

“The Spirituality of Golf”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Quotation in bulletin

“‘Golf is life,’ he says softly, and his green eyes expand.... I see that he is right ... absolutely; there is no life, no world, beyond the golf course – just an infinite and terrible falling away.”

(John Updike, Golf Dreams)

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul.

It is the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life.

It is the fire of reason, the fire of compassion, the fire of community, the fire of justice, the fire of faith.

It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart, the divine glow in every life.

(Eric Heller-Wagner)

Opening Words

This is a resplendent new day that has been given to us.

Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.

And let us count our many, many blessings:

Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,

And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.

Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: And an old priest said, Speak to us of religion.

CONGREGATION: And the Prophet said: Have I spoken this day of aught else?

MINISTER: Is not religion all deeds and all reflection, and that which is neither deed nor reflection, but a wonder and surprise every springing in the soul, even while the hands hew the stone or tend the loom?

CONGREGATION: Who can separate one's faith from one's actions, or one's belief from one's occupations?

MINISTER: Who can spread one's hours before oneself, saying, 'This for God, and this for myself; This for my soul, and this other for my body?'

CONGREGATION: All your hours are wings that beat through space from self to self.

MINISTER: The one to whom worshipping is a window, to open but also to shut, has not visited the house of one's soul whose windows are from dawn to dawn.

CONGREGATION: Your daily life is your temple and your religion. Whenever you enter into it take with your all.

MINISTER: Take the plough and the forge and the mallet and the lute, the things you have fashioned in necessity or for delight.

CONGREGATION: And if you would know God do not be a solver of riddles.

MINISTER: Rather look about you and you shall see God at play in your children.

CONGREGATION: And look into space; you shall see God walking in the cloud, outstretching His arms in the lightning and descending in rain.

MINISTER: You shall see God smiling in flowers, then rising and waving His hands in trees.

(Kahlil Gibran, "On Religion," from The Prophet; adapted)

Reading

My reading this morning is from one of our finest modern American novelists and essayists, John Updike, who in his mid-twenties took up the game of golf and over the years has written numerous essays on it. A dozen years ago these essays were gathered into a book titled, Golf Dreams.

The front cover of the book has picture of John Updike swinging a club, and on the back cover a quotation from a review of the book in which the reviewer says, "The cover picture is instantly reassuring. It shows the author in the middle of a swing which surely defies any laws of physics, geometry, physiology or even gravity. We can sink into the writing happy in the knowledge that we are in the hands of a fellow duffer." (Alan Rusbridger, Guardian)

I will read from an essay titled, "Is Life Too Short For Golf," which was occasioned by a conversation with a young woman at a luncheon meeting.

IS LIFE TOO SHORT FOR GOLF?

The subject of crossword puzzles had come up at the luncheon table. "Life is too short," I brusquely opined, "for crossword puzzles."

"Yes," the affable young lady at my left eagerly agreed, "for crossword puzzles and for golf." Then her eyes widened in slight social alarm, as she remembered, perhaps, that I had once or twice put myself on record as a faithful if fault-ridden devotee of the game.

"It does take a lot of time," I gracefully conceded, and she mastered her blush, and we moved on to less combustible topics.

But the exchange made me think. How much of my life had I spent playing golf, and could I now estimate, as my life draws near to its final accounting, whether or not this fraction had been ill-spent?...

Though the son a high-school athletic coach, I had not been much of a boyhood athlete. The natural athletes of the public schools and playgrounds of my native Pennsylvania left me groveling in the dirt, in the grass, on the waxed gymnasium floor. Compared with them I had – strangely, since I could outsmart them in the classroom – a tendency to lose my head in the pattern of the basketball break, or in the shuffle of the backfield, or in the quick-reflex emergencies of a baseball game. In the lazy striding of golf, where the ball isn't going anywhere without you, I felt I had a game I couldn't panic in, and one wherein I might ruminate my way to prowess. And, though those old naturals even now could probably beat me swinging left-handed and three beers to the wind, in the rock Transcendentalist pastures of New England I have found some other spindly types among whom I have won my share of nassaus and enjoyed a wealth of cheerful competitive thrills. My once-or-twice-a-week golf games have been islands of bliss in my life, and my golfing companions, whose growing numbers now include a number of the dead, are more dear to me than I can unembarrassedly say. Somehow, it is hard to dislike a man once you have played a round of golf with him.

