

**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**December 9, 2007**  
**“Thirst”**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Lighting the Chalice** (in unison)

We light this chalice  
For the renewal of faith,  
The wonder of hope,  
The beauty of love,  
And the gift of joy.

**Opening Words**

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this second Sunday of the Christmas season.

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 integrity, 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; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: On this second Sunday of the Christmas season we celebrate the quality of hope, forever springing up in our hearts and minds, forever being rekindled.

CONGREGATION: There is no state more desperate than hopelessness. When people lose hope, they die.

MINISTER: However deep our faith, it is sometimes shaken; however strong our hopes, they are many times crushed.

CONGREGATION: Our faith must be deepened and enlarged; our hope must be confirmed and renewed.

MINISTER: When the candle of hope is quenched, it must be re-lighted.

CONGREGATION: We must find a way to protect the flickering candle of hope.

MINISTER: We find hope for ourselves when we move with those who have visions and dreams.

CONGREGATION: We find new meaning for our life when we share in the courage, devotion, and dignity of others.

MINISTER: We come together in this season to celebrate the qualities of Christmas. Our faith is strengthened by the love of our friends.

CONGREGATION: Our lives wing with new expectancy. The hope of Christmas brings joy to the world.

(Duncan E. Littlefair, adapted)

### **Lighting the Candle of Hope**

Tomorrow, children, is the birthday of a well-known person, the poet Emily Dickinson. She was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Tomorrow she will be 177 years old.

Emily Dickinson is a well-known person today, but during her lifetime she was not at all well-known. Very few people would have known of her birthday or celebrated it while she was alive.

But after her death she became quite well-known because hundreds and hundreds of poems that she wrote were found in her room by her sister, Lavinia, who lived with Emily all her life in the same house but didn't even know these poems existed – that's how private a person Emily was.

Most of the poems Emily Dickinson wrote are very short poems and are very unlike most other poems that were written when she was living. But after her death, once people started reading her poems and got used to them, they really liked them.

And one of the poems people have liked the most is a poem about a little songbird. It's a songbird that is a little bit unusual in that it doesn't sit in the branches of trees or fly outside in the air like most songbirds do. Instead this songbird lives right inside of us – right in the deepest part of our being, right in our very soul.

This songbird is also a little unusual in that it is not always hungry like other birds. Most birds, you know, are always looking for food. But not this one; this songbird never asks for even a crumb of food.

What's the name of this unusual songbird, you might ask? Its name is HOPE, and it sings and sings and sings and sings. It never stops singing. At least that's what Emily Dickinson thought. And that is why she wrote the following poem:

“Hope” is that thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –  
And sore must be the storm –  
That could abash the little Bird –  
That kept so many warm –

I've heard it in the chillest land –  
And on the strangest Sea –  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb – of Me

(#254, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., Thomas H. Johnson)

That's the little songbird of hope that Emily Dickinson wrote about. And so on this second Sunday of the Christmas season, we light a candle to this little songbird of hope who lives within us, and who never quits singing no matter how worried or frightened or upset or sad we are.

Peri Muellner (9:15) Ryan Hoffman (11:15), will you please light the second candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Hope.

### **Lighting the Hanukkah Candles**

There are a number of different spiritual traditions in the world that meet and overlap at this time of the year. They include Christmas, Hanukkah, and the earth-centered Solstice ceremonies.

And whereas Christmas and Solstice celebrations are of a fixed date, being related to the solar calendar and the return of the sun, Hanukkah is related to the lunar calendar and the cycle of the moon. Thus, Hanukkah began this past Tuesday at sundown on December 4. In the Jewish calendar that's the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev of the year 5,768, which counts from the traditional Jewish day of creation.

In Hebrew, "Hanukkah," means "dedication," and it celebrates the re-dedication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the triumph of the ancient Maccabees against a superior military force in 165 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era).

Legend asserts that at the time the Temple was reclaimed, the Maccabean warriors wanted to rekindle the eternal flame that burned in the Temple, but they could only find one container of holy oil, which would normally last just one day. However, says the legend, that container of oil burned not for just one day but for eight days, until additional holy oil could be prepared.

