

“Making the Good Life Last”
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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
The Rev. Judy Welles©; Julie Ham, Worship Associate

Invitation to Worship

Julie Ham

We’ve gotten kind of used to the grumblings in the past year or so, but even in happier, more prosperous times we hear it — a litany of dissatisfaction: taxes, government, politics, gas prices, vandalism, traffic, health care, food prices, rudeness... and on and on....

Occasionally during such conversations, I’ve casually remarked that “we” are society and we can change things for the better – only get this look, as if I had three heads. For me the comment was a big “DUH.” But for the others, for some reason, it seems to be a new idea, and unfortunately, not always a pleasant one.

For some reason, even here in the country of the people, by the people, and for the people,” too many of us seem to forget our own power – as individuals and as a society. But we do have this power – the power to change the world.

And the world is changing, very quickly, whether we like it or not. And we’re coming to a time when as a nation, and as global citizens, we’re going to have to make some difficult decisions, and some difficult changes.

For one example, take what is becoming a very important commodity: water.

In some places, right here in America, water rights are the subject of negotiations, legislation, and courtroom battles. As business and residential communities vie with agriculture for this most basic of natural resources, rivers are being reduced to mere trickles, and may no longer reach the deltas where they flow into larger bodies of water.

How we will resolve such issues. When we will resolve them?

“Tomorrow, today will be part of the unchangeable past; but it can still be changed today.”

Like it or not, we have the power to choose our future. Let’s consider the possibilities as we worship together today.

Introduction

The Good Life

Rev. Judy Welles

Ah, the good life! Don’t we all want to live the good life? Don’t we all want to dance and be happy, surround ourselves with love, eat well, sleep well and wake refreshed and healthy?

I suspect you do. I know I do. And for me, the good life means all that I have said and ever so much more. In addition to love and happiness, I believe that the good life also means stability and security; a sense of personal satisfaction and meaning; a feeling of utter belonging and contributing to the furtherance of the good life for those around me and those yet to come. It means living with integrity, and a sense of joy, gratitude and wonder for all that surrounds us.

And I also believe that what is good for the individual is good for society and for the planet. So when I talk about “the good life,” I’m concerned for the well-being of all that “over and around us lies.” This is not just personal; it is global.

My sermon this morning is based on a book I read recently which has given focus and shape to many thoughts and ideas I’ve been living with for decades. Written by my colleague the Rev. Michael Schuler, senior minister of the First Unitarian Church of Madison, Wisconsin, the book is titled *Making the Good Life Last: Four Keys to Sustainable Living*. As with my sermon series of several years ago, “The Four Rules of Life,” this book explores four precepts or keys which, if used well, will allow us to enjoy the benefits of the good life while reducing damage to the environment and enhancing the human community.

I hope to infuse you with as much enthusiasm for this book as I have, so that we can use it as a guide in a follow-up study group. It seems to me that church provides the ideal context for some serious work on living responsibly and joyfully, and caring for the world. I would love to work with a group of us on taking ownership of its guidelines and improving the quality of our lives and the community we inhabit. So please come and talk to me after the service or get in touch with me next week if you’d like to spend more time with the ideas in this book and apply them to your own lives and the communities you occupy.

So with this prospect in mind, I invite us all to sing Hymn #21 and raise our voices in grateful praise for what we already have.

Sermon

Making the Good Life Last

Now before I get into telling you what the four keys are that Michael Schuler believes will help us to attain the good life, I want to lay some groundwork. Because the book’s subtitle is *Four Keys to Sustainable Living*, I’ll talk just a little bit about sustainability, and I want to say a little bit about how we got where we are now.

The word “sustainability” is most frequently associated with environmental issues like sustainable agricultural methods which restore the soil, or sustainable product development which uses recycled materials and eliminates toxic by-products. But in this book it’s used in a much broader sense, to include protecting cultural assets, strengthening families and neighborhoods, and achieving economic balance.

Buddhist teachings describe perpetually dissatisfied, grasping, overanxious people as “hungry ghosts.” These sad individuals are unenlightened about how an abiding sense of well-being might be secured. They lack self-discipline, subsisting on easily acquired pleasures that dull their cravings but don’t satisfy them. In a nutshell, this is the dilemma of the hungry ghost: it is greedy for experiences and possessions to fill its emptiness, but it always feels impoverished and discontent.¹

There’s a drawing of a hungry ghost on the cover of your bulletin — it wears a mask so you can’t tell much about how it is feeling, but its position suggests discomfort; the artist described it as “wander[ing] the realm looking for physical sustenance when what [it] truly needs

¹ Schuler, Michael, *Making the Good Life Last: Four Keys to Sustainable Living*, Barrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2009; excerpted from page 13.

is spiritual nourishment.”² The hungry ghost is a perfect metaphor for the way so many of us live in middle class Western society.