The nature of humankind must be considered before we decide what life is too short for. Is it too short for sex, for instance, or is sex its business? Men and women need to play, and it is a misused life that has no play scheduled into it. Crossword puzzles, even, have a fit place in some psychological budgets. With them, as with golf, we set ourselves to solve a puzzle nature has not posed. Nothing in natural selection demands that we learn how to beat a small ball into a hole with a minimum number of strokes.

But, it might be argued, the arrowing nature of the attempt answers to ancient hunting instincts, and the great green spaces of a golf course remember the landscape in which the human animal found his soul. Certainly the sight of our favorite fairway wandering toward the horizon is a balm to the eyes and boon to the spirit. Our mazy progress through the eighteen is a trek such as pre-historic man could understand, and the fact that the trek is fatiguingly long constitutes part of its primitive rightness. A more reasonable length – twelve holes, say – wouldn't have the resonance, the religious sense of ordeal. It is of the essence that a game of golf can't be quickly over and done with; it must be a journey.

To be sure, there have been days when I regretted having to jump up from my desk, where something valuable seemed to be happening, in order to keep a golf date. There have been moments, while trudging up the slope of the thirteenth hole of an indifferent round on a baked-out summer day, when I wondered what I was doing there. But in fact such moments are few, for it is a rare round without its sudden rewards, its little turns of drama. Four golfers of variable talent, over the course of eighteen holes, will each manage to win the momentary applause of the others. While the game's grand spaces pour ease upon the brain and the optic nerves, the quirky contacts of metal and balata entertain the narrative sense.

As soon say life is too short for sleep as say it is too short for golf. As with dreaming, we enter another realm, and emerge refreshed. Golf turns life inside-out; it rests the overused parts of ourselves, and tests some neglected aspects – the distant-gauging eye, the obscure rhythmic connection between feet and hands. For the hours and days it has taken from me, golf has given me back another self, my golfing self, who faithfully awaits me on the first tee when I have put aside the personalities of bread-winner and lover, father and son. Golf lengthens life, I should have told that young lady.

(John Updike, Gold Dreams, pp. 187-191)

“THE SPIRITUALITY OF GOLF”

Introduction

As I mentioned in this morning’s Congregational Announcements, the sermon topic this morning is a requested one related to the recent QUUF fund-raising auction.

I believe this is now my fourth auction sermon here at QUUF, and in each previous case the sermon topic requested is one I had never spoken on before and probably wouldn’t have.

The same holds true for this morning’s requested topic, “The Spirituality of Golf.” It’s not a topic I’ve spoken on before, nor one I would likely speak on, though, as some of you may know, the subject of golf is one I have a some interest in, since for the last twenty-twenty-five years it has been my chief recreational activity. And I admit that sometimes on a warm, sunny Sunday morning here in the sanctuary I find my eyes stealing a glance out the east windows across San Juan Avenue to another kind of sanctuary, namely, the Port Townsend Golf Course whose challenging 8th hole runs parallel to San Juan Avenue.

Still, I would not have chosen golf as a sermon topic. Why? Because golf is a game, and as such it would not seem weighty enough for what I regard as the seriousness of religion and its services of worship, or of broad enough interest to appeal to the congregation as a whole (though, I suppose, most any topic, if approached right, could serve as a fit sermon topic.) But let me begin by saying a word about the role of religion in life and its relation to the role of games in life.

The role of religion and the role of sports

One of the main functions of religion – I’m speaking now of organized religion – is that of indicating priorities in life, sorting out and indicating the worth of things, distinguishing between things of higher and lesser value, between ultimate and secondary concerns.

Organized religion, if it’s doing its job, asks and answers the following kinds of questions:

To what should I commit myself in life, and what is worthy of my

commitment?

To what should I devote myself in life, and what is worthy of my devotion?

To what should I give my allegiance in life, and what is worthy of my allegiance?

What is it that I should revere in life, and what is worthy of my reverence?

The Christian scriptures record Jesus being asked a similar question, namely, “What is the greatest of the commandments” – the commandments of the Jewish law. And very succinctly Jesus answers: “Love God above all – with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” The whole of Jewish law, he says, in all its variety and multiplicity, rests upon these two commandments; all the rest is commentary. (See the Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40)

When you don’t have your priorities straight in life, when you can’t distinguish between things of higher and lesser value and worth, then there are problems. And organized religion has developed some specialized terms to speak of occasions on which our priorities are out of whack. A couple of the traditional terms used are “blasphemy” and “idolatry.”

