

Passion

A service by Laurie Stuart

February 23, 2013

Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

I. Welcome:

Welcome to the Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. This morning we will be finishing up with our month-long exploration of passion. We began the month with a service by Sharon Paige Lisenbee where she explored passion as seen through the jazz greats. She linked their understanding to her own sense of passion, being curious. She touched on positive psychology – the idea that it is useful to explore what is working well in our lives, rather than focusing on all of the places that we were disappointed, in ourselves, with others. She asked us to consider “What have you been passionate about in the past, and what are you still passionate about today?”

We explored the methods of Pythagoras, a 5th century BC philosopher who created schools and a way of life that was designed to bring harmony and balance to individuals taken over by their passions, that included taking care of one’s body, mind and spirit in relation to others in a learning community. Not surprising is that as we learn about the nature of the mind and emerging neural science, we are returned to this school of teaching, some 2500 years later.

We brought in our own reflections on passion – and shared our individual experience. We heard a love letter from Raymond to Carol, a story that Sharon shares with her students about building bridges and not fences; Tom connected us to the history and passions that are evoked by our sense of place in the Upper Delaware; Georgette connected us to the definitions of the meaning of passion and Lloyd presented one view of passion through the love of gardening. Bob kept it all together with the history of Valentine’s day.

Today, I’m hoping to tie some of these themes together with the introduction of the work of Dr. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist who is developing a concept called mind sight, the ability to relate to our minds, to understand our passions and to exercise our agency in the world to be a reflection of our values.

And so I invite you into this hour of worship, this time of celebration and connection where we feed our minds, our bodies and our spirits.

We begin with an opening prayer “Singing in the Night” by David O. Rankin.

II. Opening Prayer

*I love to pray, to go deep down into the silence;
To strip myself of all pride, selfishness, and coldness of heart;
To peel off thought after thought, passion after passion,
till I reach the genuine depths of all;
To remember how short a time ago I was nothing,*

*and in how short a time again I will not be here;
To dwell on all joys, all ecstasies, all tender
Relations that give my life zest and meaning;
To peek through a mystic window and look upon
the fabric of life – how still it breathes, how
solemn its march, how profound its perspective;
And to think how little I know, how very little,
Except the calm, calm of the silence, and the
Singing, singing in the night.*

III. Opening Hymn: Find a Stillness #352

IV. Chalice Lighting:

As we gather this hour, we extend the mind of openness and connection to all that we experience, individually and collectively. We reach into our hearts as they inform us of our place in the world and together we breathe the breath of life.

V. Other Reading : “We are bogged down by the details of life.”

By Richard F. Boeke

We are bogged down by the details of life.

We are smothered by detail.

Our bodies fill up with knots of anxiety.

Our throats are dry.

We would weep, but our eyes have no tears.

We could cry out, but we have no passion.

Who has done this to us?

We confess the pain we cause ourselves.

We confess the pain we cause others.

May we accept our limitations:

 We cannot do everything.

May we affirm our power:

 We can do something.

May we open ourselves to larger hope,

In the silence, in the silence.

Prayer is the soul’s intimacy with God, the ultimate kiss.

VI. Find a Stillness, reprieve

VII. Candles of Joy, Sorrow and Concerns

VIII. Offering: Spirit of Life 123

IX. Story: "Give Yourself (a story about Ralph Waldo Emerson)"

By Denise Tracy

"What do you want for your birthday?" the father asked his daughter. "Do you want a doll?"

She wrinkled her nose and scrunched her eyes and thought. "No."

"A tea set?"

"A pony?"

"No, Father, I have a year to think. I want this year to be a special year, to remember."

"All right. You think and let me know."

Ellen thought. She thought of bonbons, chocolate, new dresses, hats, kid boots, books, gloves, lace collars, but none of these were what she wanted. What would be special?

Each day her father asked her, "Ellen, do you know what you want for your birthday yet?"

And Ellen would shake her head, "No, Father, I'm still thinking."

After four days, her father said, "Ellen?"

"Yes, Father, I've decided."

"Well?"

"I have a riddle. It will tell you what gift I want for my birthday. The riddle is this: You cannot buy it, for it is worth all the money you have, but only you can give it."

