

***Cultivating a Spirit of Gratitude and Hope***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
March 2, 2025

***Welcome to the 90's Club – Evelyn Bertilson***

This morning we welcome a new member of the club, Evelyn Bertilson. Full disclosure: Evelyn is my mother and today is her birthday.

Evelyn was born Evelyn Howlett in Mt. Vernon, WA, the eldest of 3. They were living in the Seattle area when Pearl Harbor was attacked. She was 7 years old and somehow knew that she would be safe under the kitchen sink. She remembers fretting about government and politics from a very young age.

Much later, Evelyn was surprised when she got an acceptance letter to the University of Washington because she hadn't applied. Miss Johnson, the Girls Club advisor, saw Evelyn's potential and applied for her. She got her degree in Political Science and was the first in her family to go to and graduate from college. While at the U of W, she discovered Unitarian Universalism.

She graduated college in June of 1957 and married Hal Bertilson in September that same year. Their first daughter, Anna, was born on their 10 month anniversary. Evelyn taught junior high while Hal worked at Boeing. When their second child, Kathryn, was 18 months old, they moved to Chicago and if I were to list all the places they/we lived, we'd run out of time this morning. But eventually, they wound up back in Pullman where Hal went to graduate school and Evelyn taught high school. Then Fargo, North Dakota, then Ogden, Utah, where Evelyn remained for 42 years.

Evelyn has been a member of League of Women Voters since living in Fargo. In Ogden, they would travel 30 miles to Salt Lake City to attend a UU congregation, and so Evelyn helped start the UU Church of Ogden closer to home. She was very proud to be co-chair of establishing a weekly OUTreach for gay youth and their allies at the new church. Evelyn was the President of Friends of the Library for the Weber County Library System for 20 years and considers it one of her greatest accomplishments.

Evelyn returned to Washington and settled in Vancouver in November of 2021. She has two grandchildren - a favorite granddaughter and favorite grandson, who are both here this morning. She also now has a favorite granddaughter-in-law. She's traveled the world, loves reading and jigsaw puzzles. She attributes her long life to good genes, being attentive to her health and exercising a lot!

Her photo is already on display in the foyer. We have brought the gifts which have become traditional for this ritual - flowers and cookies! Evelyn, Mom, we are honored to have you among us, grateful for your presence and pleased to know you. We know that you have weathered all manner of challenge and difficulty in getting to this point, and have taken a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction over the years. You have paid the dues and meet the rigorous qualifications. We welcome you to the 90's club!

***Cultivating a Spirit of Gratitude and Hope*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

It has been a good assignment this week for me to consider Gratitude and Hope because it has been hard, listening to the news, to not despair and feel hopeless. I'll be frank with you. *Dispirited* and *disheartened* are not strong enough words to describe the despair, fear, and disgust I feel at the impact of the current administration's actions. We knew it would be different this time around, but I did not imagine how different and how destructive it could be. And for many of us, that's just in the backdrop of our lives. If we're not one of the government employees under attack or fired or a person who is trans or undocumented immigrant losing their basic human rights, the news might be just in the background. As horrible as it all is, we might be able to tune it out for some portion of our days and continue on. Not everyone is so fortunate.

Fortunate being an operative word.

Many of us struggle with what might be akin "survivor's guilt" – that guilt felt after a traumatic event that we survived but others did not. Could we have done more to stop this moving train? Are we doing enough now that it is barreling down the tracks? Is it okay to experience joy in the midst of all this pain? Similar questions people ask after the death of a loved one, when they catch themselves laughing for the first time after a time of grief and sorrow.

To which I am reminded of one of Ross Gay's essays in *Inciting Joy* – this is a selection I shared back in November – but he talks about being asked by a professor,

"When all of this is going on" - he held his hands up as to imply war; famine; people all over the world in cages or concentration camps, some of them children; disease; sorrow immense and imperturbable; it only getting worse and worse and worse (dude had big hands)- "why would you write about joy?"