“Blasphemy” has to do with taking lightly what should properly be taken seriously – diminishing what should be of high value, trampling upon that which is holy, desecrating that which is sacred. You find people getting very upset when others trample upon symbols of what is precious and of high value to them – whether that be an icon related to their religion, a flag relating to their country, or a locket relating to a loved one. In each case, the diminishing of what is precious and of value is a blasphemy.

And “idolatry” is the other way around: it has to do with giving more weight than one should to something – trying to put something that ought to be secondary in the place of what should be primary. That’s making an “idol” out of something; making something more valuable and holy than it ought to be.

What, then, is properly ultimate in religion? What demands our highest allegiance and loyalty? What ought to concern us most?

Again, I return, as an illustration, to the words of Jesus where he says, “Love God above all – with all your heart, soul, and mind.”

The interpretation of this greatest of the commandments varies enormously among religions. But for me this means:

Give yourself ultimately to what is eternal and infinite.

Give yourself ultimately to that eternally creative and eternally creating power that underlies, sustains, and transcends all that exists – not one being among other beings, but the source and creative power of all beings.

Give yourself to that unoriginated reality from which we and all finite and temporal things arise and back into which we and all things will one day fall.

Give yourself to that reality which words, thoughts, and concepts cannot reach. As is said in the Eastern scriptures: “No tongue can soil it.” Or, again, “The tao that can be known is not the eternal Tao.”

This means two things to me: First, that *any* specific concern, activity, object, or loyalty is not ultimate; but, secondly, that any specific concern, activity, object, or loyalty could express the ultimate, can be a way of relating to, of connecting with, and of celebrating the ultimate – so long as it maintains its proper place and doesn't become an idol.

The German poet Goethe said, “All things are metaphors.” That is, all finite things, rightly understood, point beyond themselves to the unknown and unknowable infinite; each part of the whole points to the power of the whole and is an expression of it. And we sang earlier with the words of William Blake:

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.

The “game” of golf

Which brings us to golf, the game of golf, and the question of whether and how the infinite can shine through a game like golf.

Normally, you wouldn't think that a game of any kind should rank very high in the hierarchy of values. A game is meant to be a way of taking a break from the seriousness of life; perhaps even a diversion, a distraction; or perhaps a way of relaxing; or a way of re-charging your batteries so you can again be prepared to take on the seriousness of life – but it itself is not to be taken seriously, not really.

You may enter a game with great exuberance, energy, and enthusiasm – I recommend that – and pretend that it's really, really important. That's part of the

fun. But you know with another part of your mind – and must not forget – that it’s not really serious; it’s just a game.

One author I read says that one of the reasons he loves golf so much is because it’s “filled with arguments of no consequence.” (M. Scott Peck, Golf and the Spirit: Lessons for the Journey, p. 191) In golf, you can find all kinds of things to argue over in a fun-loving way.

And a lot of the jokes relating to golf are in recognition of the fact that it’s not really serious life – all the jokes, for example, about “golf widows,” wives abandoned by their husbands who are out on the golf course. (It’s not by accident that this sermon is being given on the Sunday of our annual women’s spring retreat.) But these jokes are also a bit of a warning not to overvalue the game, not to make of it an idol, but rather to give its proper place.

At the top of today’s Order of Service there are some lines from John Updike in which he quotes a fictitious golf instructor to this effect:

“Golf is life,” he says softly, and his green eyes expand.... I see that he is right ... absolutely; there is no life, no world, beyond the golf course – just an infinite and terrible falling away.

(John Updike, Golf Dreams, p. 23)

In its context, these lines are to be taken mostly humorously, but also with the recognition of the fact that it’s possible to give too much priority to golf (or, I suppose, to any game).

So golf is a game, and when its place as a game is maintained, then its glory can shine through. As such, it can be seen as a spiritual experience. How might this be?

“Spirit” has many meanings and definitions, but let me look at golf in relation to “spirit” in four different ways:

- 1) “Spirit” as the animating principle of life;
- 2) “Spirit” as a spiritual discipline or practice;
- 3) “Spirit” as an experience of union;
- 4) “Spirit” as a quality of awareness

1) Spirit as the animating principle of life

First, spirit as the animating principle of life.

What makes living beings alive and gives them their vitality? The answer from ancient times is “spirit.” “Spirit” is a word that is used to refer to the life principle – the vital, dynamic, animating, activating dimension of living beings.

And so what animates, enlivens, and energizes you?