"I need to repeat this riddle because it will tell me what gift you want for your birthday—I cannot buy it, because it is worth all the money I have, but only I can give it. Is that right?"

"Yes, Father."

"Well, now it is my turn to think about your riddle. I have to find the perfect present in the mystery."

Her father paced and pondered. He repeated the riddle over and over. "I cannot buy it, but only I can give it." He paced and pondered. Finally, he smiled, "I know what it is! I know what it is!" Now he had to think about how to give it.

When Ellen's birthday came there was no present from her father. She didn't expect one. After she had opened the presents from her brother and sister, from her mother and grandmother, and after the cake was all gone and the celebration over, Ellen's father said, "It is now time for Ellen's present from me. Ellen, come and sit with me."

So Ellen climbed into the armchair and sat on her father's lap. "My present to you is very special. I hope it is what you wanted—for it is not a book, or a toy, or clothes, but instead it is a present that is for all seasons and for each day. This year your birthday present from me is that we will spend time together every week, just the two of us. For you are my very special daughter and I love you dearly."

Ellen hugged him. "Oh, Father, I knew you would figure out the riddle."

Her father said, "You cannot buy it, for it is worth all the money you have, but only you can give it. It took me a long time to figure out the answer, but when I did I knew what gift you wanted. The answer was simple—give yourself."

"Oh, Father, I wanted a gift to make this year special. Time together with you will make this year the very best year of my life!"

Ellen looked at her father's eyes. "Why Father, you are crying!"

"Yes. You teach me more than any book I've ever read or written. By giving you time, I will gain more than I give."

It was Ellen's turn to figure out this riddle. How could her father, by spending time with her, get more than he gave? She thought she knew, love multiplies. But perhaps she would only understand when she was older, when she had children of her own.

But her father understood. And when he wrote an essay on Giving, he wrote "Give yourself." For he knew the wonder of this gift. Ralph Waldo Emerson.

X. Homily:

Dr. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist at the UC Los Angeles, has coined a phrase called mind sight. This, he says, is the ability to see your own mind and to see the mind of another.

We do this easily with a child. It was illustrated in our story about Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson made the commitment to spend time with his child, to give himself, to open himself up to the relationship with his daughter. And in the process of his discernment, as to what her riddle meant, he had to consider what she had in her mind. Through that, he connected to himself.

This, Siegel says, is mindsight.

Mindsight, he says, breeds an integration and this integration can change an individual, others and the course of the future.

If you were to search for Dr. Siegel on the Internet you would find a series of lectures that he has done where he is advocating that today's way of teaching is putting a child's mind in prison. The three R's, reading, writing and arithmetic, is causing a disconnected world to emerge. He says that there needs to be a change to a different three R's: reflection, relationship and resilience. These are skills that can be taught, and he is saying that there is extensive brain science that is showing that we reach this level of balance by understanding the nature of our minds. We understand the nature of our mind, which, he says, is not a noun, but rather a process.

Interestingly, this coincides with the teaching of Pythagoras, the 600 BC philosopher who was responsible for the early liberal arts tradition, which was teaching the mind, body and spirit connection. The schools of Pythagoras were designed to give students time for reflection, time to be in relationship and used tools that would calm the mind from its passions using music.

Now some 2500 years later, our contemporary scientists are preaching the same thing.

Siegel uses an illustration called Healthy Mind Platter – which includes sleep time, physical time, focus time, time in, down time, play time and connecting time. Not surprising, these follow the daily routine of the Pythagorean school.

But why does this really matter to us?

Siegel says that we are never done sculpting the brain to a different architecture and when we use mindsight to integrate our brains, our relationships thrive, our sense of vitality is heightened and we have a deeper sense of meaning as we go through the course of our day.

He describes how as human being we are changed by our cultural evolution. He says, which is probably not surprising to any of you, that our cultural evolution is moving in a direction of

mindlessness. He quotes Albert Einstein as saying that left to its own devices, that our minds perpetuate a sense of optical delusion of our separateness. And in that state, the brain will want to accumulate things and think that this body is separate. It is a recipe for unhappiness, both individually and collectively.

