

## **Intimacies**

**A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst**

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I closed yesterday's Memorial Service for John Delvaille with a poem that Nan and I found among John's favorite readings. Some of his own original poems were in this same collection so it is possible that this too was written by John, but Nan was not sure this was the case. It read, in part, "Cherish yourselves and each other, for you are love. Celebrate yourselves and each other, for you are holy. Listen to one another, not only with hearing but with seeing and touching, with finger tips and lips, for need and giving are expressed in many ways." I used those words yesterday – and I am again, today – because nothing in our lives is so powerful or has so much potential as our relationships. We do not exist except in relationship. We should treat them well.

I was very moved by my time getting to know John Delvaille and by officiating at his Memorial Service, and it seems fitting to dwell a little longer on the subject of living life fully, actively, and intimately, something we heard a lot about yesterday in the many tributes to John.

This sermon is titled "Intimacies."

Do you ever get goosebumps listening to beautiful music? I do. And I even remember the first time it happened to me. I was in junior high at a choir concert and a particularly talented soloist gave me the chills, as we say. I was as surprised then as I am amazed now when it still happens to me. I guess what I want to know is "How does this happen?" What is it about sound waves entering our ears that triggers this involuntary physiological response we call goosebumps? And how do we recognize what is beautiful in the first place?

I bring up these questions not because they are any more or less important than other questions we could be asking, and not because I am going to answer them this morning, but rather to illustrate how interesting the intimate details can be. Perhaps your interesting details would have to do with another subject, but the point would be the same. These are not life's biggest questions, but they are small parts of the whole picture. One of the advantages of asking the small questions is that sometimes they are easier to answer.

Getting close to life, digging into the details, feeling, touching, experiencing – this is what I mean by intimacies. I urge us all to immerse ourselves in life instead of removing or distancing ourselves from it. Each time we do, we just might find another tiny answer to part of our big question: what's it all about? Each of our intimate life experiences is like hearing the truth from a different voice.

No, I am not talking about intimacy in its sexual connotation today. I want to talk instead about those other things we can do (and have already done) that can also bring us closer to Life with a capital L, closer to something greater than ourselves.

I like to think I feel a lot of passion in my life. Passion is a word, like intimacy and sensuality, that can refer to so much more than just the physical. I have a card that I have kept for many years, all through divinity school and some before that. It shows a man and a woman driving in a convertible with mountains in the background and suitcases and an umbrella in the back seat. She has her arm around his shoulder. The license plate reads SEE. The caption on the card reads: "Always Take the Scenic Route." This expression, which I personally take very seriously, does not refer exclusively to cross country trips in the car, although I do that quite often, too. I think the expression "Always Take the Scenic Route" can be applied to the way we look at whatever we are doing, turning it from the ordinary into the "scenic route." I once read that the ordinary is that to which we are either too lazy or unpracticed to pay close attention. Conversely, paying attention, being intimate, turns our experiences into the extra-ordinary.

One of the ways we can nourish our souls is by getting intimate with the intricacies of nature. What an array of possibilities exist all around us every day. I'll give you one example. In a great book by David Quammen called *The Flight of the Iguana*, in which he uses examples from nature to make philosophical statements, there is a chapter called Thinking About Earthworms. The essay reveals some of the amazing details observed and calculated by Charles Darwin in his book *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Earthworms, With Observations of Their Habits*. I wish I could read you the whole chapter, but the facts are these: An acre of land has an average earthworm population of 53,767. Each worm spends much of its time swallowing everything in its path, mixing that material with digestive juices, and passing it out behind in the form of "castings" helping to create soil and humus. Some worms also have a habit of always depositing their castings above ground, thus not only are they creating our planet's layer of soil, they are also constantly turning it inside out. Based on these numbers, Darwin calculated that worms do about ten tons of earthmoving per acre per year! The author's point is that we should think differently from what "everyone" is thinking. Break stride. "Think about how sometimes it's the little things that turn the world inside out."

Perhaps counting earthworms is not your idea of taking the scenic route, but there are other ways of living intimately in our lives. And of course I have been talking only about one kind of intimacy – that with nature and our connection to the earth. There are other close encounters with life, many not nearly so pleasant as a walk in the woods, that are nonetheless every bit as important to the education of our hearts.

We have all experienced grief and sadness – sometimes even tragedy. These are definitely intimate experiences with life that we would rather not have to go through. Classically it is said that we come out better for having gone through these parts of our lives. I personally feel the phrase should be come out fuller with a more complete understanding of real life, which includes grace and suffering. We usually feel more compassion and connection to our fellow beings on the earth following a death or accident or disaster. But we carry with us the knowledge that we now know a little bit more of reality.

Just as the good things in our lives will be with us forever, so will the sad and tragic. I think to attempt to get over it, as they say, is impossible. Living an intimate life means that we will experience joy and fulfillment along with sorrow and loss. It is hard to accept that bad things happen and still go on living with a sense of joy and optimism.

Many of us have suffered and we are embarrassed to admit we are still sad about things that happened long ago as if we shouldn't be. I don't know about you, but I still cry about some things. There is a passage about crying by Mary Margaret Funk which I like. She says "When tears come, I breathe deeply and rest. I know that I am swimming in a hallowed stream where many have gone before. I am not alone, crazy, or having a nervous breakdown...My heart is at work, my soul is awake."

Closeness in our relationships with others is probably what we think of first when we hear the word intimacy. There is the intimacy of a love relationship, involving communication, trust and giving. Do you remember the line from a Shelley poem where he writes about soul meeting soul on lovers' lips. I've always liked that thought.