Without going into the fascinating details of how we got into this dilemma and which patterns of thinking are to blame, I’ll just say that the overall culprit has been short-term and self-referential thinking — looking for immediate gratification rather than long-term, sustainable happiness, and thinking only of oneself (or the company’s bottom line) without regard to the consequences for the greater community around us. This plays out whether we’re talking about the way so-called “economic development” has destroyed local neighborhoods; or about how the promotion of “convenience” foods has damaged our health; or about how relationships suffer because of an overemphasis on passion and excitement rather than commitment.

There’s a lot of information available to us about how to fix these situations, yet even though we know what kinds of things need to change, we aren’t changing — a few baby steps notwithstanding. Schuler’s theory is that there’s a link missing in the middle, the link between what we know and how we think, and the bulk of his book discusses four precepts or keys — new ways of thinking that can guide us into the significant changes that are called for in order to attain and sustain “the good life.”

These four keys are: pay attention, stay put, exercise patience, and practice prudence. Let’s start with paying attention.

Reading: “Look to this Day!”
(attributed to Kalidasa)

Look to this day!
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course lie all the verities
and realities of your existence:
 the bliss of growth
 the glory of action
 the splendor of beauty.
For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
But today, well-lived, makes every yesterday
a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

“Look!” may be the most important word in the English language. Didn’t we all learn that word early when the Dick and Jane reader was put in our hands in first grade? “Look, Jane, look! Look and see! Look, look, look!” ...and so on. If only we could remember that childhood admonishment to Look and See, to pay attention

Another way to describe paying attention is with the term “mindfulness.” In Schuler’s words, when we are mindful, “every instant offers a singular encounter with an environment that is constantly changing, continually generating new surprises, creating fresh impressions. One

² Roizen, Sara, <http://blog.sararoizen.com/>

who has learned truly to attend will never be bored, never be jaded, and never feel cheated by life.”³

These days my personal model for mindfulness is babies — in particular Duane’s grandson Viking, who has more focus and determination at eight months than most adults I have ever known. Everything captivates his attention and seems worthy of careful study — the fringe on the rug, the sound made by repeatedly slapping his hand on the tabletop, the pin on my jacket that begs to be pulled off and put in his mouth. Everything is interesting to him, everything offers an opportunity to learn something new. This child is deeply engaged with life; he is paying attention.

In terms of relationships, the relationships we have with family are the ones most deserving of our attention, but often the ones least attended to. One would think that the people we love most in the world deserve the best we can give them, but often what they get is what’s left over at the end of the day and the end of our patience.

Family therapist Mary Pipher writes:

Strong families feature appreciation, open communication, time together, a commitment to promoting happiness and welfare, spiritual wellness, and ways to cope effectively with stress.⁴

But none of this is really possible unless family members are paying attention and willing to be fully present with each other. Think of the tragedies that could have been averted if parents were really aware of their children’s rage or pain or fears, if they truly listened to them and paid attention.

And think of the children who will grow up strong and self-assured because their parents do listen to them, believe them, encourage their interests, and allow them to be fully who they are.

Paying attention gives us myriad opportunities to experience gratitude — to notice the caress of the air as we step outside, to appreciate the slant of light on the trees in late afternoon, to laugh with delight at something absurd that we stumble upon. There is much to be grateful for, and gratitude is one of the attributes of the good life. Pay attention, and be glad.

After “Pay Attention,” the next guideline that Schuler suggests is “Stay Put.”

Reading

from *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*, by Scott Russell Sanders

I wish to consider the virtue and discipline of staying put. I dwell here in company — with my wife and children, my neighbors, the people of my city, and with all the creatures that run and root and soar. I desire no home apart from this companionship. Although I have lived in the same region, indeed the same house, for twenty years, I am still discovering what it means to be a citizen. I have lived in one marriage even longer, and yet I am still discovering what it means to be a husband and father. For me, the effort to be grounded in family and community is inseparable from the effort to be grounded in one place.

³ Schuler, p. 89

⁴ Pipher, Mary, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*, Ballantine Books, 1996, p. 228

There are two aspects of this behavioral key which Schuler calls “staying put”: One is staying in place, which means finding and making a home and investing in the community where you are located; and the other is persistence and perseverance in your vocations, interests and relationships.

Literally staying in place — settling down and settling in for the duration — has many advantages. Staying put provides a sense of **security** — knowing where to get help, learning which neighbors you can trust or turn to, what the institutions are that support and sustain your community, and what resources you can depend on.

