The Unitarian Church of Montpelier
September 13, 2009
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall

"The Posture of Possibility"

Our reading this morning comes from Paul Hostovsky and his book of poems called Bird in the Hand. In addition to being a poet, Hostovsky is an interpreter for the deaf in the Boston area. His poem is called "Coconut."[1]

Coconut

Bear with me – I want to tell you something about happiness
it's hard to get at but the thing is
I wasn't looking
I was looking somewhere else when my son found it in the fruit section
and came running
holding it out in his small hands
asking me what it was and could we keep
it it only cost 99 cents
hairy and brown
hard as a rock
and something swishing around inside
and what on earth
and where on earth
and this was happiness
this little ball of interest beating inside his chest
this interestedness beaming out
from his face pleading
happiness
and because I wasn't happy I said to put it back
because I didn't want it
because we didn't need it
and because he was happy he started to cry
right there in aisle five
so when we got it home we put it in the middle of the kitchen table
and sat on either side of it and began
to consider how to get inside of it

---

[1] Paul Hostovsky, "Coconut," from Bird in the Hand. Available online at Garrison Keillor's The Writer's Almanac: http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2006/09/25.

It was a weekday afternoon like any other in the spring of 2004 when I had my introduction to the Zen Buddhist concept of “Beginner’s Mind.”

It was in Arlington, Virginia–just outside Washington DC where I had made my home for three years right after college. Luke, my four-year old babysitting charge, and I were driving back to his house after I had picked him up from school. Ahead of us was an afternoon of snacks, playing with dinosaurs, and maybe watching *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* for the twenty-seventh time.

Having quit my all-consuming job on Capital Hill a few months earlier to have more time to apply to divinity schools, I had taken a part-time gig as a nanny for my friends Drew and Liz, which meant spending my afternoons with their son Luke. Already in the weeks I had been babysitting Luke, I had learned some important tips for taking care of children – things like: never leave the house without snacks and never promise to play dinosaurs all afternoon if you don’t really mean it.

But that afternoon I was about to learn something beyond practical lessons—I was in for a spiritual lesson that has stayed with me in the years since.

Here’s what followed: as we pulled up to the house, I heard Luke’s small voice from the backseat say, “Mar, let’s make a waterfall.” A waterfall, I thought? What does he mean? But, since one of the other practical lessons I’d learned in my time with Luke was to sometimes just follow his lead, I said “Okay,” and followed him up the stairs and into the house.

With singular focus, Luke went right to the kitchen, dragged a stool to the sink, filled a sandbox bucket with water, instructed me to do the same, then marched quickly back to the porch. He set up some of his action guys and a few dinosaurs on the stairs, paused, then dumped his bucket from the top step. I quickly did the same then we stepped back and watched while the water cascaded beautifully down the rocky ledges and over the heads of the plastic figures.

Oh, I thought, a waterfall.

As we spent the next half hour shuttling back and forth to the kitchen for more water to keep the falls flowing, I marveled at the fact that Luke, with the fresh mind of a four-year old, had seen a flowing waterfall, where I, in my rational adult brain had seen only stairs.

Just another case of a child’s imagination, perhaps. And I know those of you who are parents or teachers or caregivers for kids in other ways can probably think of similar moments when you were struck by the imaginative power of a child.

For me, however, my experience with the waterfall that afternoon went beyond illustrating Luke's tremendous gifts for imagination and creative play. It pointed out to me a deeper spiritual truth.

Sometimes, I learned, our knowledge about how something works—our expertise on a subject—can actually get in the way of our ability to see new possibilities for the very thing about which we think we know so much.

If we already know what something is and how it works, then it can be difficult to see it from a different angle. When we know that stairs are for climbing into the house, when we know that's their purpose, then it's hard to consider that they might also be a perfectly good waterfall.

Paradoxically, Luke taught me, letting go of what we think we see can allow us to see something in an entirely new way.

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's there are few.

That teaching, as the order of service tells us, comes from the late Shunryu Suzuki, a Japanese Zen master who came to California in the late 1950's, ended up staying there until his death in 1971, and in the intervening years, founded a Zen Monastery where he taught many Americans about Zen Buddhism and its essential practice of meditation.

In his introduction to Suzuki's classic text "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," his protégé Richard Baker writes, "the practice of Zen mind is beginner's mind. The innocence of the first inquiry—what am I?—is needed throughout the Zen practice." He goes on, "the mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all possibilities."[2]

There is no way I can do justice today to the vast and varied tradition of Zen Buddhism, about which some of you as practitioners know a great deal more than I. But nonetheless, I want to take this idea of "beginner's mind" and use it as a springboard for us to ask what it means to approach life as Richard Baker's quote suggests.

What would it mean to live our days and our years with the mind of a beginner, rather than an expert?

What would it look like if, like Luke and his waterfall, we remained open to unexpected possibilities?

What if we assumed a "posture of possibility" more often?

---

[2] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), 13-14.

In their book, *The Art of Possibility*, Benjamin and Rosamund Stone Zander tackle these very questions. The Zanders are an extraordinary husband and wife team – he a world renowned musician and conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, she a therapist, painter and executive coach.

