

Choose to Bless the World: A Stewardship Sermon  
Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist  
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia  
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*Readings*

*Choose to Bless the World*  
*By The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker*  
*President of the Starr King School for the Ministry*

Your gifts-whatever you discover them to be-  
Can be used to bless or curse the world.  
The mind's power,  
The strength of the hands,  
The reaches of the heart,  
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining,  
seeing,

*Waiting*

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
Bind up wounds,  
Welcome the stranger,  
Praise what is sacred,  
Do the work of justice  
Or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,  
Hoard bread,  
Abandon the poor,  
Obscure what is holy,  
Comply with injustice  
Or withhold love.

You must answer this question:  
What will you do with your gifts?

*Choose to bless the world.*

The choice to bless the world  
Can take you into solitude  
To search for the sources  
Of power and grace;  
Native wisdom, healing and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,  
The endeavor shared,  
The heritage passed on,  
The companionship of struggle,  
The importance of keeping faith,  
The life of ritual and praise,  
The comfort of human friendship,  
The company of earth,  
Its chorus of life  
Welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.  
Together  
-that is another possibility,  
Waiting.

*From 'Hush Don't Say Anything to God: Poems of Rumi'  
By Jellaludin Rumi; Translated by Sharam Shiva*

Oh soul, you worry too much.  
Since you met me,  
you have become a master singer,  
and are now a skilled wrangler,  
you can untangle any knot.  
Of life's little leash  
why do you worry?  
Your arms are heavy  
with treasures of all kinds.  
About poverty,  
why do you worry?  
Oh soul, you worry too much.  
You have seen your own strength.  
You have seen your own beauty.

You have seen your golden wings.  
Of anything less,  
why do you worry?  
You are in truth the soul, of the soul, of the soul.  
Be silent, like a fish,  
and go into that pleasant sea.  
You are in deep waters now.  
Of life's blazing fire,  
Why do you worry?

Be with those who help your being.  
Don't sit with indifferent people, whose breath  
comes cold out of their mouths.  
Not these visible forms, your work is deeper.

### ***Sermon***

The thirteenth century Sufi poet Jellaludin Rumi wrote:

*Let the beauty we love be what we do  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*

The ancient mystic was giving voice to the yearning to find blessing when we feel lost and ungrounded – and the yearning to bless the world in return for the blessings that the world offers. To find blessing – and to offer blessing. You may have other words to express this – but whatever you call it – it is the hope of blessing that brings us here and brings us back or sends us seeking elsewhere until we either find somewhere blessing is possible or we've utterly numbed ourselves and forgotten that for which we sought.

I first heard the Reverend Rebecca Parker at a winter institute during my theological schooling at Meadville/Lombard. What she was saying reflected my own cherished vision of congregational life – of a spiritually grounded community that invites any person of any age who walks through the doors into a process of formation and transformation that begins with the heart/mind and moves out to transform the world. A place that invites and guides each willing person into the fullness of life. A place that blesses each person who enters.

So last year, as the congregational leadership and I began to work with the aspirations of membership, I was elated. It's one way to put into words the reality that -- whether you say it aloud or scarcely say it to yourself – each of us comes to worship and congregational life carrying aspirations not only for ourselves – but for one another and for our world.

It's human nature to want to be more – we aspire to be more alive, more joyful, more deeply connected with meaning, with other people and with the whole of the interdependent web of all life. We aspire to thrive as persons and to have our world be fairer, more peaceful, healthier, greener. In fact our own thriving is entirely dependent upon the thriving of our world.

From the moment we totter forward to sit up and then totter up to stand and totter forward to walk we aspire. It is our nature – not only to move forward – to strive for new levels of living. At any time of life – at our best we reach out to learn and to grow. I think of this as the evolutionary impulse –

it can stretch over millennia but also takes place in our own lives as we try to come to terms with our own experience – our own stories, with history, and our place in it.

And *that* is what brings us to congregational life. We may not have put that aspiration into words – we may even think that we resist it – but for sure within us is the core yearning to lean toward the light – like a plant. Surely we know it for our children – if we come bringing them – we want them to become the finest people they can be – to learn respect for others, to have nourishing spiritual lives, to be part of an ethical community, to grow in principle and purpose and meaning. But in fact, we bring ourselves for the same reason. Rumi wrote: Be with those who help your being/your work is deeper.

