

## Getting a Wider Lens on Life

### (Everyday Spirituality, Part 2)

Sermon by Rev. Roger Jones

The Autumnal Equinox  
Sunday September 22, 2013

Pastoral Prayer by Rev. Lucy Bunch  
Gift of Music by Erik Bailly and Eli Bailly

#### Hymns:

#51, Lady of the Seasons' Laughter; #1010, We Give Thanks; #1064, Blue Boat Home.

#### Sermon

Life is not a problem to be solved; it is a mystery to be explored. Human beings are not problems to be fixed; we are mysteries to be embraced.

Of course, one can be forgiven for having the temptation to fix *what is*, rather than to see it and embrace it. Books of expert advice and self-help strategies make writers and bookstores richer than the most insightful stories and poems do. I've used my own share of self-help guidebooks. Some of them have given me good advice. Poems, novels and short stories offer curiosity and empathy about life's richness as well as its challenges.

Sometimes when I finish reading the last pages of a novel, I feel sad that the story's over. Through that story, the author has given me a different lens on life, a wider lens than the one with which I normally go through my days. This for me is a source of spiritual growth.

This sermon is the second in a series called Everyday Spirituality. Working with the definition of spirituality as "that which moves us toward wholeness," I've been thinking about the healing effects of looking at our journeys and struggles from new perspectives, looking at life through a wider lens. This is one of the reasons I go to movies and stage plays. When the lights go down and the performance begins, another life appears before me. I enter a

different world. I'm still aware of things outside the theater -- people I'm concerned about in the congregation -- my relatives -- chores at home -- where to have dinner.

But even with distracting thoughts, that brief time gets me out of myself. I consider life through the lens of the story I see on the stage or screen. After leaving the theater, I feel as if those two or three hours have changed my outlook. Even when I think the show was not that great, the whole experience can refresh my perspective.

Sometimes, a show hooks me, and reels me in, emotionally. Forever after, I will view it as a pivotal moment in my way of seeing the world. I remember senior English class in high school, 35 years ago--

Mrs. McKinney is teaching us the play *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller. She tells us the story of when this modern American tragedy first played on stage, opening night, 1949 in a Broadway theater. After the curtain fell on the tragic final scene, she says, that first audience just stayed there, in silence. For a long time, they didn't applaud and they didn't leave. This play stunned those people. Their experience of it widened their understanding of life in America. What changed *my* life was hearing Mrs. McKinney tell us that story. It was hearing that people sitting at a play together could be so affected by what they saw and heard. As I look back on high school, I appreciate those afternoon hours in Mrs. McKinney's English class. It was the gift of looking through a wider lens, seeing the possibilities for my own life, and seeing more of the richness of the world. I didn't know it at the time, but now I see.

I'm sure that many of you can tell stories of events or experiences that changed your view of life. Some of you have told me, and I hope later you will talk to one another about those lens-changing moments in your life. And what about now? Do you have regular activities that offer you a fresh look? How do you get a more open lens, a more expansive look at life?

I don't mean that one-time-only, peak experience. I think we can cultivate spiritual health and healing by refreshing our vision of life in ordinary ways. Nothing fancy needed. For example, by watching a sporting event, or playing a sport, many of us get engaged in another world, physically and emotionally. Then, when we leave the stadium, walk off the field, or get out of the pool, our pressing concerns may not have changed, but our perspective about them *may have* changed. What sorts of activities can take you out of your pressing concerns? For some people it's taking care of children/ or teaching. For some, it's cooking. For many, serving others or serving the world takes us out of ourselves.

When I travel to my hometown or other cities, I look for a church to attend on Sunday—Unitarian Universalist or otherwise. I slip into their service for an hour, and hang around for coffee. After I leave the place, the day has a different feel to me. Just an hour can shift my outlook. Taking that bit of time has renewed my perspective. When we set some time apart from the ordinary, when we engage with life in a special way from the rest of our day, we can open ourselves to a fresh sense of possibility. We can consider life through a new lens.

