

Renewing Ourselves UUFM—September 20, 2020

Friday evening, I learned that Ruth Bader Ginsberg had died. Jews say for the dead “may her memory be for blessing.” She died on the eve of Rosh Hashana, the birthday of the universe, a holy time for dying reserved only for those most righteous. That seems especially fitting.

I confess to feeling emptied by the news of Ginsberg’s death. She stood for so much progress in America, for women especially. She worked tirelessly, really unto her death, for equality, dignity, and decency. She so often seemed to stand between all that is good in America and all that would blast that goodness away. It was a weight she carried and one she embodied. When I watch those videos of her 80-year-old self lifting weights and doing planks, I know that Ruth Bader Ginsberg understood she was carrying a heavy weight and to carry weight you need to be weighty yourself. You need to gather your strength and build your strength to be strong in a world that desires and requires the work and the values she embodied. Ginsberg knew her gifts, and she used them in the world as best and as long as she could.

May we honor Ruth Baden Ginsberg’s life by entertaining the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman’s invitation: “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; *ask* yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” What an invitation. As an African American man living in 20th Century Jim Crow America, Thurman had reason to feel a weight pressing on him, a constant awareness of being frustrated and thwarted, forces threatening to take away his personhood and his life. This weight can make life a living hell and can turn living people into the walking dead, diminished, less than they might be and are meant to be.

But Rev. Dr. Thurman did not break under this weight. Nor did luminaries like Justice Thurgood Marshall or Muhammad Ali or Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison or the millions of ordinary people who live under the weight and yet live in lively and beautiful ways, making precedents, making art, making light of adversity. In language from black liberation theology, people made a way out of no way. People asked what made them come alive despite oppression and so survived and thrived when only destruction and devastation seemed possible.

We are living in times that are devastating and destructive. Parts of our country burn up and parts are flooded into oblivion. The entire world is gripped by a disease we have not yet found a will or a way to quell. People die, especially Black men, in inexplicable cruelty. Wars and famine and genocide continue in our peripheral vision. We are living, we are loving, we are dying, we are grieving in physically distanced ways that eat at our well-being and peace of mind. We are working and learning under constraints that seem to yield far too little product for the energy going into the labor.

I don't want to make a false comparison here. I am not saying that the systemic oppression of people of color in this country is just like what I and all of us experience now. But it looks like the world as we know it is coming to an end, and I don't feel fine. I often don't know what to do, and I think I could use the lessons of persistence and resilience our siblings of color clearly embody for staying lively and vital.

But we have all had some practice of making it through the hard times. How might you tap into that persistence, that resilience, those gifts within yourself? How might we scale out the ways we help ourselves so as to help the hurting world, including the world of our own households?

I journeyed to southern India in 2010, and I immediately felt at home. And that was a very strange feeling, since I have no ancestry outside a small European circle encompassing Ireland and a narrow strip of land surrounding the Mediterranean Ocean. It was very bewildering to feel at home in a place so foreign, and that feeling shook up a lot of ideas I had about myself and my values. It continues to do so. Feeling at home in southern India forced me inside myself, to examine myself, to ask what makes me feel alive and to discern the ways that I am uniquely gifted for confronting the challenges of this life as it is now.

In what follows, I am thankful to Carrie Rice, who reminded me of some of these approaches for turning inward and knowing, when we slow down and renew our sense of ourselves, what gifts every person may give to the world.

We are all familiar with the remarkable transformation of wormy caterpillars into winged moths and butterflies. We know that the chrysalis or cocoon stage comes

between the worm and the wings. There is some dispute in the science about whether caterpillars and butterflies are the same animal. We do know that inside the chrysalis the body of the caterpillar breaks down completely. Within this soupy remainder something called imaginal cells activate DNA sequencing that produces a butterfly. It's messy and destroyed inside there, and yet some of the old remains to shape the new. Experiments on worms show that the moths remember their wormy selves. Scientists sprayed the worms with stinky gas and gave them a little shock. Once the moths emerged from their cocoons, they avoided the stinky gas, anticipating and avoiding a shock. Deep inside, even if everything seems a mess, the life-giving and the gifts of life and goodness can be found.

How do you know what makes you feel alive? How do you locate the gifts you've got to sustain yourself, your family, your community? One way is to ask people to tell you what they see as your gift. One way is to reflect on your childhood and think about what you really loved to do, and to do it. And one way is to spend some time within yourself, in quiet contemplation, moving around in the dark where it might be a little messy but you can have faith that something beautiful can emerge. The meditation today from gives us a way. That is John O'Donohue's gift, thank goodness he knew and graced us with it.

First slow down:

"There is nothing else to do now but rest
And patiently learn to receive the self
You have forsaken in the race of days."

Do not be afraid, do not be bewildered if the terrain is unfamiliar:

He says," At first your thinking will darken
And sadness take over like listless weather.
The flow of unwept tears will frighten you."

The objective is to return to yourself for renewal.

He says "You have traveled too fast over false ground;
Now your soul has come to take you back."

Within yourself and through yourself you will find what you possess and what you need:

He says, "Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through."

He says this is a hard journey, though a good one, so

“Be excessively gentle with yourself.”

He says choose companions who help you be in this journey,

“Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.

Learn to linger around someone of ease

Who feels they have all the time in the world.”

He says go slow, be gentle,

“Gradually, you will return to yourself,

Having learned a new respect for your heart

And the joy that dwells far within slow time.”

O’Donohue’s words make a good path. Here, in this religious community, there are companions for you along the way.

What makes you feel alive? What gifts have you got to sustain yourself, your family, your community? Those things you take for granted about yourself, they are life-giving and life-saving. You are cooks and knitters, dancers and singers, builders and maintainers, organizers and explainers, actors and teachers. You are readers and artists and writers of poetry. You are gardeners and farmers, tillers and tenders. You have the gift to weave words of comfort and truth. You have the gift to listen with compassion and open-heartedness. You have hands and bodies with the power to heal others. You have minds to solve problems. You have the presence to bear witness and to act for justice. You are full of gifts, and the world eagerly awaits your revelations.

These are hard times, hard times, and we cannot be sustained with despair, we cannot sustain others with despair, though we may feel it. The Hindu god Shiva reminds us that out of destruction new life emerges, his dancing destroys the old creation and prepares the advent of the new. What makes **you** come alive, only you can say. But consider that each of us is a wonderful, calculated accident. Can you imagine what serendipity produced you, your one precious life out of all that old life? Going back only twelve generations, about 400 years, 4094 ancestors made it possible for you to be here today. That is some ancestral mathematics.

More immediately, the egg that produced you was inside your mother when she was a fetus inside your grandmother. Considering how many eggs from women’s ovaries are never fertilized or never yield fruit, that is some powerful calculus. All of this is remarkably and mundanely true for all of us. I wouldn’t say that means there is a purpose to our lives, that we are made for. But I would say our lives are

opportunities to see our gifts. We are each presence and thus presents to the world which receives us. You have goodness breaking out of you at this time, I know you do. I pray you do not put it under a bushel basket. Let it shine.

Howard Thurman invites you, John O'Donohue invites you, I invite you, Ruth Bader Ginsberg would implore you, turn inward and listen for the still, small voice inside you. Return to the most human, to the deep sources, with new respect for your heart. Take yourself home, home to the place you belong, your rock, your den, no one else's, and let your song burst out of you with a joy that dwells within slow time. You need to know that you have a song. You need to hear your song. The world needs **your** song. Be so sure and so bold to sing it and be fully alive to yourself, today and every day, as you remember you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."