

First Unitarian Church

October 28, 2018

This week, on his blog called Possibility Conspiracy, the Rev. Aaron White published a piece called “Ash, Bone, and Temporary.”ⁱ Ash, bone, and temporary.

In it he describes something that I don’t remember anyone ever mentioning when Aaron and I were in divinity school together: the scattering of a person’s ashes. We didn’t learn anything in particular about that in school. But it’s a part of ministry. And it is a deeply spiritual thing to do.

When ministers help scatter ashes, we are usually with the family or friends of the person who has died. But in the case Aaron describes, the loved ones did not wish to take part. It was just Aaron and a minister who works with him. They had the ashes not just of one person, but of three. One of the deceased had never met Aaron, had no idea Aaron would someday do such an intimate thing for him.

The ministers found themselves standing in their church’s memorial garden in dress clothes on a hot Texas afternoon, gathering up handfuls of ash and praying as they scattered it. Because it was a hot day, they were sweating, and some of the ash stuck to their hands. Some got under their fingernails. This kind of ash isn’t light and fluffy like the wisps you see rising from an autumn campfire. The ash of a person is heavy, gritty, and has bone in it. You can tell what it is.

Aaron wondered what a passerby would think. He writes,

But I have to tell you, it was good medicine for me. I was feeling pretty low today, about myself and the world. It was a day where everything had seemingly gone wrong already, and the day wasn’t half over. I had gotten in my own way and other people’s at work. My kids woke up at an unimaginable hour, and so did I, with what seemed liked non-stop whining from all of us. I felt unproductive in important tasks, and I was just in a bad mood overall, feeling low. Placing that ash into the earth, their ash, did me good. It was, as it usually is, a shot of instant perspective. So little matters. What does matter, matters so much...

You and I are temporary, like everyone you’ve ever met and loved. The perspective gained from holding human ash in your hands is hard to replicate. The symbolism that comes with letting physical evidence of your finitude slip through your fingers and stick to you all at the same time is hard to miss.

I thought of Aaron’s words as I prepared for today’s meditation on those who have died; as I thought of the photos that would be all around the sanctuary, photos of family members and loved ones.

“It is a shot of instant perspective.” The real presence of death in our lives. A vaccine against meaninglessness. If we let it be.

That shot of perspective—when we need it and we allow ourselves to receive it and we don’t turn away in distraction—that shot of perspective reveals our lives to us.

“So little matters. What does matter, matters so much.”

A shot of instant perspective nudges us to ask some hard questions.

If we look at our lives, what does it *look* like matters to us? What kind of person does it *look* like we are trying to be? What are we making of ourselves? Not in the sense of outward signs of success—what are we making of ourselves as human beings? Are we still in formation? Toward what goal? Stagnating? Where? And when we are dead and gone, what continuing impact, what formative influence will echo in the lives of those who have known us?

Whether we have the courage and take the time to reflect on these questions, or whether we give ourselves over to distractions—this will make all the difference in our formation.

Do we live as though we are steering our own lives? Or as though our lives are on autopilot, or worse, on a crash course that we feel we cannot change?

Are we steering our own lives...

Now some things are not in our control. For one thing, we’re born into whatever we’re born into. It is what it is. The philosopher Martin Heidegger called this “thrown-ness.” Like we’re just thrown in. We’re thrown into a certain context. Family. Culture. Geography. Socioeconomic status. Opportunity, or the lack of it.

Some people believe our souls are attracted to a particular birth because of our karma, or lessons we need to learn. I always worry about the impact of these kinds of statements—they sound self-righteous when they come from someone with a privileged life and my worry is that the speaker will fail to examine their own role in systems of oppression.

But even if it is true in some way, we do not retain any awareness of it. Our experience from birth is thrown-ness. As though we’ve been randomly thrown in.

We come into the world into a context, and with a complete set of DNA. We’ve got some hardwiring. We will be drawn toward some things—maybe music, maybe mechanics— and repulsed by others, because of the way we are made.

But our consciousness is undeveloped and, wrapped in a little blanket on the day we arrive in this world, we are only about the size and shape of a big burrito.

A lot of formation is still going to happen.

Let's pause here for a moment with this image because it's something all humans have in common.

All across this country, just as all over the world, babies born. Surrounded by formative influences beyond their control. Responding according to their hardwiring, and according to their best knowledge as they learn, and according some measure of free will that is impossible to disentangle from the rest of what we are.

At what point do some of those babies become our enemies? And we theirs?

We start out so similar in that way, but we end up in wildly different places in terms of how we view the world and one another.

If we had been born with the same hardwiring and same set of formative influences as someone who holds very different political opinions than ours, maybe we would have come out closer to where they are.

Along the way in our lives, small decisions also lead to vastly different outcomes. The decision to make friends with this person instead of that one, to read this book or that one, take this class or this job... or that one.

A while back, I read a story about a search and rescue team trying to find a missing man at Joshua Tree National Park. The team found his car, and set out on the trail he must have followed, but as they went along, they discovered all the "cascading decision points" that confront a hiker.

The trail formed junctions with other trails, crossed dry stream beds or washes where the man might have taken a turn. "As they compound over time," the author wrote, "these minor decisions give rise to radically different situations: an exposed cliff instead of a secluded valley, say, or a rattlesnake-filled canyon instead of a quiet plain."ⁱⁱ

One of the great questions of our time is how do we find each other again in this *social* landscape?