For some people the game of golf is something that brings vitality to their life. Not to everyone obviously. I mentioned to someone a couple of days ago that I was going to do a sermon on golf, and the person responded saying that she couldn't imagine anything more boring than golf.

And, it's true, if you look at golf from the outside, it doesn't make much sense – most games don't ... trying to a put a ball in a hole with the fewest number of shots.

“Golf,” as Winston Churchill famously said, “is a game whose aim is to hit a very small ball into a even smaller hole, with weapons singularly ill-designed for the purpose.”

“Golf:” “flog” spelled backwards.

“A good walk spoiled,” quipped Mark Twain.

But for others whose spirit has somehow been caught, hooked, taken in, golf awakens the life-energy and one feels alive.

I confess it is so for me.

I have always enjoyed games – games of many kinds, but especially games of sport that had some kind of ball in them ... such as a baseball, basketball, softball, football, volleyball, soccer ball, billiard ball, bowling ball, croquet ball, tennis ball, racquetball, handball, ping-pong ball, and golf ball ... some kind of ball that could be hit, thrown, caught, bounced, shot, served, kicked, swatted, or bowled. I've played and enjoyed all these games.

Of them, baseball was my favorite when growing up and into my late thirties. I have preached from pulpits with parts of my baseball uniform under my preaching uniform. And I was distraught, then, when I could no longer play baseball at the level that I had enjoyed.

But then, joy of joy, I found golf, or golf found me – and all the energy I had ever had for baseball went right into golf. It was the most surprising and gratifying thing. And it has stayed with me ever since.

Who can explain this? Who can explain why one is drawn to something? Who can explain what animates one?

I would not wish to over-analyze this. Rather, I believe in following the energy. Follow the thing that makes you come alive and feel alive. As has been said, God is where the energy is. The impulse of energy is your particular connection to the power of being. Don't question it too much, but follow it; see where it leads. As John Updike says:

I have written over the years so much about the game – because I am curiously, disproportionately, undeservedly happy on a golf course....
(John Updike, Golf Dreams, p. 169)

And I would say the same.

One of my very favorite things to do on summer mornings is to get up before the sun has arisen and go to the golf course – it can be either by myself or with a friend or two – and to watch the sun rise and the geese hydroplane onto the lakes while striding down the fairways (which are, indeed, fair-ways) pursuing and finding and striking a little, innocent, white golf ball with various long-stemmed instruments with hooks on their ends. It makes no sense, but:

How beautiful is the morning, all light in its tranquility. Clear blue is the depth of the heavens, and the earth is silent and calm.

The bloom is purple on the mountains; the waters are transparent in the valley. The sweet grass is an emerald floor; the vesture of earth is aglow with rejoicing life.

O all ye things of tenderness and grace, all ye works of strength, and memories of love! Bless our minds, and lift them up forever.

Thus, a game like golf can be a spiritual experience ... for the life of the spirit has, in part at least, to do with paying attention to what enlivens the spirit and keeps one vital and alive.

2) Spirit as a spiritual discipline or practice

A second way in which the game of golf may be related to the life of the spirit is as a spiritual discipline or practice.

Like many games, golf can be both a spiritual teacher and a gauge of what shape your spirit is in.

Golf is a game where, perhaps more than any other, the physiological, psychological, the social and the moral all come into play. (Updike, p. 163) Golf, says John Updike, is “part hike, part contest, part demonstration, part lesson.” (Updike, p. 125) It combines: exercise, companionship, beauty, opportunity for learning, and competition.

Mental and spiritual balance and control are important in most sports, and certainly in golf. In golf, the ball is stationary. It’s just sitting right there, waiting, not apparently moving at all, until you strike it. If it goes in a certain direction after you strike it, there’s no one to blame but yourself for where it ends up.

That is to say, there’s nothing to blame other than the wind that just came up, the tree branch that reached out and grabbed it, the sand trap or water hazard you didn’t see, the odd stone that it struck, the wetness or dryness of the grass that deflected its course, the hot or cold weather, the contour of the land, the designer of both the golf course and the golf clubs; and perhaps your ill health that day, a crick in your neck, your lower back pain, or the flu-like symptoms you just discovered; and, finally, God Almighty Himself is clearly involved, since His name is invoked on golf courses at least as much as in houses of worship.

Indeed, anger “is perhaps golf’s greatest enemy.” (Peck, p. 61) Anger is related to not accepting reality – both reality outside of you and your own reality.