In memory of this miraculous event a special menorah is lit at this time of the year that contains eight candles, plus the ninth servant candle in the middle of the menorah, called the *shamos*. Thus, for the eight days of Hanukkah, each evening Jewish families light a

candle of the menorah and say a blessing to celebrate the triumph of freedom over persecution and of light over darkness.

And though we cannot perform this ritual precisely as it would be performed in Jewish homes or houses of worship, still we seek to honor the Jewish heritage within the Unitarian Universalist faith as well as individuals of Jewish heritage and spiritual practice within this congregation.

Nan Toby Tyrrell, a member of this Fellowship as well as a member of Bet Shira, will now light the first six candles of the Hanukkah menorah because tonight marks the sixth evening of the Hanukkah celebration. Nan will read the traditional Hanukkah prayers in English and then will be accompanied by Paul Becker, also of Jewish heritage, who will sing the blessing in Hebrew with her.

Following the lighting of these candles we will sing hymn number 221, "Light One Candle," a hymn that celebrates Hanukkah.

### **Reading**

My sermon title this morning is taken from poet Mary Oliver's most recent book published last year titled, "Thirst."

A number of the poems in this book represent a new direction and movement in both her poetry and her life, namely, a connection to spiritual powers beyond the natural world. Prior to this, Mary Oliver's poems have always been anchored in the world of nature.

This new movement in her work coincides with the loss of her life-partner of forty years, Molly Malone Cook. In these new poems you can feel the poet reaching out to fill the hole in her heart at her partner's death.

The book ends with the prose poem after which the book is titled.

### **Thirst**

Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have. I walk out to the pond and all the way God has given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord, I was never a quick scholar but sulked and hunched over my books past the hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.

## “THIRST”

### **Introduction**

The Christmas season to me is, above all, the season of the human heart. It’s the time of the year when we are called to attend to what it is that makes us most deeply human.

This morning, through the work of two poets whose writings I know well, I will explore what touches, sustains, repairs, and lifts the human heart.

Over the years there have been a number of poets whose writings have been meaningful and valuable to me. Had I the time, I’m sure there would be many others of whom I could say the same; but we are finite beings and our time is finite.

Of the poets whose work I do know and value, there have been two whose writings have absolutely seized me – seized me so that I had to read everything they had written, and not just once, but over and over and over again.

Who can explain such seizures? They come upon one and may even be a little embarrassing. But something “out there” touches something “in here,” and a connection is made, a need filled, an interest awakened.

It’s a kind of falling-in-love experience, which I’ve had, not only with poets, but with other authors in addition to poets. Poets have actually been the last in this line of seizures.

And I don’t know how it is with you, or what seizes you – perhaps music, art, science – or whether you are seized in this way; but in my life, to this point at least, there have been two poets who have seized me. (The obsessional phase by now is well-passed, and I am not under their spell as I once was, though I continue to enjoy them.) The name of the first – no surprise to some of you – is Robinson Jeffers, and the name of the second – again, no surprise to some of you – is Mary Oliver.

Both of these poets have a focus that is deeply connected to the natural world.

### **Robinson Jeffers and the connection with nature**

Robinson Jeffers, for example, was so taken with the natural beauty of the earth and what humans were doing to destroy that beauty that, on his more troubled days (of which there were a goodly number), he spoke of human consciousness as being like an infection in the universe, and he imagined a time when our solar system would be shed of the human species and the infection it carried.

Some age of time after mankind has died,  
Then the sun will say “What ailed me for a moment?” and resume  
The old soulless triumph, and the iron and stone earth  
With confident inorganic glory obliterate

Her ruins and fossils,...  
And grind the chalky emptied seed-shells of consciousness  
The bare skulls of the dead to powder; after some million  
Courses around the sun her sadness may pass:...  
(from "Margrave")

Wrote the poet:

...it is more than comfort: it is deep peace and final joy  
To know that the great world lives, whether man dies or not."  
(from "The Inhumanist," Part II of The Double Axe)

He says:

The beauty of things is not harnessed to human  
Eyes and the little active minds; it is absolute.  
It is not for human titillation, though it serves that."  
(from "The Inhumanist," Part II of The Double Axe)

And, so, for Jeffers, the role for humans – if there is to be a role – is to awaken and behold the beauty of things.

