

Deeper than the Ordinary

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UU Society of Sacramento

SHARED OFFERING: for [Sacramento Mustard Seed School](#)

HYMNS: #399, Vine and Fig Tree; #201, Glory, Glory, Hallelujah; #298, Wake Now, My Senses.

INTRO NOTE:

The Hand of Fellowship (greeting one another) will be introduced by my inviting people to greet one another with a handshake or a bow, and the word *Namaste*.

SERMON

Nineteenth century American philosopher William James made the claim, “The deepest human life is everywhere.” The distinctions we make among people, the differences in ability or social class or culture, are merely surface differences. From the Divine perspective, James wrote, our differences vanish. “Here we [all] are,” he said, a “multitude of vessels of life, each [confined by] peculiar difficulties, with which we ... struggle by using whatever fortitude and goodness we can summon up.” (Samuelson, 194) James calls on us to summon up our “underground virtues” of courage, kindness, and patience, and to live these virtues.

James talked about the unity of human beings below the surface, just as the nature lovers among the American Transcendentalists celebrated the unity of all forms of nature, all kinds of life. They said there is more to us, more below the surface. There is more possibility in us than we often allow ourselves to see. The philosopher Bernard Meland said: “We live more deeply than we think.”

I hope they are correct. I want this to be true. I hope there is more to us, more to me, than the hurried and harried busyness that is so distracting, more than the grasping and craving of insecurity and greed. Our habits of emotional reactivity lead us to treat ourselves and others in ways we know are not kind or helpful. Surely there is a depth in us that grounds us beyond all this. I want to believe we live more deeply than we sometimes act.

Honoring this depth is the meaning of the greeting of *Namaste*. The root of the word in Sanskrit simply means *bowing / to you*. But the deeper meaning, the symbolism, is

this: The divine in me recognizes the divine in you. The place of peace in the center of my being honors the place of peace in the center of your being.

The habit of shaking hands has meant many things in many cultures over time, but in general it seems to be a gesture of goodwill. It seems to say, *I mean you no harm*. “See, no weapon in my hand! Shake!” When we greet one another in the morning here at church, it’s an exchange of goodwill. It’s a gift anyone can give. It’s a gift anyone can accept, whether you’ve just walked in the door for the first time or whether you’ve been here every Sunday for decades.

When we are busy, upset or lost in thought, it’s easy for any greeting of goodwill to be only a habit. How to return to a place of deeper understanding of our connections, our unity, our goodwill? It all comes back to the underground virtues – remember, the virtues of courage, kindness, and patience? Those virtues--which reside under all else--need our attention and our practice.

Today I’d like to focus on the virtue of patience. The biggest insight I’ve had about patience, is that when I am *showing* patience, I don’t *feel* very patient on the inside! It’s an effort. I am not a parent, but I assume that if *you* have cared for a child, then you know what I’m talking about. Patience is not easy.

When I want someone to get here, or want something to be over with, practicing patience feels uncomfortable. If I'm listening for someone to put into words the thought that's forming in their mind, it takes effort. If I'm waiting for a person to *stop talking*, my gift of patience doesn't feel virtuous.

(Of course, I was not referring to any of you. I was thinking about my relatives. For decades I gave them the gift of patience and attention, more than I received back. But from all of that one-sided effort, I did gain great experience for being a minister.)

The most important element of patience is time. Taking time, giving time. Accepting time's passage, shifting our mind's eye to a longer view, away from the urgent, in-your-face view of life which plagues too many of our days.

Writing in 1836, the Transcendentalist and Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson advised: "Adopt the pace of nature. Her secret is patience."

Consider the patience of the oak trees, which are so plentiful in this area. Their fruit, their nut, is the simple acorn, a smooth little brown cup with a point at the bottom and a beret hat on top. Each tree yields countless acorns. Out of so many, it is a lucky rare acorn which will find its way to friendly soil and its next incarnation. It will sprout, grow roots and reach toward the sun. It will become a tall, solid, enormous oak tree, giving shade, breathing out oxygen, shedding leaves in the fall, and making more acorns. Generations of mighty oaks have led up to this moment, to *this little acorn*. Every acorn holds so much history, a line of unnamed oak trees going back centuries. Inside each acorn is an amazing inheritance of natural history.

At the same time, inside each little acorn are countless possibilities. It may sprout, and become a seedling, and then end up as breakfast for a deer. Or it may keep growing--it may be the start of something big. The acorn holds history, and it holds promise. But it doesn't know that. It doesn't understand its potential, doesn't see how significant its life is. Sometimes we don't understand our own significance.

In the demands of our days, with so many choices or challenges, we may not see that under the ordinary surface, it is a miracle that we are here. Walt Whitman's poetry celebrates the details of human life. He wrote with praise about all kinds of

people--the people he knew and those he never met but loved all the same. Whitman said: "The sum of all known reverence I add up in YOU, whoever you are." (Whitman, #659)

We have so much to praise and celebrate. We forget this in our moments of impatience with ourselves and impatience with others. We forget our natural significance. I'm curious if you can remember, when was the last time you felt impatient with yourself or another? When did your impatience cause pain? What can change things for you? What can turn it around? After the service, please send me an email.