What we need to do, he says, is understand that the brain is a social organ of the body, and that it has the capacity to regulate our perceptions. He uses a hand model to explain how the brain works.

Again, what is this to us?

To me, I see this integration of knowledge about our brains, our minds, our passions, as our obligation to be religious people. As Unitarian Universalists, we espouse to be a presence in the world that furthers social justice, and brings compassion into the world. From our early religious forefathers, including Emerson, we created an affinity to reason, to thought, to free will, to making good in the world. In some ways, we are in the mainstream of this body, mind, spirit disconnect that breeds coldness and separateness in the world.

But as those thinking, reasoning people, we also have the capacity to apply ourselves to this emerging science and see how it will bring about harmony in the world. I find it fascinating that in this time there is colliding information – that there is great consistency in this essential knowledge. It's wonderful that Dr. Dan Siegel is speaking all over the place about the connection between mind, brain and relationship. It's awe inspiring that this is directly related to what we know about the theorems of Pythagoras, and how Einstein was preaching about the brain and its tendency to create an illusion that we are separate. It is no wonder that all of this has been exploited in our cultural evolution toward amassing goods and wealth for a limited amount of people.

And it seems exciting that we get to know these things. And as liberal religious beings, I advocate that it is our responsibility to be introduced to these concepts, to be prodded to understand that it is never too late to practice a mindfulness that will change our brains. Siegel talks about his work with a 92-year old man, who always had a dispassionate relationship with others. After therapy sessions with Siegel, the man's wife asked him if he had given her husband a brain transplant. That is how different he was – at 92.

I know for me, I sink into my old patterns. They are familiar. Sometimes I am convinced that it is impossible for me to make changes. And so I am emboldened by this opportunity, to be in awe of the connections, and I make a commitment to continue to understand that our minds are a self-regulating presence that is both embodied and relational and as we open ourselves to mind sight, we have the capacity to bring harmony to our world.

I hope you will join me.

For all this, and more, I am grateful.

XI. Closing Story: The Hidden Emerald

The old man leafed through the book, and fell to reading a page he came to. The boy waited, and then interrupted the old man, just as he himself had been interrupted.

‘Why are you telling me all this?’

‘Because you are trying to realize your destiny. And you are at the point where you’re about to give it all up.’

‘And that’s where you always appear on the scene?’

‘Not always in this way, but I always appear in one form or another. Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a crucial moment, I make it easier for things to happen. There are other things I do, too, but most of the time people don’t realize I’ve done them.’

The old man related that, the week before, he had been forced to appear before a miner, and had taken the form of a stone.

The miner had abandoned everything to go mining for emeralds. For five years he had been working a certain river, and had examined hundreds of thousands of stones, looking for the emerald. The miner was about to give up when, if he were to examine just one more stone, just one more – he would find his emerald.

Since the miner had sacrificed everything to his destiny, the old man decided to become involved. He transformed himself into a stone, which rolled up to the miner’s foot. The miner, with all the anger and frustration of his five fruitless years, picked up the stone and threw it aside. But he had thrown it with such force that it broke the stone it fell on, and there, embedded in the broken stone, was the most beautiful emerald in the world.

Paulo Coelho

XII. Benediction:

May you find what you’re looking for, may there be helpers along the way, and may we always remember that our passion to be alive and vibrant in the world is fed with well-being and harmony, a bit of focused attention as well.

XIII. Closing song. This Little Light of Mine

Seven daily essential mental activities to optimize brain matter and create well-being

Focus Time — When we closely focus on tasks in a goal-oriented way, we take on challenges that make deep connections in the brain.

Play Time — When we allow ourselves to be spontaneous or creative, playfully enjoying novel experiences, we help make new connections in the brain.

Connecting Time — When we connect with other people, ideally in person, and when we take time to appreciate our connection to the natural world around us, we activate and reinforce the brain's relational circuitry.

Physical Time — When we move our bodies, aerobically if medically possible, we strengthen the brain in many ways.

Time In — When we quietly reflect internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, we help to better integrate the brain.

Down Time—When we are non-focused, without any specific goal, and let our mind wander or simply relax, we help the brain recharge.

Sleep Time—When we give the brain the rest it needs, we consolidate learning and recover from the experiences of the day.