

*Swinging on the Garden Gate – Feb. 24, 2008*

Good morning. I woke up with a cold yesterday and I apologize for my voice.

Swinging on the garden gate, sliding down the banister, and gliding on a freshly waxed floor in your socks are some of the fun things we do that set our souls free for just a moment. As we know well, life is not all fun and games. Being present with each other and sharing of ourselves is a way we can acknowledge some of our innermost thoughts and feelings. Even if it is not fun, it can be deeply satisfying.

How do we come to know our true selves? Do we listen to what our parents tell us? Do we take in the messages that our society sends us through mass media sources? Do we listen to our peer group? Do we take those report cards from elementary school into our inner selves? Through and around all those messages, it is each and every one of us, individually, who decides what we hold dear to our hearts.

At times during this service I will ask you to turn to your neighbor and just speak a word or a sentence. If this sounds like fun, I ask you to contain yourself and just share one thought until coffee hour. If the thought of turning to your neighbor causes an uncomfortable stirring, please acknowledge that feeling and give it a try anyway. Please share your experiences, even if you answer, "I love to cook" to each question. When you hear the chime please stop talking.

Who am I? What am I going to do with this life and the time that I have before me? How do I feel on the inside of me and what does that look like on the outside of me? Joyfully, I have come to learn that what is on the outside matters less as we get older. But WHAT does it all mean!? How can we make the most of who I am? How do we know each other? Really know each other? We share ourselves.

Who am I? Is there a part of me that is the most important part and the other parts of who I am are secondary? Am I the nice neighbor who bakes cookies for the new family on the block? Am I a lawyer first, and then a nice neighbor, and then a cookie baker? Am I

a teacher in everything I do and say, whether I am in the third grade classroom or the World classroom? Am I simply and only a soul learning all I can in whatever ways I can find? Am I a bodhisattva, a learned one in the Buddhist tradition, who chooses to remain in this realm to help others along the way?

- Please turn to a person next to you, in 2's or 3's, please don't leave anybody out, and briefly say one thing that you do for others. You just have a minute. OK, please come back, you can talk more at coffee hour....

Elizabeth Andrew, a writer and from whom the title "Swinging on the Garden Gate" comes, tells of a professor she once had, a professor who changed her perspective on everything. Andrew reports, "This woman looked at me as though *I* was the poem and not the words on the page." She asked me, "When do you laugh? What is worth fighting for? Tell me of a sacred moment when you felt connected, beyond flesh and time." As she began to understand what her teacher was saying, Elizabeth exclaimed, "*Oh! I am the draft!* I must be rewritten for these poems to work. The primary text

is me; I can revise and fine-tune my life as well as the poem. As Elizabeth learned about theology, the same professor taught her that every study of God begins with what we experience and what is filtered through the lens of our identity. Does my identity create my experiences or do my experiences make my identity? Both, I believe. Do different parts of identity trade places depending on the situation? Does the largest part of our identity shift hour-to-hour or day-by-day? At one time in my life I would only say that I was a tree-climber. I loved climbing trees and sought to do nothing else. At another time, I might have identified as only a student, forever a student. Accountant, chef, dancer, teacher, barista, account representative, driver, receptionist, sales person, board member, there are many things we do. How many of the things that we do become part of our identity?

- Please turn to your neighbor and tell them one or two of your prior identities that have fallen away. Please welcome in a third person, if need be.                      OK, please come back.

Being, I think, is a little bit more difficult for us because sometimes we get busy in the doing. And maybe the only difference is **how** we do the things we do. If we are mindful about what we are doing, do we move into a more conscious state of being?

Listening to another person is a wonderful way for us to acknowledge their humanity. Listening completely - with nothing else on our minds except receiving the other person's story, not thinking about a response, but being present to what the person is saying and taking our time, because when we are slower, we are more present for the other. Listening to someone else and sharing of ourselves is how we create relationship; it is how we come to know who we are and who the other person is.

- Please turn to a person near you and share with them a time when someone was really present for you and what that felt like.                      Great. Please come back in.

My life is my primary story.    As I have crawled and skipped, and climbed and fallen, **I have learned.** and as I have slogged through the mire, flown through the air, and waded through garbage, **I**

**have learned**, and as I have loved and lost and loved again and I **have learned**. By giving birth and holding death...by going for a walk – alone or with others - **I have learned**. By blowing bubbles with 2-year-olds and 72 year-olds alike – **I have learned**. By meeting someone who showed me that it was ok to cry in front of other people – **I have learned**. By working with people who have taught me that every day is a new day and we can start over – **I have learned**. By being in classrooms with teachers who were respectful enough that students shared their deepest most fears – **I have learned**. By knowing people who were willing to share their power and privilege by inviting those with less in – **I have learned**.

- Please turn to a person near you and tell them briefly, something that you are very thankful that someone shared with you, a great learning you have had along the way. Please come back now.

What will you fight for? What really makes you laugh a deep belly laugh? What are the things that make you cry and WHY do you cry about them? What is sacred to you?

In *Disciplines of the Spirit*, speaking about reconciliation, theologian Howard Thurman says, “When the need to be cared for is dishonored, threatened, or undetermined, then the individual cannot experience their own self as a unity and that person’s life may become deeply fragmented and splintered. In its extreme form the disturbance upsets the balance of the mind, and a person gradually loses their sense of identity.” So, it follows that it is crucial for each and every one of us to be with others and that we are with each other in caring relationships. In order to become whole people we must have the opportunity for the development of a spiritual inner life so that we may become more authentic beings. We need interaction in community to become more full and whole human beings. We need to be cared for, so that we learn to care for others and develop a sense of connection and belonging. A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words. Please share more of your songs in your heart at coffee hour with your community.

Blessed Be, Ashay, and Amen