

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
October 23, 2011
Ministerial Intern Elizabeth Buffington Nguyen

“Every Single Soul is a Poem”

Reading

Excerpt from Every Single Soul

-

No matter where I roam
I know every single soul is poem
written on the back of God's hand.

You see people are so beautiful in love
that's why I'm reminded of life's precious moments every time
I see lovers walkin' by in the park
close my eyes and I stop reminisce
to see a little baby...blessin' the world with another soul.

I'd like to sing a little song
dedicated to the people who would like to sing along
'cause every little song has little beats and notes
like every little lake has little trees and boats
all people deserve a safe and warm home
'cause every single soul is a poem
written on the back of God's hand.

This past summer I worked at a library. It was straightforward, unlike ministry, and I loved it. I scanned things. I took things off shelves. I put things on shelves. I told you that I couldn't waive your fines.

And sometimes I recycled books. It was a surreal thing, being tasked with dumping carts and carts of library books – now quickly becoming former library books, into blue recycling dumpsters. Most of these were bound periodicals – magazines and newspapers that are now in digital form. The thunk of each book landing in the bottom of the dumpster was satisfyingly loud. As a graduate student, I think took special pleasure in this. Ha! I thought, “I don't have to read you, I get to recycle you!” This part of my job was so simple, so straightforward; books in the bin.

There was also something naughty, wrong and sad about throwing books, particularly former library books into dumpsters, spines all a-splay, pages creased and bindings cracking with the weight of the next book falling.

I felt bad recycling books, perhaps for the same reason some of you are visibly cringing as I describe bindings breaking, pages crumpling. Most of us have been taught, either by parents or teachers or by librarians that books are sacred. Objects of reverence to be treated with the

utmost care. The written word on paper is holy. There's a reason that book burning in movies signals the apocalypse and in nations the worst sort of repression.

This I've learned well: treating books badly is really bad. I remember making book covers out of paper bags in grade school. I remember my mother holding up a spectacularly creased copy of the *The Boxcar Children: Lighthouse Mystery*, and, voice full of disappointment and conviction, flapping the abused pages in my direction, lecturing me on how I should and should not treat books.

So when I hear poet, musician, and activist Michael Franti sing "Every single soul is a poem/written on the back of God's hand," I believe him and I also remember that so often we do not treat each other, we do not treat ourselves like poetry – we so often do not afford the reverence we easily give to books, to our own souls, to the souls of our sisters, brothers, siblings in this world.

"No matter where I roam," sings Michael, "Every single soul is a poem." Whether you're into God or not, the poetry of it – the idea that we are each a work of art, known like the back of the holiest hand – that's powerful. I cannot hear those words without thinking of the most recent time I treated myself or someone I love like less than poetry. We are all worthy of such reverence – that is certain. We are all as holy as the pages of a beloved novel, the lines of a favorite poem, the stores of sacred scripture. And it is so easy, so easy to feel like less.

The task of seeing our own souls as holy is one that many religions traditions and practices take up. They offer metaphors, ways of thinking about us, as humans connected to the divine: humans souls as part of the body of God; human souls as permanently and irrevocably connected to divinity, human souls that are one with the holy before birth and after death with this time on Earth a brief separation.

I am in favor of what I'm sure many would call a very simple way of thinking about the holiness of souls. Like the mathematical property of identity: Our souls are holy because souls are holy in the same way nature is holy because it is holy.

From this perspective the task of seeing and treating our own souls as holy is not one that can be accomplished through more thorough reading of theology or through regular spiritual practice (though of course the reading of theology and the doing of spiritual practice can't hurt!) but through a transformation our view of ourselves wholly.

Of the six sources that Unitarian Universalism draws on, the first is "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." In this direct experience are the seeds for transforming how we see and treat our souls. And I say that, knowing that, many of us already know theoretically that our souls are holy. It's in our heads; we see human sacredness as worthy of reverence just like poetry. But knowing it our heads is so different than knowing it in our hearts. As Rumi says, at some point we must "stop the words now" and "open the window in the centre of our chest, letting the spirits fly in and out."

