

e.e. cummings' Burning Question
Sermon preached by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo
First Parish in Cambridge. November 20, 2011

I. THANSGIVING

Edward Estlin Cummings considered by many to be the major American poet of his generation, was born at 104 Irving Street, not far from First Parish, on October 14, 1894. He was the son of a Unitarian minister, was educated at Harvard, and became successful as a painter and as a poet somewhat late in life.

He said: *if you like my poems let them walk in the evening a little behind you.* Wherever his spirit might be, he must know that many of his poems have been walking with me. And that his poem we are enjoying today is walking not a little behind me but right in the center of my heart.

For how could I read

*i thank You God for most this
amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirit
of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and
for everything
which is natural which is infinite
which is yes*

and not feel moved by the way he expressed his gratitude for the natural world? How not to feel at home savoring those words written in the intuitive, grateful, Transcendentalist language?

For me, gratitude has two axes: the horizontal when I express my gratitude to all beings on the planet and in the universe just for being my companions on this journey at this time in history. I feel specially indebted and grateful to those humans, past and present, who were and are able to open to the calling of life, and live with purpose and selflessness love. Pioneers in science, in the arts, in the written word, in philosophical and pshychological fields; men and women in the service professions who labor to alleviate the lot of humanity, teachers and professors who help us imbibe the beauty, the mystery, and the excitement of this world. I feel specially indebted and grateful to my parents, my children and my friends and to this congregation my spiritual home for the daily gifts of trust, compassion, and opportunities to spread my wings and become that which I aspire to be.

I manifest my gratitude on my vertical axis when my thoughts and feelings are directed to the “Source of All”, to that Mysterious Life Force animating all that exist. I did not ask to be born, and yet I was given this amazing life. What a gift we have all received from that unnamable source and with life myriad of all kinds of gifts; some readily easy to appreciate, and others, well, still gifts even if in disguise.

II. RESURRECTION

(i who have died... In this part of the poem e.e. cummings shares with us one of the most existential states we humans can experience; that of feeling dead although going through the motions of living. Who among us upon losing a great love, a companion of years, a trusted and loved friend, a child, have not felt that life is over, that perhaps death is more bearable than to continue living?

It breaks my heart when I learn of children that are bullied by cruel peers in school, or abused at home. They have their joy and their innocence stolen. In these days it is common to hear adults disclosing in public the deep hurts received as children and as teenagers. Many said that they feel dead inside.

Today we have with us our children and our youth in this sanctuary. Parents, family and friends, let us promise to honor and protect their innocent minds and spirits. Let us be vigilant, and always open to what they share with us. And you, beloved children and youth I beg you to remember your Unitarian Universalist principles; when you see somebody being bullied, or hurt, please speak up, or report it to your parents or teachers. And if you are the one being hurt or bullied, tell that to your parents, to your teachers, to Mandy, to Fred, or to me. Telling on others could be very difficult and scary. I know. But we need to help each other to grow happy, healthy and, grateful for our families, our teachers, and our friends.

And for all us, there is always hope of coming alive again. When one has weathered the storm of doubts, of despair, of depression, of whatever is that led us to feel dead; after conquering addictions to food, drink, work, gambling, or any other that had buried us alive; when we regain our healthy bodies and minds, when we finally feel lovable and capable of loving again, we have regained our lives.

Then, we can say *and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birthday of life and of love and wings:* Not surprising we experience the exhilarating feeling of being able to fly once again because our mental and spiritual wings feel supple and strong, able to take flight to skies never tried before. Let us in that mood of revival and rejoicing celebrate *the gay great happening illimitable earth*) as e.e. cummings called our earthy home, by singing hymn #38 Morning has broken in your grey hymnals.

III. BURNING QUESTION

Now let us reflect on e.e. cummings' burning question; most importantly, let us consider how today, at this moment, we could answer it. He asks:

*how should tasting touching
hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely
being
doubt unimaginable You?*

After tasting refreshing water like our toasters did a moment ago, after enjoying the miracle of every breath, after the glorious feeling of being touched by love, how do we answer the burning question? What sincere answer emerges from our innermost being?

