

APPROXIMATE LIVES
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
July 20, 2008

Reading – “Bone” by Mary Oliver

Understand, I am always trying to figure out

what the soul is,

and where hidden,

and what shape –

and so last week,

when I found on the beach

the ear bone

of a pilot whale that may have died

hundreds of years ago, I thought

maybe I was close

to discovering something –

for the ear bone

is the portion that lasts longest

in any of us, man or whale; shape

like a squat spoon

with a pink scoop where

once, in the lively swimmer’s head,

it joined its two sisters

in the house of hearing,

it was only

two inches long –

and I thought: the soul

might be like this –

so hard, so necessary –

yet almost nothing.

Beside me

the gray sea

was opening and shutting its wave-doors,

unfolding over and over

its time-ridiculing roar;

I looked but I couldn’t see anything

through its dark-knit glare;

yet we all know, the golden sand

is there at the bottom,

**though our eyes have never seen it,
 nor can our hands ever catch it
 lest we would sift it down
 into fractions, and facts –
 certainties –
 and what the soul is, also
 I believe I will never quite know.
 Though I play at the edges of knowing,
 truly I know
 our part is not knowing
 but looking, and touching, and loving,
 which is the way I walked on,
 softly,
 through the pale pink morning light.¹**

The little boy sat at his desk fidgeting with his pencil. He raised his hand for permission to sharpen it. Back at his desk he rummaged through his papers. He stared out the window until the teacher commanded him to return to the writing project. The boy read the assignment. He raised his hand for permission to go to the bathroom. Back at his desk he thumbed through the assignment. He erased his answer and rewrote the exact same words, but with greater care. The pencil point broke and he raised his hand for permission to sharpen it. He returned to his desk just in time to turn in his work. The grade he received was barely passable. The answers he got right were exactly right. The other questions remained unanswered.

This was a pattern that haunted him all through elementary school. Predictably the teacher was certain that the boy had attention deficit disorder. She recommended that the boy be tested and muttered the word Ritalin under her breath. His parents, wanting their child to excel in school and not wanting to appear uncooperative with school authorities, took the child to a testing psychologist. After family surveys, psychological

¹ Mary Oliver, “Bone,” *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 4-6.

examinations, a conversation with the school counselor and teacher, and hours of observation the boy was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. The doctor explained that what appeared as attention deficit or hyperactivity was a mask. Behind the excuses of pencil sharpening, trips to the bathroom, and fidgeting was a deep fear that the boy could not get the answers right or perfect.

The parents were relieved and agreed to medicate their son. “But there are still standards,” insisted the boy’s father. “You know,” he continued, “brushing his teeth for three minutes, mouth washing for sixty seconds, and flossing. Toys must be put back in their right order every evening before bedtime. Clothes should be folded and neatly placed in the dresser, shoes lined up on the floor of the closet, and shirts hung up with the top button fastened.” The boy knew that if he could be so perfect his father would finally love him.

If you have seen my desk, you know that this is not a story about me. This story is about a child I have known, children I have known, and a society that is often obsessive and compulsive about the ordering of human beings and their relationships. I am not talking about keeping a watchful eye on our children, nor teaching them the basics of hygiene and civility, nor the fundamentals of clear moral thinking. I am talking about the urgent necessity that each of us must “get a grip,” “be on top of things,” and “get it together.” I am talking about the moral codes that insist on the perfection of body, mind, and soul. I am talking about the sense of inadequacy and even failure that haunts too many of the people I know and love.

Think about the time, energy, and angst we expend on job performance, sexual performance, parental performance, athletic performance, and moral performance. We are deeply worried, down to the

core of our being, that we are not “good enough” in most aspects of our lives. We demand as much perfection as any Wesleyan could ever think of.

This morning I would like to offer you some good news. The good news is that you are never going to get it all together. You will not ever be nor are you expected to be perfect. You came into this world flawed and you will leave this world more flawed than when you got here. If this message is a little too blunt, perhaps the words of St. Paul to the church at Rome is a little more elegant: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” All of us – not exceptions. If you are lucky you will depart with warts, sags, wrinkles, limps, bulges, and calluses. Your mind, even if you die in a relatively lucid state, will harbor doubts and regrets, resign it’s self to unsolved problems, and be marginally informed on what really makes the world go round. Your soul, even amongst the best of you, will be troubled by guilt, unrequited love, and unresolved conflicts with the people you love the most. Your soul may also be burdened by shame, the deaths of loved ones, unfulfilled vocation, or a general dissatisfaction of what you might have accomplished if you only had more time.

