

August 10, 2019
II Corinthians 9: 6-11
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

Invitation of Life
Get over yourself

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's reading comes from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. It is in a section of the letter where Paul is encouraging the people to be generous to a collection for the church in Jerusalem.

SERMON

Last week I shared some thoughts about the pilgrim path from English poet, David Whyte, who was the keynote speaker at a national event Ron and I attended during my sabbatical.

David's approach to poetry and philosophy is the conversational nature of reality. He suggested that the invitation of life to us is to get over ourselves, which I thought would be good for us to explore today. I'm going to begin and end with his poem,

Just Beyond Yourself

*Just beyond
yourself.*

*It's where
you need
to be.*

*Half a step
into
self-forgetting
and the rest
restored
by what
you'll meet.*

*There is a road
always beckoning.*

*When you see
the two sides
of it
closing together
at that far horizon
and deep in
the foundations
of your own
heart
at exactly
the same
time,
that's how
you know
it's the road
you
have
to follow.*

*That's how
you know
it's where
you
have
to go.*

*That's how
you know
you have
to go.*

*That's
how you know.*

*Just beyond
yourself,
it's
where you
need to be.*

In his talk, David explored three practices involved in getting beyond yourself.

- Generosity
- Deepening conversations
- Practicing becoming

Generosity

One of the things I enjoyed about hearing David Whyte was the stories he told about his friendship with John O'Donohue, the Irish poet, whose words we heard in today's opening blessing. I have appreciated O'Donohue's words for many years and after listening to Whyte, I had a sense I had met O'Donohue.

David told a story about a conversation with John while they were in the pub together. David told John that he was inclined to give his father some money. When John asked how much, David told him he was thinking about 1,000 pounds. After a brief pause, John said *Go against yourself and give him 2,000*. David hesitated and then said OK. After another pause John said *Go against yourself again and make it 4,000*. David was surprised but after some thought he decided to follow John's advise. Much to his surprise it worked out well.

A few months later they were back in the pub. David figures that John had forgotten that conversation because John said to him, *I'm thinking of giving a friend some money...* We can imagine David's response.

Too often we think a good friend is one who always agrees with us, who is always on the side of whatever our ego is promoting at that particular time. However, a truly good friend invites the best part of us to come to life. A good friend invites us to go beyond ourselves and be generous.

Being generous is not only about finances, it's also about generosity of spirit. Being generous of spirit invites us to:

Deepening conversations

Have you been having the same conversation with someone – maybe a spouse, a parent, a child — maybe for years — with no progress. You both are stuck. In fact, you probably know the script. You'll say this and then the other person will say that, and you're both sure you are right. We just play the same tape over and over again.

David's advice to us was *If you wish to deepen the conversation you are having with someone, FIRST, you have to STOP having the conversation you are having now.*

Zip your life – that's the hardest part. You have to throw out the old script. You have to stop playing the role into which you have solidified. You have to get over yourself and come into the encounter with a new perspective.

David talked about taking his own advice in relating to his teenage daughter. People who are living with adolescents are particularly challenged to deepen the conversation. Teenagers are changing faster than the people around them can

keep up with; in fact, faster than the teenagers themselves can keep up with.

I've been fortunate to have time with our grandson almost every week for the last three years. It is amazing how there is a developmental change every week. Adolescents are changing almost that rapidly, but they no longer let us know in quite the same ways. Adolescents hold those changes closer to the vest, and we often aren't paying as close attention.

David offered the helpful insight that when we speak to adolescents, *we are usually addressing a person who is no longer there*. The young person has already changed and become a new person whom we have yet to know. Family members who don't truly meet each other can develop life-long estrangement. Not wanting that, David asked his teenage daughter what he was doing in their relationship that wasn't helpful. She had ideas; in fact, a long – very long – list. Yet, when he asked her what he could do that would be helpful she was stumped. As he said, she didn't know herself well enough yet to know what to suggest. It is always an on-going process. But they had begun a new conversation.

When we stop the conversation we are having now, we practice becoming someone who is open to a deeper relationship with the other person.

Practicing becoming

Life is a journey. Early childhood and adolescence are intense periods of change and development; but change is always a part of the human experience. When we become aware of the ways we are changing, we meet a new version of

ourselves. Sometimes that new person can be a stranger – *You can't be me!*

The way we spend our days, the things to which we attend, shape who we are. So we ask ourselves, *Who am I practicing becoming?*

David suggested that in this country the most common answer is that we are practicing being workers. Work is our religion. For those of us still in the work force we can see that danger. Maybe for some of us who are retired, our list of activities can be our religion.

Studies show that the U.S. has one of the worst records of vacation time allotted to workers and worst records of people actually use that vacation time. The average American worker has 10 days of paid vacation each year. Most European countries mandate 20 or more days a year – a month of vacation is not unusual. Studies show that about half of U.S. workers don't take all their vacation days. And often when people take vacation they don't fully unplug. They still respond to electronic communications from work. This is not good for us and it actually makes us less productive in the long run. When all you do is work you are practicing becoming a worker.

So, I invite you to ponder: Who am I practicing becoming? Who do you want to become? Do they match? If not, what practices would help you to become the you you want to be. In the process have a sense of humor about it and then get over yourself. Life will be better.

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