

“When Life Doesn’t Feel Like A Gift”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
November 25, 2007
Bruce A. Bode

Poetry for Order of Service

Is it right to take your life
Or better to let life take it?
Is it superiority of man
When things have come to such a pass
As this, the whole truth none else knowing,
To make a final affirmation
In a final, great negation?
Is it an intellectual grace
So to do, and, Oh far deeper,
Is it a spiritual unity
Known once and forever known
Between the doer and the Creator?

(Richard Eberhart, from “The Parker River”)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

At times our own light goes out,
And is rekindled by a spark from another person.
Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude
Of those who have lighted the flame within us.

(Albert Schweitzer)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Thanksgiving Day weekend.

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: Is there not, after all, much more mystery in human relations than we generally recognize?

CONGREGATION: None of us can truly assert that we know another, even if we have lived with them for years.

MINISTER: Of that which constitutes our inner life we can impart, even to those most intimate with us, only fragments; the whole of it we cannot give, nor would they be able to comprehend it.

CONGREGATION: We wander through life in a semi-darkness in which none of us can distinguish exactly the features of our neighbor.

MINISTER: Only from time to time, through some experience we have with our companion or some remark that passes, does our neighbor stand close to us, as though illumined by a flash of lightning.

CONGREGATION: After that we again walk on together in the darkness, perhaps for a long time, and try in vain to make out our fellow traveler's features.

(Albert Schweitzer, from Memoirs of Childhood and Youth)

Meditation & Period of Silence

As we enter into our time of meditation and prayer this morning, I will read a poem of Robert Frost titled, "My November Guest." This is a poem that has been in my mind these last few weeks in relation to the beautiful wall hanging artists of our congregation created for this season of the year. This poem also fits with today's sermon theme.

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.
She talks and I am fain to list:
She's glad the birds are gone away,
She's glad her simple worsted grey
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,
The faded earth, the heavy sky,
The beauties she so truly sees,
She thinks I have no eye for these,
And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know
The love of bare November days

Before the coming of the snow,
But it were vain to tell her so,
And they are better for her praise.

(Robert Frost, "My November Guest," A Boy's Will)

Reading

The reading this morning is a poem by California poet Robinson Jeffers, 1887-1962, titled, "The Deer Lay Down Their Bones." This was written about three years after the death of Jeffers' wife, Una – she who brought light and vitality into the poet's life, as he tended to live on its dark, depressive side.

In this poem you will hear reference made to "a thirty-year-old decision." This was a promise the poet made to his wife – and himself – that he would not take his life by suicide, but would live it to the end. The question came up because at that time thirty years ago a number of their literary friends and acquaintances were ending their lives by suicide. It seemed almost a fashionable thing to do.

I followed the narrow cliffside trail half way up the mountain
Above the deep river-canyon. There was a little cataract crossed the path, flinging itself
Over tree roots and rocks, shaking the jeweled fern-fronds, bright bubbling water
Pure from the mountain, but a bad smell came up. Wondering at it I clambered down the
steep stream
Some forty feet, and found in the midst of bush-oak and laurel,
Hung like a bird's nest on the precipice brink a small hidden clearing,
Grass and a shallow pool. But all about there were bones lying in the grass, clean bones
and stinking bones,
Antlers and bones: I understood that the place was a refuge for wounded deer; there are
so many
Hurt ones escape the hunters and limp away to lie hidden; here they have water for the
awful thirst
And peace to die in; dense green laurel and grim cliff
Make sanctuary, and a sweet wind blows upward from the deep gorge. – I wish my bones
were with theirs.
But that's a foolish thing to confess, and a little cowardly. We know that life
Is on the whole quite equally good and bad, mostly gray neutral, and can be endured
To the dim end, no matter what magic of grass, water and precipice, and pain of wounds,
Makes death look dear. We have been given life and have used it – not a great gift
perhaps – but in honesty
Should use it all. Mine's empty since my love died – Empty? The flame-haired grandchild
with great blue eyes
That look like hers? – What can I do for the child? I gaze at her and wonder what sort of
man
In the fall of the world . . . I am growing old, that is the trouble. My children and little

grandchildren
Will find their way, and why should I wait ten years yet, having lived sixty-seven, ten
years more or less,
Before I crawl out on a ledge of rock and die snapping, like a wolf
Who has lost his mate? – I am bound by my own thirty-year-old decision: who drinks the
wine
Should take the dregs; even in the bitter lees and sediment
New discovery may lie. The deer in that beautiful place lay down their bones: I must
wear mine.