"The beauty of things is the face of God: worship it;  
Give you hearts to it; labor to be like it."  
(from "The Inhumanist," Part II of The Double Axe)

On occasion the poet would be so smitten with this beauty that the walls separating himself and the natural world would dissolve, and in mystical union he would exclaim:

Dear love. You are so beautiful.  
Even this side the stars and below the moon. How can you be ... all this ... and me also?  
Be Human also? The yellow puma, the flighty mourning-dove and flecked hawk,  
yes and the rattlesnake  
Are in the nature of things: they are noble and beautiful  
As the rocks and the grass: not this grim ape  
Although it loves you. – Yet two or three times in my life my walls have fallen –  
beyond love – no room for love –  
I have been you.  
(from The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers, ed., Tim Hunt, pp. 624-25)

### **Mary Oliver and the connection with nature**

For poet Mary Oliver, too, it is the natural world and its splendor and surprise that grips her.

In poem after poem she longs for a deeper connection with nature; she longs to be free of human self-consciousness, to sink herself completely into nature and *just be* – no more thinking, no more stressing.

In one poem, for example, she imagines herself as a lily – the lily of the field that, as the scriptures say, “neither toils nor spins” – and yet she finds she can’t be content like the lily. She says:

But if I were a lily  
I think I would wait all day  
for the green face

of the hummingbird  
to touch me.  
What I mean is,  
could I forget myself

even in those feathery fields?...

I think I will always be lonely  
in this world,...

(from “Lilies,” New and Selected Poems)

So try as she might, and wish as she would, she simply couldn’t free herself from self-consciousness. And, of course, it is this very capacity of self-reflexive consciousness that enables her to behold and praise the beauty and wonder of nature in the first place.

And so for her, too, as with Robinson Jeffers, the role of humans is to wake up and behold the miracle of natural things. In a poem titled “The Deer,” she says:

This is the earnest work.  
Each of us is given  
only so many mornings to do it –  
to look around and love

the oily fur of our lives,  
the hoof and the grass-stained muzzle.  
Days I don’t do this

I feel the terror of idleness,  
like a red thirst.

(from “The Deer,” in House of Light)

And in her most recent book, Thirst, from which I read earlier, the first poem is titled, “Messenger,” and here again the poet speaks of her work:

My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird –  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished....

(excerpt from “Messenger,” Thirst)

### **The human bond of Robinson Jeffers**

But it’s not the love of nature of these poets that I want to speak about this morning. It’s something else, namely: how their connection with and love of nature does not seem to be enough in times of deep grief.

Both of these poets were deeply bonded to a human life-partner: Robinson Jeffers, from his early twenties, to his wife, Una; and Mary Oliver to her lifetime partner, Molly Malone Cook, to whom each of her books is dedicated.

When Robinson Jeffers’ wife died, he was cut to the core – completely stricken and forlorn, a wound from which he never really recovered.

Two weeks ago I read a Jeffers’ poem in which the poet – this was about three years after his wife’s death, I believe – discovered a little clearing on a mountainside precipice where hard-wounded deer went to die. The beautiful, grassy place was littered with antlers and bones. Upon seeing these antlers and bones and recognizing it as a final resting place for the deer, the poet cries out: “I wish my bones/ were with theirs.” My life’s “empty since my love died.” (from “The Deer Lay Down Their Bones”)

And in the year immediately following her death, Jeffers wrote a long narrative poem titled, “Hungerfield” as an attempt to deal with his grief. It was to be his last major poem, even though he continued to live for another eleven or twelve years after his wife’s death. But with her passing the vitality of his life simply drained from him.

At various places in this lengthy poem, he breaks out of the narrative to directly address his deceased wife. And near the beginning of the poem, he cries:

September again. The gray grass, the gray sea.  
The ink-black trees with white-bellied night-herons in them,  
Brawling on the boughs at dusk, barking like dogs –

And the awful loss. It is a year. She has died: and I  
Have lived for a long year on soft rotten emotions,  
Vain longing and drunken pity, grief and gray ashes –  
Oh child of God!