I am reminded about the mission that James Bond was assigned to. “M” sent him on a mission to heaven. When “M” did not hear from Bond for over a day he got worried and called up to heaven.

The Virgin Mary pickup the phone answering, “The Blessed Virgin Mary speaking.” “M” asked her if Bond had reached heaven yet. She replied that he had not.

“M” waited another few more days and called heaven back. “The Blessed Virgin Mary speaking,” came the response. “Is James Bond there yet?” asked “M.” The Blessed Virgin Mary replied, “No.”

“M” was really worried but decided to wait a few more days before he called back. “Hello, Mary speaking...”

None of us will die in the sweet arms of perfection. We will all die with some regrets or unfulfilled hopes and unfinished projects. And here is some more good news. Perfect living is not possible. None of us live or die in perfection. But proximate living is both possible and filled with grace. May I suggest that the art of living is the art of proximity? The art of proximity means the art of nearness or closeness. We can only live approximate lives that never achieve perfection.

I once heard Fanny Hill, wife of the late Rev. Ben Hill, tell a childhood story. When she was about eight years old she went to church one Sunday morning. She had been thinking about making a commitment to Christ for quite some time. When the pastor called on all who wanted to be saved, Fanny went down to the altar. The minister laid hands on her head and prayed for her salvation. He prayed that she be filled with the Holy Spirit.

After services she met an old woman who stared fiercely into Fanny’s eyes. She said that she really doubted that Fanny had Jesus in her heart, nor was she filled with the Holy Spirit. The child was frightened by the doubt put in her mind by such a pillar of the church.

That night she went to bed in deep anguish. Fanny said that in her deep sleep an angel came and stood at the foot of her bed. Being an angel, of course, she knew what troubled the little girl’s soul. “Fanny,” said the angel, “you’ve got all your going to get.” Fanny never worried again about her nearness to God. It was enough.

Proximate living is being close and as Mary Oliver suggested, looking, touching, and loving. The truth is that we can only live on the

edges of knowing. I believe that is true, not only about the fields of our expertise, but also about the things that really matter – like friendship, marriage, sex, children, and God. Proximate living keeps the mystery alive and spares us of the necessity of knowing everything or being an expert on everything.

That is one of the failures of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists demand an infallible faith, an infallible scripture, and an infallible doctrine. It never occurs to them that the instruments of faith, scripture, and doctrine are always human instruments, set within the historical context of human communities over the span of human history. As such, they are necessarily reflective of human hopes, fears, prejudices, and dreams. I certainly believe that they contain wisdom, inspiration, and noble themes on the religious quest. But each and every one is only approximate. None of them ever adequately expresses the sacred experience and certainly do not adequately share the reality of God. And we can be thankful for that!

It is my experience, both in my own spiritual quest and in my relationships with many religious communities, that fundamentalism is a mask for fear and insecurity. Fear always exercises the need to control. Pride is another name for anxiety and the will to dominate. The so-called “fall” of Adam and Eve is rooted in their insistence that they know as much as God. They thought that they could improve on paradise. They were going to perfect things and better manage the garden. They were not content to be close to God, they had to be as good or better than God. They were not able to enjoy the looking, touching, and loving. Proximity to God would never satisfy their need to be in charge, or in Biblical language, “to be as gods.” You know that a relationship is in trouble when one partner thinks that he or she is going to improve the other.

The more we try to squeeze goodness and perfection out of life the more we strangle and kill it. In a poem entitled “The Future,” Wendell Berry wrote:

For God’s sake, be done
with this jabber of “a better world.”
What blasphemy! No “futuristic”
twit or child thereof ever
in embodied light will see
a better world than this, though they
foretell inevitably a worse.
*Do something! Go cut the weeds
beside the oblivious road. Pick up
the cans and bottles, old tires,
and dead predictions. No future
can be stuffed into this presence
except by being dead. The day is
clear and bright, and overhead
the sun not yet half finished
with his daily praise.*²

Let us look at, touch, and love the world and the life that we have been given! We cannot perfect paradise and I do believe that this old planet is as close to paradise as I will ever get. I am not called to show God and nature what a better job they should have done in the first place. And likewise, it is not my place to improve or perfect any one of you. I can observe and see deeply into the lives that make this community of faith. I can touch and be touched by the joys and sorrows of the men, women, and children gathered here. I can love you and be loved by you. It is my prayer that we will invite others into our circle of understanding and grace. Let us invite others, not to a perfect church, but to a proximate church. That is as close as any of us will get!

Finis

² Wendell Berry, “The Future,” *Given* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Howard, 2005), 27.