Call to Worship

“Wild Geese”

Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Reading: “Consumer Society”

Peter Block & John McKnight

The essential promise of a consumer society is that satisfaction can be purchased. This promise runs so deep in us that we have come to take our identity from our capacity to purchase. To borrow from Descartes, “I shop, therefore I am.” This dependency on shopping is not just about things; it includes the belief that most of what is fulfilling or needed in life can be bought—from happiness to healing, from love to laughter, from rearing a child to caring for someone at the end of life.

In our effort to find satisfaction through consumption, we are converted from citizen to consumer, and the implications of this are more profound than we realize. This is clearest when we explore two particular consequences of a consumer society: its effect on the function of the family and its impact on the competence of the community.
The greatest tragedy of the consumer life is that its practitioners do not see that the local community is abundant with the relationships that are the principal resource for rescuing themselves and their families from the failure, dependency, and isolation that are the results of a life as a consumer and client. ...

The way to the good life is not through consumption. It is, instead, a path that we make by walking it with those who surround us. It is the way of a competent community recognizing its abundance. We, together, become the producers of a satisfying future.

We see that if we are to be citizens, together we must be the creators and producers of our future. And if we want to be the creators and producers of our future, we must become citizens, not consumers.”

**Blessing: “For a New Beginning”**

John O'Donohue

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.
“The future is no more uncertain than the present.“ Walt Whitman, Poet

Some people despair about the darkening direction of the world today.

Others are excited by the possibilities for creativity and new ways of living they see emerging out of the darkness.

Rather than thinking one perspective is preferable to the other, let’s notice that both are somewhat dangerous. Either position, optimism or pessimism, keeps us from fully engaging with the complexity of this time.

If we see only troubles, or only opportunities, in both cases we are blinded by our need for certainty, our need to know what’s going on, to figure things out so we can be useful.

Certainty is a very effective way of defending ourselves from the irresolvable nature of life. If we’re certain, we don’t have to immerse ourselves in the strange puzzling paradoxes that always characterize a time of upheaval: —the potential for new beginnings born from the loss of treasured pasts, —the grief of dreams dying with the exhilaration of what now might be, —the impotence and rage of failed ideals and the power of new aspirations,—the horrors inflicted on so many innocents that call us to greater compassion.

The challenge is to refuse to categorize ourselves.

We don’t have to take sides or define ourselves as either optimists or pessimists.

Much better to dwell in uncertainty, hold the paradoxes, live in the complexities and contradictions without needing them to resolve.

This is what uncertainty feels like and it’s a very healthy place to dwell.
Sermon: ”The Dialogue of Human Evolution: Knowing Together in Community”

“We would be one in living for each other, to show to all a new community. …We would be one in building for tomorrow, in searching for that meaning that binds our hearts, points us on our way. … We pledge ourselves to greater service, with love and justice, strive to make us free.”

These were the words our Unitarian and Universalist youth sang to the tune of Finlandia when they joined together into one liberal religious youth movement decades before the adult Unitarians and Universalists consolidated into one association of congregations.

Our youth began the conversations that united us in the 1890’s. It took 70 years of conversation for the formal consolidation of our diversities of class and culture into one Unitarian Universalist Association.

Until very recently, the idealism of those youth of the first part of the last century seemed quaint to me. I’ve officiated at the funerals of those members of those early youth groups who were members of the “Greatest Generation.” I know that that they were dedicated to creating communities of service, that lived for one another, striving with love for justice and freedom.

Baby Boomers, on the other hand, were raised in the age of Madison Avenue. Our mindsets was transformed by promises of more immediate fulfillment in the marketplace. Phrases such as —“Satisfaction guaranteed!” “Money back if you are not satisfied!” replaced the languages of community with the language of consumers.

The limits of the earth’s resources calls us into a new conversation that requires that we unlearn the implicit language of the marketplace that shapes our thinking. The marketplace, according to linguist George Lakoff, thrives on “individuals who pursue their self interest with little or no commitment to the interest of others.” “I shop therefore I am” might be the motto of the consumer mindset that requires us dwell in the “private sector.”

The mindset of the citizen, on the other hand, is grounded in the notion of the “public” with a moral mission beyond satisfaction of individual selves. True democracy is grounded in knowing the moral mission of a people. True democracy is not simply a popularity poll of preferences.

Our national conversation about health care is a good example of the shared language of the marketplace implicit in our culture. Health care is a product—like a TV. If you have

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1 Singing the Living Tradition, Hymn # 318, Samuel Anthony Wright and Jean Sibelius.


the money to buy one, you buy, if not, too bad. No one can force you to buy a TV if you
don't want one. The affordable health care act, Obamacare, is made possible by the right
of Congress to regulate commerce across state lines. In the mindset of the marketplace
health care is a commodity, a product that we can make “affordable.”

