

“Who Would Have Imagined”

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Readings

From “Poetry and Marriage” by Wendell Berry

The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word. And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to another we join ourselves to the unknown. We can join one another only by joining the unknown... In life, in the world, we are never given two known results to choose between, but only one result that we choose without knowing what it is.

Marriage rests upon the immutable givens that compose it: words, bodies, characters, histories, places. Some wishes cannot succeed; some victories cannot be won; some loneliness is incorrigible. But there is relief and freedom in knowing what is real; these givens come to us out of the perennial reality of the world, like the terrain we live on. One does not care for this ground to make it a different place, or to make it perfect, but to make it inhabitable and to make it better. To flee from its realities is only to arrive at them unprepared.

Because the condition of marriage is worldly and its meaning communal, no one party to it can be solely in charge. What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go. It is going where the two of you - and marriage, time, life, history, and the world - will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way.

“The Parable of the Moth” by Robert Cording

Consider this: a moth flies into a man’s ear
One ordinary evening of unnoticed pleasures.

When the moth beats its wings, all the winds
Of earth gather in his ear, roar like nothing

He has ever heard. He shakes and shakes
His head, has his wife dig deep into his ear
With a Q-tip, but the roar will not cease.

It seems as if all the doors and windows
Of his house have blown away at once—
The strange play of circumstances over which
He never had control, but which he could ignore
Until the evening disappeared as if he had
Never lived it. His body no longer
Seems his own; he screams in pain to drown
Out the wind inside his ear, and curses God,
Who, hours ago, was a benign generalization
In a world going along well enough.

On the way to the hospital, his wife stops
The car, tells her husband to get out,
To sit in the grass. There are no car lights,
No streetlights, no moon. She takes
A flashlight from the glove compartment
And holds it beside his ear and, unbelievably,
The moth flies towards the light. His eyes
Are wet. He feels as if he's suddenly a pilgrim
On the shore of an unexpected world.
When he lies back in the grass, he is a boy
Again. His wife is shining the flashlight
Into the sky and there is only the silence
He has never heard, and the small road
Of light going somewhere he has never been.

Sermon

Let me take you back to a year, 2002. We were a different country then. George W. Bush was less than two years into his first term as president. We were less than a year out from the attacks of 9/11, and we were still trying to understand what happened. The Patriot Act was in full swing. We had not yet invaded Iraq, and there were still intelligent people who believed in the existence of “weapons of

mass destruction” – including our own Joe Biden, who spoke to a packed house here one Sunday night that year. He also said that if we did go to Iraq, we should prepare to be involved for many years. (Well, one out of two, Joe.) In 2002, we could not have imagined a black president. I heard a black comedian once say that when you are watching a movie, there is one surefire way to tell if it’s science fiction, and that’s if they show a black president of the United States. “If there’s a brother in the white house,” he said, “it’s got to be set in the future.” In 2002, we were floating along gently in an ever-expanding housing bubble. Robert and I made out like bandits with the sale of his townhome in Northern Virginia. (Of course, so did the people who sold us the house we live in now.) Civil unions and marriage rights for same-sex couples was just starting to exist in a few states, and it was never going to include Delaware. That’s just silly.

We were a different church in 2002. Just this week, I looked up the number of members we had listed in the 2002 UUA directory. 884. Gasp. Insiders at our church now express some distrust of this figure. We now look on it as a kind of vanity number – puffed up and porked up with people who hadn’t been around for years. And yet, no matter how inflated that number, 884, may have been, it says something about how we saw ourselves back then. In 2002, there were two services, though the earlier one was starting to shrink and feel a little sleepy from my perspective at the pulpit. We had only voted to become a “welcoming congregation” a few years before, and we were trying to understand what that meant to us as a church. Statistically, we were slightly older; that is, a higher percentage of us were age 60 and above. Some of you were sitting next to a spouse in 2002 that is no longer with us. Many of you had children and grandchildren yet to be born. Some of you had jobs that you had no idea would end. Or new careers that would blossom. Patrick O’Neill was the senior minister. We were celebrating Scott Ward’s 10-year anniversary as our honorary minister of music. And a member, a remarkable woman named Phyllis Wynn, had just offered us a million dollars to purchase the library property for sale on the corner. We said yes.

