

The Cost of the Sunflowers

The Rev. Ian W. Riddell

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Las Vegas

Sunday, October 14, 2012

It is good to be with you again this week. It is both a joy and a challenge to preach ongoing sermons with the same congregation. A joy, because it becomes an ongoing conversation that can deepen relationship and grow understanding and trust. A challenge, because many of you will have the words I spoke last week in your minds and perhaps I will have to live up to them again, or live them down, or be challenged when you say to me, “But last week, you said.” And this week’s words may well be the same.

In two weeks, we will spend a good amount of our time with our attention and intent focused on the writing of the Hebrew prophet Micah - work that is, by millions of people around the world, considered scripture. In many ways, we will engage in the fairly traditional and old-fashioned practice of mining a piece of scripture for its lessons and meanings in our lives — using it as a jumping off point for reflection and discernment.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, over this year we will occasionally be taking unusual or unconventional texts as the sources of our reflections and “mining.” This week is our next installment.

And so I want to share some reflections with you this morning — reflections sparked in me as I encountered and then reconsidered and pondered my response to an episode of one of my favorite television shows: Doctor Who.

Doctor Who — for those of you who have not seen it — is a long-running work of serial science fiction. Through several incarnations — and with a long hiatus at the end of the last century — it has run on the BBC — for almost 50 years now. The show presents the story of a time-traveling, humanoid alien with two hearts who has the ability — among others — to regenerate when he is mortally wounded — thus allowing the show’s creators to continue telling stories with new actors every few years. We are now on Doctor number 11. The Doctor is almost always accompanied by companions who provide a regular-person foil against which the Doctor’s brilliance and oddness are reflected and explored.

Traveling in time and regenerating has allowed the show to explore deep philosophical and often theological issues. Issues of redemption and regret. Issues of the challenge of responsibility and the weight of power. Issues of identity and technology.

One of the more enjoyable and thought-provoking explorations the show has made over the last few years is to travel in time and place into the lives of great artists and writers. The Doctor and his companions have met Charles Dickens and explored the origins of Dickens’ fascination with spirits — they’ve met Shakespeare and played around with the notions of inspiration and artistic honesty — they’ve met Agatha Christie and developed fictional explanations for unexplained occurrences in the author’s life. And — in the episode I’m talking about today —

The Doctor and his companion Amy meet up with Vincent van Gogh and grapple with his brilliance and his mental illness and their impact on his work and our world.

The story begins and ends at an exhibit of van Gogh's works, where a guide — Dr. Black — expounds on van Gogh's brilliance and the meaning of his works.

Between these two gallery visits, the Doctor and Amy travel in time and insert themselves into van Gogh's life — aiding him in battling demons both real and mental. The writers of the show take time to try to put into words — through the actor playing van Gogh — how the artist saw and was gripped by the world.

“Look around. Art. It seems to me there's so much more to the world than the average eye is allowed to see. ... I believe, if you look hard, there are more wonders in this universe than you could ever have dreamed of. ... It's colour. Colour that holds the key. I can hear the colours. Listen to them. Every time I step outside, I feel nature is shouting at me. "Come on. Come and get me. Come on. Come on! Capture my mystery!"¹

You hear the hints here — through the artistic passion — of the mental illness that caused van Gogh such pain and anguish — pain and anguish that led to his self-destruction.

And despite his stature and adoration in our time, van Gogh sold but one painting in his life and never knew that effect his art would have on the world.

And so, Amy insists that the Doctor bring Vincent into his future — back to that museum — to see how honored he had become — to see the power his work had on the future. They entice an unknowing Dr. Black to share with an anonymous Vincent the legacy of his work. Asking,

“[W]here do you think Van Gogh rates in the history of art?”

And Dr. Black answers: “Well, big question. But, to me, Van Gogh is the finest painter of them all. ... Certainly, the most popular, great painter of all time, the most beloved. His command of colour, the most magnificent. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty. Pain is easy to portray, but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world - no-one had ever done it before. Perhaps no-one ever will again. To my mind, that strange, wild man who roamed the fields of Provence was not only the world's greatest artist, but also one of the greatest men who ever lived.”

Amy and the Doctor take Vincent home and then return to the future to see the impact of knowing all of this on Vincent's life — hoping that things changed and he had a long and prosperous career. But no, Vincent van Gogh still ended his life — a victim of painful and profound mental illness. This man, whose painting “Sunflowers” sold for a price of 81 million dollars, died penniless and in pain.

¹ Transcript found at <http://jggr.livejournal.com/104141.html>

At the end of the episode, Amy stands in front of that same painting and says, “Oh . . . the COST of those sunflowers.”

We see great art and we admire it. We love its color and the glimpse it can give us of a different world. We see it — we collect it — we wear it on t-shirts and put it on our walls.

How often do we see the cost of what we admire? Not its price — that’s pretty clear — not just the effort that went into making it —but the cost in the life of its creator? What hurdles and pain did they have to navigate and negotiate and overcome in order to bless us with their vision. Think of Vincent van Gogh. Think of Beethoven, deaf and with painful ringing in his ears in the last years of his life. 10 years before he composed his majestic Ninth Symphony he was unable to hear what he had created. Any of his music after 1814 - he couldn’t hear it.

And it’s not just the arts. Marie Curie died of cancer caused by the radioactive materials she studied — died in service of science that changed our world and saves lives every day.

