

Morning Meditation

Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent. Parker Palmer

My very first job was working in the dish room at a local restaurant. It was not exactly a glamorous or glitzy position. I was elbow deep in warm soapy water trying to scrub off bits of food that had been baked on so long it clung to pan like concrete. Stacks of plates congregated stuck together and cups with bits of leftover coffee (hopefully you are not reading this during breakfast). It was hard work and I went home exhausted, my fingers wrinkly like a prune after spending hours in water, and smelling a bit like Salisbury steak. Good times. I forget how much I was paid, but I remember feeling like I earned every penny.

On this Labor Day, I invite you to reflect on your first job. What did that job teach you? Maybe you delivered newspapers and learned how quiet the pre-dawn darkness can be. Maybe you worked at a family store or mowed lawns or babysat the next-door-neighbors kids. Those lessons from our first jobs stick and stay with us. On this Labor Day, we affirm that where we share our time and talents is important. We are shaped by our jobs, our co-workers, and bosses. You will spend 90,000 hours on average in your lifetime at work. I wonder if that number is increasing given how often we check emails and texts and reports at odd hours. I wonder if the number of hours we work might be increasing especially as more people work from home where there is no separation.

I love Palmer's quote above that we need to listen to our lives. So often we can be lured to a position because of perceived power or prestige or money. But as theologian Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it!! Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." We may or may not receive a paycheck for what helps us come alive. Sometimes we work one place and volunteer in the place and with the people who warm our hearts. Sometimes our paycheck comes from one place while our soul is feed/nourished by what we do somewhere else unpaid.

I invite you to reflect on the ways work and volunteering has shaped you in good ways and perhaps not so great ways. May God, who rolled up the holy sleeves and sunk God's fingers into the earth to fashion and form creation be with you wherever you let your light shine and come alive this week.

Prayer: Take my gifts and let me love you, God who first of all loved me.

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Building on the morning meditation from yesterday, I find it difficult to listen to my life. Part of this is because it can be difficult to discern what voice within me is authentic and which ones are clamoring with the so-called wisdom of culture. For example, the deepest part of my heart can ask me to do or say something my soul longs to express, while there is that concerned voice within that cautions, “What will others think?”

Our deepest parts can tell us to risk and take a leap toward a new adventure...the prudent part of my life says, “Whoa...hold up there. How much is this going to pay? Do you really have the time?”

Thomas Merton who wrote about the True and False Self said this, “Your True Self is a little tiny flame of this Universal Reality that is Life itself, Consciousness itself, Being itself, Love itself, Light and Fire itself, God’s very self.” I know I am living from the True self, even in difficult times, when my heart is strangely warmed. I know I am living from the True self when I am able to speak the truth in love – balance both honesty and the call to stay connected to another. I know I am living from the True self when from the top of my head to my pinkie toe I feel a reassurance that I am doing the best I can. The True self doesn’t demand perfection and is willing to be faithfully foolish. The True self will sing out with the soundtrack to “The Greatest Showman,” just because it brings me joy and picks me up. The True self will laugh joyfully even in these difficult days, because this is still the day God has made. The True self has the courage and conviction to step forward, doesn’t have to be comfortable or stay silent on the sideline.

How do you listen to the True self? For some find the deep self in quiet contemplation. For some, (who think out loud/verbally) the deepest part of the self is discerned in talking with a soul friend. For some, it is walking/wandering outside. For some, it is being out on the water. For some, it is exercising. For some, it is sitting in the sun. For some, it is seeing the leaves start to change colors in the fall.

How do you listen to the self you hide because God is calling You to share your life and shine your light; to join in the great symphony God is composing and conducting in these days.

Prayer: God open my eyes, ears, and heart to watch, hear, and attune to the hymn You are singing right now.

Morning Meditation (written for September 9)

Today is my nineteenth anniversary of ordination. On September 9, 2001, at Urbandale UCC, I covenanted with God to serve the church and share my light. I have preached almost a thousand sermons (many of which I don't really remember); presided at funerals that broke my heart and weddings that brought me joy. I've held babies in my arms to baptize and even one went down to a river in New Hampshire to perform a full immersion baptism. There are moments that stand and stick out in my memories. I remember the handbell choir playing Silent Night every Christmas Eve at my first church; tearing out 1960s gold carpeting in the sanctuary of the second church I served (God knows what kind of dust was hiding there!); and listening to beautiful concerts here in Sarasota including Carrie Newcomer in January of this year. I hold onto the ways people's love here at our church makes a difference, even as we seek to have the hard, holy conversations. I treasure the ways we laugh at church meetings and try to listen with love to one another.

Nineteen years ago, I took a step of faith forward. I think of Peter in the gospel of Matthew when he steps out of the boat to walk toward Jesus on the water. Then, he starts to sink. Yup...been there over nineteen years. Like Peter, there have been moments I have started to sink when a meeting goes awry or I say something I regret or I don't act in a way that reflects God's loving kindness to do justice. Honestly, I have been there this year stepping out of the boat and sinking in a time of online ministry and trying to connect digitally. In the gospel story of Peter when he starts to sink, the water started to soak his robe, reached his knees, and then dramatically the hand of Jesus caught him before his chest was wet. Yup...been there too. Especially this year when I feel like I am hanging on by a thread, I realize that the fringe/fray of fabric is one of God's love. Then, I realize that God's grace is a net beneath me to catch me should I fall.

I am honored to celebrate my nineteenth anniversary here with you as God's people. Our church is vital and vibrant, diverse and divine. You each reflect God's handiwork in ways that bless me beyond words. Our church is resilient and resourceful. I know that no matter what we face, we do so together. I know no matter what else happens, we will try to do our best to love each other the good and bad.