“WHEN LIFE DOESN’T FEEL LIKE A GIFT”

Introduction

Today’s sermon subject is one I have been asked to speak on ... a delicate subject: “Is suicide a legitimate life-choice?” And: “Should we judge badly of persons who take their own lives?”

I don’t know if there’s a particularly good time to address these questions, and one might wonder whether this Thanksgiving weekend is an appropriate time, beginning, as it does, the whole festival season.

But, of course, this is also the time of darkest depression, deepest despair, and greatest loneliness for those parts of ourselves that feel shut out from the celebration of life, light, and love that is called for in this season.

I’ve never before addressed suicide as the main subject of a sermon, nor have I made a scholarly study of the subject, but professionally as a minister I have encountered suicide on a number of occasions, and also prior to that as a student working as a psychiatric aide in a psychiatric hospital; and, of course, personally and privately as a member of the human species I have dealt with the question of today’s sermon subject – a question, it appears, only our species asks, namely, “Is life worth the living?”

In reflecting on this subject, though I don’t know I have any special wisdom to share, I do find I have a number of thoughts, opinions, and recommendations on the subject – more than I can fit into one sermon – so let me begin with an approach to suicide that has been helpful to me, this from Jungian analyst, author, and friend, Robert A. Johnson.

Suicide and levels in life

When persons come into Robert Johnson’s consulting room declaring that they wish to kill themselves, his typical approach is to say, “All right, that’s an appropriate diagnosis of your situation; but now let’s see if we can accomplish the task without harming your body.”

In other words, when one is in despair or depression to the point of wanting to end it all, a sacrifice of some kind is called for – but not necessarily the sacrifice of the body, as one might think.

Rather, the sacrifice, the death, the suicide, can be a different level – not the physical level, but the psychological or spiritual level. It's the sacrifice of a given attitude, posture, or orientation to life; the sacrifice of a given self-image, of what you think you need, or deserve, or can't live without.

Such a sacrifice will be very difficult. It may, indeed, feel like you are killing your very self because you have identified yourself with a given attitude, image, person, object, or way of life.

But “What is needed,” says Johnson, “is not for the ego to give up, but for it to give up its pretensions.”

And “...it is precisely at this point of breakdown that a breakthrough is possible.”

(Robert Johnson and Jerry Ruhl, Contentment, p. 54)

Indeed, sometimes when persons in despair and depression attempt to commit suicide but are unsuccessful, the attempt itself will act like a kind of “shock therapy” so that the old attitude dies, the ego bubble bursts, and the persons are awakened to a new view of life.

The Earl of Gloucester

William Shakespeare, psychological master that he was, depicts such a scene in King Lear in which the Earl of Gloucester, a high figure in Lear's court, has his eyes brutally plucked out because of his loyalty to his king. And now in pain and anguish, and completely deflated from his previous high position in the court, Gloucester seeks to end his life by throwing himself over the cliffs of Dover.

But his son, Edgar – whose identity at this point in the drama is not known to Gloucester – plays a little trick on him. Instead of assisting his father to the edge of the cliff as requested, Edgar takes him to a little rise in a field, a cow pasture, but describes the scene for his father as though they were standing on the edge of the cliffs of Dover with ships far below and fishermen tiny as mice.

“Give me your hand,” says Edgar, “you are now within a foot/Of the extreme verge.”

Gloucester, then, throws himself forward, believing he is leaping to his death, but he lands instead with a thud at the bottom of the little hill in the cow pasture. The shock of surviving the fall cures him and he is awakened and transformed to a new way of taking his life. (See Contentment, pp. 48ff)

A conversation

I assumed that such would also be the case with a young, strongly-built, handsome farmer I met when I worked as a psychiatric aide some 35 years ago. This was a man who had taken a heavy overdose of drugs to end his life, but in a completely accidental and unforeseen way had been discovered and revived.

And now he was nearly fully physically recovered and completely sane and rational. In one of several conversations with him – I remember we were sitting at a table looking out on the fenced-in hospital grounds – I asked him if he was now glad that he had been found and revived, assuming he would say “yes,” assuming he would be happy he had come through with a new lease on life.

His answer took me back – it was a definitive and chilling “no.” “No, he was not glad to be alive; he was sorry to have been found; and he was sorry to have been revived. His wife had left him, meaning was gone, his continued existence was a living hell.”

