

“Awake to Now”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading

Selection from “Three Days to See” by Helen Keller¹

Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. "Nothing in particular," she replied. I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little...If I were the president of a university I should establish a compulsory course in "How to Use Your Eyes." The professor would try to show his pupils how they could add joy to their lives by really seeing what passes unnoticed before them. He would try to awake their dormant and sluggish faculties.

Sermon

Over the past few weeks, you may have noticed the first signs of awakening Nature after her winter's sleep. For my part, I have been watchful for the first signs of the crocuses that we planted in the fall along the road. Little by little, I have seen their shoots emerging, pushing up out of the soil and along with them the first signs of daffodils and the buds on lilac bushes.

Being awake right now to the change of seasons means having a front seat to the fickleness of Mother Nature as she turns towards then away from the bright sun and warm days. Anyone who has lived in Vermont or in a northern climate for a while is all too familiar with this ritual of early spring. Mother Nature, at times, seems slow to awaken from her winter's sleep.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1933/01/three-days-to-see/371679/>

I don't think Mother Nature is the only one who is difficult to awaken. Our senses may also be dormant and sluggish. Still reviving from the winter months when there is less variety in the landscape to catch our attention.

And, it is not just a season of winter that may lead to a slumbering of the senses and our spirits. There are also seasons in our lives when we become less awake, less attuned to what is right before us. In these seasons, we may be less aware of the here and now, the present moment and all it has to offer.

In the reading I shared, Helen Keller, who became blind and deaf as a very young child, is incredulous when a friend returns from a long walk and reports that she had not observed much. She reminds us that our senses, and for her, sight in particular, is not just a convenience but adds fullness and joy to life. Sometimes, though, we need assistance in awakening our dormant and sluggish faculties.

To be awake to now is to recognize what we might have easily missed or taken for granted. It is to come into full presence of here and now and to appreciate exactly what is right before us. Keller describes this so beautifully - the delicate symmetry of a leaf, the smooth skin of a silver birch, the velvety texture of a flower.

In preparation for this service, the worship team shared the invitation to submit a photo or video of what reminds you of the abundance of here and now. You shared: toes in the sunshine, a comfortable reading chair and shelves full of books, a simple, satisfying meal, an open tulip, playful pups, a bird at the feeder, baby's first roll.

All of these are things that, on any given day, might pass us by unnoticed. Awakening means paying attention to what is right in front of us and all around us. It means rooting ourselves in both what is here physically and what is happening now, in this moment.

When we awaken and attune ourselves to right now, we can open to a sense of abundance.

The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield writes: "The state of abundance is connected with a deep sense of gratitude. When we open to abundance, we can enjoy the fog lifting from the morning's melting snow, and the steam rising from the hot bowl of tomato soup on our lunch table. We can appreciate the half smile of the tired waitress, the silver crescent of the moon at

twilight, the unstoppable laughter of children in the schoolyard, and celebrate the fact that we are here, breathing and alive, on this marvelous earth.”²

We are here, breathing and alive, on this marvelous earth. That is a miracle and a blessing. One that we know is also fleeting. Some of you know all too well that our days on this earth are numbered. In the face of this limitation of time, we can begin to feel profoundly aware of how abundant each segment of time really is, how full of life and living each week, each day, each second is in the face of the alternative.

Each simple and ordinary moment is to be treasured as the gift that it is. And yet, it is far too easy to be pulled away from the abundance of here and now.

Our anxieties can pull us into worry, planning for worst-case scenarios. After two years of pandemic living, anxiety might be routine, a habit even as you’ve grown accustomed to preparing for the next shoe to drop.

Our attention can feel divided between what is right before us and what is happening many hundreds of miles away, and what we are paying attention to may have us feeling conflicted.

While spring awakens here, and we delight in the early buds on the trees and the morning chorus of bird song and lengthening days, there is war raging and ice caps melting and people we love who we are losing and the daily struggle to stay afloat with food on the table and a roof over our heads.

We live with the perplexing paradox of being attuned to the here and now while also being able to witness from afar atrocities that break our hearts. We live with the paradox of the presence of such joy and beauty in the here and now alongside such pain and suffering.

This is why I believe that awakening to the abundance in the ordinary is an act of resistance. It is to say, though there is pain and though there is much that points to the contrary, yes, there is beauty. There is good. Yes, my heart can sing with the utter joy of my good fortune to be alive and to witness this small act of kindness, or this beautiful piece of creation, or this healing piece of music.

² <https://gratefulness.org/resource/abundance-and-gratitude/>

Awakening to the abundance of now doesn't mean denying that there is suffering in our own lives and in the world. It doesn't mean ignoring the pain of others. It doesn't mean that needs for basic, human survival should go unmet.

With an awakened heart, we are open to the deep connection we have to others and the world around us, and that connection is the source of abundance, the source of gratitude that can soothe our souls and motivate our service and action.

I will admit that it is far easier to awaken when the sun is shining, when other worries don't preoccupy our minds. But, even in the those moments when our senses are sluggish or our minds are pulled elsewhere, we can open our hearts with attention to the world and see, hear, touch and smell the abundance of now.

The writer Anne Lamott recently shared her reflections on turning 68. As with much of her writing, she reflected humorously and poignantly on the quandaries of human life, and to the question of how to live in the face of the paradox of this particular moment, she writes:

“Well, how does us appreciating spring help the people of Ukraine? If we believe in chaos theory, and the butterfly effect, that the flapping of a Monarch's wings near my home can lead to a weather change in Tokyo, then maybe noticing beauty—flapping our wings with amazement—changes things in ways we cannot begin to imagine. It means goodness is quantum. Even to help the small world helps. Even prayer, which seems to do nothing. Everything is connected.

But quantum is perhaps a little esoteric in our current condition. (Well, mine: I'm sure you're just fine.) I think infinitely less esoteric stuff at 68. Probably best to have both feet on the ground, ogle the daffodils, take a sack of canned good over to the food pantry, and pick up trash. This helps our insides enormously.

So Sunday I will celebrate the absolutely astonishing miracle that I, specifically, was even born... I will celebrate that I have shelter and friends and warm socks and feet to put in them, and that God or Gus found a way to turn the madness and shame of my addiction into grace, I'll shake my head with wonder, which I do more and more as I age, at all the beauty that is left and all that still works after so much has been taken away. So celebrate with me. Step

outside and let your mouth drop open. Feed the poor with me, locally or, if you want to buy me something, make a donation to UNICEF. My party will not be the same without you.”³

Let us shake our heads with wonder, step outside, and let our mouths drop open, in awe of it all.

Let us nudge our senses awake to this day and all it has to offer.

Let us offer the day our presence, our attention, our reverence.

Let us live into the fullness of this day awake and open to the abundance that awaits us.

So may it be.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/524381439050367>