And it’s not just the “great” ones either. Look at this building around us. Or the Luxor Pyramid. Or the Hoover Dam. We can see what the PRICE of these buildings is - but what of the COSTS - in time, in lives lost — 96 people at least lost their lives building that dam — in injuries and chronic illness, in time away from family, in mind-numbing repetitive work. I was here in the building yesterday as we held a clean-up day. Think of the hours that go into maintaining the structures we inhabit.

I’m trying to get at something small and simple - but profound and meaningful too, I think. Something that has an effect on all of our lives and not just those great ones.

I want to share two stories with you that come at this from other directions.

Boy walking down the street in his fabulous pants

- how soon will his friends pressure him to conform?
- Heartlands men
- what will he lose by giving in to that pressure?
- what safety does he gain - from bullies for example
- what choices do we each make - what are the costs of conforming?

A&W

- reminder of hamburger throwing incident with Nancy the cashier
- I know what benefit Nancy got from doing a job that sometimes subjected her to such abuse - despite what we could do to stop it - less than 10 dollars an hour, for sure - but food on the table and shoes and clothes for her daughter to go to school in
- what was the cost she paid when she got up to go to work the next day?

All of these people - all of these hidden costs to our culture - our society - our daily lives. How often do we pay attention to these costs for ourselves? How often do we pay attention to these costs for others?

This is where we back to Micah. As a preview of a future sermon - the prophet Micah points us to the idea that in order to live a righteous live — to be in right relationship with the divine mystery and with the communities we build, we need to act for justice, be steadfast in our kindness and mercy, and walk through the world as humble companions with the holy.

Micah's second admonition — variously translated as love kindness, love mercy, be steadfastly faithful — is what calls us, I think, from these reflections. Knowing the possibility for pain and anguish, for silencing and conformity, for the cost of living life in a common culture, we must be kind to one another.

And here's where the hope is, I think.

There is an old, or not-so-old saying, attributed variously to Plato or Philo of Alexandria, but most likely penned by a man named John Watson around the turn of the last century: "Be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle."

It sounds simple. It sounds simplistic. It sounds small and insignificant. But we live in a world that is very often stressful and anxiety inducing. The pace of life, the level of public dialogue, the strain of limited resources — all of these work on us to make it an easier choice to react without thought, to be brusque, to be inhumane to each other. And our neighborliness is whittled away. Our gentleness and generosity become more difficult. We are rude to each other in the grocery store. We honk angrily at each other on the streets. And we begin to stop seeing each other as people — equal and dignified and worthy as ourselves. What did the man who threw the hamburger see when he looked at the cashier across the counter?

Just as anxiety and fear and brusqueness can ripple, so can kindness. It takes such small choices — simple practices that make us stop and realize that we are interacting with other human beings who, just as we do, have pain and worries and distracting fears. Small practices — tiny pebbles in the pond that throw out ripples to counteract anxiety and inhumaneness.

Here are two practices I have committed myself to — every day since I witnessed the throwing of the hamburger. I chose to find ways to make sure I saw the person I was interacting with — whatever their role or station in life — as worthy of my attention. And so, my first practice, when I'm in a restaurant, is to always — no matter what the conversation or situation — to stop when the person serving our table is there and face them and interact with them — rather than just ignore them as they bring food to the table or refill my water glass. To stop and be grateful to them.

And a second practice — If you've ever lived in a large city with a well-used transit system - buses and trains and subways — you know how stressful and crowded it can be to commute that way. I'm a big advocate of public transportation and was delighted when I heard the Mayor of Bogota say "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation." And in big cities like New York and Chicago, all sorts of people ride the bus and the train, because it really is convenient. But it's often uncomfortable during rush hours. When I lived in Chicago, and I rode the bus or the train — I made it a practice to always

say “Thank You” to the driver or the conductor. Whether I was exiting from the back of the bus or the front, I said “Thank You.” When I rode the train and saw the conductor after I got off, I said “Thank You.” I think about the number of anxious, hurried, impatient, rude people the drivers and conductors deal with daily — and I wanted to change that pattern — or to try at least.

There is one conductor on the train route I rode home most often who did this for all of us who rode his train. At each stop, the conductor (or a recording) makes an announcement about the station — which stop it is, what side of the train is the exit, when the doors are closing. This conductor went beyond the basics. “This is Granville. It’s raining but have a beautiful evening anyway,” he’d say. Or “Aren’t you glad you’re going to see your family soon.” Or “It’s spaghetti night, enjoy!” Or something like that.

And you know what? On that train I wasn’t the only one who said thank you to the conductor. I’ve watched people get off that train — their steps are a little lighter, their faces a little brighter. And I know that the next encounter they have with another human being is probably going to be a little kinder.

I share these practices to show you that they are small, simple things — that help us reconnect with each other as fellow travelers on this journey — that help us acknowledge that the people we interact with are our kin on this earth — that help us remember that each of us is struggling with challenges — with debilitating mental illness, with different visions of what the world might be, with physical challenges, with the choices we need to make for our safety, with jobs and interactions that make us feel less than worthy, less than holy. We all struggle in some way to listen to that “new voice” which we “slowly recognize as our own.”

May we always be kind. May we always be merciful. May we always be steadfastly faithful in the face of the blessings — and the costs — of living life in community.