It is not that I am lonely for you. I am lonely:  
I am mutilated, for you were part of me:  
But men can endure that. I am growing old and my love is gone:  
No doubt I can live without you, bitterly and well.  
That's not the cry. My torment is memory.  
My grief to have seen the banner and beauty of your brave life  
Dragged in the dust down the dim road to death. To have seen you defeated.  
You who never despaired, passing through weakness  
And pain –

to nothing. It is usual I believe. I stood by: I believe  
I never failed you. The contemptible thought –  
Whether I failed or not! *I* am not the one.  
*I* was not dying. Is death bitter my dearest? It is nothing.  
It is a silence. But dying can be bitter.

In this black year  
I have thought often of Hungerfield, the man at Horse Creek,  
Who fought with Death – bodily, said the witnesses, throat for throat,  
Fury against fury in the dark –  
And conquered him. If I had had the courage and the hope –  
I should be now Death's captive no doubt, not conquerer.  
I should be with my dearest, in the hollow darkness  
Where nothing hurts.

I should not remember  
Your silver-backed hand-mirror you asked me for,  
And sat up in bed to gaze in it, to see your face  
A little changed. You were still beautiful,  
But not – as you'd been – a falcon. You said nothing: you sighed and laid down the  
glass; and I  
Made a dog smile over a tearing heart,  
Saying that you looked well.

The lies – the faithless hopeless unbelieved lies  
While you lay dying.

For these reasons  
I wish to make verses again, to drug memory,  
To make it sleep for a moment. Never fear: I shall not forget you –  
Until I am with you. The dead indeed forget all things.

And when I speak to you it is only play-acting  
And self-indulgence: you cannot hear me, you do not exist. Dearest...  
The story:

And then the poet goes on to tell his deceased wife about this fictitious figure of Hungerfield who fought with death and who conquered it, and all the horrors that resulted from his not accepting death. And at the end of the long story he concludes with a brief, final address to his love, saying:

Here is the poem, dearest; you will never read it nor hear it. You were more beautiful

Than a hawk flying; you were faithful and a lion heart like this rough hero  
Hungerfield. But the ashes have fallen

And the flame has gone up; nothing human remains. You are earth and air; you are  
in the beauty of the ocean

And the great streaming triumphs of sundown; you are alive and well in the tender  
young grass rejoicing

When soft rain falls all night, and little rosy-fleeced clouds float on the dawn. – I  
shall be with you presently.

(excerpts from “Hungerfield”)

### **The human bond of Mary Oliver**

A couple of years ago, in 2005, Mary Oliver’s life-partner of forty years, Molly Malone Cook, died at the age of eighty. Mary Oliver’s recent book, Thirst, is primarily about her struggle to come to grips with her death.

From the complications of loving you  
I think there is no end or return.  
No answer, no coming out of it.

Which is the only way to love, isn’t it?  
This isn’t a playground, this is  
Earth, our heaven, for a while.

Therefore I have given precedence  
to all my sudden, sullen, dark moods  
that hold you in the center of my world.

And I say to my body: grow thinner still.  
And I say to my fingers: type me a pretty song.  
And I say to my heart: rave on.

(“A Pretty Song,” Thirst)

And this poem titled, “Letter to \_\_\_\_\_.” But, of course, it’s a letter to Molly Malone Cook:

You have broken my heart.  
Just as well. Now  
I am learning to rise  
above all that, learning

the thin life, waking up  
simply to praise  
everything in this world that is  
strong and beautiful

always – the trees, the rocks,  
the fields, the news  
from heaven, the laughter  
that comes back

all the same. Just as well. Time  
to read books, rake the lawn  
in peace, sweep the floor, scour  
the faces of the pans,

anything. And I have been so  
diligent it is almost  
over, I am growing myself  
as strong as rock, as a tree

which, if I put my arms around it, does not  
lean away. It is a  
wonderful life. Comfortable,  
I read the papers. Maybe

I will go on a cruise, maybe I will  
Cross the entire ocean, more than once.  
Whatever you think, I have scarcely  
thought of you. Whatever you imagine

it never really happened. Only a few  
evenings of nonsense. *Whatever you believe –  
dear one, dear one –  
do not believe this letter.*

(“Letter to \_\_\_\_\_.” from Thirst)

Interestingly, and disturbingly to some who have followed Mary Oliver’s naturalistic poetry over the years, in her grief she has begun attending church after a lifetime of non-

attendance – an Episcopal church with plenty of ritual, so far as I can tell from her poems.