Thus, golf is a sport where you have the opportunity to truly be with yourself and your own temperament, your own capabilities, your own limitations. Again, as John Updike writes:

Choking is one aspect of golf that, from the start, came naturally to me. Given even a paper-thin opportunity to let my side down and destroy my own score, I will seize it. “It’s all on you partner!” is a sure-fire battle-cry to swing extra hard and dribble the ball into the flowering weeds. The muttered hint, “Remember, you have a stroke here,” freezes my joints like a blast from Siberia.” (Updike, p. 33)

In preparation for this sermon, I read a book by author M. Scott Peck titled, Golf and the Spirit: Lessons for the Journey. It consists of 18 chapters, matching the number of holes in a typical golf course, each chapter elucidating some aspect of spiritual discipline that golf could teach, plus a 19th chapter for the conversation in the clubhouse following the round – the 19th hole.

As Scott Peck indicates, golf lends itself to seeing life as a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey, with deep inner learning and inner changes that take place along the way. The various obstacles and hazards in the game of golf are “life condensed.” (Peck, p. 61)

He says that he cannot think of any game better calculated to teach the spiritual virtues we need to learn: “humility, patience, precision, balance, and alertness, as well as the never-ending practice of kenosis [that is, self-emptying; letting go of ego-control].” (Peck, p. 299)

One aspect of golf, both attractive and off-putting, is the endless pursuit of perfection that one may give oneself to in golf ... for in golf there is an “opportunity for infinite improvement.” (Updike, p. 90)

Even the best of golfers are always tinkering with their swings. And the best of all them, Tiger Woods, has, as I recall, gone through three major swing changes in his career, knowing that he would get worse before he got better (which he did), receiving all kinds of criticism for changing his swing when he was already the best in the world; but, then, after a time, coming back stronger than ever.

And related to perfection is the opportunity to explore competitiveness – both within oneself and in relation to others. Scott Peck says:

Competition is a choice in all aspects of life... The healthy or whole person will know when and how to compete – and when or how not to compete. (p. 201)

He also says:

Whenever I’ve encountered a human who despises playing games (and virtually all games are competitive), it has been someone who is probably excessively competitive. Such individuals refuse to play games simply because they cannot bear the pain of losing; it is agony for them.” (p. 223)

So golf lends itself to various types of competition. There's a book titled, Golf: Games Within the Game that lists 196 different ways one can play competitive golf. But I'm certain this list doesn't cover all the "games within the game of golf" – in fact, I know it doesn't, because I'm part of a local golfing group that has a kind of skins game that is virtually impossible to describe, particularly to those who actually know how golf is supposed to be played.

The rules of our game are given out to newcomers on a "needs to know" basis, since it would be impossible to describe the intricacies of our game prior to actually playing it. And if such a newcomer might complain about the strange rules as they are paying out their nickels at the end of the round, they are instructed to take their complaints to the Rules Committee, which, to my knowledge, has never met – and which, perhaps, does not even exist.

This local group, incidentally, as some of you may know – some of you do know because you are here this morning – is largely made up of male members and friends of this congregation. It's called The Quimper Golf Fellowship, also known as the QWUUF-Links.

Our group – new persons are invited – golfs once or twice a week across the street, weather permitting. And its friendly competition, which I must confess I had a part in initiating, is one of the highlights of my life here in Port Townsend.

3) Spirit as an experience of union

Very briefly, a third way, in which golf may be seen as being related to the life of the spirit is in terms of being in harmony with an unseen order of things. That's how William James describes religion: as an attempt to be in harmony with an unseen order of things.

And sometimes that harmony, an almost mystical connection – a spiritual experience of the highest order – can happen in golf. One is "in the zone," "in the flow." Time disappears, the world stands still, all is at peace, all is in rhythm and harmony, all is connected.

It's as if we experience consciously what physicists tell us about reality, namely, that we are all part of one energy field, and our bodies and minds are simply little knots or whorls of congealed energy.

Usually we are concentrated on those knots or gatherings of energy, but in the mystical experience we don't see the knots, rather, we see and experience the field, and know in our very bones that it is all of one piece, and we are suffused and overwhelmed with a sense of well-being and of beauty.

4) Spirit as a quality of awareness

Finally, let me also briefly mention a fourth way in which the game of golf may be related to the life of the spirit, somewhat similar to the third way just mentioned, namely, the consideration of spirit as a quality of awareness.

What is the spirit, and what is the spiritual life?