Sometimes we come here aching from the weight of the previous week – haunted – in the heart of struggle -- crushed by suffering – not only our own. When we bring ourselves here – we do so in hopes that something may alleviate this suffering – may salve our sadness or give some clue as to how to transform our suffering into greater wisdom. That's not a merely private affair – often we have to reach beyond ourselves – sometimes we have to reach out into the world – to make changes in the conditions of the lives of others so that our own suffering is reduced.

Sometimes we arrive already fired up – actively seeking a way to direct our life energies. Sometimes we're aware of some inner force like a morning glory wound in upon itself and only waiting for the sun to rise and the forces of nature to make it possible to flare and blossom, full of color – learning, meeting, growing, connecting and serving.

Last week we heard from a number of our members about how, in this congregation they Stand on the Side of love – how they choose to bless the world. It was a remarkable witness for the power of the theology of love to transform the lives of the people who do the work of love as well as those for whom the work is done. Standing on the side of love is an aspirational stand.

I think of the work that you have done in our program Making the Most of Our Money. You don't participate out of a sense of charity. You do it because you feel with other folks who are at risk economically. Not that you're better than them or better off financially – but because you feel for the uncertainty, loss, risk, and potential for more loss that the people who sign up for the program face. When you engage with purpose, your own suffering is lifted somewhat – you feel less powerless. Our work/life group supports our people as they face professional and job challenges. It strengthens the people in that group to support one another. This is aspirational support.

When Jane Matthews spoke for Living the Welcoming Congregation I heard in her words and I see in the steady hard work of that group, that by advocating for progress on LGBT issues they diminish *their* sense of powerlessness – but also they help *us* as a congregation remember that we have committed to that work as well – within our walls and out in the community. And what they remember that sometimes we can forget – something I've seen in UU congregation after congregation – is that taking a stand on the side of love – for a myriad of issues reminds us of the place where love and action meet – choosing to bless the world energizes us. It is an aspirational stand.

I find the same reality when I meet with our Lay Ministry Team – the specially trained people within the congregation who call, visit, and support everyone here. Each month we gather to be sure that, as a congregation, we're truly caring for one another. It is work and time – but that's not what I see on their faces. Instead – I see compassion, concern and eagerness. They make this place stronger and more loving by helping me serve and expand the circle of care. They choose to bless the world. It helps us grow in compassion and enables people to move through crises less alone so that they can continue to grow in life. This is aspirational service.

We live our aspirations through learning, worshipping, serving, caring, and growing together. This week the Living Scripture class met. It was smaller than usual, but our exploration was passionate. We're not just learning together about the history and context of scripture – we're sharing our own thoughts and feelings about the text. Besides the pleasure of dialogue, it equips us to wrestle with and understand the power of texts that move nations and are used and misused to shape our world. We find the freedom to grow into and even beyond the text. This is aspirational learning.

When Chalice Circles meet, people bring their yearning for spiritual growth, for mutual support, for a sense of joined purpose in their own search for truth and meaning.

On Earth Day we will dedicate, bless and name children in the congregation – and that is profoundly aspirational – for into every dedication we fold our hope for that child, for his or her growth into a strong, ethical, and positive member of our world, and for the world to greet her or him with warmth.

Yesterday a group of congregational leaders and staff met to talk about how we can be better organized to support our programs and all who come here. It was exciting: a balance of big picture and small details – thinking of the needs of our spiritual community, our world, and how we can be a blessing. It was aspirational planning.

When, at the beginning of the year we began to shape our aspirations of membership it was out of this foundational aspiration – that we come together – not because we haven't got anything better to do – but because – there is nothing better that we can do – nothing better than seeking meaning, shaping justice, caring for one another, serving our world, magnifying the presence of love – blessing our lives and the world. Nothing better than to come together and co-create a place in which we are each invited and inspired to lean toward our best aspirations. Be with those who help your being.

There is so much in the world that is broken – or stifled – so many places where people are trapped, wrapped tight with their vision and options constrained and limited. We watch as people around the world take to the streets aspiring to freedom that we have taken for granted in the United States. In truth freedom has to be created and reaffirmed everyday or it can vanish. Along with deep faith in love – Unitarian Universalism also cherishes human freedom. I always have to remind myself that freedom is not license to do simply anything. It is the breathing room to choose and do the right -- the best – the thing that sustains, deepens, and affirms life. Freedom is the room – even within tremendous limits, to live into the fullness of life

Aspiration – is an act of breathing – the act of breathing that creates sound and words. Like the breath over the deep that brought forth all of creation. Aspiration is an act of breathing deeply and living more fully into life.

