

# **"Breaking Some Eggs"**

**Rev. Alison Hyder**

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**First Unitarian Church of Wilmington**

**Invocation: by Howard Thurman**

We seek to bring together all the fragmentation of our lives the wide diversities of our interests, with the quiet hope that they may all be seen as one event, one experience, one life.

We seek meaning for the commonplace, for the ordinary, for the nondescript; we seek strength to walk the ordinary path, to do the ordinary task; we seek wisdom to live fully, that our hearts and minds may be filled with a quiet tranquility, that we may walk in dignity and meaning on our way, on our street, in our home, in our tasks, by the light in our hearts and by the light in the sky.

**Chalice Lighting Gregory Vlastov:**

You must say yes or no to the light you have seen. There are a thousand ways of saying no, one way of saying yes, and no way of saying anything else. Commitment is never merely a series of prunings. It is a tremendous decision.

**READING: "A True Empty Nest" by Tressie White**

One year, mourning doves built their nest in a cedar tree next to my husband's shop where we could easily keep an eye on the family's progress.

We watched the mother feed and care for her babies until they were almost as big as she was. That's when she tried to coax them out of the nest, but the young birds wouldn't budge.

Soon we noticed that each day the mother removed sticks from the nest, perhaps to build a new nest for the pair's next brood.

One morning, we saw the babies perched on the limb where the nest had been. The mother remained close, and the next day they were gone.

I guess that's one way to get the kids to leave home!

**"To Savor the World or Save It" which Rev. Richard Gilbert wrote from a quote by EB White.**

I arise in the morning torn between the desire  
To save the world and to savor it—  
To serve life or to enjoy it—  
To savor the world or save it?  
The question beats in upon the waiting moment—  
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy  
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;  
To celebrate life with exuberant step  
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden?  
What am I to do—  
When the guilt at my bounty

Clouds the sky of my vision;  
When the glow which lights my every day  
Illumines the hurting world around me?  
To savor the world or save it?  
God of justice, if such there be,  
Take from me the burden of my question.  
Let me praise my plenitude without limit;  
Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!  
No, you will not let me be.  
You will not stop my ears  
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;  
You will not close my eyes  
To the sight of the afflicted.  
No, you will not!  
What is that you say?  
To savor one must serve?  
To savor one must save?  
The one will not stand without the other?  
Forgive me—  
In my preoccupation with self,  
In my concern for my own life  
I had forgotten.  
Forgive me, God of justice,  
forgive me, and make me whole.

### **Sermon "Breaking Some Eggs" by Rev Alison Hyder**

For a long time, whenever I would spy a New Yorker magazine, I would flip through it to find those little "Newsbreak" pieces that quoted journalistic errors such as mixed metaphors and confusing grammar, and skewer them with a wry comment or two. I loved these end notes and was disappointed when they disappeared from the magazine. The occasion, I've discovered, was the death of their editor in 1985. E.B. White co-authored and updated the standard writing handbook *Elements of Style*, also known as Strunk and White. He was also the creator of several beloved children's books, first *Stuart Little*, and later my favorite, *Charlotte's Web*. White was a very shy man, who used to hide on the New Yorker fire escape to avoid strangers. When he wasn't in the busy heart of the world's literary capital, he was on his pig farm in Maine. White confessed himself to be torn between fact and fancy, between his warm nature and the demands of a complex existence. He wrote, "It is hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

Indeed. And it is a common problem for us, for we too are urged by our values to make the world a better place for the marginalized and powerless, whether they are being bullied or manipulated or exploited by the strong. As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we covenant in our Principles and Purposes to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity and compassion in human relations ..." and "respect for the interdependent web of existence, of which we are all a part." We strive to make our building and habits less environmentally costly with our "Green Sanctuary" initiative. We help orphans and foster kids through our ILYA program. We teach our children to understand and respect other people's religions and cultures. We do our best to create an environment that is friendly, curious, and caring. And

we try to respond to a world that is harsh and hurtful. Yet we also celebrate the beauty of music and movement, the abrupt honking of geese in their flight, the colors of the quiet butterfly, the wonders of human creativity.

To save the world, or to savor it? It is a hard choice. But what we know is that we cannot have one without valuing the other. The world needs our protection from the forces of greed and indifference. We have to work for what we love or risk losing it forever. We see that every day.

You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs. We have to be willing to crack open our hearts and let our life pour out. We may have to make a stir, mix it up with other ingredients, and take a little heat if we expect to feed and sustain a wanting world.

