seeing, that new seeing—often involves opening ourselves to include more of the world, a stance of inclusiveness, openness to diversity, to the welter of the world, and in this we surprise ourselves. The poet who best comes to mind for me is Walt Whitman.

Whitman is the father of contemporary American poetry: Whitman is the wild man, the radical, who made lists, who brought the runaway slave, the butcher-boy, the people of every occupation into his poems, who broke open the tight, metered, correct and dry verse that was no longer saying much, and brought in a new music to American poetry. Whitman's epic poem "Song of Myself" shows in its title alone how far we've gone from literature shot through with theology. Whitman's unabashed egotism is the embodiment of Emerson's "American Poet": the poet now as namer, as creator, as a god in and of himself. Emerson wrote Whitman a famous letter praising his work: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start." Whitman released the letter to the New York Tribune without asking Emerson's permission & arranged to have the letter privately printed & distributed in a broadside—(Emerson was very angry)—but it was typical of Whitman's career "to seize on such opportunities" and to "arrange favorable accounts of his work, and even reviewed it himself anonymously and pseudonymously."

Here's the opening section:

Leaves of Grass

I.
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and school in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.
Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Whitman's democratic praise & stance is to throw his arms wide and embrace all that is: from blades of grass to people of all occupations, from life to death, from the eyesight to the mouth, to all the senses, not discriminating, not setting them into a hierarchy. It's Whitman's glory and his curse: some people find his work too sprawling, too chaotic, his bardic "yawp" too uncultured and unrefined—in 1881, the district attorney in Boston warned Whitman's publishers that the book could be thought of as "obscene literature."

I want to just read another excerpt or two, showing those listings, and that open-armed stance:

#8
The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silent brush away flies with my hand.

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the busy hill,
I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen.

The blab of the pave, tires of cars, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod
horses on the granite floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs,
The flap of the curtain'd litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,…
I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart.
***

#15
The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, . . .
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, . . .
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, . . .
The duck-shooter walks by silent. . .
The deacons are ordaine'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
etc.

***

#21
I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man.
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

I think that gives you an idea of Whitman's utterly democratic spirit.

A fourth embodiment of praise is a catalog (like Whitman's lists) but a catalog of a single person's virtues—especially the beauties and virtues of a woman (the Renaissance word for it is "blazon"—the conspicuous display of such) Think of Shakespeare love sonnets and you'll have in mind many examples of this. But an American example is, to my mind, Michigan's finest poet, Saginaw poet Theodore Roethke.

I Knew a Woman

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
she taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
Coming behind her for her pretty sake
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
She played it quick, she played it light and loose;
My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose
(She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
What's freedom for? To know eternity.
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).
--Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

"I Knew a Woman" departs, as you see, from the traditional blazon, concentrating not so much on physical attributes of beauty but on movement, physical touch, even gesture and play. It seems to me perfect for a poet to admire the RHYTHM of this person rather than her eyes, hair, nose, skin: listen to the opening again, "when small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them; / Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one."

The poem even suggests, I think, the sensual moves of love without being—thank goodness—graphic, or crude. "My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees; / Her several parts could keep a pure repose."

In the comparison of a woman to the things of this world that come and go, "Let seed by grass, and grass turn into hay"—the poet suggests the dailiness of long love and also the process of ageing. There is now and there is time passing, and to come. We know eternity if we can become lost in the moment: "What's freedom for? To know eternity." The poet celebrates in both touch and in allusion the sensual nature of love. This is praise of a high order; praise of the physical, praise of our degradable selves.

The surprise of a fresh likeness—A is like B—is another graduation of praise in poetry.

Sharon Olds' work is notable for its exploration of the family, and of family tensions, attractions, and history. Writer Michael Ondaatje has called Sharon Olds' poetry "pure fire in the hands" and cheered the "roughness and brag and tenderness and completion in her work as she carries the reader through rooms of passion and loss." Certainly many of Olds' poems use praise: in writing of the physical processes of the body, especially of childbirth and parenting, but also of the decline and death of her father—praising his courage during that time, praising her own tenderness and courage.

My example from Sharon Olds is a poem called "Topography"

Topography

After we flew across the country we
got in bed, laid our bodies
intriciately together, like maps laid
face to face, East to West, my
San Francisco against your New York, your
Fire Island against my Sonoma, my
New Orleans deep in your Texas, your Idaho
bright on my Great Lakes, my Kansas
burning against your Kansas your Kansas
burning against my Kansas, your Eastern
Standard Time pressing into my
Pacific Time, my Mountain Time
beating against your Central Time, your
sun rising swiftly from the right my
sun rising swiftly from the left your
moon rising slowly from the left my
moon rising slowly from the right until
all four bodies of the sky
burn above us, sealing us together,
all our cities twin cities,
all our states united, one
nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.
--Sharon Olds (1942-)

I'm impressed with Olds' poem and how she combines maps with parts of the human body to both add humor and freshness to lovemaking. I find some interesting connotations rising from her use of place names—"Fire Island" is nice for the male, as is "my Sonoma" for the female. I like the use of burning with Kansas—and the repetition that starts to kindle some heat—just as it does there in the summertime. And I admire how the rhythm leads us into hymn and eventually—to national anthem, pledge of allegiance. It might seem like blasphemy to some but this is the climactic moment.