The Zanders start with the premise that "much, much more is possible than people ordinarily think."[3] In each chapter, they describe a practice that, if undertaken, can help you enter what they call "the universe of possibility."

There are several sermons within the Zanders' book—and in keeping with my preaching professors' advice, I'm going to try to avoid passing all of them along. But there is one thread from their narrative which I want to share with you:

Throughout their examples, Ben and Roz point out that one of the most important places we can assume a posture of possibility is in our relationships with other people. Seeing those with whom we are in relationship—whether our oldest friend or our most challenging relative—in a new way can have a profound transformative power.

Ben, the conductor, tells a story from when he was rehearsing Mahler's Ninth Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra of London, and he noticed one of the violinists slouching while she was playing. Unlike the rest of the musicians in her section who were, in Zander's words "fired up and visibly demonstrative,"[4] Tanya was overly relaxed and seemingly indifferent. On the surface of things—and certainly to Zander, it appeared that the violinist was unengaged with the performance and that she did not really care about the music.

Zander decided to step back from his assumptions about what Tanya's body language was telling him and to ask her directly what was going on with her performance.

To his surprise, Tanya revealed that, rather than not caring about the music, she was having a hard time playing her violin to the tempo that Ben had set. She conveyed that the relationship between her bow and the strings felt out of wack in certain sections of the piece. Zander took seriously her feedback and before that night's performance, he recalibrated his interpretation of the Mahler score, thinking about Tanya and her bow. The performance went off without a hitch—and Tanya was fully engaged.

Zander later learned that Mahler was Tanya's favorite composer. Her earlier body language had reflected her disappointment with not being able to play her beloved music properly—not her indifference to the music.

---

[3] Rosamond Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life,* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 2.
[4] Zanders, 37.

Zander had the ability to step back from what he thought he could tell from Tanya's performance—to empty his mind of his assumptions so he could consider other possibilities.

He didn't use this language—but to me, in those moments, Zander engaged his beginner's mind. He assumed a posture of possibility. The expert conductor stepped back, and made room for another interpretation to enter.

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's there are few.

Perhaps it is not so hard, after all, to see the virtues of beginner's mind—or to grasp how keeping our hearts open to new possibilities can enrich our experiences and breath new life into our old relationships.

But even if we can understand its importance, that doesn't mean it is easy for us to enter a posture of possibility—or to stay in it for long. It takes regular spiritual practice to keep our mind open to what is possible—rather than be closed off and attached to our personal expert version of what is.

To help us, Zen Buddhism offers sitting meditation. The Zanders suggest we practice noticing and questioning our assumptions.

The poet Rumi wrote, "there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the earth." And so too there is more than one way to enter and remain in the Zanders' "universe of possibility." There is more than one way to maintain your beginner's mind. This is what our Unitarian Universalist faith teaches us—there are many paths to the same destination.

What matters is not how you do it—but that you do it.

Practicing the art of possibility matters. It makes a difference. It matters in our individual human relationships and experiences—as Ben Zander's story illustrates.

And it matters, too, when it comes to seeking change and transformation in the wider world.

In her novel *Beloved,* Toni Morrison describes the character Baby Suggs preaching to a gathering of former slaves. Morrison writes:

"She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was they grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they could not have it."[5]

[5] Toni Morrison, *Beloved,* (New York: Plume, 1988), 88.

I believe that these words of Morrison's, though written about a particular time and place in our American history, still hold value for all of us here today.

Perhaps especially in this time, as our nation and our Congress considers whether it is indeed possible for all Americans to have quality affordable health care, we need Morrison's words and we need our beginner's mind.

Because, if <u>we</u> cannot see it, <u>we</u> cannot have it.

If we cannot envision a more just and humane world—a world that has not yet come into being—then we will not be able to achieve it.

If we cannot believe in the possibility of health care reform, then we won't work for it. And if we don't work for it, we won't have it.

If we cannot see the waterfall, then we will be left with only the stairs.

Without possibility, there can be no transformation.

I pray—and let us all pray—that the possible becomes the real this year—that health care becomes a right in this nation, not a privilege.

And on that note, we could end. But I cannot resist—in the spirit of the musical Zanders' who end their book with a coda—offering a brief one of my one.

A few years after my experience on Luke's front porch, I was reminded of the lesson it taught me when Paul Hostovsky's poem "Coconut" –this morning's reading–arrived in my email inbox. It came via a daily missive from Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac.

I loved this poem immediately—perhaps because it felt so real.

Reading through it, I initially recognized myself in the narrator, who fails to see in a coconut what his son does: an object of astonishment and wonder, a new mystery to be explored.

As the parent/adult/expert, the narrator tells his son to put this amazing discovery back—because, after all, they don't need a coconut. They have no use for it. It takes his son's tears in aisle five to tug him into seeing the object from a different angle.

Now, when I go back to this poem, I try to read from the son's perspective. This is my practice in beginner's mind.

I read from the perspective of the child who takes delight and finds happiness in his not knowing. I try to take on the mindset of a person who is open to all the amazing possibilities.

The poet writes:

“ . . . and what on earth
and where on earth
and this was happiness
this little ball of interest beating inside his chest . . . ”

May it be so with us.
May we keep practicing our own beginner’s mind.
And may we adopt more often the posture of possibility.

The world needs it.

Amen.