Through my life as a Unitarian Universalist, I have heard congregants regret that they were brought up without a sense of connection with the infinite; others regret not having being taught the vocabulary of religious experience; some feel at a loss for words when others are sharing transcendent experiences; some say that they can not possibly relate to others who experience moments of ecstatic beauty as mystic moments; and others say that, for them, the feeling of true union with all that is, described by mystics and gurus alike as illumination, has no meaning. Some acknowledge feeling grateful, without the need to express their gratitude to a supernatural being, to any spirit or to a god.

Perhaps you are familiar with this very popular quotation by the French poet and critic André Breton: "*All my life, my heart has yearned for a thing I cannot name.*" I would venture to say that in some instances we feel ashamed or too proud to confess that we, too, are yearning for that something we know gives vitality and meaning to others. Many of us are scared to let our intuition inform us about *that Transcending Mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures*; we are perhaps too proud letting reason be the master of our lives. Or could it be that we experience that *homesickness we cannot shake off*, which is Rilke's description of the Divine, but feel it is too much work to even start the journey home?

Throughout my years as a minister and as a chaplain, I have learned that at times it is easy to confuse our yearning for spiritual connection with psychological and even physical distress.

I am glad that our congregation proclaims that part of our mission is to *foster spiritual curiosity and faith formation*. I am very glad that we are intentional in fostering that curiosity in our children and youth. If we are faithful to our mission, our members and friends would have many opportunities to develop faith in their intuition as complementary to reason; they also would have opportunities learn or to enhance their spiritual vocabulary.

I would like to repeat here what I said to our children at the Coming of Age retreat: Do not let the holy curiosity be extinguished in your hearts and minds. Do not let anybody tell you that you are the end of all that is. True, each one of you is immensely valuable as you carry the spark of divinity in you. However, when hubris threatens your sense of humility and of gratitude to the Source of All, remember Rumi's admonition: *Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment.*

LOVING ANSWER

(*now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened*) thus ends this provocative poem.

I can only imagine the variety of answers you gave to e.e. cummings burning question. Who knows? Some of you might feel like sharing yours during our congregational conversation in the chapel.

There was a time in my life when it was easy for me to deny the existence of any loving spirit, or of any being beyond my material world. I was angry, in despair, hurting badly and questioning, why was I born? Who needs this life?

Later, much later, once the ears of my ears started to awake and the eyes of my eyes started to open, I could start feeling gratitude. After a long period of just gratitude, there was a breakthrough in my consciousness and I was able to I ask myself: *How should I doubt unimaginable You?*

The following reflection written by a mystic monk in the fourteen century in his classic book *The Cloud of Unknowing* helped me move from just gratitude to love. *The Divine, whom neither humans, nor angels can grasp by knowledge, can be embraced by love. A person may know completely and thoroughly, every created thing and its works, yes, and God's works, too, but not God's self. Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I know, choosing rather to love that I cannot know. Though we cannot know the Divine, we can love the divine. By love that Divine Presence may be touched and embraced, never by thought.*

Since then, I have encountered several other writings all affirming the same idea. The mind and reason alone are often insufficient to help us apprehend, and love the mystery. Amado Nervo the Mexican laureate poet wrote the poem *Cómo es? How is It?* In this poem he asks a series of 18 questions such as: *Is God personal? Is impersonal? Is it essence? Is it substance? Is it the conscience of the Universe? Is it all there is? Is it simply the harmony of all forces?* And so on. He ends his poem thus: *Soul of mine, it has been a long time since you asked those questions. Is has been a long time since those things do not interest you any more. The only thing you know is that you love him ...*

I totally resonate with Nervo's conclusion. No more questioning, just love.

The most important thing to always remember is that we are free to relate to the divine in any way we can or desire. We really have free choice in this matter. May you all, but especially those in a borderline situation consider going deeper, or higher. Whatever way you decide to answer the deeply existential question, my heartfelt wish for you is that one day you may be transported to a glorious state of awareness and gratitude.

Let it be so. Amen.