It is the longing for participation in the fullness of life that drives me back here – day after day. I'm here out of a consuming desire and my utter faith that we can create together a place that can help to enable every person to live into the fullness of life.

This is a lot to ask for – but we are born as bundles of miracles into the most miraculous of worlds. Yet as we grow we are snipped off, fenced round, and isolated. We're tricked into thinking that our lives are private projects and that we do best when we go it alone.

Rev. Rebecca Parker put it this way: “We are subjects and always of value – but this value is always fleeting and always relational. Our well-being enters into the well-being of others, adding a measure of health or joy. We live both for ourselves and for one another.” I say amen. Be with those who help your being/your work is deeper.

So our aspirations of membership have to do with creating a place where we truly can live fully for ourselves and for one another. Our aspirations of membership invite you to intentionally sign up to learn with others here. They invite you to choose a way to enrich your own life by engaging in one of our programs for spiritual growth or sustenance – like chalice circles, scripture study, singing meditation. They invite you to attend worship regularly and take part in the worship life of this community; to be of service within the congregational community and to find ways to stand on the side of love with the congregational community to serve the world. Our Aspirations of membership invite you to open these doors and the doors to your own mind/heart/soul and walk more fully into life through deep participation. They also invite you to do this through pledging generously so that we can make all this possibility real, so that you are more deeply invested and engaged, and so that you understand that what you give enriches you just as surely as that which you receive.

It's human nature to want to be more – we aspire to be more alive, more joyful, more deeply connected with meaning, with other people and with the whole of the interdependent web of all life. In fact, countless research studies to which I will not point right now, show again and again that as people engage and give of their time and resources – the more deeply satisfied they become. Because what we want – if our needs are truly met and our condition is not fragile – is to be part of all life – that – I assert as a matter of faith – is the more we yearn for – not more house, more cars, more stuff – but more meaning and deeper engagement in the world to be fully in life. Our growing congregational programs and our aspirations are meant to bring about just that result.

I was inspired when I read “The Power of Half” -- the story of the Salwen family. Fourteen year old Hannah Salwen had been so moved by the plight of a homeless man at a stoplight that she'd challenged her family to live more simply. Together they decided to sell their two million dollar home, and give half to work on the hunger project in Ghana. It was, truly a family project. Amazingly, after they moved out of the mansion, unloaded lots of stuff, and reached out to help others – they felt exponentially richer rather than poorer by half.

The parents wrote on the website “Bolder Giving” “our family began to live more tightly, and as a result more cohesively. As we learned to live smaller and built our family project ... interconnected moments became more frequent. The more we shared, the more we bonded, the more we trusted. We don't expect others to sell their houses. We chose to because we had more than enough house. But we think everyone can find something in their lives they have more than enough of, whether it's time or treasure. Our family set out to make a small difference in the world and ended up transforming ourselves. We basically traded “stuff” for a closer family unit. That's living richer.”

I was inspired by the Salwen's story – and more than a little challenged. I don't have a two million dollar home to sell and scale “down” to a one million dollar home. But the idea of giving boldly and allowing that giving to transform my life and my family's life is pushing me. I pledge here at Countryside – not half my income – it would be crushing – but we pledge so that we feel it and it makes a difference in our lives. It doesn't amount to quite ten percent yet – but it's over five and closer every year – as Mark and I look at our net income and increase our pledge. I come here, I work here because I have seen that congregational life blends love and vision – calls forth aspiration and makes real our most sacred hopes – and has the power to transform individual lives, our shared life in covenant, and our larger world. I give my life to this work because more than anything I believe that we can bless the world.

In Genesis, when the God of that story sent Abraham forth on his pilgrimage he said: "Go forth... and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." And you shall be a blessing. And so I ask you to be engaged here – in light of your own real means – your real treasure and your time – knowing that everyone of us lives within different limits. And many of us struggle from day to day. So I invite you each by the light of your own life and your own conscience – knowing that whatever you offer is gratefully received as you yourself are gratefully embraced – to be as Abraham to give yourself into this community of aspiration, vision, and love.

Every time we come here – we are, as Abraham, on our own pilgrimage – aspiring – to fuller life now -- for ourselves now, for our world now, and for the future. We are choosing not some other place – we are choosing countryside and we are choosing not some other world – but this world -- in all its beauty and tragedy, order and chaos. We are choosing one another as partners in the most amazing work of all – the work of blessing the world.