And Gay's response that it is a dangerous fantasy to imagine any emotion as discreet from any other, and to imagine that it might be even *possible* to live without heartbreak or sorrow

"What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another?" he asks. " Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other *through* these things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?"

So maybe it is a good thing that some of us are able to put the news into the backdrop of our lives so that we might be able to care for those whose lives are in the news, or be ready to care for those whose lives are in the news, who are suffering and have temporarily lost access to joy or hope or gratitude.

I said some of us are fortunate and that *fortunate* is an operative word. It operates to remind us of our good fortune, our luck, our blessings – things for which we can be grateful. "there is no blathering on enough about gratitude," writes Ross Gay, " the real thing I mean, there is no *enough* to gratitude."

Gratitude reminds us of all we have and all we can do. It reminds us of our power. It resists the feeling that it's useless to take action, that there's nothing we can do, or that our efforts won't make a difference. It neutralizes that feeling of hopelessness.

I also suspect that it leads to a long life. Or, perhaps, a long life leads to gratitude. I'm not sure of the cause and effect, but there does seem to be a correlation. At least from the perspective of one who has welcomed so many elders into the 90's club this year. I think it's a record. With my mom, we currently have a dozen elders in the club – and that's not mentioning member Lyle Smith who turned 90 in December who we're still waiting to schedule.

A common theme in all those biographies is one of gratitude. And to Ross Gay's point, both Enfields (Norm and Jeannette, both 90) mention the death of their two-year-old daughter so many years ago – in a way that expresses gratitude – Jeannette for the various faiths that helped her understand that death, and joy. “What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?” asks Gay, reminding me of the Enfields. Or Arthur Metzger's appreciation for all those who have cared for the trees on this property. He planted them, but others care for them. Or my mom's devotion to the OUTreach program for gay youth and public libraries. Gratitude and long life, somehow, go together.

Sean Parker Dennison says that the other danger of hopelessness – besides making us feel it's useless to take action – is that we can lose each other. Those are related dangers – the commonality being this sense of being alone. We feel helpless when we think it is ours to do alone – because nobody can do it alone, so of course, as an individual, I *am* pretty helpless! And when we lose hope, it is because we have lost each other – we have lost the perspective that it is not ours alone to do, but that others can carry us for a time, or we can carry others, that there is that which “effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks.”

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic” writes Howard Zinn, “it's based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.” The thing is, small acts of compassion or courage, don't make the headlines. Cruelty does. And we've elected a president who understands that there is no such thing as bad publicity – he yanks our attention this way and that, and throws us off our center, off the principled kind thing we were doing, to notice the cruelty and violence being perpetuated. But the truth is, we allow ourselves to be yanked this way and that, by not prioritizing our own center, our own conviction, values, and actions. *We* control where we put our attention, though I know it often doesn't seem like it. I think this is one of the reasons we come to church – to remind ourselves of the control we do have, so that we don't abdicate it prematurely.

“What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives.” That statement from Howard Zinn reminds me of the stories in the book, *How the Word is Passed, A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* by Clint Smith. It was published in 2021, but I've only just read it. Smith visits sites important to the history of slavery in America and reveals the stories told in those places – how slavery is remembered or misremembered in those particular locations.

I'm particularly struck by the two chapters about how this history is denied. He visits the Angola Prison and the Blandford Cemetery. The Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola, is on the site of a plantation, which is a part of the history of the land completely skipped over on the official tour. The

tour starts by acknowledging the Indigenous population who first lived on the land centuries ago, and then skips right to 1869 when the land is leased to house inmates. They go on to tell the horror story of early prison days and the violence and corruption and exploitation, and then how much better the prison is now and all the good things they do for the inmates. (That said, the ACLU issued a report in 2022 called “Captive Labor: Exploitation of Incarcerated Workers” that featured Angola) The official tour does not mention of the fact that the population of prisoners is largely African American, descendants of the same people enslaved on the land when it was a working plantation and how the Jim Crow laws following slavery virtually guaranteed a way to fill the prison and keep the prisoners in labor camps working under horrific conditions not unlike slavery.