I don't recall what become of this man – whether he found a way to end his life, or whether later he discovered a new meaning to life, or whether he lived a diminished life of quiet despair – but I do recall others in the years I worked at that hospital who wanted only to die, who were desperate to die, who longed for death as most others long for life. And I remember a couple of these persons who, despite all hospital and staff precautions, succeeded in taking their lives in horrific ways.

Different kinds of suicide

Over the years, I have learned that there are many different kinds of suicide.

I remember early on in my ministry, after officiating at my first memorial service of a person who had taken his life, thinking, “Now I know how, as a minister, to deal with death by suicide.”

How wrong I learned that thought was ... for in the years that followed I have officiated at services of persons who have taken their lives in many different ways and for many different reasons. Suicide is not a singular subject.

I find, as I have reviewed in my mind and in my pastoral records, that I have been acquainted with suicide related to:

- mental illness;
- loss of physical abilities;
- loss of relationship;
- or inability to find and form relationship;
- suicide related to financial disaster;
- or getting caught in a situation and not knowing how to escape;
- suicide related to not seeing the point of life;
- or a world-weariness;

- suicide related to other family members who have previously taken their lives;
- suicide related to wanting to get back at others;
- suicide related to a desire to show others the pain and anguish one is in;
- suicide related to being too sensitive to the pain and horror of the world to be able to go on;
- suicide related to wanting to unburden one's self, to start over, to be cleansed, to fly free, to return to the root, the source;
- suicide of those who have weighed the matter for years before finally deciding to go ahead;
- and others in which it seemed almost spur-of-the-moment and casual;
- or accidental – only meant to come close to the edge, not go over;
- violent suicides;
- quiet suicides;
- and, of course, many suicides under the conditions of terminal illness, which I would not really consider suicide,* but rather the hastening of death, the purpose being not to end life but to speed the dying process and lessen its pain.

Is suicide a legitimate life-choice?

But now to the questions: “Is suicide a legitimate life-choice?” And: “Should we judge badly of persons who take their own lives?”

Many years ago, I came across some words of Albert Schweitzer that still, for the most part, express for me my approach to this subject. In article titled, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” published in 1936, Schweitzer wrote:

...when it begins to think, the will-to-live realizes that it is free. It is free to leave life. It is free to choose whether or not to live. This fact is of particular significance for us in this modern age, when there are abundant possibilities for abandoning life, painlessly and without agony.

Moreover, we are all closer to the possibility of this choice than we may guess of one another. The question which haunts men and women today is whether life is worth living. Perhaps each of us has had the experience of talking with a friend one day, finding that person bright, happy, apparently in the full joy of life; and then the next day we find that he has taken his own life!

Stoicism has brought us to this point, by driving out the fear of death; for, by inference it suggests that we are free to choose whether to live or not. But if we entertain such a possibility, we do so by ignoring the melody of the will-to-live, which compels us to face the mystery, the value, the high trust committed to us in life. We may not understand it, but we begin to appreciate its great value. Therefore, when we find those who relinquish life, while we may not condemn them, we do pity them for having ceased to be in possession of themselves. Ultimately, the issue is not whether we do or do not fear death. The real issue is that of reverence for life.

(Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," pp. 228-229, in Christendom, Winter, 1936)

No judgment

This statement of Schweitzer, as I say, pretty well summarizes my approach to the question of suicide. First, no condemnation – absolutely no condemnation or judgment of the one who has taken his or her life. And more than that: a sympathetic understanding ... because human life with its burden of self-consciousness is terribly difficult.

Perhaps there have been times when your own life hung in the balance and you weren't certain whether or not you were ready to go on.

Or times when you were tired of the struggle, tired unto death, and only wanted a final rest.

Or times when you wanted others to understand the depth of your own struggle, pain, or sorrow.

Or times when you wanted to clear away the past, to be cleansed, and to merge with the essential elements of nature.

And a second reason not to judge or condemn is that, though a few persons take their lives abruptly and decisively, multitudes of us take our lives slowly and indecisively ... a slow, suicidal way of living characterized by life-denying acts of many kinds.

And a third reason not to judge is simply that we don't know what a life is like from the inside. Listen to this poem by Mary Oliver titled, "Beaver Moon – The Suicide Of A Friend":

When somewhere life
breaks like a pane of glass,
and from every direction casual
voices are bringing you the news,
you say: I should have known.
You say: I should have been aware.
That last Friday he looked
so ill, like an old mountain-climber
lost on the white trails, listening
to the ice breaking upward, under
his worn-out shoes. You say:
I heard rumors of trouble, but after all
we all have that. You say:
what could I have done? And you go
with the rest, to bury him.
That night, you turn in your bed
to watch the moon rise, and once more
see what a small coin it is

against the darkness, and how everything else
is a mystery, and you know
nothing at all except
the moonlight is beautiful –
white rivers running together
along the bare boughs of the trees –
and somewhere, for someone, life
is becoming moment by moment
unbearable.