There’s also a comforting sense of **familiarity** that comes with staying in one place. After living in Ventura County, California for sixteen years, I could never go to the movies without seeing several people I knew, and I felt disturbingly disconnected after moving to Berkeley, where the movie theaters were filled with strangers! Now Duane and I go to the Farmers Market or Hollywood on High feeling confident that we’ll see familiar faces and be greeted by people who know us. That can go a long way toward a feeling of well-being and belonging in the world.

When people stay in their communities, those **communities are better cared for** and thus more attractive and livable. People have a holistic investment in the safety and beauty of their environment; if they are willing to think long-term and understand the benefits of good community planning, they are more likely to make the financial investment that may be required to keep their communities strong and healthy. They become conscientious good citizens.

When we stay put, we get to watch our own and other people’s children growing up around us, and we feel held in the cycles of life. That’s one of the great appeals of parish ministry for me: I get to be with you when you bring babies home, when the children develop into their own unique and interesting selves, when they leave home and you have to make that painful adjustment into a different way of life. And we’re still together as you age and are confronted with health issues or end-of-life challenges, and as I witness you drawing the story of your life together and making meaning of it all.

All of us can do that by staying put here in the religious community that is also home to us.

The other kind of “staying put” is about perseverance and persistence. It’s the ability to stick with an enterprise in order to achieve maximum proficiency, excellence and a sense of satisfaction. Perseverance increases the chance of attaining not just transient gratification but a real sense of accomplishment.

In terms of vocational perseverance, I think of those among us who came to this area for work straight out of graduate school and stayed for the entire duration of their careers. This flies in the face of the “conventional wisdom” that we will be employed in many different careers during the course of our work lives. But think of the satisfaction of deeply knowing one workplace, becoming recognized as an expert in your field, and becoming a mentor to others in the field who come along after you.

The current state of committed relationships — or sort-of committed relationships, to be truthful — is another example of our inability or unwillingness to persevere and stay put. We are indoctrinated by the media and by cultural icons to expect thrills and romance in our intimate relationships, when the truth is that often it’s just pretty much the same old thing, day after day,

stirring the oatmeal and changing the sheets. We need to learn to cultivate the deep satisfactions of loyalty, fidelity and simple affection, which have the potential to gratify us more deeply and last longer than the wildest passion we can imagine.

Friendship is another issue here. With the advance of social networking sites like Facebook, it's easy to carry on many low-maintenance "friendships" which are fun but demand very little of us. Which is more likely to draw out the best in us: reading a sentence or two on someone's FB page, or spending time sitting with someone who's going through a hard time and needs our full attention? I'm not advocating giving up Facebook here; I'm just reminding you to be mindful about what true friendship is and what it asks of us.

For this is what the good life means, as well: it means being willing to have things asked of us, and answering "yes."

So now we've touched on the first two keys, Pay Attention and Stay Put, and it's time to move on to the third, Exercise Patience.

Reading: A Zen Teaching Story

A young man approached the venerable master, seeking guidance. "If I meditate eight hours a day and study the Sutras four hours every night," he asked, "how long will it take for me to gain enlightenment?"

"Ten years," the master replied.

The novice was taken aback. "*That* long?" he gasped. "Well, then, what if I practice for ten hours a day and study for six? How long then?"

"Twenty years," said the master.

"But how can that be?" the incredulous novice wondered aloud.

The master shook his head and sighed. "For someone who is in such a hurry, enlightenment does not come easily."⁵

The Dalai Lama once likened patience to a muscle, pointing out that it can be significantly strengthened through exercise. If your ambition is to acquire tranquility and calmness, an enhanced ability to face adversity, and greater tolerance and acceptance of others, the Dalai Lama urges you to put the practice of patience at the heart of your daily life.⁶

Recalling that the source of our current dilemma is short-term thinking, it's easy to understand why the cultivation of patience could be a valuable response. There is so much in our lives that urges us to hurry up, get it over with, and move on to the next thing, yet patience is a virtue that can keep us centered, grounded, relaxed and fully present in this moment

⁵ Schuler, p. 135

⁶ Schuler, p. 136-7.

I think of the words to one of the songs in last year's Solstice Cantata, reminding us that

When the world is telling you
to get it done, to make it through,
the thing you really have to do
is slow down....⁷

Some of the ways we can practice patience are to eat slowly, enjoying each bite and pausing at times for conversation or contemplation. Remember, the good life is about savoring, not getting it over with.

We can drive more slowly — I recommend that you push the Cruise Control button and then Step. Away. From. The. Gas. Pedal. — and thus we can refuse to participate in the craziness that happens on the highways every day. For every patient driver, there is one less opportunity for road rage.

Exercising the muscle of patience is a good hedge against frustration and stress, so that we learn to tolerate delays and keep our emotions under control. Some things, like enlightenment, are worth waiting for.

