

First Universalist Yarmouth, ME
Worship Service, Sept 20th, 2020
Homily: "Daze of Awe," by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick,

Opening Words

"When Great Trees Fall" by Maya Angelou

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down in tall grasses,
and even elephants lumber after safety.

When great trees fall in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly, see with a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened, examines,
gnaws on kind words unsaid,
promised walks never taken.

Great souls die and our reality, bound to them,
takes leave of us.
Our souls, dependent upon their nurture,
now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance,
fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance
of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period
peace blooms,

slowly and always irregularly.
Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration.

Our senses, restored, never to be the same,
whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be better.
For they existed.

Reading

Our reading this week is a short, but mighty poem by Alicia Jo Rabins, a writer, mother, musician, performer, and feminist scholar of the Torah. The poem is entitled, “How to Assess Your Net Worth.”

“How to Assess Your Net Worth”

Take two small pieces of paper.
On one, write: the world was created for me.
On the other: I am only dust and ashes.
Put one in each pocket.
Never leave the house without them.

Homily

“Daze of Awe” by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick

The world was created for me.
I am only dust and ashes.

Last year at this time, I was teaching a Spiritual Memoir class at a boarding school. The course was a senior elective, cross listed as an English and religion class.

Coming straight to the classroom from years of Religious Education Ministry, I basically ran as a Coming of Age class - Though - I’m not sure the 17 and 18 year olds - who were already battling the onset of senioritis - were as willing to go as deep into their personal theologies as I hoped.

I began each class by handing out a poem that we read out loud twice.

The first time just one person would read the whole thing, and the second time we would go around our long seminar table and each read a line.

In this way there was a time for everyone to listen, a time for everyone’s voice to enter the room, and –

two chances for those who tended to diddle on their phones underneath the table to pay attention to the poem, or at least pay attention to one line of the poem.

After we read it, I usually asked the students to pull out their course notebook and either free write or respond to a few questions.

I passed out copies of Alicia Jo Rabins, “How to Assess Your Net Worth,” early in the semester. We read and listened to it twice, and then I asked the students to open their journals and respond to these four questions:

How does the statement “The world was created for me,” make you feel?

How does the statement, “I am only dust and ashes,” make you feel?

What’s the point of writing both of these statements down and putting them in your pockets?

Do you want to try putting these statements in your pockets today and see what happens?

I still have a number of these course journals. Students turned them in at the end of the semester and a bunch never asked for them back. Deep dives into faith can be so fleeting. Flipping through these responses recently I couldn’t help but chuckle - and pause.

How does the statement, “The world was made for me,” make you feel?

“Stressed!”

“Fine.”

“It makes me feel like I can do anything.”

“It makes sense, everyone’s just in their own world all the time.”

“I don’t know.”

How does the statement, “I am only dust and ashes” make you feel?”

“Stressed!”

“It’s stupid to think that, what’s the point of life if you think you’re dust?”

“It makes me think of church.”

“It Makes me feel kind of free, sort of.”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the point of putting these statements in your pockets?”

“So you are grateful for your life and don’t get too crazy about anything.”

“Put them in your pockets so you can be in your world, but you can also get out of your world.”

The responses to my final question, “do you want to try putting these statements in your pockets?” was a resounding no, except for the kid who wrote “I don’t know” in response to all the questions, and my personal favorite response -

Do I want to put these in my pockets - hell no! Maybe when I’m older, though, and I’m ready to have an exciting crisis!”

An exciting crisis indeed. I remember we clarified in class that the term he was reaching for was existential crisis. Exciting crisis is close enough though.

Flipping through these spiritual memoir notebooks recently, laughing and taking a moment to just be in that classroom again, I remembered the epiphany I had that day, discussing that poem.

It was the same thought that let me finally fall asleep Friday night after receiving the unexpected news that Ruth Bader Ginsburg was dead.

Alicia Jo Rabins’ “How To Assess Your Net Worth” is a self-help poem. A weird, exciting-crisis-inducing, self-help poem.