My primary mentor in the ministry, Dr. Duncan Littlefair, spent the last years of his career and life trying to sharpen his understanding of the meaning and nature of "spirit." And he concluded that the spiritual dimension of life can be understood as both the capacity for and the expression of a certain quality in our life, namely, a quality of awareness, attention, discernment, and gratitude for the miracle of our life.

The spirit, he said, is no "incendiary flame," but rather "the still, small voice." It is "so quiet, so soft." It's the "stir of wonder" that may quietly marvel at any natural event. Though born of the natural, physical life, the spirit stands apart from nature in wonder and amazement.

Thus, the game of golf can also be an opportunity for spiritual experience in this respect; that is, in and through this game one can experience the wonder, appreciation, and gratitude for the miracle of life and being.

I conclude with a final reading, again from John Updike, who discovered in and through the game of golf a gratitude for the gift of life. This is from an essay titled, "The Bliss of Golf."

THE BLISS OF GOLF

I never touched a club until I was twenty-five. Then, on a shady lawn in Wellesley, a kind of aunt-in-law showed me how to hold her driver and told me, after one swoop at a phantom ball, that I had a wonderful natural swing. Since that fatal encouragement, in many weathers inner and outer, amid many a green and winding landscape, I have asked myself what the peculiar bliss of

this demanding game is, a bliss that at times threatens to relegate all the rest of life, including those sexual concerns that Freud claims are paramount and those even more basic needs that Marx insists must be met, to the shadows.

The immensities of space, beside which even polo and baseball are constricted pastimes, must be part of it. To see one's ball gallop two hundred and more yards down the fairway, or see it fly from the face of an 8-iron clear across an entire copse of maples in full autumnal flare, is to join one's soul with the vastness that, contemplated from another angle, intimidates the spirit, and makes one feel small. As it moves through the adventures of a golf match, the human body, like Alice's in Wonderland, experiences an intoxicating relativity – huge in relation to the ball, tiny in relation to the course, exactly matched to that of the other players. From this relativity is struck a silent music that rings to the treetops and runs through a Wagnerian array of changes as each hole evokes its set of shots, dwindling down to the final putt. The clubs in their nice gradations suggest organ pipes....

A beautiful simplicity distinguishes the game's objective and the scoring. One stroke, count one. William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury opens with an idiot watching a game of golf, and he grasps the essence well enough; "They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit." That's how it goes; golf appeals to the idiot in us, and the child. What child does not grasp the pleasure-principle of miniature golf? Just how childlike golf players become is proven by their frequent inability to count past five. There is a lovable injustice, a comic democracy, in the equality, for the purposes of scoring, of a three-hundred-yard smash from an elevated tee and a three-inch tap-in. Or, let's not forget, a total whiff – the most comical stroke of all. A ground-out in baseball or a tennis ball whapped into the net is not especially amusing; but bad shots in golf are endless fun – at least the other fellow's are. The duck hook, the banana slice, the topped dribble, the no-explode explosion shot, the arboreal ricochet, the sky ball, the majestic OB, the pondside scuff-and-splash, the deep-grass squirt, the cart-path shank, the skull, the fat hit, the thin hit, the stubbed putt – what a wealth of mirth is to be had in an afternoon's witnessing of such varied miseries, all produced in a twinkling of an eye by the infallible laws of physics! And the bliss of the swing. The one that feels effortless and produces a shot of miraculous straightness and soar. "I'll take it," we say modestly, searching about with a demure blush for the spun-away tee. Just a few shots a round keep us coming back; what other sport offers such sudden splendor in exchange for so few calories of expended energy? In those instants of whiz, ascent, hover, and fall, an ideal self seems mirrored. If we have that one shot in us, we must have thousands more – the problem is to get them out,

to *let* them out. To concentrate, to take one's time, to move the weight across, to keep the elbow in, to save the wrist-cock for the hitting area, to keep one's head still, down, and as full of serenity as a Zen monk's: an ambitious program, but a basically spiritual one, which does not require the muscularity and shapeliness of youth. What other sport holds out hope of improvement to a man or woman over fifty? True, the pros begin to falter at around forty, but it is their putting nerves that go, not their swings. For a duffer like the abovesigned, the room for improvement is so vast that three lifetimes could be spent roaming the fairways carving away at it, convinced that perfection lies just over the next rise. And that hope, perhaps, is the kindest bliss of all that golf bestows upon its devotees.

(John Updike, Gold Dreams, pp. 147-150)

Spoken Benediction

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Preface to “The Time Of Your Life” by William Saroyan)

Extinguishing of Chalice

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 preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 27, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)