Frederick Douglass expands upon this metaphor when he said, "Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

And don't be misled - the world is hungry for the kind of bold and principled compassion that we can provide. Our society needs people who can see past divisions of caste and culture to the root of our common human frailties. We have to be willing to get out of our shells and past our comfortable assumptions and habits, the verities of our existence, to honor the truth of another heart. And although Unitarian Universalists are largely classified as a white, educated, white-collar denomination, we can and sometimes do learn to change to respect the needs of diverse longings. We can expand our boundaries outward. And it is just this paradox that gives us strength. We are people who have both the resources and the compassion that these times need. We exist within the systems of justice and learning, of engineering and business - in short, the basic structures of our country - and yet we can also critique it through the lens of liberal ethics and reason. I like to think, at least, that our status as religious outsiders and our concern for human rights keep us from blind submission to privilege and power.

This is important because sometimes you have to work from within a system to change it. As parents know, the more you pressure someone, the likelier it is that they will resist or push back. And so we have to be an active part of our culture if we are to change it. That's why I love George Weinberg's illustration from *The Taboo Scarf*:

*Owing to an egg's shape, a beast banging on it from the outside will have great trouble breaking it open. But the slightest tap from inside the shell can shatter it; when the chick is ready it can pop out and get started. Nature in its selective wisdom thus favors the new generation - for instance, the unborn ostrich over a pride of lions, who can slam an egg halfway across the Serengeti without being able to open it. Nearly all the leverage is from within.*

*By the same token, a patient, any patient, tapping even lightly, can accomplish more personality change than even the best therapist working alone from the outside.*

If we want a wider world of sunlight and joy we can't wait for our salvation. We have to act assertively to crack the shells of fear, of subjection, and of ignorance. But there is a further implication still. We can't get different results from the same old actions. If we repeat the same behaviors, stay in the same mental and social ruts, we are unlikely to find a new solution. It is up to us to change and to be the world we want. This can be scary, but it is necessary for growth.

Just like an egg, a community's strength is in its shape. The more that we can distribute the weight and the pressure, the more we can handle. That is the architectural beauty of the dome shape. It distributes the weight of a structure evenly instead of needing a lot of great pillars to hold up the roof. This strikes me as an apt metaphor for the state of our country, where a whole bunch of people are struggling to hold up a top-heavy level. But more and more of our pillars are being removed, overburdening the structure that remains. Instead, what we need and what so many people are now striving for is for the weight to be evenly distributed, so that everyone shares in the load and the structure jointly. No one is expendable. And we are all in it together. It is the only way that we can keep from getting crushed.

In *Ethical Ambitions*, Derrick Bell explains, "...It is both necessary and reassuring to question what we do as we continue doing something. We cannot know whether our actions are a help or a harm. And that, of course, is not the test. Our lives gain purpose and worth when we recognize and confront the evils we encounter - small as well as large - and meet them with a determination to take action even when we are all but certain that our efforts will fail. For in rising to those challenges there is no failure. Rather there is the salvation of spirit, of mind, of soul."

I like to think of our UU congregations as the place where people can experiment with their growth. We don't expect you to find the one truth and stick to it. We encourage people to try on new ideas, hear about different beliefs and practices, and reject what doesn't fit. And, I hope, we also provide opportunities for each of you - and our children too - to use new skills and birth talents that you can't at work or even at home, whether it's chairing a meeting or working with kids. Yes, people may talk if things aren't perfect or done as they were in the past, but we still have need of a host of ability and ideas and generous talents.

The counterpoint is, of course, to accept these gifts with the understanding and generosity with which they are given, something which I will not belabor. For none of us are perfect, yet we all want to be accepted with charity and gracious understanding. In fact, that is the most worthwhile gift of all. We all want to belong. It's not restricted to the young or even to humans. Just watch a group of dogs. All beings are dependent upon each other for a place in the world. They need our care. Besides, it is far more powerful to be in favor of something positive than to be against the negative: to be for peace instead of against violence, for excellence instead of against mediocrity. When we refuse to compound a problem through exaggeration, anxiety or drama we have more energy for solutions. Our hearts are more open to collaborate and cooperate with other people.

This is the principle that grounds Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is a process for assessing and improving an organization by focusing on its strengths and assets, on the 52 or 86% of things that it does well, and making them even better. It is a way of transforming a group from within by celebrating past contributions and finding new ways to shine. It doesn't pretend that everything is perfect, but it wastes less time on things that don't work.