And in 2002, I was just arriving for my new job at the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware. I was a different person, too. I had a lot more hair, it was a lot less gray, and I weighed more. I was not married, not even engaged. This last point was actually the source of consternation among some of our older members during candidating week. My advance publicity stated that I was in a “committed relationship” with a Robert Gadon, which was quickly translated by the rumor mill into “living in sin”. It was the hot gossip at church. (I think it may have been a let-down for some, to hear that we were actually living in

two different states at the time.) Of course, I found the rumors and the disapproval expressed in the rumors quite upsetting, and passed this along to my beloved. A month later, we were engaged. So if I've never said this to you as a congregation, let me say it now: "Thank you."

I considered myself seasoned. I had just come from serving a little UU fellowship on the Eastern Shore for five years; just shy of 100 members. We had a quarter-time Director of Religious Education, and when I was in our tiny building, I answered the phone. I came here, just wowed by the talents and resources of this church, especially the staff. I was flattered and humbled to have been chosen to work with them.

For my installation, I chose a poem by Wendell Berry about marriage. I suppose it was on my mind. Wendell Berry says,

"What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go. It is going where the two of you - and marriage, time, life, history, and the world - will take it..."

I had no idea how true that was - in both my marriage and my ministry here. What were the things I could not have imagined when I first came here? Well, that I would stay for nine years, for starters. Associate ministries are usually short - about 2-3 years long. We tend to measure associate ministry in dog years. It was hard at first. I had a big case of what Scott calls "the big church 'wow' factor". There were just so many people - and committees and groups and classes and hospital visits and meetings, and problems to fix and shortages of volunteers and money. Complexity on top of complexity. I would sit in committee meetings trying to look thoughtful and wise, and think: "I have no idea what they're talking about." At some point, about three months in, on a particularly bad day, I called Robert. It was about 11:00 at night. I said, "This is just too hard. I think I may have made a terrible mistake."

I went in the next day and met with Patrick, Scott and with our Director of Religious Education at the time, Jude Henzy. I started out fairly composed, you know, I just wanted some advice with some things I was working on. And then at some point I spilled the truth. I didn't think I was going to make it. These talented people, whom I held in awe, each of them said, "Me too. That happened to me, too. About three months in." And then, they said, "How can we help you?"

We all get to the point, brothers and sisters, where we simply cannot imagine very much. The wings of the moth beat painfully in our ears. We don't see or

hear well. We need assistance. We need other people to imagine for us. This is what saves us.

I would not have imagined, in 2002, that my heart could break as many times as it would over the years. Being your minister of pastoral care was a privilege and a challenge and sometimes it hurt, because you hurt. We want to love, we want to give our hearts, and yet we are surprised by how much it can hurt. This is probably a good thing. Who would sign up for it, otherwise? “No, I won’t marry you because in 40 years you will get cancer or leave me for another person or lose your marbles, or die. And I’m not up for any of that.” Exactly right, you aren’t up for it. None of us are. We can only learn to deal with such things by dealing with them. We’re not “ready” in advance. Wendell Berry said that “in life, in the world, we are never given two known results to choose between, but only one result that we choose without knowing what it is.”

I don’t believe that anybody or anything is choosing these things for us, by the way. I am a theist, an old jousting point I’ve had with some of you over the years, but I don’t believe that God has it all worked out. I don’t believe that there’s a big old blue print somewhere, and ooh, if I could just get my hands on it. Let me tell you, if it’s one thing I’ve decided in my nine years here, having performed a memorial service for an infant, with parents heartbroken beyond comfort... or hearing that my favorite office volunteer, the one with the shy, sweet smile, who brought the staff donut holes every week, that this man had stage 4 lung cancer... or performing a wedding ceremony on someone’s back lawn, and just two years later, presiding over the groom’s funeral because his airplane crashed for no apparent reason, leaving behind a two-year-old... If there’s anything I’ve decided from all this is there is no grand scheme, no master plan where everything makes sense. You cannot look these good people in the eye and say that what they suffered was on purpose, or happened for a reason, or is the will of any God that is worth loving. You cannot imagine such things ever happening, and God doesn’t, either. God doesn’t dream up awful stuff to teach us nice lessons in character.