Now let's consider the acorns again. Even without knowing their significance, some acorns do achieve their potential, and yield their gifts to the life that enfolds them. How do they do it? What does any one of them need? What do we need?

The sprouting oak needs space. Breathing space, growing space. Permission to spread its green sprouts as they grow into branches. For people, for us, I see this as not physical space, but accepting one another's path and honoring the pace of another's journey. Our human growing-space depends on the virtue of our patience with one another.

Unless a sprouting tree is being tended with care in a nursery or an arboretum, getting the space it needs can be a random, haphazard, uncertain matter. An acorn won't sprout and grow too near to its parent, for lack of sunlight. It needs to get out of the shadow of others. It needs a rodent to carry it off, and hoard it along with enough other seeds that the rodent forgets to eat it, and it can start sprouting. So, to emulate the good luck of an acorn, don't hide in the shadows, and don't get eaten by a squirrel.

The acorn needs to put its roots down. It starts with the tap root, but then as it grows, it extends additional roots. It makes a home. It grows where it's planted. It blossoms and bears fruit where it's planted. We human beings have some degree of choice about where we plant ourselves. This freedom can be life giving. Many of us uproot ourselves over the course of our lives, or circumstances do the uprooting and transplanting for us. But to pursue our potential like the lucky acorn, it's worth giving attention to growing where we are planted.

U. S. Americans move around more now than we ever have, perhaps more than any

civilization in history. And this fact, for many of us, is why finding a spiritual home is key to our health and growth. For those of us already here, providing a spiritual community is part of our calling. We cultivate the soil. We invite people to a nourishing place, and share it. For any of us in times of change, putting down roots can mean giving a chance for this ground, this community, to become a home. Of course, right now this congregation is not on our home territory. A mile from here, at our home base, the renovation of our main building will continue till next fall. So now, when we invite one another to *be at home*, to put roots down a little more deeply, we must admit we're talking about potting soil till next year.

Trees reach out. As they grow, they extend their branches and leaves. That's how they get more sun, how they produce more fruit and more seeds. Yet, it's a risk. If you're a tree, the farther out you reach, the higher the chance you will get struck by lightning in a storm. The farther out you reach, the more surface the wind can catch, and the greater chance you might be toppled, or lose a branch.

There is a book of sermons entitled *In Storm, Even Trees Lean on Each Other*. It's a collection of sermons about the life of Unitarian churches in the Hungarian-speaking province of Transylvania, which was given over to Romania after the First World War. Since they emerged in the 1560s, the Transylvanian Unitarians have weathered the storms of oppression by a Catholic empire, and by a Romanian dictatorship, as well as world wars, and poverty and isolation. So the book's title hints at a reason for their endurance over four centuries, all the way to the present: In storm, even trees lean on each other. Those Hungarian-speaking Unitarians kept going by keeping together.

The love of other people and the care of a community are what hold us up in times of storm, or drought, or some other challenge to our strength.

In storm, even trees lean on each other. I wanted to be sure the tree metaphor was true scientifically, and sure enough, it is. According to a plant physiologist with the federal Department of Agriculture, "When trees that were living in the midst of a forest lose the protection of a rim of trees and become stand-alones..., they are more vulnerable to strong weather elements such as wind. They also lose the physical protection of

surrounding trees that had kept them from bending ... and breaking." (Knudson 2011)

The Unitarian Universalist minister William R. Murry says: "A ... religious community in which people recognize the worth of one another is helpful in increasing self-love and self-acceptance." (Murry, 83) We try to show acceptance and patience, and share it with others, and we experience more of it ourselves. This can be an abundant exchange of love. And abundance is another cause of the success of the oak trees over the generations. They are generous with their fruits, their acorns. To have better odds at leaving a strong legacy of more mighty oaks, each tree is generous, lavish and free-spending with its acorns. A tree is generous with patience, letting the promise of an acorn make itself known according to the pace of nature, in nature's own good time.

"In God's eyes," as William James would say, the deepest human life is everywhere. Yet our distractions keep us from knowing these depths. We wrestle with time, vie with it, instead of opening to it. Patience is the gift of time that we can show to ourselves. Patience is the gift of time we can receive from others and share with others.

When we sit and listen to a pianist play a work of music, or when we observe a painting or sculpture, we are giving the artists and the works of art a gift of our time. We are making a gesture of anticipation, recognizing that in the moments to come, we might encounter some of the deepest human life.

Musicians and artists have given us their own gifts of time and patience. Condensed in every sculpture or painting, and reflected in every piece of music we hear, are generations of creativity and effort, years of training, countless hours of practice.

Every work of art contains an inheritance of creative human history, just as every acorn holds eons of natural history. And like the acorn, every gift of art holds powers and promises, waiting to be encountered and experienced, waiting for our gift of attention. Gifts of art and the grounding of community can help us to see, as Meland said, "We live more deeply than we think."

The gifts of time, attention and patience benefit all of us. Choosing to slow down helps you, helps me, helps the world. When we are grounded, rooted, we can enable connections to grow.

May we strive to take a longer view of life, tending our lives and our life together with patience. So may it be. Amen.

Now join with me in taking some time together in silence, for the gift of a few moments of silent gratitude for the deepest parts of life. Namaste.

AFTER ONE MINUTE, THE PIANIST WILL
PLAY A CHOPIN PIECE.

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