Incorporating patience into our way of thinking and being is a good spiritual practice. Some things take time, as the Zen Master understood so well. Even here at UUCV — I want to encourage you to invest in this religious community for the long term, knowing that some practices and changes will happen very slowly, but hopefully with care and appropriate attention.

In the public sector, though it may be tempting to rush through a bureaucracy and cut the red tape, there is often good reason to move slowly and with deliberation, such as when environmental impact statements are called for, or when it would be a good idea to study the effect of big-box stores on similar communities before permitting them in ours. Public patience can be as valuable to a community as private patience to an individual.

In terms of foreign policy, think of the difference between hasty “regime change” imposed from the outside and the kind of slow accrual of democratic practices in Eastern Europe that has taken place over the past several decades. Which will be the more sustainable?

Closely aligned with this virtue of exercising patience is the fourth key that Michael Schuler advocates: Practice Prudence.

The Grasshopper and the Ants (a fable by Aesop)

In a field one summer's day a grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. An ant passed by, bearing along, with great toil, an ear of corn he was taking to the nest.

“Why not come and chat with me,” the grasshopper asked, “instead of toiling and moiling in that way?”

“I am helping to lay up food for the winter,” said the ant, “and I recommend you to do the same.”

⁷ Glasgow, David M. “Remember the Dark: A Cantata for the Winter Solstice”

“Why bother about winter?” said the grasshopper. “We have got plenty of food at present.” But the ant went on its way and continued its toil.

When the winter came the grasshopper had no food, and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the ants distributing every day corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer.

Then the grasshopper knew: IT IS BEST TO PREPARE FOR THE DAYS OF NECESSITY.

What better object lesson is there on the value of practicing prudence and preparing for the future than the recent economic disaster that this country has endured and is still enduring? Not just individuals, but nearly the entire country was caught up in an experience of willfully ignoring the future — purchasing homes we could not afford; buying on credit and never managing to fully pay off our bills; and somehow rationalizing that debts really never needed to be paid.

At every level, from the individual through local and state governments, and other entities all the way up to the federal government and the world economy, we have been willfully ignoring the future and refusing to plan for what is to come. Wetlands have been filled in, the rain forest is being cut down, wild rivers have been dammed, pristine wilderness areas are invaded and exploited, all in service to the goal of monetary wealth and without attention to the other costs involved.

Practicing prudence doesn't mean never taking risks, but it does mean giving the risks some careful thought and weighing the possible consequences. Every action from eating that fourth slice of pizza to using or not using birth control has consequences that we should be thinking about, but seldom do.

In California I knew a woman who was significantly overweight. A few years after we moved here, I ran into her at a General Assembly and was startled to see how much she had slimmed down. I asked her how she had done it, expecting an answer like Weight Watchers or the Atkins Diet. She told me “I didn't exactly have a regimen, except that every time I considered eating something, I asked myself if I really wanted it badly enough to compromise my weight-loss goal. And the answer was usually no, I didn't.” This woman had a clear goal, and she practiced prudence consistently, always thinking about the consequences, in order to reach it. I was impressed.

As we near the end of our lives, the advisability of practicing prudence comes into sharper focus. It is imprudent to think that things will not change as we age. It is imprudent to think that we will always be able to do what we do now, that we will be able to move effortlessly through the world, care for our bodies, exercise our brilliant minds, and just go on the way we are. Somehow we know that this is true for other people, but we have a hard time accepting it for ourselves.

Thinking about the end of our lives is sobering, isn't it? Not something we especially want to do unless we feel it coming very close. But I do want to encourage you to imagine — just imagine — that you are near the end of your life, looking back over it, the whole thing, and feeling great satisfaction that you have lived a life of integrity and meaning, that your heart is filled with gratitude, knowing that you have made a difference and left the world better for being

here. What would it take, what changes might you have to make now so that you could come to the end of your life with such equanimity and serenity?

Remember the four keys: pay attention, stay put, exercise patience, practice prudence. How might they change your life for the better, starting now?

Minister's Prayer

Gracious and loving God whom we call by many names, we gather today in hope: hope that coming together into one body will strengthen us to become the people we long to be. We long to live with integrity, always keeping our highest values in mind, yet we often fall short.

Help us to forgive ourselves when we fail, and remember that becoming whole takes time and patience.

We understand the value of paying attention to others, yet sometimes we are so caught up with ourselves that we fail to give others the attention they deserve. As we contemplate the sorrows, celebrations and struggles among us today, help us to move beyond the narrowness of our own small worlds into the world of wholeness that all of us occupy together.

Spirit of life, we open our hearts to you in wonder and gratitude. We honor your presence within us, among us and beyond us this day and all days, and we ask you to help us remember that we are never alone, never separated from your love.

Amen.

Benediction

“We are here...”

by Annie Dillard

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature, so that creation need not play to an empty house.