Here, in every Sunday service, we invite you to greet a few people around you in the ritual of the Hand of Fellowship. Some of us like this ritual more than others. A hopeless extrovert like me will bound to the end of the sanctuary to say hello to as many as I can before music from the piano calls me back. A quieter person may shake two or three hands, and sit back down. From one angle, this gesture of welcome is a little ice breaker. But from another perspective, it is a spiritual gift of recognition.

Do you know what happens in the religious education room here for Spirit Play? Before each child enters, the Door Keeper extends a hand, greets the child by name, looking in the eyes, and says "Are you Ready for Spirit Play?... Welcome, and come in." We can call this greeting our Namaste moment.

Coming from ancient Sanskrit, one meaning of Namaste is "The divine in me greets the divine in you." The moment of recognition. Namaste.

That's what we mean when we greet. Even if we don't say *Namaste*. When you greet other people, I invite you consider seeing them through the lens of Namaste. Whether in here or in a store, in your own home or out on the sidewalk, your greeting to another person is a momentary gift of recognition. A spiritual gift of attention.

Sometimes widening your perspective can be a matter of language. We shape how we look at life through the lens of the words we choose. For example, so many of us go around speaking about how busy and stressed we are. The Reverend Lillian Daniel writes: "When I ask someone how they are, I can almost predict the ... answer. 'Busy, I am so busy.'"

Daniel says: "It pains me to hear people who live good lives *complain* about being busy, especially when it's my own voice doing it." (Daniel 2013, 36, emphasis mine)

When ministers get together for professional meetings or denominational assemblies, we can fall into this habit ourselves:

"How are you?"

"Oh! BIZ-ZY! Overwhelmed."

You know, folks, that's just a boring answer!

Lillian Daniel is now trying to practice another approach, a new answer with words that are more generous, more full of gratitude. Now, in response to the question: "How are you?" she says: "Life is rich and full." It beats the opposite: empty and boring. It's better than saying: I'm so busy I don't have time to be aware of life.

By using these different words, or by trying to, she reminds herself that her life truly is "rich and full."

I'm trying new words too. Unless I have a cold or flu, when somebody says, "How are you?" I say: "Thank you, I'm doing well!" This does not mean I am free of anxieties, getting enough sleep, or without any aches and pains. But I am trying to count my blessings *first*. I'm trying to start my answer with words

of gratitude. My hope for all of us/ is that we can say: “Life is rich and full.” When life’s hard, I hope we can offer to one another the spiritual gifts of attention, care, and listening. The divine in me greets the divine in you.

What about when life is not only rich and full, but also unfair, hard or confusing? Well, if we try now to practice ways to open our sense of possibility, we might find it easier to find balance and have a broader perspective when life gets tough. We might have the flexibility to step away, take a breath, and look on our questions with fresh eyes. As the poet Wallace Stevens wrote: “Perhaps the *truth depends* on a walk around the lake.”

When hope is hard to come by, when doubts and questions burden us, it can help to widen the lens so big that we take a bird’s-eye view of our life. Even wider, and we can take a God’s-eye view of the situation. We try out a divine lens. This does not mean that atheists or agnostics must change our theologies. It means only that we look with a lens that brings out the most generous parts of ourselves. Look with an open attitude of good will and acceptance toward ourselves and others. When you’re facing trouble or weakness, can you explore a wider, larger picture of life in which you dwell? What have you not yet seen/ as a gift, a resource or a strength you can count on?

When unsure of the way forward, see if you can recall a previous challenge. How did you move and speak in that situation? How did you act, and what was helpful? Such questions invite us to take a wider view, looking with compassion, kindness, generosity. We try out a divine lens when we ask questions like this: How did you find a way forward at that time? Did you receive any wise advice then? Consider... who could now suggest a fresh perspective to you. Who could suggest a walk around the lake, or go on that walk with you? When we hear these questions, or when we ask ourselves, we are opening up to a new outlook.

