

“LIVING SPACIOUSLY”
A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 E. Philip Ln.
P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org

May 29, 2011

Call to Gather: from Henry David Thoreau
I love a wide margin to my life.¹

Reading: from Bernard Loomer

(Bernard Loomer was a process theologian who became a Unitarian Universalist later in life. In adult classes he facilitated at his UU church, he often asked participants, “What is the size of your soul?” For Loomer, “size” was a defining concept in spirituality. For emphasis, he usually wrote the word with capital letters and dashes. This passage describes what he meant.)

By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person’s soul, the range and depth of (your) love, (your) capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.²

Sermon

Sometimes sermons are kind of selfish. More often than you may think, the sermons you hear from me are really meant for me. Sometimes I preach consolation when I need consolation, challenge when I need challenge. So I’ll admit it: today I’m preaching what I need to hear.

This has felt like a season of loss for me. Many of you noted that Dottie announced her resignation about a week before my mother died. This felt like an apples and oranges thing at the time. Don’t get me wrong: I have loved working with Dottie and count her as a very good colleague and friend. But she’s not dying. And she’s not my mother! But a loss is a loss. I am certainly feeling a sense of loss as her departure date nears. Now the proximity of these losses feels more noteworthy.

1

http://books.google.com/books?id=73o98V6s7cC&pg=PA108&lpg=PA108&dq=thoreau+wide+margin&source=bl&ots=DV5NIBmYJ-&sig=MbM4pePelUoWwxmMT6sHwimjpEk&hl=en&ei=mSjpTcGClIfh0QHyzoyvAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=resul t&resnum=2&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=thoreau%20wide%20margin&f=false.

² <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/23672.shtml>.

And another loss looms larger than I expected. Later this week, my youngest kid will graduate from high school. A few months from now, he'll go off to college 1000 miles away. I have always kind of looked forward to the Empty Nest, and I still do in many ways. But it is the end of an era—that's for sure. Although we don't see our son that much given his busy life, it's actually pretty fun to hang around with him when we do get to see him. So his imminent flight from the nest feels like a loss, too.

Of course sitting for days and months on the pity pot isn't necessarily a good thing. My mom was old. She lived a good life, and with full faculties she decided it was time to quit struggling so hard to stay alive. And then she went fast and painlessly. Dottie is going on to a really cool opportunity. Her job change is good for her family. And of course this congregation is strong and healthy. We will get through this transition just fine. And my son is ready for college. The place he's going feels like a good match for him. So there's a lot of blessing woven finely in with these losses.

But still, I'm in need of a particular message today. The message I need to hear is this: acknowledge the losses, and live L-A-R-G-E anyway. I love the passage from Bernie Loomer that Dottie read. It suggests to me that there are two poles in the way we live our lives. On one end, we live our lives in a way that is tight, constricted, closed. We allow ourselves to be dominated by anxiety, fear, and worry. Our gaze stays internally focused, or reaches out just to include the little box of family and work around us. Our hands are clenched shut.

On the other end of the pole, we live L-A-R-G-E. We live spaciously. Mary Oliver writes in her poem "When Death Comes" that she wants to live this way right up to the end: "When it's over, I want to say: all my life/I was a bride married to amazement./I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms."³ When we live spaciously, we see the world as chock-full of opportunity. We live with open hands—and open hearts and minds. Our soul is L-A-R-G-E: it's deep and it's wide. Loomer talks about the "volume of life you can take into your being."

I think of my daughter's boyfriend during Packer games. "Okay, this play is H-U-G-E," he'll say before a key play—just so we're all paying attention adequately. Especially my daughter, who's kind of new to this Packer thing. "This is H-U-G-E!" He says this frequently. In truth there are a lot of significant plays during the course of a game. This is pretty much how he lives his life, too: he sees a lot of significant moments in life, too. He lives like a bride married to amazement, a bridegroom taking the world into his arms. He lives spaciously.

Of course he doesn't always live this way. None of us live always and forever on one end of the spectrum or the other. The spectrum between living L-A-R-G-E and living small is fluid. We move back and forth along the spectrum as we live our lives.

