

“A POLAR TENSION AT THE HEART OF HUMAN LIFE”

Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Musicians: Harmony Rutter, LeRoy Davidson

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Sermon Title & Description: “A Polar Tension at the Heart of Human Life” – Two of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s most well-known poems, “Ulysses” and “Crossing the Bar,” assist us in exploring one of the great polarities and paradoxes in human life: doing *and* being, striving *and* surrendering, never to yield *and* always to yield.

Chalice Lighting

Deep calls unto deep,
joy calls unto joy,
light calls unto light.
Let the kindling of this flame
rekindle in us the inner light
of love, of peace, and of hope.
(Rev. Gordon B. McKeeman)

Greeting, Introduction to Responsive Reading

Thank you, Dianne, for opening today’s service, and greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually. As we begin today’s service, I invite you to join me in a Responsive Reading. It’s from the hand of the Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewitt, who served from 1956-1991 as the senior minister of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, British Columbia.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

CONGREGATION: By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.

MINISTER: Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

CONGREGATION: We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

MINISTER: We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

CONGREGATION: We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

MINISTER: Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

CONGREGATION: Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

MINISTER: In this spirit we gather.

CONGREGATION: In this spirit we pray.

(“From the Fragmented World” by Rev. Phillip Hewitt)

Sermon, Part I: “A Polar Tension at the Heart of Human Life: Two Poems”

Dr. Walter Bergman, “freedom rider”

Over twenty-five years ago – October 9, 1999 – I officiated the memorial service of Dr. Walter Bergman, a member of the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the congregation at which I served as an associate minister from 1978 to 2001.

An academic by profession, Dr. Bergman had a passion for social justice and was one of the leaders of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, participating in the first Freedom Ride in 1961, a bus trip into the Deep South testing the recent Supreme Court desegregation rulings.

Walter, along with his first wife, Frances, and eleven others, thirteen in all – eight Blacks and five Whites – boarded two buses to test the desegregation laws. Traveling through various cities in the South, the Blacks sat in the front of the bus, the Whites in the back; the Whites ate at restaurants marked “Colored,” the Blacks at restaurants marked “White.”

It was a dangerous thing that they were doing, and it took a lot of courage. Indeed, on that first Freedom Ride, the buses were burned and the Freedom Riders were savagely beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Shortly after Walter’s beating, he suffered a stroke that doctors determined was caused by damage to the brain from the beating he had received. Walter was left partially paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life.

Sixteen years after that first Freedom Ride, it was discovered that the FBI knew about the impending attack on the Freedom Riders’ buses by the Klan, but that they had done nothing, simply stood by and allowed the attacks to take place.

Learning of this, a legal suit was filed on Dr. Bergman's behalf in Grand Rapids, Michigan by the American Civil Liberties Union charging the government with a violation of one of its fundamental duties, namely, the duty to prevent violence and to protect its citizens when possible. U.S. District Court Judge Richard Enslen ruled in favor of Dr. Bergman's legal suit, and his ruling was upheld by higher courts.

Dr. Bergman's memorial service

Throughout his long life – and Dr. Bergman lived a very long life, dying at the age of one-hundred – he was an untiring warrior for civil rights and civil justice in a variety of areas; and, as such, he hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about or planning for a memorial service.

But for his memorial service, two poems were given to me by his second wife, Pat Bergman – his first wife, Frances, having preceded Walter in death – two familiar poems that Walter especially liked, with the request that each poem be read at his service. Both poems were from the hand of the same author, the 19th century Victorian English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who lived from 1809 to 1892.

So, in preparing for that memorial service, I had the opportunity to sit with these two poems of Tennyson, which proved to be an interesting and revealing exercise.

One of the poems, often taught in high school and college literature classes – at least in my day – is titled "Ulysses," which was Tennyson's take on the great Greek hero Odysseus, or in the Roman world Ulysses, as he confronts older age.

In a number of ways Odysseus – Ulysses – filled the slot in the Greek and Roman worlds that Jesus or Gautama fill in our present cultures. That is, he's a mythic figure: human, but yet much larger than any given human; he's a model for how a human life can and should be lived, and a representative of the seasons of a human life. And so, Odysseus – Ulysses – is a warrior, husband, father, engager of the gods and goddesses and all the forces of nature, both outer and inner.