(Mary Oliver, “Beaver Moon – The Suicide Of A Friend”)

We simply don't know what goes on in the interior places of another human heart and mind. And we don't know what interior resources are available to others.

This past Thanksgiving Day, in the evening, I brought up the subject of this morning's sermon with my family. My brother-in-law made a comment I thought was on target. He said:

Some people have the life-instinct to take the next step wherever the circumstance;
for others that instinct simply isn't there to the same degree.

Thus, I believe we have no right to judge or condemn others in regard to suicide.

Other considerations

At the same time, however, there is a second part to Schweitzer's statement that relates to a sadness or sorrow that the value of life has not been discovered – or has been lost – and in particular the loss of connection with larger life.

Is suicide a legitimate life-choice? Though I would make no judgment of an individual, I would make the point that our decisions, particularly regarding life itself, are not only individual decisions.

We humans do not belong to ourselves alone. We belong to other human life and are deeply dependent upon others and connected to them. We support each other and hold each other up, both physically and spiritually. We make meaning together and we travel into the future together. And when one of us, in effect, says, “I can't go on, or I won't go on,” this affects us all. Says Robert Francis:

If we had known all that we know
We never would have let him go.

We had the stronger argument
Had we but dreamed his dark intent.

Or if our words failed to dissuade him
Unarguing love might still have stayed him.

But what we know, we did not know.
We said good-bye and saw him go.

(Robert Francis, "If We Had Known")

I learned a couple of days ago, again on Thanksgiving Day, how deeply affected my two children were by the suicidal death of one of their high school teachers some ten years ago – a man young in years and vitality and apparently in good health.

My oldest daughter, a writer, has been trying to compose a poem about this event since that time, but has not been able to do so – in part because of one detail related to this death.

Clearly, the death had been planned, with many end-of-life details attended to ... so that, for example, the student files of this teacher were all neatly laid out in order in his home.

There was, however, one unfinished piece of business: some of his clothes were left in the dryer ... almost, as if to say, I don't really believe this myself; perhaps this is not final.

But for the whole of the student body and the staff, it was both very final and very troubling.

A recommendation

If I know a person is intent on taking his or her life – and, typically, only persons who are terminally ill will reveal this – I strongly recommend that the individual gather his or her loved ones and talk to them of the decision and the reasons for it. Even if their loved ones disagree with the decision, as they often will, it is better that they understand clearly that this is this person's decision and so not be tempted to take responsibility for it themselves.

I remember one circumstance of a woman, age 50, still relatively young and attractive, but she had lived with cancer for over 15 years and had been through treatments several times. And now she was again facing more chemo treatments.

But, no, she wasn't going to go through this again, not with any real chance of regaining her health. She decided that she had lived her life, and so spoke about this with her husband and children. They could not agree; they could not let her go. But in her mind, she had to go; she could not stay.

And so she went, but with such loving preparation as you can possibly imagine: Seeing to it that her eldest daughter was married with a beautiful wedding dress of her own making;

and arranging her death in such a way that none of them would be involved or find her; and writing goodbye notes to each of her family members, including one of the most tender love-notes to a husband I have ever seen, and including with it her wedding rings.

And so though the family could not let her go or assist her, they understood, and could do nothing but praise her in her death.

A psychological barrier

But I have learned that to take one's life, even in situations of terminal illness, is something to be undertaken with great care. I'm in support of the proposed Death with Dignity Initiative now just beginning to be promoted in our state. But I also believe that one should not cross this threshold lightly or casually – and, of course, most don't, as they have found in Oregon. But I have experienced that there is a great difference between hastening one's end and letting nature take its course.

One might wonder why there should be this great psychological barrier, since we do not hesitate to release our companion animals from this life when they are near death and in pain – it's considered the most loving thing one can do. So why do we hesitate so with humans in this regard?

I imagine there may be a number of reasons, but one of them surely is that we humans have *self*-awareness, the lamp of consciousness. And so long as that lamp gives light, we want to see what there is to see and feel what there is to feel. As the poet Robinson Jeffers said in my earlier reading, "...even in the bitter lees and sediment/New discovery may lie."