All of life is like that. Decisions compounding to lead us toward vastly different outcomes. Not only that, even where we seem to be walking a straight line, even the slightest change, over many miles, will lead to something vastly different.

Now this branching of ourselves and our paths is a source of opportunity, but also some angst.

As I moved through my late thirties, I remember becoming acutely aware of the paths not taken. When we are very young, the possibilities are laid out in front of us and—even though the particularities of a life or context set some limits—the array of things we could learn and do and become seem innumerable. Too many to count.

As time passes and the process of formation takes place, we leave many junctures behind. The paths not taken. It's too late now for me to become a gymnast. I've chosen the path of religion and enchiladas.

I've been trying to eat healthier lately you guys and every metaphor has green chiles and cheese on it right now.

It's too late now for me to become a gymnast. I will never do a backflip. At least not on purpose. I once did a front flip while trying to ski. I'll never be a ski instructor.

The older we get, the further down our actual paths we go, the more our past options fall away behind us, becoming if not impossible, at least ever more difficult to attain.

This is, I think, at the heart of what we call a midlife crisis—the dawning realization of how many paths lie untaken too far in the distance behind us to reconsider, and a reckoning with where we find ourselves, whether it has been a largely conscious or largely unconscious journey, and with these the mortal angst of FOMO. Fear of missing out.

It's not only later in life. I've seen young adults agonize over college majors with that same sense of no return.

But even though we leave old junctions behind, even though our decisions lead us down particular paths, even though we may experience grief that we cannot change the past, if we look to our future formation with a sense of scarcity, then that's only because we have not yet understood life properly.

Every day, at every age, there are new possibilities before us... especially, always, the possibility of becoming larger spiritually than we were. That how Alice Walker speaks of it.ⁱⁱⁱ Becoming larger spiritually.

Maybe you have known someone with a large spiritual presence. Not in the sense of being flashy and woo-woo or possessing a lot of knowledge about religious issues. Those qualities may cause someone to take up a lot of space in a room, but spiritually large they do not make. Not in the way I think Alice Walker means it.

A person with a large spiritual presence, the kind that emanates from deep within, is a person who knows peace inside their self, and is therefore truly present to others. They experience the same feelings as anyone else, they may have a quiet or feisty personality, they may speak and smile quietly or talk in animated tones and with a belly laugh. However they are, they are certainly not perfect. But what they consistently return to and radiate is love.

Love born from a sincere engagement with life. They have asked the hard questions. They have sat with their uncertainty. They have let go of what is already gone.

They have turned from resentment to gratitude. We're going to delve into gratitude beginning next Sunday.

In this morning's reading, Stanley Kunitz writes,

"In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

'Live in the layers,
not on the litter.'"

In other words, go deep. Don't skim along the surface. Let the heavy ashes in your hand inform your questions.

"I am not done with my changes." Kunitz wrote this when he was in his 70's.

Think of it! You're not done yet. Did you mess up? Today is a new day. Got goals? Keep unfolding toward them. Are you happy? How will your joy enlarge your soul?

The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman said, "Look well to the growing edge! All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born." He said, "The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit." Look well to the growing edge!

Life is not a spot we stand on, but a path we walk. You've got a spiritual compass within you. Use it to set your course.

Last week, we lost Ike Payne. He died suddenly, while recuperating from heart surgery. Ike was a longtime member of this congregation. A military man. He was one of only three black Americans to integrate the US Air Force Academy in 1959. He flew B-52s.

Ike was a lifelong learner. Always in formation. Learning, traveling, setting goals. As he aged, he began setting not just learning or travel goals, but character goals. Empathy. Compassion. Gratitude. Humility.

Is that not beautiful?

In his last weeks, those who met him commented on his kindness. His presence. It looks to me as though, in his continuous formation, he became spiritually large.

"When you write my eulogy, don't put in a bunch of fluff," he said. He had that humility. He didn't say anything about a sermon. I hope he wouldn't mind that I have shared these few details, many of which are reflected in his obituary.

I was touched by his pursuit of his own formation. Our fellow UU. May his passing be in peace.

So little matters. What does matter, matters so much.

Will you join me in a closing prayer?

Let's breathe.

And bring ourselves to attention before the Spirit of Love,

That great magnet for the spiritual compass.

We give thanks for those who have gone before. For the richness of their living, and for the formation we may do in our own lives for having known them.

We bless any who are newly grieving. In Pennsylvania and in Albuquerque, and everywhere. May they be comforted during this painful time. In their sadness, may there also be peace.

Love, help us to move toward humility, generosity, empathy, compassion.

Help us to move from resentment to gratitude.

And in our continuous formation, may we make our lives be a blessing upon others, through our manner of being in the world.

Amen.

ⁱ White, Aaron. "Ash, Bone, & Temporary (5 Min Read)." *Possibility Conspiracy*, 18 Oct. 2018, possibilityconspiracy.com/2018/10/19/ash-bone-temporary/.

ⁱⁱ Manaugh, Geoff. "Tragically Lost in Joshua Tree's Wild Interior." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 Mar. 2018, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/22/magazine/voyages-joshua-tree-lost-hiker.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ From "Living by the Word." Qtd. in *Touchstones Journal*, October 2018. P 7.