And now, Tennyson, in this lengthy poem, imagines Ulysses confronting older age. We, thus, meet Tennyson's Ulysses pacing back and forth in restlessness, saying:

Ulysses

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees. All times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those

That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea. I am become a name
For always roaming with a hungry heart.
Much have I seen and known – cities of men,
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honored of them all –
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me,
Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the scepter and the isle –
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfill
This labor, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centered in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me –
That ever with a frolic welcome took the
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads – you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil;
Death closes all. But something ere the end,

Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are –
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Tennyson's "Ulysses" – never to yield

This famous poem of Tennyson expresses one aspect/trajectory/or direction of the power of Being as we experience it, namely: the creative impulse, the tremendous drive to move forward, to evolve; the ongoing, forward-pushing urge in ourselves and all things – “Urge and urge and urge,” cries Walt Whitman, “Always the procreant urge of the world.” (“Song of Myself,” Chant 3, from *Leaves of Grass*)

And there's a song in our hymnbook that Harmony will sing in a few minutes that expresses the same idea, as the first line of the hymn reads, “A fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things.” (Don Marquis)

That's the unrest in Tennyson's “Ulysses” – never to yield, never to give up the fight, never to stop growing, never to quit exploring ... never, ever, ever, ever to rest.

A question

But at the time, I wondered in reading this poem: When did Tennyson write it, for it sounds like it might be the poem of a young man *imagining* what an older person might feel like; or, imagining what he would *like* to feel like as an older person?

So, I looked up the date of this poem and, sure enough, the poem is dated 1842. Since Tennyson dates are 1809-1892, he's a young man in his early 30's when this poem appeared.

A second Tennyson poem

Well, I told you I was given two poems by Pat Bergman to read at her husband's memorial service. And the second poem was an even more familiar poem of Tennyson's, a much shorter one titled "Crossing the Bar." And I knew that this poem was written late in Tennyson's life. It's dated 1889, just three years before Tennyson's death.

And, here, in this poem Tennyson is no longer a young man *imagining* older age – he doesn't have to imagine it, because he himself is in older age; he's in his 81st year. And, here, Tennyson feels another aspect/trajectory/or direction of the power of Being or the Creative Life-Force.

As I read this familiar poem, imagine Tennyson (or yourself) looking out upon the sea both in the evening of a particular day but also in the evening of his (or your) life.

And a note on the word "bar" in this poem "Crossing the Bar," as it's rich with nuance and meaning. "Bar," can be:

- 1) "bar" as a sand or gravel bar deposited by the ocean upon which the sea crashes;
- 2) "bar" as any obstacle or barrier to break through and get across;
- 3) "bar" as it is used in the legal profession: a judgment, as in a "bar exam," and also the railing in a courtroom separating the public from the jury, judges, and attorneys, which is also called a "bar."

Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star [actually, it's the planet Venus as it rises in the western sky],
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

"The boundless deep" – a time to yield

“The boundless deep,” says Tennyson. That’s what he’s feeling in later life: The boundless deep of the ocean far, far from shore.

The Boundless Deep – and now I’ll capitalize it – may be seen as a metaphor for Being-itself, for Ultimate Reality, for that which is infinite and limitless and which shatters all human-made boundaries.

The poet’s life – and our lives – emerge from this Boundless Deep ... individual waves that come to shore and crash upon a sand or gravel bar near the shore, briefly creating sound and foam.

Note that the sea that Tennyson looks upon in later life is a very different sea than the sea he saw when he was writing “Ulysses” in his early thirties. Then the sea “moaned round with many voices,” and he imagined himself and his companions *smiting* the furrows and *pushing* beyond the sunset right to the end.

But, here, in “the boundless deep” to which he is returning, there is no turbulence – “the tide as moving seems asleep, too full for sound and foam.”

And so this is another dimension of Ultimate Reality, that eternal Ocean Deep that “always was, always is, and always shall be.”

We come from that Boundless Deep and to that Boundless Deep we one day all return.

Make it “one clear call,” cries Tennyson, make it “one clear call.”

Introduction to Musical Interlude

Before further exploring the relationship between the perspectives of these two poems, we’re going to take a musical break. Harmony will sing the hymn “A Fierce Unrest,” related to the poem “Ulysses;” and then, as a congregation, we will sing the hymn “Abide with Me,” which I relate to the poem “Crossing the Bar.”

Words to “A Fierce Unrest” (#304)

by Don Marquis

1. A fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things:
it was the eager wish to soar that gave the gods their wings.
There throbs through all the worlds that are this heartbeat hot and strong,
and shaken systems, star by star, awake and glow in song.
2. But for the urge of this unrest these joyous spheres are mute;
but for the rebel in our breast had we remained as brutes.
When baffled lips demanded speech, speech trembled into birth;
one day the lyric word shall reach from earth to laughing earth.

3. From deed to dream, from dream to deed, from daring hope to hope,
the restless wish, the instant need, still drove us up the slope.
Sing we no governed firmament, cold, ordered, regular;
we sing the stinging discontent that leaps from star to star.

**Words to “Abide with Me” (#101)
by Henry Francis Lyte**

1. Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens; still with me abide.
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

2. Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O thou who changes not, abide with me.