Our connections with others

But my larger point here is that we humans belong to other humans, and our individual decisions, particularly with regard to life and death matters, affect far more than just ourselves.

Poet Marvin Bell, who lives here in Port Townsend half the year and who spoke so wonderfully to us this past September, wrote the following poem related to suicide – and related to human relationship. The poem is set here in Port Townsend and titled, "Slice of Life." The one in the poem looking through the blinds of the window must be his wife, Dorothy, who was also here at the service at which he spoke:

You take a window, a seat at the window,
and you look through the slats
of the half-open blinds because it's a slice of life
to be sitting without waiting. I'll be walking
on the shore when the tide claps a little,
breaking a wave into sea-shot that swarms over
the driftwood, and I'll turn my head to catch some of it,

and press the sand as I walk, looking for
the washed-up pieces of sea life and boat life,
and it will be a kind of end-of-days experience,
what with the source of life rolling in and out,
while you at your window watch for my return.

I could be walking along the shoreline,
edging downhill, my shoes covered now and my ankles
wrapped in heavy socks, and still
I veer farther out, knowing I cannot float or swim
but am old, terribly aware that I am now old,
and wishing to make an easy ending for you
but not knowing how. So I think what's possible,
the water at hand, the bridge above, the Sound ferry
that sometimes docks a passenger short.
Someone might have been at the rail, no one is sure.
And you sitting home by a window
will be expecting me, a fault in my façade, my plan.

I have outlived my insurance, but not my future.

(Marvin Bell, "Slice of Life," from Mars Is Red, p. 33)

In other words, the poet's future remains here with his wife.

A final consideration

And one final consideration of which Albert Schweitzer speaks – this related not just to our connection to human life, but our connection with life itself, the miracle of life, and our connection to the creative power of being which produces life. We may not understand life or its creative power, but, as Schweitzer says, we come to revere it.

And in regard to the larger life of which we are a part, we may also consider this: that our burdens and problems are not only of our own making. We are part of this creative power of being that is, we might say, experimenting with itself.

Sometimes these experiments seem more than we can bear – that we are being asked to do too much. But consider that the power of being struggles to come to awareness and self-consciousness *in and through us*. This consideration might give us a little different perspective on our problems and a way to release our ego-grip on things when we are troubled.

Thus, when you feel that life is too much, make an attempt to stand back from yourself. Go out under the night sky and catch a glimpse of the larger reality of which you are a part. Realize that your problems are not all of your own making; they have a bit of

history behind them. And seen, then, in a more cosmic perspective, perhaps you will see that your problems are not as large as you may now believe.

I conclude with a poem by Nancy Henry and with how she dealt with life when it became too much for her. It is titled “Keys” – keys to a car, keys to meaning:

When things got hard
I used to drive and keep on driving—
once to North Carolina
once to Arizona—
I'm through with all that now, I hope.
The last time was years ago.

But oh, how I would drive
and keep on driving!
The universe around me
all well in my control;
anything I wanted on the radio,
the air blasting hot or cold;
sobbing as loudly as I cared to sob,
screaming as loudly as I needed to scream.
I would live on apples and black coffee,
shower at truck stops,
sleep curled up
in the cozy back seat I loved.

The last time, I left at 3 a.m.
By New York state,
I stopped screaming;
by Tulsa
I stopped sobbing;
by the time I pulled into Flagstaff
I was thinking
about the Canyon,
I was so empty.
Thinking about the canyon
I was.

I sat on the rim at dawn,
let all the colors fill me.
It was cold. I saw my breath
like steam from a soup pot.
I saw small fossils in the gravel.
I saw how much world there was

how much darkness
could be swept out
by the sun.

(Nancy Henry, "Keys," from Our Lady of Let's All Sing, Sheltering Pines Press, 2007).

Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
and the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms,
and the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance,
and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life,
who move also in a dance,
to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing the 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.

* In the literature related to the Death with Dignity Initiative a distinction is drawn between hastening death and committing suicide. The literature states:

Hastening death by using the provisions of the proposed law is not suicide according to the American Public Health Association, American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, American College of Legal Medicine, and the Washington State Psychological Association. The term "suicide" applies to people who end their own life without facing a terminal illness. The terminally ill people who will be allowed to use this proposed law are facing an imminent, inevitable death. They find themselves at the end of all curative therapies and they want the power to avoid prolonged, unnecessary suffering.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on November 25, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)