

*Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?*

*-William Blake, 1794
London, England*

200 years ago, William Blake encouraged his countrymen to look at what was happening in the world around them and ask themselves: Is this a holy thing to see? I really like this question. Check it out on the cover of today's order of service. Blake used it to draw attention to the cruel irony of English society at the turn of the 18th century – where the church and the wealthy made *gestures* of charity toward those who were suffering, but made no effort to address the conditions causing the appalling and hopeless conditions of the poor.

It's not so different now. We know what is holy. And we know that much of what we see is not.

It is not at all difficult to see examples of un-holiness in the world around us. People living homeless in our own "rich and fruitful land." Environmental destruction on a vast scale in the Gulf of Mexico. Mass species extinctions. Imprisonment of large sectors of

America's lower class. Torture and maltreatment of US prisoners. Discrimination and economic injustice. The list goes on.

Personally, when I look at the world we have created, what gnaws at me most is our country's ever-increasing tendency to use violence in trying to achieve economic dominance. Quite literally, we have slaughtered millions of civilians over the past half century, and the killing continues today. Our attack and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan has been responsible for the deaths at least 120,000 innocent people. Add to that, if you like, the many thousands more that have been wounded, maimed, incapacitated. And the 2 million people displaced from their homes, now living as refugees.

Honestly, it haunts me. At times I feel I can hear the screams of the mothers and fathers who have seen their children killed by US bombs, and the wailing of children orphaned by our attacks. Were not these children too born "one more redeemer" as we say in this church? And if we Unitarian Universalists really believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, why are killing them, making their lives hell on earth? Is this a holy thing to see?

But that's just me. You probably have quite different concerns. What especially gnaws at you is quite possibly something else. But no matter which issue we look at, the question soon comes up:

What do we do about this? How do we correct this un-holiness that we see? How do we bend the universe toward holiness?

I'll tell you: I don't know for sure. Certainly none of us can snap our fingers and change the world.

Still, there are signs and guideposts suggesting a direction. I believe that the gnawing in each of us is very important. We can use that gnawing to spur us to continually re-shape our lives to align them with what's really important to us.

One place to start is with something like a really thorough spring cleaning, where you go through the house and get rid of everything that has no utility, no meaning – getting rid of clutter, of boxes of things that are filling up the basement and taking up space in the backs of closets. In your house or apartment, this creates space and a feeling of well-being. In our lives, we can similarly create space by throwing out the things which actually don't serve us well, the idle distractions, the time-wasters, the money-wasters.

Each of us can do our own inventory. Maybe there are parts of your daily living in which you're wasting time and energy? What activities, what expenditures are there that take your energy away from what you care most about? Are you losing hours per week to television? Is shopping and the pursuit of more and more things

stealing your wealth from where it could be most meaningfully used? Could the time and energy you spend watching and following professional sports be applied instead toward something you really care about?

Getting rid of these time and energy-wasters gives us more time, money and energy for things like reading, reflecting, learning, playing with your kids or grand kids, teaching, helping a neighbor, volunteering. Nothing too exotic, probably. Just focusing on and doing the things that really are important to you. Things that to you, are holy.

“Give me a break,” you might say, “there is nothing special in this! It seems extremely boring, tedious, and mundane. Anyway, I’m pretty much already doing all this, and I don’t see where it’s making much difference. Mr. Know-it-All – weren’t you supposed to be telling us how to bend the universe, change the world!”

And you’d be right. I’m sorry. It does seem pretty mundane. But I really do think that the whole deal starts with just our daily lives. You know the Zen saying: “Before enlightenment – chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment – chop wood and carry water.” The point here is that our work is our work. There’s no place else to look for it. It’s the precise spot where we are best able to push our spades into the rich earth, the place where we can best pry with our

crowbars. It's the exact location where we need to focus our attention. The work we are doing every day can have meaning and importance – and can be the means through which we bring change to the world.

The work of our urban lives is less poetically rustic, but probably no more glamorous than “Chop wood, carry water.” For us moderns, maybe it translates to “drive car, answer emails.” Or “balance checkbook, buy groceries.” No matter. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that we must learn to bring intentionality and awareness to all of our everyday work. “Wash the dishes,” he says when talking to Christians, “with the same care and love you would use if you were giving the baby Jesus a bath.” Even the mundane task of washing the dishes then becomes a spiritual exercise, a meditation, a way to get closer to what we value most.

And consider: We could, if we tried, bring a sense of love and awareness and to all of our mundane work. Our daily interactions with our co-workers. Caring for our children. Talking with our neighbors, or the person who sits next to us at the bus stop. Making supper. Re-filling the copy machine with paper. Preparing food. Eating.

Yes, you say, Deliberate Living. I've heard of it. So what?

Well, it seems to me that this is where we must start if we want to change the world. I think it goes like this: more and more, we slice off those parts of our lives that don't carry meaning for us. And more and more, we bring a higher level of awareness, care, and love to the parts that remain. This awareness brings us into closer harmony with what we truly value, and we learn more and more about how to focus our energies on what is truly important. And carve off more of what's not. In this way, the persistent effort to bring care and awareness to all of our daily activities brings each of us closer and closer to what we consider important, holy.

OK, you say, that's nice. We all become more centered, more focused, more aware, and our own lives take a turn for the holy. Great. Could even be a ticket in for me when I get to the pearly gates, or buy me some better karma for the next life. And I admit it: I can maybe even see how this deepening and nurturing of our spiritual selves would have a beneficial influence on those in contact with us on a daily basis. Some of this may even be likely to rub off and benefit those we come into contact with regularly - our friends, our children, our partners, our co-workers.