One gets the impression from the official tour guide at Angola, in the account from this book, that he is comfortable with the history he tells – it fits his worldview and this sense that improvement is happening. When the author asks questions or challenges a little of his story, pointing out that the site had been a plantation with slaves or noting that 74% of those incarcerated are Black, while only 32% of the Louisiana population is black, the tour guide rushes on to different facts. “What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives.”

Howard Zinn is not suggesting that we emphasize the positive and skip over the hard exploitative and violent parts, like the official tour guide of this prison. Instead, we tell the complex history like Clint Smith, with all the gory details and uncomfortable facts, but we can focus on the survival of a people who were so mistreated and abused. By putting our attention there, we might learn a little of that resilience.

I was even more struck by Clint Smith’s visit to the Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia where the bodies of roughly thirty thousand Confederate soldiers are buried. He opens with the image of the black men on lawn mowers working around the gravestones draped in Confederate flags. There are a couple of striking things about this chapter. First of all, as a Black man, Smith walks into some pretty white nationalist spaces – he brings a white friend along for the Memorial Day event hosted by the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The courage of this journalist to ask hard questions in a space where armed white men who feel the South should have won the Civil War is remarkable. I’m so grateful to him. The other information that struck me in this chapter – and I’m a bit embarrassed I didn’t get it before reading this – is how systematically and consciously the story of the Civil War was re-written in the South and in this country. I didn’t know that. I was starting to understand it a decade ago when some of the monuments to Confederates started to come down. It’s not normal to erect monuments to honor the losing side in a war that is over, but we can so easily adjust what is familiar... I hadn’t understood why the euphemisms like the War Against Northern Aggression or the War Between the States persisted. But it was quite consciously done and generations of kids in schools in the South were told that the Civil War wasn’t about slavery – and who is to blame them for believing their teachers? Now that Florida has banned black history and the 1619 project, I see how this re-writing of history works – in real time. We’re seeing it now. And we’re seeing it again.

Howard Zinn is not suggesting that we re-write history and de-emphasize the violence and oppression, but rather that we tell the full complex history, which involves violence and oppression, but also resistance and survival, and the everyday kindnesses that won’t make it into the headlines.

Zinn reminds us that “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.”

“The message of hope that still blazes bright for me in these hard times is that I am not alone.” says Sean Parker Dennison, “I don’t have to face the world alone and I don’t have to fix the world alone.” We have each other. We have our values which can keep us centered. Those JETPIG values beginning with J for justice and ending with G for generosity, the value we’re studying this month. These values centered on love. We have our bodies, with those trillion or so microbes in your gut and skin and slathering through your mouth and eyeballs and nostrils... We are not alone.

It helps to remind ourselves of these gifts, this good fortune, these blessings when we’ve been deceived by the illusion, the myth of separation and when we’ve been temporarily defeated by those in power. We can act. Our small acts of compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness matter. I think that is the thru-line told in the many stories of our elders: Jean Dodds who turned 97 this week, and Jeannette Enfield who turned 90 last Sunday and my mom, who entered the club today. Their lives are filled with small acts of compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness, and we can learn from them. They are resilient – to have survived this long in a world this harsh. We need that resilience now. The key may very well lie in that attitude of gratitude their lives express. “There is no *enough* to gratitude” Ross Gay tells us. It may be that looking back on our lives from nine decades of living gives us that sense of perspective and gratitude, but that doesn’t mean that if we are looking forward to decades of living we can’t start now with recognizing our blessings and good fortune beginning with those microbes or all the other mysteries that make us alive.

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Cultivating gratitude reminds us of our power, and hope comes with that feeling of agency: We are not alone. We can do this, if we stick together. May it be so.