3. I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still if thou abide with me.

**Sermon, Part II: “A Polar Tension at the Heart of Human Life: Exploring the
Tension”**

The tension and paradox at the heart of life

The two poems of Tennyson that I read, both appreciated by Walter Bergman, put before us one of the great polar tensions and even paradoxes of the Creative Life-Force as we experience it in our human life-form; namely, the same Power that propels us forward out of the ocean depth as a finite, individual unit in time and place is also the ocean depth itself, infinite in dimension, and prior to and beyond time and place.

Our lives are lived out in the middle of this polar tension and paradox: doing *and* being, striving *and* surrendering, never to yield *and* always to yield.

On the one hand, we experience ourselves as individual identities that seek, strive, and evolve ... who roll forward as a wave emerging from the Ocean Deep, and with sound – and sometimes fury – strike the earthly shore.

And, on the other hand, we are part of a depth and unity from which we never truly separate, a depth and unity prior to the restless striving of our life, a depth and unity that transcends and encompasses the striving.

In younger age, we are more likely to be attracted to and fascinated by the restlessness that

comes from out the Boundless Deep, as represented by the poem “Ulysses.”

In older age, we are more likely to consider the Boundless Deep itself, as that which is sufficient unto itself and needs nothing from us.

The ego/Self distinction

In order to further consider this polar tension between doing *and* being, striving *and* surrendering, never to yield *and* always to yield, and the paradox of simultaneously belonging both to finite and infinite realities, I’d like to look for a few minutes with you through the lens of depth psychologist Carl Jung, bringing forward a central idea in his understanding of our human reality, namely, his notion of the human psyche – our interior being – as having two different centers, which he names the “ego” and the “Self” (with a capital “S”).

The “ego,” the smaller center of the psyche, may be referred to as the “organ of self-consciousness” or the “organ of self-awareness.” This is the part of the human psyche that has to do with self-identity, with our sense of who we think we are.

We use the pronoun “I” with respect to this center within us. And I watched with interest as my own children came to use the “I-word,” which occurred around the age of two.

For Carl Jung and those who follow his approach, the “ego,” important as it is as the organ of self-consciousness, self-awareness, and self-identity, is much the smaller part of the entire psyche, most of which we are not conscious of.

And the center, then, of the entire psyche, the deeper center, is the “Self,” the individual Soul ... but more than the individual Soul ... for the Self – the “Deep Self” in contrast to “little-self” of the ego – is connected to and is part of the interior dimension of Reality ... or of what might be termed “the World-Soul” ... or, again, to borrow a term from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Tennyson’s American contemporary, the “Over-Soul.”

The relationship of the ego and Self

In a properly functioning relationship between the ego and the Self, the ego receives its inspiration and overall direction from the Self.

The ego is properly the servant of the Self, and as such it performs tasks on behalf of the Self that would otherwise not get performed.

The ego has the role of bringing the light of consciousness to Reality; it is a way that Being-itself becomes self-conscious. As process theologians put it, we humans are “co-creators with God.” Through us, “God” comes to self-consciousness.

Two halves of a human life

Carl Jung also divided a human life into two halves or “two arcs.”

The first-half of life, the first arc, is the more ego-oriented half of life, the part of life when one develops one’s sense of personal identity ... when one becomes aware of and hones one’s individual gifts ... when one discovers and sharpens one’s particular “genius.” It’s the time of developing and building a life ... typically, a time of striving, creating, competing ... a time of outward focus and “external” matters.

The second-half of life, the second arc, is related more to the larger Self, a time of greater awareness of how one is part of the greater whole of things, a time of more internal focus on “eternal” matters. (see Michael Meade’s “The Second Arc of Life, Living Myth,” podcast #217: link: <https://www.mosaicvoices.org/episode-217-the-second-arc-of-life>)

The distinction between “ego-oriented” and “ego-centric”

When I say that the first-half of life is more ego-oriented, I don’t mean that the ego is the dominant part of the psyche – that’s never the case. I mean, rather, that the tasks of life are ego-oriented tasks. It’s the time of a human life when the “light bulb,” you might say, is the brightest.

But if the ego should ever come to believe that *it* is the center of the psyche, the *master* of the larger Self rather than the *servant* of the larger Self ... should the ego ever become proud in this way, then the “ego” has lost its way. This is what is called “egotism” – the “ego” not understanding and maintaining its proper role in life.

Jungian author John A. Sanford puts it this way:

“But the ego, as we know it, is but a passing phenomenon; the true reality is the soul or, in psychological language, the expression of the Self. The task of the ego is to accumulate consciousness and to be willing to die when its time comes; thus [says Sanford] the ego is important, but not the most important thing. Anything less than this turns religion into another form of egocentricity.” (John A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 248)

Ego/Self distinction and “Crossing the Bar”

Now, let’s return for a few concluding minutes to the poem “Crossing the Bar,” looking at it in terms of this ego/Self distinction. This poem was written by Tennyson, as I said, deep into the second half of this life, written at a time when he is not just reflecting on the dimensions of “the boundless deep,” but focusing on the actual letting go of his ego-life and the return home to “the boundless deep”:

For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

The word “bourne” here – b-o-u-r-n-e – means limit or boundary. Thus, at death, at the “crossing of the bar,” there is the breaking of the boundary of our little life, and we are carried away as by a flood into the vast, limitless ocean.