But there are other kinds of intimate relationships than that between lovers. I would like to share with you one of the kindnesses I have received in my life. Some years ago, when I was going through some hard times, I happened to be fortunate to have a man working for me named John Fox. John and I never talked very directly about his life, or mine, but I know he knew my situation. Every day, as we worked together, John would share recordings of some of his favorite music and opera singers. He would say to me "Now stop working for a minute and listen to this one." John and I would sit together in the frame shop of my art gallery and listen – usually he gave me the words in English to look at too – and most days both of us would cry at either the lyrics or the beauty of the music or both. It was an incredible experience – every day for months – for which I am very grateful. We still did not talk personally, but John had shared with me something that meant a great deal to him in his life in the hopes that it would be of some meaning to me also. John Fox and I are not intimate friends in some senses of the world, but there has been a sharing between us, a gift given and received, that has created an intimacy.

Our lives yearn for intimacy, even though we quite often believe that to let go of everything, to be sense-less is the way to enlightenment and peace. Rather I think we should find and encourage the meaningful, intimate, sense-ful experiences that will mean something, change us forever, and feed our souls. Life is about expansion, not protection – celebration, not adjustment.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, counseled her spiritual directees to be "juicy people," folks who are so filled with wonder and curiosity, with lusty appetites and high spirits, that they embrace life....with a grinning bear hug. To be a juicy person is to be a frequent violator of the ordinance against indecent exposure of the heart.

My vision of the importance of intimate connections in our lives is very similar to Henry Nelson Wieman's theological concept of creative interchange, that is, the idea that in a "real" connection between people there is a continuation of the creative process in the direction of a universal "good," what some might call God. Wieman's intimacies are only between human beings, but in my vision intimate connections to the divine are inherently possible in all of our relationships, with the animate and the inanimate, with each other and within our daily routines. Perhaps your housework this week will take on new meaning following our reading this morning about dusting.

I subscribe to the philosophy of Martin Buber, who believed that we have the capacity to relate in such a way with everything in our lives (his famous example is about a tree) that it becomes an I-Thou relationship. That is, we connect to the pure nature of the other person or thing, allowing it to reciprocate in relationship as more than merely an “it.” He describes it as an “immediacy” between two beings into which the eternal is able to arise. With every I-thou encounter a seed is planted encouraging further relationships of such an intimate nature, for these glimpses of divine connection are intoxicating. Martin Buber calls us, in as much as we are capable and because it is in our very nature, to connect to the Thou in all the relationships of our lives, to authentically live as the intimate beings that we are.

We could start simply. Maybe take our shoes off and walk in the water. Take time to have a conversation with someone we don’t know, or perhaps a deeper conversation with someone we love. Learn about the history of a country before we visit it. Read a sad book and cry great crocodile tears. Sit on a rock in the woods and feel the cold seep up through our bones. Live passionately, face to face with ourselves and skin to skin with the world around us. It may be that our moments of real intimacy touch something within us we are not aware of in most of our waking moments – the possibility for transformation may be very real.

Consider these words by Diane Ackerman from her book *A Natural History of the Senses*: (It could be that in our present awareness of our finite lives given the loss of two among us in recent weeks, what she has to say will plant a viable seed within us that we can continue to nurture.)

*When you consider something like death, after which (there being no news flash to the contrary) we may well go out like a candle flame, then it probably doesn’t matter if we try too hard, are awkward sometimes, care for one another too deeply, are excessively curious about nature, are too open to experience, enjoy a nonstop expense of the senses in an effort to know life intimately and lovingly. It probably doesn’t matter if, while trying to be modest and eager watchers of life’s many spectacles, we sometimes look clumsy or get dirty or ask stupid questions or reveal our ignorance or say the wrong thing or light up with wonder like the children we are. It probably doesn’t matter if a passerby sees us dipping a finger into the moist pouches of dozens of lady’s slippers to find out what bugs tend to fall into them, and thinks us a bit eccentric. Or a neighbor, fetching her mail, sees us standing in the cold with our own letters in one hand and a seismically red autumn leaf in the other, its color hitting our senses like a blow from a stun gun, as we stand with a huge grin, too paralyzed by the intricately veined gaudiness of the leaf to move.*

May your days reveal the infinite possibilities for connection and intimate relationship that exist all around us in this world.

Blessed be.

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The reading is a poem called *Dusting* from the book Being Home by Gunilla Norris.

Time to dust again.  
Time to caress my house,  
to stroke all its surfaces.  
I want to think of it as a kind of lovemaking  
..the chance to appreciate by touch  
what I live with and cherish.

The rags come out - old soft pajama legs,  
torn undershirts, frayed towels.  
They are still of use.  
It is precisely because they have exhausted  
their original use that they have come  
to this honorable task.

Rag in hand, I fee along each piece  
of furniture I live with, and luster returns  
to the old sideboard, to the chair legs  
and the lamp stands. It is as if by touch  
they are revealed and restored to  
themselves.

Strange that in the dumbness of  
inanimate things  
one can feel so much silent response.  
What then of us animate creatures?

We are so many-surfaced: bumpy, smooth,  
prickly, rough, silky, hairy, spiny, soft, scaly,  
furry, feathery, sharp, and on and on.  
And don't we all want to be stroked  
in some way  
...to be restored to ourselves by touch  
as much as by sight or smell or sound?

I want to be a love of surfaces all day today.  
Let this be my prayer:  
that my hands not be ashamed  
to give and to receive  
a passionate exchange  
,,to luster and to be lustered...