

Grounded and Guided:
A Sermon for the Installation of the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills

Sunday, April 7th, 2019

Given by the Rev. Ana Levy-Lyons

“The beginning of wisdom,” says King Solomon, is “get wisdom.” That seems a little circular, if you think about it, like one of those Escher drawings where people are spiraling down a staircase and winding up back where they started. What does it mean to get wisdom by getting wisdom? Where are we supposed to start? How are we supposed to do that? This is clearly not a simple, rational teaching, but something more intuitive and spiritual. So I want to begin to explore it by telling a story about my kids. They’re 8-year-old twins. They were off from school a few weeks ago and one afternoon I took them to see an exhibit of Escher’s work. One was excited, the other was skeptical, but it was a rare outing alone with mom, so they were basically happy to be going.

We got there to this hipster gallery built into a giant old warehouse and as we entered, on the left there was a little theatre that was playing a loop of a video about Escher’s life. The kids, of course, wanted to watch the movie – they were drawn to the screen like iron filings to a magnet. I said, “Come on. Let’s look at the art first and then we can see the movie at the end if we still want to.” They reluctantly tore themselves from the screen. We entered the first room with Escher’s stunning woodcuts, and the kids immediately started complaining dramatically about being hungry and wanting to leave and having a stomachache and being so thirsty they could feel their tongues cracking. They were gazing longingly back at the room with the screen. My son even darted back there at one point and I had to pry him away again. Why, again, did I think coming here with two 8-year-olds was a good idea?

But then something really interesting started to happen, and I only realized it was happening twenty minutes later. We started to move through the show – we looked at Escher’s famous Tower of Babel print and I told them the story of the Tower of Babel and talked about how amazing it was that he could create that look of light and shadow and angles all by making little cuts in a block of wood, all backwards from the way it was going to look on paper. We saw scenes from the Seven Days of Creation. We looked at his fish and birds and how he tricked our eyes so that the positive space of one was the negative space of the other. Which one was the real one – the fish or the birds? Am I a person dreaming I’m a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that I’m a person?

As we wound our way deeper into the gallery, the work started to get – for lack of a better word – trippy. This was before the age of psychedelics, but his creatures got weirder. He played with perspective and made large things look small and small things look large. He created intricate symmetrical cascading designs that looked like mandalas. He represented whirling infinity. He wasn't communicating rational knowledge, but primordial wisdom. And I realized that the kids' complaints had fallen away. Their bodies had quieted and they were starting to show *me* stuff that they liked. "Look mom, come over here, here's another negative and positive space one, but this one has different animals – and there's a person upside down! That's so cool!" Something had shifted.

We spend most of our time in a world that's very different from the world of that gallery. It's a world of managing busy lives, taking care of ourselves and others, work, health issues, entertainment, shopping, getting stuff done. It's a fast world where efficiency is valued, newer is better, and younger is better. It's a world where appearances count for a lot. It's a world where we are constantly told that we are not good enough so that we buy more and more things. It's a world of screens to which we spend hours and hours a day attending. It's a world of cost/ benefit analyses, where data is king. It's a world guided by algorithms that understand everything from climate change to gun violence in terms of economic costs. It's a secular world where everything is for sale – politics, love, entire ecosystems – everything. It's a world full of knowledge but very little wisdom.

We all participate in this secular, algorithmic world, even though we know on some level that the elements of life that make life worth living are rarely found there. I'm thinking of elements like the depth of a long-standing relationship between two people bonded in friendship, marriage, or family. Or the subtle presence of spirit rising as we sing together here. Or ancestral memories and words that ripple through the generations and touch us in our core. In many ways these elements are the mirror image of the algorithmic world – the negative space – the exact shape of where the algorithmic world can't trespass. They are of the heart and of dreams, non-quantifiable. And they are the very core of religion.

When we enter into religious community like this one, we open to a different dimension of ourselves. Over the hour of a worship service, like my kids and I at the Escher exhibit, we slow down. And slowing down our bodies, and breathing, whether we're attending to hundred-year-old hand-drawn images or two thousand-year-old sacred texts, our minds open to a different kind of wisdom. Without the electric background hum of our lives, we can allow in a new vocabulary and go on a journey with the artist or the prophet as they explore where that vocabulary can lead. We get to see the building blocks of someone else's universe, the world through their eyes. The

mystic gives us a peek behind the curtain to see the gears of the cosmos. The experience is totally different from day-to-day modern life. Totally outside. We get to see that there *is* an outside.