“I hope to see my Pilot face to face”

And what is to be made of the hope of seeing “my Pilot face to face?”

With respect to this poem, Tennyson wrote that “The Pilot has been on board all the while, but in the dark I have not seen him.”

And his son Hallam, who was with his father at the time he wrote “Crossing the Bar” – they were actually out at sea when he wrote it – Hallam reported his father explaining to him that the “Pilot” is “That Divine and Unseen, Who is always guiding us.”

So, in terms of the ego/Self distinction that I am using in looking at this poem, the “Pilot” is the Self, the larger, deeper center of one’s psyche, connected to the Soul of all.

Time as a “construct of the ego”

What takes place at “the crossing of the bar?”

At the level of the Soul or Self, this may be seen as the ego-life, its work accomplished and its journey over, returning to the Sourceland, returning to the Boundless Deep.

Or, again, we might say, it is the individual soul returning to the World-Soul ... being met, being taken in, being absorbed by the great Self.

How exactly this meeting takes place and what it looks like cannot be known ... for the meeting takes place beyond the boundary ... on the far side of the “crossing of the bar” ... behind the veil ... beyond time as we know time ... for time, as Jungian author John Sanford writes, is “a special construction of the limited ego.”

Horizontal and vertical metaphor

Thus, you might think of time as the horizontal dimension of Reality, the *surface* of the ocean. But beyond time, and beyond the ego, is the Boundless Deep to which our Deep Self is connected. And we might think of this as the vertical dimension of Reality ... to which we may attach the word “eternal,” a dimension of Reality *other* than time.

“Eternal life,” again to quote author John A. Sanford, “is not to be understood as ‘living forever.’” It is not the everlasting life of the ego, which has to do with a horizontal, linear extension of time; but “Rather, eternal life is an entirely new dimension of reality.”

(John A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 249)

The ego at death

So, what happens beyond “our bourne of Time and Place?” Is one ushered into a blaze of luminous light, as attested to in near-death experiences? Or, is there the mysterious dark, the immense silence?

One may hope, one may wish, to see one’s guiding Pilot more clearly, even face to face ... but, truly, one doesn’t know.

But what we do know ... and what we can do ... is to try to surrender, to attempt to let go, and to welcome our meeting with the Boundless Deep from which our finite life has been drawn.

Tennyson at the “crossing of the bar”

Alfred Lord Tennyson, as I said earlier, wrote “Crossing the Bar” three years before his death when he was in his eighty-first year. He would go on to write more poems. But just a few days prior to his death, he told his son Hallam to “put ‘Crossing the Bar’ at the end of all editions of my poems.”

Thus, Tennyson, in the act of saying good-bye to his long and productive life, ends by expressing the thought/hope/wish that as he “crosses the bar” he might see his soul-partner, his Pilot, even more clearly.

One’s ego is, naturally, disturbed at the “crossing of the bar,” frightened, sorrowful, anxious, etc. But one’s Deep Self is undaunted at the “crossing of the bar,” for the Deep Self is related to the Absolute and embraces all polarities, all paradoxes ...

... and so Tennyson, experiencing his connection to that larger Reality, doesn’t demand, doesn’t protest, and doesn’t cling ...

... rather, he opens his arms, he surrenders; he hears and obeys the clear call of the return to “the boundless deep” from which his ego-life was drawn. He says:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

Closing Hymn #128: "For All That Is Our Life"

Words to "For All That Is Our Life" by Bruce Findlow

1. For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise;
for all life is a gift which we are called to use
to build the common good and make our own days glad.
2. For needs which others serve, for services we give,
for work and its rewards, for hours of rest and love;
we come with praise and thanks for all that is our life.
3. For sorrow we must bear, for failures, pain, and loss,
for each new thing we learn, for fearful hours that pass:
we come with praise and thanks for all that is our life.
4. For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise;
for all life is a gift which we are called to use
to build the common good and make our own days glad.

Closing Words

Our Closing Words of Benediction are from the Rev. Dr. Kendyl R. Gibbons:

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, and in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment, or
The Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, June 29, 2025. Rev. Bode is minister emeritus at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (QUUF) in Port Townsend, Washington, from which he retired in 2018 as the senior minister after serving the congregation for fourteen years (2004-2018).

Before coming to Port Townsend, Rev. Bode was the interim minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas (2002-2004) and the Hope Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma (2001-2002). Prior to that, he served for twenty-two years (1978-2001) as an associate minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a large, independent, religiously liberal congregation.