There are no plural pronouns in it, no collective we, us, them, or y’all.

It’s about me. My net worth. My world, my dust.

I’m a living being trying to thrive in this world that was created for me.

I am also dust, ash, impermanent, and one day I’ll be nothing.

Everything and Nothing. As the youth say, it me.

But - in listening to those kids work out the message of the poem that day in September, I was smacked with an obvious truth, a truth I missed cause I was lost in my world: the truth that each one of those teenagers had these papers in their pockets.

The truth that *everyone* was walking around with these pieces of paper in their pockets. Not just me.

Sure, The poem asks us individually to consider that we are everything and nothing. But it also reminds us that *everyone* is everything and nothing.

Everyone is living in a world created for them - or perhaps more affectingly - a world they see and feel and long to be fully alive in.

And likewise, everyone is accepting the reality of impermanence, of loss, of the great connective tissue of dust and ash that we are - that our worlds are - all made of.

Like many of you I was in shock when I got the news that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died Friday night. Word came unexpectedly at the end of a logistical email about a class Alexis is teaching. "So and so students are having trouble accessing so and so file, can you upload it again? Thanks. Also did you see that Ruth Bader Ginsburg died? Awful news."

Alexis began to cry, I sat still - dazed.

The evening became a haze of doom spiraling, attempts at hope, and zombie stares into our phones.

Eventually, we realized we just needed to walk the dog, calm down, and go to bed.

Lying there awake, I remembered "How to Assess Your Net Worth" was the reading I chose this week for this Rosh Hashanah morning.

And I remembered that moment in my spiritual memoir class when suddenly I saw a bigger picture of life and loss - beyond just me, beyond just one person.

This moment can't just be about Ruth Bader Ginsburg's world, or now - Ruth Bader Ginsburg's dust and ash. It has to be about us, all of us.

All of our ability to thrive, all of our ability to cope with loss, and all of our ability to recognize that we are inherently part of something greater than ourselves and greater than what's in our personal pockets.

People posted messages left and right all weekend about RBG - I admit I was amongst them - the ones that gave me the most solace were the empowering ones that reminded scrollers that Ruth's work was not in vain,
That it's up to us now to seek justice,
That we can *be*, now, be and be better, cause she existed.
That we've got this.

We've got this, yes, we've got this. We've got this. Right?
What does that mean, though - what do I do, what do we do - to get this?

Justice Bader Ginsburg once said:

"If you want to live a meaningful life, you will do something outside yourself.
Something to repair tears in your community.
Something to make life a little better for people less fortunate than you.
That's what I think a meaningful life is, living not for one's self, but for one's community."

This weekend marks the new year of the Jewish Calendar - Year 5781. Shana Tovah, here's to a sweet one (please God). Tomorrow begins the Days of Awe - a period set aside for reflection, resolution, renewal - re-assessment of our ways of being in our world.

It's time for re-assessing our net worth and for making some resolutions.

Where to start?

Well, call your senators, reach out to loved ones, have hard conversations, show up when you say you're going to show up, send Reclaim the Vote postcards, spend your money where it matters, look to the places in your community that need mending - go to them -

And – in this oddly polarized time of great, collective suffering

Try holding this thought in your mind as you go about your days:

Everyone you cross paths with - physically and virtually - has a piece of paper in each of their pockets -

One piece says: The world was created for me

The other: I am only dust and ash.

(These are in your pockets too.)

Just hold that thought, and see what happens.

Perhaps a misplaced sense of care, of humanity, of connection returns to you.

Perhaps you will ask someone, "How are you doing?" and really want to know.

Perhaps things will get more complicated - in a good way.

Perhaps you will experience a repair in the tear of your community.
Perhaps you'll have an exciting crisis.

I don't know.
Just try though.

Thank you, Justice Bader Ginsburg. Thank you.
Rest in Power, actually just rest.
We've got this.

Let it be so.