I've used Appreciative Inquiry myself in several settings, in my Provincetown Congregation and here at First U, and I've seen the way it enlivens a group. It gives everyone a chance to deepen relationships through valuable memories and discussions of values and goals. This is the method that our Board is using to move First Unitarian forward. You'll be seeing the posters and announcements for "Mission Possible." In the next few months, you'll have the opportunity to join a small group for a guided conversation. It might be within an existing team and help you work more collaboratively. Or, if you choose, you can join an open group and get to know different members. Either way, you'll have a chance to express your own thoughts and highs and hopes for this congregation. You'll contribute to the future course of First Unitarian Church, transforming it from the inside out. And you'll have a good time.

But even if you didn't, sometimes we have to risk the pain in order to grow. If we never failed, if we never felt dissatisfied or embarrassed, we wouldn't need to change. We could keep on with our old ways until we stagnated and died. We'd just sit there in that nest, waiting to be fed.

But miracles happen when we are brave enough to try. Not just the miracle of flight, though that is amazing enough. But I mean real, gut transformation. There are people here who have already survived abuse, cancer, the loss of children, and faced unimaginable crises. They have been born into a new fortitude. This is the kind of change that can stand up to violence and hatred, that risks pain and despair for a larger purpose. We have been seeing that kind of action around the world, as people resist their oppression. Regular people resist censorship and control, and call for fair treatment of immigrants and gays. We band together to save the environment from exploitation and untold damage. We get off our sofas and into the streets. Things happen.

It happens when people join together. But it also happens when one individual is brave enough to open her heart. And in some ways, this can be the scariest and most marvelous growth of all.

Jack Kornfield, the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" man, tells this true story. He was taking a train from Washington, DC and he sat next to a man, an African American man, who had worked for the State Department in India, but left to run a rehabilitation program for juvenile offenders in DC. Most of these kids were gang members who had committed homicide. Kornfield writes,

*One fourteen-year-old boy in his program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang. At the trial, the victim's mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of the killing. After the verdict was announced, she stood up slowly and stared directly at him and stated, "I'm going to kill you." Then the youth was taken away to serve several years in the juvenile facility.*

*After the first half year the mother of the slain child went to visit his killer. He had been living on the streets before the killing, and she was the only visitor he'd had. For a time they talked, and when she left she gave him some money for cigarettes. Then she started step by step to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts. Near the end of his three-year sentence she asked him what he would do when he got out. He was confused and uncertain, so she offered to set him up with a job at a friend's company. Then she inquired about where he would live, and since he had no family to return to, she offered him temporary use of the spare room in her home.*

*For eight months he lived there, ate her food, and worked at the job. Then one evening she called him into the living room to talk. She sat down opposite him and waited. Then she started,*

*"Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to kill you?"*

*"I sure do," he replied.*

*"Well, I did," she went on. "I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you the job and let you live here in my house. That's how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he's gone. So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and that killer is gone, if you'll stay here. I've got room, and I'd like to adopt you if you let me." And she became the mother of her son's killer, the mother he never had.*

I know it's hard to pay attention after a story like that! It's almost unfair of me to go on. But I can't imagine the gust and compassion that it took that woman to take those steps, and the patience she displayed. She knew that she had to crack that boy, to help him open up and reveal his softer side. She gave him time to think - six months to experience his situation and suffer loneliness and fear. And then she slowly extended herself to him. I am sure that she mixed him up and confused him with her visits. But she felt that her wisdom and deep faith in love would bring about a rebirth and transform that boy from a killer to someone new, someone open and

vulnerable to love. Which of us would trust ourselves that much that we could risk disappointment and loss. But wouldn't you like to try?

All we can do is work from where we are. But that doesn't mean that we don't matter. There are plenty of lives to save and souls to transform all around us. And, just as importantly, we'll support you as you strive. Let us be the place where you can share your hopes and sometimes lick your wounds. We applaud your strengths and your courage to change - for we are all responsible for each other. Let us savor that truth as we sit in silence together.

**CLOSING WORDS: "Beginning" by Rev. Myke Johnson**

We never begin at the beginning  
The call comes before we are ready  
before we have the skills we need  
before we know what we are doing  
We leap like a child onto a moving merry-go-round,  
startled and anxious and dizzy  
We say the new year begins  
but it has never stopped turning  
All around us already vibrating  
the ache of pain waiting for relief  
the song of joy like a whistling bird  
the curious young, running ahead into the next field  
the dead unburied and noisy in our hearts  
Where does a circle begin?  
There are many beginnings  
but we cannot begin at the beginning.  
Only where we find ourselves  
only here and now  
already feeling late  
When we get the call.