Sometimes I don’t get a new lens, and I’m not looking or asking for it. Instead, I get a divine kick in the head. This is what I call

those times when our vision is renewed by surprise and not with ease. We are going along, ... not looking for a outlook on life—and BOOM! Perhaps that’s how we find a fresh way of looking—when we stop looking for it.

Nearly ten years ago I took a sabbatical from the congregation I was then serving. Using frequent flier miles, I traveled for a few months to Australia, India and Europe. I had guidebooks and a few email and phone contacts, but I hadn’t planned anything. I knew ONLY my dates and cities of departure and arrival. I could figure out what to do once I arrived. I would stay open to seeing what would happen/ to me. This journey of immersion would be perspective-shifting, I just knew it.

First stop, Australia. After two weeks in Sydney, I was, frankly, bored. I was lonely. Everything was great, but I wearied of being a tourist. It felt like a job.

[*Whining*]: Every day, get up, decide what museums to see, restaurants to eat in, shows to attend, parks to visit, hostels to stay at. Dutifully, I stopped at every statue and monument, read it and took notes. My trip was a job!

Maybe I should have planned it. Since then I’ve realized: I would have done better if I had based myself in one place rather than wandering everywhere. I would have been more engaged and happy if I had gone there with a goal, some end product, or a particular study.

After two weeks of aimless tourism, I was feeling lonely, and sorry for myself about all this freedom and privilege I had.

One humid sunny day, I trudged through one of many urban parks in Sydney--enormous, green, hilly, filled with trees. Yeah, trees. Lots of ‘em.

“I’m tired; I’ve seen enough. Ready to turn back, and find lunch.”

But a little farther on, I could see one more monument. Dutifully, I marched on.

I thought: “At least I can say I’ve seen it, whatever it is.”

Bronze or stone, now I can't remember. But it was a war monument. It was a memorial to the young men from Australia and New Zealand who died in the First World War. Thousands of them died in one of the most pointless and wasteful wars of western history. The monument quoted famous words from the Gospel of John. It said: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Here I was, feeling sorry for myself. Lonely, tired, hot, aimless, bored. And here they were, sacrificed as teenagers and young men in a war, in service to their countries. I choked up. I cried for their deaths, and for my own sorry self-centeredness.

That moment was a divine kick in the head. A new lens on life. A new perspective on my travels. Starting then, I could choose to see my walks and wanderings in Australia/ as time spent on holy ground. Everywhere I walked there was history. Stories of lives and of deaths very different from the life I knew. Through this new perspective, I visited museum exhibits about the Aboriginal people of Australia. I came to see that sacred ground covered the whole continent. The Aboriginal people had lived there for thousands of years before settlement by Europeans. For the past few hundred years they have endured slaughter, dispossession, and the social dysfunctions brought on by colonization. Many of them have resisted, many have created works of art, many have brought the truth of their lives into the lens of the majority and the dominant culture of their country. Holy ground, all around.

Of course, even after a kick in the head, it's easy to slide back into my own attitudes and my own worries. For most of us, it's natural to slip into the pressing concerns of life and not realize when our perception of life has narrowed on what's possible or what's true.

This is why I appreciate spiritual communities. This is where we remind one another to reframe and refresh our vision, to consider new perspectives, to look through new lenses.

In community, we invite one another to take a walk around the lake. An invitation to a fresh look, a wider lens. We can take that walk together.

The divine in me greets the divine in you. When we widen our vision, we see this. We acknowledge one another by handshake or spoken greeting. For an hour or so, we stand and sit and listen and sing. We set aside this time to look on life with the wide view of gratitude. Life can be rich and full. Yes, life is busy, challenging and confusing. Life can be hard and unfair. But it can be rich and full. Holy ground, all around.

It is my prayer and my hope/ that the divine in you can find renewal and strength when you take some time to breathe, wait, watch, and look at life through the lens of gratitude. Life is rich and full. The divine in me greets the divine in you. So may it be.

Blessed be, amen, and Namaste.

#### Work Cited

Daniel, Lillian. *When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough*. New York: Jericho Books, 2013.