Some of these new poems reveal her reaching out to a reality beyond nature, a power and presence with a more human face. She has begun addressing prayers, not as before to non-personal nature, but to a more personal, spiritual reality that is more than and other than natural reality. For example:

Lord, what shall I do that I  
can't quiet myself?  
Here is the bread, and  
Here is the cup, and  
I can't quiet myself.

(excerpt from "Coming to God: First Days", from Thirst)

And this:

1.  
I know a lot of fancy words.  
I tear them from my heart and my tongue.  
Then I pray.

2.  
Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour  
me a little. And tenderness too. My  
need is great.

(excerpt from "Six Recognitions of the Lord", from Thirst)

And this poem titled, "After Her Death":

I am trying to find the lesson  
for tomorrow. Matthew something.  
Which lectionary? I have not  
Forgotten the Way, but, a little,  
the way to the Way. The trees keep whispering  
peace, peace, and the birds  
in the shallows are full of the  
bodies of small fish and are  
content. They open their wings  
so easily, and fly. So. It is still  
possible.

I open the book  
which the strange, difficult, beautiful church  
has given me. To Matthew. Anywhere.

("After Her Death," from Thirst)

## **More than a connection with the natural world needed**

So am I struck that for these two naturalistic poets the connection with nature does not seem, by itself, to sustain in times of great sorrow. Something more is needed.

As meaningful and as sustaining as nature outside the human realm is, we humans are, first of all, connected to nature in its human dimension.

We are part of nature, but we are a human part of nature. We are part of reality, but we are a human part of reality. We are constructed, we have evolved, so that we belong, first of all, to human life, or to reality with a human-like dimension.

Our hearts are human hearts. Their strings are tuned, first of all, to other humans; their pulse is set, first of all, to keep time with other human hearts.

We are made to connect with other humans and we are made to be damaged when those connections are broken.

## **The biology of the heart connection**

Just now our Early Bird Sunday Morning Book Discussion Group is reading a book titled [A General Theory of Love](#) in which the authors discuss the architecture of the human heart, and how we are geared by nature to attach to other humans. It's part of our heritage as mammals – mammalian bonds, endowments of the evolutionary development of the limbic brain that we share with other mammals. (p. 67). It's not the same for reptiles. As the authors say:

The lack of an attuned mother is a nonevent for a reptile and a shattering injury to the complex and fragile limbic brain of a mammal. (p. 89)

For creatures like us, say the authors, “a relationship is a physiologic process...” (p. 81) Our immature neural systems will not develop properly without attaching to other humans. “Feed and clothe a human infant but deprive him of emotional contact and he will die.” (p. 87)

The need for humans to connect with other humans, to touch other humans, to love other humans is part of our physiology, part of our biology.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, it is good on a sunny day to look out on the majestic mountains that surround us here and feel their beauty, strength, and eternity. And it is good on a dark evening to stand under the stars and know you are part of a vastness beyond comprehension.

But it is especially good *as a human being*, and particularly in this season of the year, to look to that part of nature and reality that is closest at hand to us – namely to other humans, and particularly to those with whom we are most closely connected.

They may dwell under our roof and in our community, or they may be far away. They may be alive in time and space, or they may have returned to the source of life and dwell in memory.

But without the human connection, without the heart-connection, as we learn from the poets of whom I have spoken this morning, the center is gone, and the hopes and dreams of all the years are drained of meaning and value.

“...all our pain,” writes Robinson Jeffers, “comes from restraint of love....” (from “The Loving Shepherdess”)

May this Christmas season, this season of the human heart, be a time for you when your love pours forth without restraint to light up your world and ours.

**Closing hymn: #18 – “What Wondrous Love”**

### **Benediction**

And now may the faith we nourish here  
And the memories we gather here  
Give us hope for the future.  
May the love that we share  
And the companionship we feel  
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.  
And may the blessings of our fellowship rest upon us,  
This day and forevermore.

### **Extinguishing the Chalice**

We extinguish this 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 service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the second Sunday of Christmas, December 9, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)