There is no place in marketplace metaphor to include healthcare as a moral ideal that
preserves community by preserving life. The mindset that “illness takes away liberty” is a
mindset of a citizen.

“Consumers preserve their personal right not to be forced pay for the goods of others.
Citizens preserve the public’s right to the liberty that health preserves.”

But I am not here to argue health care policy. I offer it as an example of the danger of us
all speaking the language of the marketplace and not knowing that we are speaking the
language of the marketplace.

We need to learn new languages to confuse our debates about the future. Confusion will
help us have a new conversation about both the limits and the possibilities for human life
on this planet.

We need to learn to live together speaking a variety of languages, alert to the truths in
each.

I believe that human dialogue across differences will serve the necessary evolution
required for human survival on a fragile planet.

Can our families, neighbors, and communities gather in circles to ask generative
questions that are bigger than the consumer mindset that asks, “What do you want?”
“How have you been satisfied?” “What don’t you like?”

Some of you might know that I consult to congregations in conflict. In my first training
for conflict management in congregations, I was taught a model of reducing the heat of
the conflict by coming to a conclusion about the source of the conflict and giving the
congregation a prescription for cooling off.

Later, I learned a different method of intervention that came from the communal mindset
of the Quakers. In this understanding, the heat of conflict is welcomed as the source of
transformation. My role has been to train lay leaders to convene listening and learning
circles of dialogue. A convener guides the group to create a safe container for a heated
conversation.

The container is made with the covenant to speak the truth in love and to listen deeply to
the truths of others.

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4 Ibid

walking_in_the_way.html
The container is sustained when the participants notice and then let go of the assumptions made in the heat of polarization.

The transformation comes when the “letting go” becomes the “letting come” of a new communal understanding of the current reality.

The congregation that received the first sort of intervention has remained fearful of conflict, and boring in its rigid stability.

The congregations that learned how to create listening and learning circles of dialogue have discovered missions larger than producing satisfied customers. They have challenged themselves to become competent as communities of truth.

Satisfaction is not guaranteed, nor is it a sign of health.

Certainty is not guaranteed, nor is it a sign of truth.

Stability is not guaranteed, nor is it a sign of maturity.

There is a group of thinkers who are gathering around the fire of a theory about human adaptation and evolution. The theory, sometimes called Theory U, begins with the notion that humans are designed to learn and adapt in community.6

Human meaning-making for change is a collective practice.

Theory U suggests that when human beings with diverse histories and experience gather with a mindset of “community,” there is access to an “underlying field of potential from which new possibilities emerge.” Together we can learn from and act for the future as it emerges.

The practices required are:

The Open Mind: Learning to see freshly, transforming our perception of present reality and our part in creating it.

The Open Heart: Becoming a presence that is open to experiencing the source of commitment to the future.

The Open Will: Transforming our actions in order to act in service of what is seeking to emerge.

That culture of opening to the future with compassion and commitment is “a community of truth,” in the words of the educator Parker Palmer.

Let me share the Parker Palmer7 reading I use at the start of my training of dialogue circle conveners:

“The image of a community of truth embraces an essential fact: the reality we belong to, the reality we long to know, extends far beyond human beings

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interacting with one another. This is a community held together not only by our personal powers of thought and feeling, but also by the power of the grace of great things.

By great things, I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered: the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of literature, I mean the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems in management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice. ... 

Great things such as these are the vital nexus of community. ... It is in the act of gathering around them and trying to understand them—as the first humans must have gathered around fire—that we become who we are as knowers (of truth). When we are at our best, it is because the grace of great things has evoked from us the virtues that give a community of truth its finest form.”

A community of truth assumes diversity of opinion is abundance.

Diversity in a community of truth is not simply agreeing to disagree, but rather an opportunity to be curious about the sources of our difference. We begin by knowing each other’s stories. “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.”

In a community of truth we are all experts of our own experience, and, more important, we are not present with the intention to sell anything, to influence anyone, to compete for the power of our particular view.

In a community of truth, the people rest assured in the knowing that, here and now, “this beginning has been quietly forming, waiting until (It was) ready to emerge ... with eyes young again with energy and dream, a path ... opening.”

“Though our destination as human community is not yet clear, we can trust the promise of this moment opening before us.

Let our souls sense the world that awaits our full presence.

May the best of who we are becoming go on in endless song.
Benediction: “The Grace of Great Things”  

We invite diversity into our community not because it is politically correct but because: Diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.

We embrace ambiguity not because we are confused or indecisive but because: We understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.

We welcome creative conflict not because we are angry or hostile but because: Conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.

We practice honesty not only because we owe it to one another but because: To lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.

We experience humility not because we have fought and lost but because: Humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.

Go in peace, with love. Blessed be and Amen.