A great symbol of this fluidity comes from literature—from Dr. Seuss' Grinch.⁴ The Grinch: here is a creature who seems completely at one end of the spectrum. Perhaps his heart is literally too small. For whatever reason, he lives a small and constricted life. When he hears the sounds of Christmas joy from the residents of Whoville in spite of his theft of everything Christmasy, the Grinch's heart grows three sizes larger. We all have the Grinch in us—both the Grinch with too small a heart, and one with a heart so L-A-R-G-E. Dr. Seuss himself recognized this truth when he drew a self-portrait in which he's brushing his teeth and looking into the bathroom mirror. Guess who's looking back? Not Dr. Seuss, but the Grinch, looking

³ http://www.panhala.net/Archive/When_Death_Comes.html.

⁴ My colleague Rob Hardies connects the Grinch to this theme in an article he wrote for the *UU World*: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/23672.shtml>.

particularly nasty and mean!⁵ If the mean Grinch is in the saintly Dr. Suess, well, he must be in you and me, too!

Now I don't have much doubt that life is more joyous and fulfilling when we live L-A-R-G-E rather than small. Certainly this was true for the Grinch. So how can we live more consistently on the L-A-R-G-E end of the spectrum? I'll share a few ways that work for me.

A very significant way for a lot of human beings to live L-A-R-G-E is to be in nature. When you're looking out over the Grand Canyon—or looking up from deep within it—how can you not feel the beautiful, awesome E-N-O-R-M-I-T-Y of life? Or when you're lying on your back in a dark field on a clear summer's night, looking up at the vast array of stars.

For me it's not just the grand experiences of nature's vastness that make life feel L-A-R-G-E. I get the same feeling of spaciousness when I sit by a small, quiet North Woods lake, a loon coming up for air every now and then. Listening to the birds chirp, the breeze in the leaves, the frogs croaking, I feel how L-A-R-G-E life is. I think scientists get the same feeling not just by looking through a telescope, but by looking into a microscope as well. Even the microscopic can nudge us toward seeing the enormity of life.

It's no surprise that the Call to Gather quote comes from Thoreau. Here was a guy who mostly lived L-A-R-G-E. Declaring that he loved "wide margins" in life was another way of saying this. Clearly the place he found wide margins most intensely was in nature.

Another important avenue to living L-A-R-G-E for me is the arts. Take the Compassion Project event at the PAC a few weeks ago. What a magnificent event! Music, art, poetry and video, the Dalai Lama's voice saying "Appleton" were all beautifully integrated into a moving, compelling message about compassion. My heart felt three times L-A-R-G-E-R when I left the event than when I arrived.

Speaking of the Compassion Project—practicing compassion and love certainly helps me feel like my life and my living are L-A-R-G-E. Aiding a family member or a friend or a stranger in need, working for justice: these things connect me to something much larger than myself. Helping to build a better world helps me live spaciously.

Doing a spiritual practice also helps me live L-A-R-G-E, too—especially when gratitude is a very central part of my spiritual practice. When I don't get to my practice, it's easier to feel petty and entitled. My life becomes smaller. Feeling gratitude connects me to something greater than me.

A final way I live L-A-R-G-E is to recognize the spaciousness of time. This is really hard to do when we are rushing from one thing to the next. It's really hard to do when we realize just how short life is. Even if we beat our life expectancy, life goes by in a blink. Yet eternity is present in every moment. Every moment is connected to the enormity of time. Every moment is connected to all that stretches behind us and ahead of us for billions of years. Sure, we're only a dot on the timeline of the universe, but that dot is connected to everything that happened before, and everything that will happen after. When I am conscious of this, it helps me stop and breathe mindfully. Breathing reminds me of the brevity of life: one day, I won't be breathing. But it also reminds me of the continuity and the enormity of life; I'm breathing in some of the same atoms that the Buddha breathed in millennia ago. I'm breathing in atoms that were present at the Big Bang. I am a small part of something impossibly L-A-R-G-E!

All of this makes me think of a passage from the book *Saving Paradise*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker. Rebecca Parker is a UU minister; Rita Nakashima Brock is a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). They make a brilliant case in *Saving*

⁵ Dr. Suess, *Your Favorite Seuss* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 189.