But what about the problem of the larger world filled with unholiness. What about that? How does that change?

Yep. That's where the ice gets a little thin. I'm not really sure here. But I can see how there might be linkage. It's hopeful to me that American historian and social activist Howard Zinn, quoted in today's readings, and who thought a lot about how to change the world – took pains to point out “that age-old lesson – that everything we do matters.” Everything we do ... matters. He must have had a reason for saying that.

Let's think about how this goes, at least up to this point:

1. We see many un-holy situations in the world around us, and they gnaw at us
2. We should let those things keep gnawing at us, and use them to remind us to continually re-dedicate our lives to what really matters to us
3. We eliminate distractions and time-wasters, and bring awareness and focus to all that we do
4. In general, we live as we believe life should be lived; we become the change we want to see in the world
5. And we continue with this “virtuous spiral:” We continue to learn even more, focus more, become more centered on what's important, what's holy

And what happens next?

I don't know. It's impossible to predict. There are no guarantees. It could be that you live your whole life in this way, but never see how you've made any difference whatsoever. Or maybe one small thing you do does lead to some small change, and then another, and another, and another, and eventually, as Lao Tzu says, virtue prevails throughout the kingdom.

So as to whether or not right living actually will bend the universe, I simply have to have faith. That's hard for me.

Like David Whyte in his poem, I try to be open to faith, but it doesn't come naturally. I much prefer cause and effect. I like predictability. If you're playing pool and you make the cue ball hit the three ball with enough force and in just the right spot, the three ball will drop sweetly into the pocket. Plant a sunflower seed, and you get a sunflower. Relying on faith, on the other hand, seems a little crazy. It's like taking target practice in total darkness. You can't tell if you're hitting the target, or even if you're pointed in the right direction.

But there's nothing else for it. All we have to go on is faith. Faith that right living, focus, clarity really will make a difference, even

though you never really know if it will. You certainly can't know in advance. And you may never know if how you've lived or what you've done actually did make a difference.

It irks me, this need to have faith, but at the same time I feel like if I stand on tiptoes, maybe – just maybe – I can see a reason to believe.

There is, after all, the butterfly effect, and that's encouraging. Because if, as the theory goes, the minute disturbance in the air caused by flap of a butterfly's wings might indeed set off an unexpected chain of events – and if that tiny pulse of air from the butterfly could thereby alter the course of a tornado, or even help bring it into existence, much later or far away - if that's possible, perhaps it is also possible that flapping our little wings is not a waste of energy.

I bet you yourself have even seen glimpses of this. Perhaps you can remember a teacher or an adult that said something to you when you were little, or impressed you by his or her example, or gently set you on a better course – and that made a huge difference in your life, affecting you even decades later. Perhaps even someone has come up to you at some point and said, “You know, 10 years ago you said something to me that I remember to this day!” At the time, it

seemed like nothing, but it ended up changing someone's life, and perhaps even the lives of those around them.

We simply can't see far enough through time and space to predict the results of our actions. Abraham Lincoln, when he wrote the Gettysburg address, didn't think much of it, and never would have guessed it would become an icon of American culture. Rosa Parks, refusing to give up her seat at the front of the bus in 1955, wasn't expecting that her actions would become an important catalyst for the civil rights movement. She was just doing what she felt was right. She acted on faith.

I'll conclude with this remarkable example, cited by Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, in her book called Faith: At one point in her life, she and a group of friends decided it would be good to put together a book of Buddhist instruction based on a series of lectures they had attended. It wasn't easy, but they worked hard at it, believing it was a good thing to do – even though they knew that the book would never attract wide readership.

Several years later she was startled while reading an account of the experiences of the leader of the Burmese pro-democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi. By speaking out, this remarkable and fearless

woman had provoked the ire of the brutal military Burmese dictatorship, and had been placed in solitary house arrest, not allowed contact with friends, family, or supporters. While imprisoned, Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but for six long years she suffered -- sick, lonely, starving, and at times all but hopeless. She related later that while imprisoned, the spiritual dimension of her struggle became very important to her. One particular book she received while imprisoned, she said, had made all the difference in Suu Kyi's quest to find peace and get through her ordeals. The book was *In This Very Life* – the same book that Sharon Salzberg had worked to develop years earlier.

So the book-writing effort that Salzberg felt would have little or no consequence turned out to have had a profound effect in the life of a woman and in the life of a nation, thousands of miles away. The flap of the butterfly's wings had, in effect, helped bring on a tornado.

We should all do so well! But it's quite possible that we'll never know how or if our actions and our lives have made a difference, if we've actually changed the world that so often is not a holy thing to see. All we can do is cultivate virtue, and live now as we think humans should live.

As to what happens as a result of our efforts ... that's a matter of faith.

From Tao Te Ching (2:54) -Lao Tzu

What is firmly established cannot be uprooted.

What is firmly grasped cannot slip away.

It will be honored from generation to generation.

Cultivate virtue in your self,

And your virtue will be real.

Cultivate it in the family,

And the family's virtue will be more than sufficient.

Cultivate it in the village,

And the virtue of the village will endure.

Cultivate it in the state,

And the state's virtue will be abundant.

Cultivate it in the empire,

And virtue will be pervasive.

From Howard Zinn, in his book *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something.

But if we remember those times and places - and there are so many - where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Faith

I want to write about faith,
about the way the moon rises
over cold snow, night after night,
faithful even as it fades from fullness,
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible
sliver of light before the final darkness.

But I have no faith myself
I refuse it the smallest entry,

Let this then, my small poem,
like a new moon, slender and barely open,
be the first prayer that opens me to faith.

~David Whyte, from Where Many Rivers Meet