It's not that the fast-paced world of algorithms and technology, productivity and consumption is all bad; this is the time and place we were born into. It has its benefits, and it's part of the curriculum of our experience on this earth. But the question is – Is there nothing else? Is that world the real world, and the world of spirit just an optional extracurricular activity like playing basketball? Or is the world of the spirit the real world and the algorithmic world just a small piece of it? Which world defines the terms of our lives? Which world grounds us and guides us in our deepest values? Am I a person dreaming I'm a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming I'm a person?

It turns out that, to some extent, we have a choice in the matter. When we let in the wisdom of religion with its silence and its wild, joyful singing; its mythic stories, and prayers yearning for the holy – these things can swivel our perspective. What was large becomes small and what was small becomes large. Something can shift and open up inside us. We can tune into a different level of consciousness. The technocratic world where we spend most of our time can shrink and take its rightful place as a small piece of a vast, multi-dimensional universe. It's just one frequency on the radio and we are free to change the station.

We want this. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that we *all* want this wider vision, this spiritual freedom. The embers of the longing for it live in all of our hearts. And when we encounter the possibility of it, it's like oxygen; those embers blaze to life. When you light your chalice here on Sunday mornings, it's those embers blazing to life. It's the hope that maybe together, with your new minister you can create a space here for that wider vision to flourish – a different way of being and becoming in the world. One of the things that your minister can do for you – that *this* particular minister can do for you – is to be someone who holds that vision, who holds it up over and over and serenades you with its sweetness, even as the dominant culture is competing for your soul with its cynical knowledge and materialist logic.

It's hard for us modern people to surrender to these experiences. We feel the tug – myself included and just like my kids did at the gallery – the tug of the screen, the tug of the rush, the fear of missing out, the insecurity of needing to prove ourselves in the social world. News. Sports. Production. Consumption. We don't feel like we have a use for words from 2000 years ago. We think we know better. We don't feel like we have a use for praying when we don't even know if there's something or someone out there to answer us. We can be skeptical and a little

defended sometimes. The ancients knew all this, but also knew how readily available wisdom is once we take the step of opening ourselves to it.

So when King Solomon taught that the beginning of wisdom is to get wisdom, I think he meant something about having the humility to say to ourselves, “Actually, I need this” and the discipline to say, “I’m gonna go get it.” The full verse says, “The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom. And with all your getting, get insight.” He was teaching us to prioritize the effort itself – that making the sacrifice of time, carving out the space in our lives to get wisdom – to sit in a sanctuary like this one week after week, with a spiritual teacher like Rev. Kelly, trusting the unknown, singing and praying together – making that committed effort to get wisdom is itself wisdom.

My kids and I never did make it back to see the movie about Escher. We had been subtly changed by the experience of being there. I find that the commitment to get wisdom takes nurturing it in myself the way I tried to nurture it in my kids at that Escher exhibit. Many of us are just like kids in this respect – we’re a little immature in our ability to downshift into a different mode of being. We’re easily distracted and hungry for all kinds of fleeting treats. We need a little compassionate nudge toward a deeper spirituality. So I think the trick may be to take ourselves by the hand and gently pull ourselves away from the movie about the art and go look at the art. Go beyond the discussion about heaven and experience heaven. Repeatedly redirect our attention from what we want to consume to what we can participate in and learn from. Be our own parent and set limits on screen time and, if necessary, hide the devices, and drag ourselves to services on Sunday morning.

To know that we need wisdom is the beginning of wisdom. To know that our spiritual lives need to be protected, enriched, and sustained is the first step. There is a world beyond the world of algorithms, a world not accessible through data and reason, but only through creativity and faith, human connections, humility, and awe. In that world, what was large becomes small and what was small becomes large. Today it’s more important than ever to hold on to our ability to access that world. To get it with all of our getting.

So my prayer for all of you on this day of celebration is this: May you lead yourselves like small children to slow down, open your eyes, and tune your radio to a higher frequency of wisdom. May the words you hear from Rev. Kelly each week be a beacon for you. May you hear them inviting you into the discomfort of shifting perspectives. May you hear them calling you to question what you’ve come to call the limitations of your lives. And may this new ministry in

which you are embarking together deepen the journey of your souls on this Earth and serve as a blessing for all the world.