Maybe God is that thing in us that helps us go on. That helps us to love, in spite of what can happen, and does happen. Your whole life is a process of drawing this God forth from within you. It is the practice of letting your heart break, of learning to love anyway. Because that is what will save you. What breaks your heart is what makes it stronger. If you let it. What breaks your heart makes it stronger. We are all made on this lousy, brilliant design. All of us.

The heart of a church can break. In 2002, I came to work with the Rev. Dr. Patrick O'Neill. Patrick is beloved among the colleagues. He is a big presence, the life of the party, and a generous friend. I heard his wonderful sermons. I saw how deeply he cared for his church. He was at the center of this big, bustling place. I would never have imagined, just three years later, that he would be gone. Poor health. Conflicts between him and the church leadership, changes in the way the church did business, new demands. Disappointments mounted - on both sides. It all added up.

I was in Patrick's office the moment he decided that he couldn't do this anymore. It was too hard. There was too much that was broken. This time it wasn't a lack of imagination. This was a moment when things became painfully clear. It was time. I walked down the hall into my own office. The wings of the moth were beating so loudly in my ears, I did not know, I could not imagine what was going to happen next.

Slowly we started to sort things out. We brought in someone from the Samaritan Center, an ecumenical group that helps churches in trouble. She and some of the board members held small group conversations that gave people some basic information and allowed them to speak their pain. We set about looking for an interim minister for the fall. And people began to leave. Lots of them. You could say that if they were there for the preacher and not for the church, how committed were they? True enough. But their hearts still broke. They still lost something. Actually, they lost more than they realized. They lost their chance to love this church.

"What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go." People have said over and over that I have been the "glue" that held this place together. Rev. Josh likes to call me the duct tape. I had no idea that I was going to become the duct tape in my ministry with you, when I started in 2002. But while we're telling the story, let's make sure we get it right. If you're going to get the story right, you have to put Scott in there, too. I don't know what we would have done without Scott Ward. And Georgianne Sheehy. And then you have to put Ken Hostelley and Dale Stratton and Cindy Cohen in there, heroic presidents serving in the worst possible times. You would have to include all the people who stayed and fought and loved this church when it was the hardest to love. I love you so much.

Who could have imagined? The healing has taken awhile. A great resurgence has begun. In no small part, thanks to Rev. Josh who has helped us

back to health and new life. If I'm the duct tape, he is the Energizer Bunny who is so excited about this church and what it can be. We are already seeing wonderful new life and energy in the three years he has been here. Church feels grander and easier and more hopeful than it has in a long time. But the ministers can't just make that happen. You have to have some faith in yourselves and in life and in what holds us all up. I call that God, you call it whatever you want. It happens because you are willing to love and to trust, in spite of all the reasons not to. In spite of being completely unable to predict the future.

When things look bad, who can imagine joy coming again? Who can see the joy that can spring up like a new green shoot? It didn't take that long. The first year of interim, fourteen of us marched in the Philadelphia Pride parade – young and old, men and women, gay and straight. We looked a bit drab, marching behind the drag queens. But we turned the corner with our rainbow banner that said First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, the only church in the parade, mind you, and the people watching from the curbside cheered and cheered. Last fall, there was Camp Tockwogh. We had an evening bonfire, and all the little boys became pyromaniacs, and we made community, singing goofy songs and making up dumb skits and laughing until we were going to pee our pants. Camp Tockwogh is becoming a new tradition for generations of families. And today we are celebrating Loving Day, with music and raffles and games and food and more music – all to bear witness to the amazing power of love across races. We will honor the power of love, which isn't just a nice, squishy feeling, but something that stands up to bigotry and hate, something that stands up and stands with people who are oppressed. That's what we're here for, right? Love stands up to trouble.

So much has happened that we could never have predicted. Who knows what will be next? This is my last worship service with you. I am leaving this summer for Chicago, and I will no longer be a part of this community. But I will be watching your career with interest. Thank you for allowing me to be your minister these nine years. Thanks for all the wonderful memories. As the great Bob Hope once said, you might have been a handful but you never were a bore. Blessings upon you. All my love, always and always. Amen.