

“Feast on Your Life”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading “Love after Love” by Derek Walcott

Sermon

In early June, I joined a small crowd in a park on Main Street in Waterbury. Lively music was playing from a set of speakers and a singer was about to take the microphone. She began to sing in words I hear only occasionally these days. She was singing a love song in Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines. At the edges of the park, there were booths selling foods I typically find on my grandmother’s table: pancit noodles, chicken adobo, and pork inihaw. I filled a small tray with a variety of dishes and settled down on a spot on the grass.

Filipinos from around the state had gathered to celebrate the national Filipino Independence Day which commemorates the day in 1898 when the Philippines declared its independence from Spanish colonial rule.

More than anything, this was a cultural celebration giving people of Filipino descent an opportunity to be with one another, to share food and song and dance, to feel connected to a people, a culture, and a place that, for many, can often feel distant.

Filipinos are known for their diasporic migration and are spread all across the globe. There are Filipinos living and working on almost every continent. My own family’s diaspora includes relatives who have lived in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Qatar, Australia, China, Malaysia, and those who have remained in the Philippines.

As part of the diaspora, Filipinos often seek one another out in order to feel a sense of home and rootedness wherever they are.

The French philosopher Simone Weil has said: “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

A sense of rootedness comes from connection - to self, to community, to place. These connections build the spiritual self and nurture our souls.

For me, sitting in that park for a couple of hours on a summer afternoon re-connected me to an important part of my soul.

Soul can be a difficult word to define. For me, the word suggests that inner aspect of the self that is sacred and core to who we are. Buddhists call it original nature. Quakers call it the inner light. Humanists call it identity and integrity.

What we call it doesn't matter so much as the soul's functions - how it works within us to support our sense of self and wholeness.

The Quaker teacher and writer Parker Palmer describes some of the soul's functions this way. He says: The soul wants to keep us rooted in the ground of our own being. The soul wants to keep us connected to the community in which we find life. The soul wants to tell us the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two. And, the soul wants to give us life and wants us to pass that gift along, to become life-givers in a world that deals too much death.¹

Recognizing the needs of the soul is essential to our well-being. We are happier and more capable of generosity when we are in touch with that part of ourselves that sees clearly our truest self and connects with the whole of life.

When we are not rooted in the ground of our being, our souls go awry. We become strangers to ourselves, as Derek Walcott writes. Taken to its extremes, this disconnection can lead to self-destructive behavior and violence toward others.

We can feel uprooted for a variety of reasons.

In times of transition, moving from one place to another, facing new health challenges, losing a loved one.

¹ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, pp. 33-34

And certainly times of crisis can be quite uprooting - throwing us off our center. We can become lost and unmoored whether the crisis is a pandemic, a natural disaster, or war.

Indeed, the crises of the past few years have been taxing on my inner resources and made me feel less grounded, and I know I am not alone.

This crisis-filled and fast-paced time we live in can lead to a sense of uprootedness. Information is coming to us from all directions, and there are so many demands on our attention.

The theologian Thomas Merton writes about the spiritual danger of this frenetic pace in a way that I think has resonance for all of us. He writes, “The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work... It destroys the fruitfulness of [their]...work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”²

It kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

This is strong language to be sure, but also truth being spoken.

I don't think you have to consider yourself an activist for these words to resonate with you.

Many of us are caught in the frenzy of life.

Demands are placed on our time, some of which are fulfilling and some of which just drain us away.

Demands are placed on our attention that can overload our emotional capacities to be present or compassionate.

The danger of this is emotional depletion, burn out, and the destruction of the root of inner wisdom.

Anyone who has felt this depletion knows how empty and isolating it can feel.

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 81.

And, yet that root of inner wisdom is within us.

It is that place of knowing, the place where our deepest truth resides. One could call it soul.

The good news is that root within us is never that far away. The soul is always there close at hand. Sometimes, we just need a little help to be able to find our way back.

Reconnecting to self and tending to our souls becomes even more important in times like this.

I am grateful to be able to take some intentional soul-tending time in the weeks ahead.

During my upcoming sabbatical, I am hoping to nurture that root of inner wisdom. To step away for a short time from the busyness of ministry and my day-to-day life to reconnect with my self, community, and place. To rest and root in the inner home of my soul.

My ancestral roots as I have mentioned can be traced to a land on the other side of the planet in the archipelago now called the Philippines. Both my parents were born and raised there on the island of Luzon in the same province of Batangas. They immigrated to the United States in 1975 and 1980.

I have previously traveled to the Philippines on four occasions, twice when I was a child and twice in my young adulthood. It has been over sixteen years since I was last there. Filipino often take trips back to reconnect with loved ones and with the land and waters of home.

My time away will include a five-week pilgrimage of sorts to the Philippines. Three of these weeks will be spent with family, including about a dozen members of my family who now live in the United States and are also traveling to back home. We will visit relatives, places of ancestral significance, and also take in the natural beauty and cultural offerings of the Calabarzon region of the country.

The last two weeks of my pilgrimage will include learning more about Unitarian Universalist connections to the country. I will visit with ministers and leaders of the UU Church of the Philippines in Dumaguete City, where the national office is located, and travel to some of the rural church fellowships in the area.

On this journey, I hope that I will strengthen my connection to the place and the people who have made me who I am in ways known and unknown, tangible and intangible. Along the way, I hope to give my soul generous space and time to become more grounded and rooted.

This sense of rootedness is something I hope for each of you.

When we are rooted within ourselves, we are able to be present to others. We are more able to feel a sense of wholeness. We are more receptive to joy. And, we are more able to fully engage in the work of bringing forth peace and justice in the world.

Rootedness leads us back to our souls.

It is not just individuals who have a soul. Communities and congregations also have a soul, a true and authentic self.

The consultant Susan Beaumont defines a congregation's soul in this way: "The soul is an agent of the divine spark in the institution. The soul is the authentic and truest self of the institution; the source of its divine calling, character, and destiny; the protector of institutional integrity."³

While I am away reconnecting with my own soul and nurturing my truest and most authentic self, I have a charge for all of you. Be soul detectives. Pay attention to the ways you witness the soul of this congregation emerging. What does it feel like? How would you describe it?

I shared this charge with a group of you last week during the Committee of Chairs meeting. About 18 people were present. I heard some poignant observations.

People shared about witnessing a young person in our congregation warmly greeting a stranger who arrived on Sunday and inviting them in to watch the service in the Fireplace Room. There was soul in that welcoming hospitality.

I heard about the soul of the congregation showing up at Monday Community Lunch now being prepared in the Christ Church parish hall where our volunteers greeted and served each person with acceptance, warmth, and a neighborly love.

³ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*.

The congregation's authentic self was felt by one person in a spiritual exploration class as a child and adult volunteer who hadn't previously known each other, became fast friends, and stretched their bodies into a downward-facing dog and breathed together.

The soul of this congregation wants to be recognized. And so does your own soul.

Be generous with yourself and with one another in the days ahead so that you might welcome yourself to sit and re-discover the root of your inner wisdom, to feast on your life and your soul come alive.

So may it be.