Through experiences that help us transform what we know into how we feel and thus how we can treat ourselves and others, we pray that we may come to the place where everything, including our own souls, is music, where to paraphrase the words of playwright and poet Ntozake Shange, we may find god in ourselves, and love her, love her fiercely.

One of the deepest ways to engage this ongoing process of transformation is through music. I first heard Michael Franti from my Aunt Mary's sound system one summer in Rochester, NY. By day I was an intern for a public defender and by night I listened to the sound of the city sweating and marveled at the chaos and injustice of the courthouse. My Aunt Mary

was, still is an intense Franti fan. The recordings she pumped out of that house in Southwest Rochester were from a live concert so my introduction to Michael's music was punctuated with applause and 5 minute long bass solos.

Out of those recordings came a musical journey that found me singing along at concerts in Indiana and Detroit, sharing my newfound musical crush with friends, and turning to those songs when my soul really didn't feel like a poem, when my faith in my family, in my communities, in this world was falling apart. I turned to these songs when my faith in anything I could ever hope to call God was turning to fragments. One album in particular, appropriately titled *Stay Human*, consistently provided me with what Franti calls "a soulshine." He has a song, by that name, that offers these words: "Take ya time/unwind ya mind/we all need a little soulshine."

I love idea of a soulshine. I imagine a own soul, tarnished from whatever crappy thing just happened, looking a little raggedy from wear and tear and general use, from bills and loss and trying to get places on time, having it's own little soulshine – the soul version of being buffed and polished with care – a soul shine could be a bike ride, a kitchen dance party with friends, a tickle fight, some really good roasted vegetables, whatever leaves a soul feeling shinier, refreshed, unwound.

And I love that it sounds like something you've just got to do – it's maintenance: if we don't do it, our souls suffer, everything runs less smoothly, the bumps hit us hard and repairs are more costly. "Take your time," sings Michael; "unwind your mind, we all need a little soulshine."

I can't talk about the good news that Michael Franti sings without talking about the title track of the album, also called "Stay Human." The refrain of this song is basically the Michael Franti version of inherent worth and dignity: he sings, "all the freaky people make the beauty of the world." How amazing is that? All the freaky people make the beauty of this world.

In the song he also sings, "I'm giving thanks for bein' human every morning...Tell your neighbor tell a friend every flower got a right to be bloomin'! Stay Human!"

Sometimes we just need to hear the same good news, over and over, from different sources. It's not enough for our minister, our friends, our moms to tell me to take care of ourselves. Sometimes we just need to hear in a song, telling us to have a little soulshine. Sometimes, it's not enough to know in our heads that our souls are beautiful, sometimes I want to hear that truth pumping through speakers on a Saturday night. Sometimes it's nice to have a melody to go with our theology, some inherent worth and dignity that we can sing along to.

Every flower has a right to be blooming, stay human. Every single soul is a poem. We are wondrous, beautiful creatures and are lives are confusing and hard and messy and blissful and heartbreaking and joyous. That is the poetry within each of our souls. That is the freakiness that beautifies this world.

The width of our lives, the depth of our feeling is a miracle. That we are here is the holiest thing. Let us celebrate it. Let us treat it with reverence, let us hold it in our hands like we would hold a favorite poem, a beloved novel, a new library book.

May we feel it in our bones, know it in our hearts, live in our lives – our souls are poems. All the freaky people make the beauty of this world.

Every single soul is a poem, written on the back of God's hand.

Amen and blessed be.

Benediction

Join hands with your neighbor. We give thanks for this blessed day, for this time to gather together in worship. May we seek out soulshine. May we know that all our souls are poems; and may we live that truth with our hands and our hearts. May we know that we can come to a place where everything be music.