Thus, looking closely, newly at something—this takes us right back to the beginning, with Emily Dickinson's poem. In this case, the case of the Olds poem: she looks closely, newly, at lovemaking and makes a topographical connection.

Two more examples: one illustrates how often reflection and the use of memory leads to praise. My example is from the poet Charles Wright—probably one of America's finest poets and one who often uses spiritual imagery.

Archaeology

The older we get, the deeper we dig into our childhoods,

Hoping to find the radiant cell
That washed us, and caused our lives
to glow in the dark like clock hands
Endlessly turning toward the future,
Tomorrow, day after tomorrow, the day after that,
all golden, all in good time.

Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina.
Still 1942,
Still campfire smoke in both our eyes, my brother and I
Gaze far out at the lake in sunflame,
Expecting our father at any moment, like Charon, to appear
Back out of the light from the other side,
low-gunwaled and loaded down with our slippery dreams.

Other incidents flicker like foxfire in the black
Isolate distance of memory,
cross-eyed, horizon-haired.
Which one, is it one, is it any one that cleans us, clears us,
That relimbs our lives to a shining?

One month without rain, two months,
third month of the new year,
Afternoon breeze-rustle dry in the dry needles of hemlock and pine.
I can't get down deep enough.
Sunlight flaps its enormous wings and lifts off from the backyard,
The wind rattles its raw throat,
but I still can't go deep enough.
--Charles Wright (1935-)

I love how Wright moves through this poem—how many of us would resonate in that search for a "radiant cell." I love the very fragmentary memory that results—the father rowing back to them, "loaded down with our slippery dreams." These foxfire flickers are the visual arts in action—the Jackson Pollock drip painting that adds up to something. The process Wright describes at the end, his struggle: "I can't get down deep enough" reminds me a bit of Bradstreet. Praise for the moment is almost missed—as the speaker is looking for something more, the always elusive something more.

Finally, I think elegy often leads us to praise. Elegy is one of the most venerable types of poetry, that of memorializing an individual. Just about every poet of every nationality tries her or his hand at elegy. If you're tantalized by Walt Whitman, you might want to find his elegy to President Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." Another favorite of mine is by another Poetry Night poet—Galway Kinnell, his poem "Freedom, New Hampshire" written for his brother.

Here's a recent poem of mine. I wrote this—surprising myself on a morning of recent writing—a couple of years after a friend's death, a friend who in despair took her own life.

Elegy for R.

I remember her breathing long into the night,
her quiet rustling in sheets the way a squirrel pushes aside
the leaves of the blueberry bush. That night
she spoke of her fear, water welling up
in her eyes. The hotel staff rolled a cot into my room,
and for two nights she tried to slay the dragon
of her insomnia, two nights giving in to rest.
Always we linked up in places where we didn't belong—
Albany, Kansas City, and Baltimore, the weekend it snowed.

Light trembled above us in the glassed-in hotel lobbies
where she moved elegantly in silk, a slender swan,
her dark eyes watchful, as our words went flying past each other,
and a kiss brushed a cheek, *next year, yes,* and *goodbye.*

My swan, you are lost, and I think of our laughter,
our dream of a journey together to Paris, how when someone asked,
you joked that we were lovers. How you loved words,
my bird of many cities and no city, swan of no country left.

If only I had brought you down to the river, gently
carrying you there in my arms to the reedy, bird-tracked shore
where it's shallow, and calm. I might have
washed away the grit of the world—then flown
with you over the ocean, far away to another land.
--Patricia Clark

It was W.H. Auden who in a poem wrote, "we must love one another or die." Later, he turned on his own poem a bit and thought it was overdone, overwrought, maybe even dishonest. He thought he should have written, more accurately, "we must love one another AND die."

I hope some semblance of my friend Reetika comes across in this poem; she had a vitality and a beauty that will be missed. She was a poet, born in India—and she struggled in the United States to find a place where she could belong. Which takes me back to Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul: some of us stay where we were born; some of us go away, but our goals remain similar: tell the truth of what we see.

The connections between praise and worship are clear: we praise to give voice and to lift our voices, singly and together, and to celebrate the fleeting moments and individuals of our lives.

Even the most humble objects or items set apart, looked at for appraisal—become paradoxically more valuable than initially thought as the process itself humanizes us, helping us to see, to include, to join, and to remember—becoming more fully alive in the process.

Praise be.

Benediction

> There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.
>
> We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.
>
> Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Kendyl R. Gibbons)

Extinguishing of Chalice

> And now we extinguish our chalice
> But not the light of truth,
> The warmth of community,
> Or the fire of commitment.
> These we carry in our hearts
> Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by Dr. Patricia Clark at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on May 6, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)