At my ordination we sang the hymn, "Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant?" The hymn tune is "Servant Song" and I invite you to pray or sing these words with me:

*Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travelers on the road;
we are here to help each other go the mile and bear the load.*

*I will hold the Christ-light for you in the shadow of your fear,
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share you joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.*

*When we sing to God in heaven we shall find such harmony.
Born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.*

Prayer: God continue to let the words and melody of this hymn sing to my heart and inspire our ministry in these days.

Morning Meditation ~

Attention is the beginning of devotion. Mary Oliver

Another way to listen to your life is attention. Right now, we can be so distracted all the time by the cycle of news and the blur of life. The average news story on television is forty-one seconds. We tend to scan the headlines and quickly form opinions. We have convinced ourselves that we can multitask. Sure! I can write a devotional, talk to my wife about my day, pet the dog, and eat breakfast. To pay attention to all the details right here and now is more than we can ever comprehend.

Take a moment right now to pay attention ~ how many colors do you see around you where you are? As I do this, I lost count at twenty-five and never realized how many shades of brown I have in my living room. How many sounds do you hear? The hum of the refrigerator, the breeze rustling the leaves outside, the barking dog, the car door shutting for a neighbor heading to work, my dog shifting to another position, my wife typing on her computer. What do you smell? What do you feel just beneath your skin? All of these questions open us to a moment that is fleeting and fading. As soon as you answer all the questions, the moment has passed, and some new detail has crept into the space you inhabit waiting for you to notice. Now I can hear the clang of my wife's spoon on the cereal bowl and my dog deciding the best thing to do is to join in the chorus of barking beginning from our neighbors.

Attention is just the beginning of devotion, Mary Oliver says. Pay attention is the way we begin to listen to our lives. Pay attention is how our True self starts to sing. Pay attention is the gift we can give another. I invite you today to try to pay attention. When you are tempted to multitask, draw your focus back to what is right before you. When you find your mind going in twenty different directions, try to hone your focus on one detail right in-front of you. Notice your breathing as you pay attention. Notice your body – where there is tightness and where you feel relaxed. To pay attention to

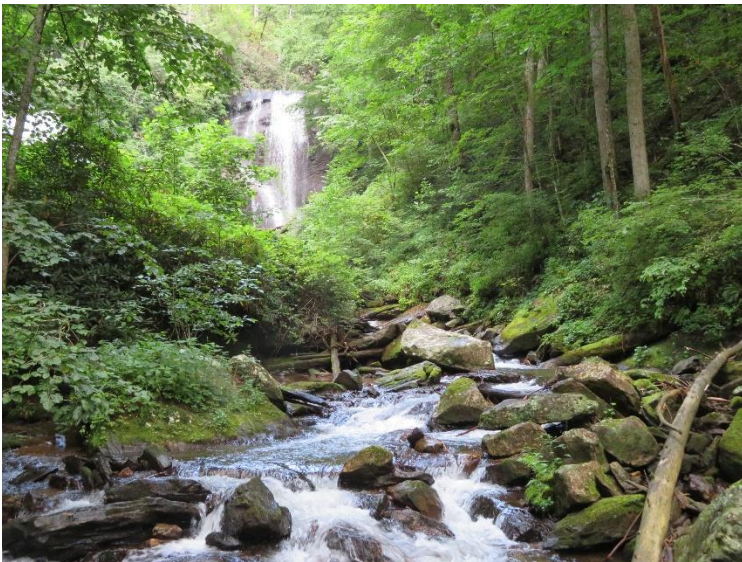
now, this moment with all its beauty and brokenness, I believe is one of the ways we can listen to our lives and what the world needs now more than ever.

Prayer: God help me pay attention to the good, the bad, the ugly, all that is swirling around me. Help me find ways to respond with your love.

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One of the places I feel most alive is wandering out in creation with a camera in my hand. To be sure, I am no Ansel Adams. I am sure that no one years from now will pay...well...anything for one of my photographs. But I don't practice spiritual photography for fame or fortune, I practice this way of praying because the action feeds and fuels my soul. I practice photography because it helps me pay attention. I need to pay attention not only to what I am seeing, but often what I am hearing. Sometimes it is a bird singing that I hear first before seeing the colorful wings. Sometimes it is the rustling of limbs that I hear before I see the squirrels playfully chasing. Sometimes I smell a flower before I see the brilliant, bold color.

I invite you to look at the photo below. What do you see? Come closer and step into the photo, stand in the middle of it. What do you hear? What might you smell?



Maybe you picked up and could even heard the rush of the water over the rocks. Or saw the brilliant and bright greens of the forest. Or found yourself focusing the logs that are laying near the water – a symbol of life and death side-by-side. Or maybe your imagination really became alive and you heard a bird singing just out of view. Or started singing, “Shall We Gather at the River...where bright angel feet have trod. Gather with the saints at the river... that flows by the throne of God.” Or “Wade in the Water” or “My Life Flows on in Endless Song”.

Whatever stirs in your heart, I pray you notice and start to name what happens when we pay attention. I also believe that whatever swirled in your imagination is your life getting a word in edgewise. When we center our attention on one moment, we engage the world God crafted and created. I pray this day you might continue to practice this way of exploring this moment we inhabit.

May God's love enfold and hold you now more than ever.

Prayer: God wash over me with a peace and presence I need this day. Renew and refresh my soul as I seek to be caught up in Your symphony of life today. Amen.