Paradise that the early Christian church focused a lot on paradise. They conclude this after encountering countless scenes of paradise painted or sculpted in churches dating back to the first 800 or 900 years of Christianity—before bloody crucifixes became the central artistic symbol of the religion, before the Crusades. They were surprised that the pictures of paradise they found in the early Christian art were decidedly earthly, not heavenly.

The two authors spent many months searching for images of paradise in ancient churches, especially in Italy and Turkey. The passage I'm thinking of describes one such quest. It has stuck with me. They were riding up into the mountains of Turkey with their cab driver, Ercun, in search of an ancient monastery. Ercun stopped to ask directions from an old woman. She got in the cab, and they continued driving up the steep road. Nakashima Brock and Parker write:

As we climbed, the sunny sky turned gray and began to roil with black clouds. Fat raindrops plopped onto the windshield. The higher we ascended, the more fiercely it rained. Soon the windshield wipers hardly marked the sheets of water pouring over the cab. After a long climb, we emerged into what looked like a big meadow, barely visible through the torrent.

Ten bumpy minutes later, we stopped under a cluster of tall trees, and the old woman shook Ercun's hand. They said goodbye in Turkish, and she turned to smile at us and stepped out of the cab...

Ercun pointed into the opaque downpour. "Church," he said. The hazy silhouette of stone ruins stood just beyond the trees. It had been hot and sunny (when we left), so we brought no gear for rain. We covered ourselves as best we could and conducted a quick and cursory look at the ruins, which held little art beyond a few relief carvings on the crumbling walls and capitals. Disappointed and nearly soaked, we returned quickly to the cab.

The deluge ceased abruptly, and golden light leaked through the churning clouds. In the crystalline air, a rainbow straddled a vast rolling meadow below a ring of gray-blue peaks. Spread before us were acres of lush, emerald pastures and orchards dotted by swaying flowers and flocks of snowy sheep. The three of us sat in stunned silence in the cab for some time, simply gazing at what we had crossed unseeing as it now lay before us, vivid in the golden light.

Ercun retraced our route across the breathtaking valley. We rolled down our windows and passed small, carefully tended fields of cucumbers, tomatoes, grapes, peppers, beans, and onions. We smelled the wet grass and earth. Fruit trees sagged with ripe plums, peaches, and early apples. As we approached the turn that would take us down the mountain, we asked Ercun to stop. He pulled the cab next to some sheep and turned off the motor. In the moist stillness, we could hear the ticks of the cooling engine and the rip-click sound of the grazing sheep. On the opposite side of the valley, where we found the ruins, we could see (a) village..., nestled in the trees. An orange searchlight of sun streamed through a gap in the mountains and clouds, illuminating the ancient monastery stones. We paused a few moments to breathe in the fragrances brought by the breeze ruffling the grass and drank deeply of the valley. Then we turned down the mountain...As we headed west, we could see crimson, gold, and mauve-streaked clouds billowing into a deepening indigo sky—our last glimpse of paradise as we rounded a switchback and the valley disappeared from sight.

Searching for images of paradise, we found the real thing. From ancient peoples in lands such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Israel, Christians inherited the idea that paradise is in this world. Our arduous journey told us that paradise is neither easy to find nor a guaranteed destination. But with a wise guide and an intrepid driver, we found it is possible to arrive there.⁶

Living small, we miss the reality that paradise can be found here, on earth, in our back yards and the nearby park (as well as the Grand Canyon and the valley in Turkey. We overlook that we can find paradise in each other's faces. For too much of our lives, this reality is veiled, like the lush, gorgeous valley in Turkey was veiled by the torrential rain. We need to find ways to pierce the veil so that we can see and drink in the beauty and the E-N-O-R-M-I-T-Y of life. It's there all the time; we just don't always see it.

I hope that for each of you there will be magical moments this summer when you will see how L-A-R-G-E life truly is. Slow down. Smell the roses. Watch a sunset. Hug someone you love. This is my message for you today.

Oh yeah—it's my message for me, too!

© 2011 by Roger B. Bertschausen. All rights reserved.

⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Saving Paradise* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), pp. 218-220.