175 years ago this July, barely a half mile from here, Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed the senior class at Harvard’s Divinity College.

In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy.

In the nearly two centuries since Emerson spoke these words, how little has changed, and how much.

The sun still shines as brightly, the birds sing as joyously, the shade of night brings the same welcome.

But the child—the wanton, reckless child has broken the toy.

The earth I explored and marveled at as a boy a half-century ago is no more.

Oceans are rising. Glaciers are melting. Arctic sea ice is vanishing. Coral reefs are dying. Drought spreads. Crops wither. Wildfires rage. Extreme weather floods the coasts and batters the heartland. Unprecedented numbers of entire species are driven to extinction by human activity.

Maybe our own species will be next.

And then last Monday, Patriots Day, a perfect New England spring day in our city on the hill—terror and mayhem.

Lives ended and upended, a world of beauty and normalcy shattered into fragments of pain and confusion.

Worse, we knew that someone had done this, had wished for it, planned for it, rejoiced in it. And that someone was still among us.

The very same day, in Iraq, coordinated bombings and a shooting left fifty dead and nearly three hundred injured.
Wednesday night fire and explosion in Texas at a fertilizer plant with multiple safety violations, not apparently an act of terror but of how we put food on our table cheap. Fourteen people now confirmed dead, ten of them first responders, with hundreds more injured.

Earthquakes this week in Iran, Pakistan, and China left hundreds dead and thousands injured.

So much suffering. So much horror. So much brokenness.

What do we do with our pain? What do we do with our grief? What do we do with our anger?

First we must feel them.

We must feel everything we feel—all the pain, all the grief, all the rage—let them possess us, let them course through our bodies, surge through our souls, and sweep us clean.

Let our hearts be broken.

Let our hearts be broken open.

Open to it all—the ugliness and the beauty, the cowardice and the courage, the despair and the hope, the sorrow and the joy.

“Life is filled with suffering,” teaches the Vietnamese Zen master and war refugee Thich Nhat Hanh. “Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time.”

You don’t have to be a Zen master. You just have to pay attention to the signs of wonder all around us.

Brian Downes couldn’t be with us here this morning, but if he were he could have delivered the sermon instead of me.

With his son and daughter-in-law both gravely injured by a terrorist bombing and now facing their future life as amputees, here’s what Brian says: “What I’m thinking about right now is that 99.9 percent of humanity is full of heart and soul and love for their fellow human beings, and those people saved my son’s life this week.”

Paying attention means looking deeply into everything.

We don’t really know what to make of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, do we?
Is he American or Chechen? A sweet kid or an angry jihadist? A gifted student or a troubled stoner? A sensitive, suggestible teenager in thrall of his big brother or a confident leader who knew exactly what he was doing?

What if he is all of these things?

What if, however monstrous his crimes, we can’t file him neatly under “monster”?

What if the only completely accurate label is “human being”?

But that can’t be.

Because then he would be one of us.

A very long time ago, I was a high school wrestler. It’s an individual sport, but it’s also a team sport. I know the bond among wrestlers.

So I got exactly what Peter Payack was talking about. Peter coached Dzhokhar for three years at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, where he was an all-star wrestler and team captain.

When he heard that Dzhokhar was a suspect, Peter said “It was like a bomb going off in my heart . . . because [he] was one of my guys.”

And when I heard Peter’s words, I thought: In the eyes of God, they’re all “my guys.”

Every single one of ’em.

Every single one of us.

That’s the core of my faith.

That’s the essence of Universalism.

Each of us is responsible and accountable for what we do.

But no matter what we do, no matter how fatal our mistake or contemptible our conduct, we cannot be cut off from our connection with each other or from God’s infinite love.

Ours is a paradoxical faith for a paradoxical world.

And even as that world breaks and it breaks our hearts, we are grateful for wholeness.

Grateful for first responders who plunge into the carnage to rescue the wounded disregarding the danger that another explosion could take their life, too.
Grateful for athletes who after running 26.2 miles keep on running to donate blood.

Grateful for bystanders who tear their clothing into tourniquets.

Grateful for police officers and firefighters and paramedics who risk their lives every day to keep us safe.

Grateful for friends and family who, at our bedside in the valley of the shadow of death, take our hands, whisper in our ears, and by the power of their love will us back to life.

Grateful for a sip of juice.

Grateful for hospital food.

Grateful for fresh air and open space after a day of lockdown.

Grateful for company.

Grateful for community.

Grateful for democracy, however flawed.

Grateful for those who peacefully and relentlessly resist the desecration of the earth by protest, political engagement, or civil disobedience.

Grateful for all who work for justice and peace and understanding.

Grateful for the inexorable profusion of new life in the springtime.

Grateful for dew glistening on the grass at daybreak.

Grateful for baseball on a sunny afternoon.

Grateful for the cacophony of seagulls.

Grateful for wind rustling in the trees.

Grateful for stars gleaming in the endless sky.

Grateful for everything, in spite of everything.

Amen and Blessed Be.