

Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall  
January 10, 2010

“Holy Fractions”<sup>1</sup>

“Unfinished weekend reading.”

This is what I found one Monday morning a few years ago, when I clicked on Philocrites<sup>2</sup> – a favorite UU blogs – and checked out the title of his most recent posting. Philocrites was the blogger name and alter ego of *UU World* editor Chris Walton. If you ever visit the Unitarian Universalist blogosphere (yes, there is such a thing), then you already may have been to this site.

Walton has recently retired from blogging at Philocrites, but for several years, he offered interesting posts on “religion, liberalism, and culture.”

On this particular morning, his words hit home with me on a rather personal note. Under the heading “Unfinished weekend reading,” and above a list of interesting titles from the *Boston Globe* and the *Sunday Times*, Philocrites wrote this brief description:

“Articles I wanted to read this weekend but didn’t.”

And then in parenthesis: “sometimes life interferes!”

“Boy, do I know what you mean, Philocrites!” I thought to myself when I read this description. Because indeed on that very Monday morning, I too had articles to read that I had not finished. While we’re at it, I also had chores started Saturday afternoon but did not complete by Sunday night. Errands not run. Notes not written. Emails not sent. Papers not filed. Calls to old friends not returned. Plans not made. Problems not solved.

In short, of all I had hoped to do, only *a fraction* got done.

*More unfinished than complete.*

Now, I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest that maybe, just maybe, you can relate to what I’m talking about here. I tend to think that on any given day we all have a fair amount of unfinished business. We start out with a plan, we have a course of action, we intend to get a *whole* project done, but then—inevitably— life interferes.

We get distracted or called away, and the something we intended to do or complete goes unfinished. As the poet Jessica Goodfellow writes in our second reading<sup>3</sup>, we end up having to “settll[e] for the part instead of the whole.”

Now, before I start to sound like a complete pessimist here, let me acknowledge that *sometimes*, every once in a while, we actually do get to finish something—and when we do, it feels like total triumph. Indeed, you may have examples from your own lives of projects you actually completed—or recent weekends when you got through everything on your list. In fact, I have one of these too. I’ll call it the story of “the back porch.”

The “back porch” refers to an unheated, enclosed porch at the back of the first apartment Ben and I lived in together back in Boston. The “back porch” was our equivalent of the basement or attic, a place where you put all those things you aren’t ready to throw out, but you’re not sure if you’ll ever use again.

Old clothes, empty boxes saved for our next move, a computer monitor from five years ago – you get the picture. In our case, the back porch had become a “do not enter zone,” a virtually un-usable space, because there was so much in there.

Well, from the day we moved in, Ben and I had “the back porch” on our list. For nearly a year, every Saturday morning, we’d say to each other, “maybe we should work on the back porch today.” But then, something else would come up, and another weekend would go by without the project getting done.

Over time, this weighed on us—this incompleteness.

Months passed until finally, on the first anniversary of our move-in date, we tackled it. It was an all-day, full-court press. We sorted, we threw out, we recycled and we gave away. It took a week to tie up the loose ends – to make a trip to the Salvation Army, and to reconfigure what we did decide to keep. But at the end of it, the mission was thankfully accomplished. Miraculously, we could now walk around on the back porch. Looking at our new, cleared out space, we felt that amazing satisfaction of getting the whole thing done.

But here’s the thing. As the immediate joy of project completion waned, we remembered that, while we had accomplished this seemingly amazing feat on the back porch, there were other projects, big and small, that were still languishing unfinished. Yes, the back porch was done, but in the broader context of our life to-do lists, there was still so much left undone and incomplete.

Life is like this, I think. You finally reach completion on one front, then turn around to find a new area that needs perfecting.

You get one problem solved and squirreled away, only to discover a new dilemma that’s demanding your attention.

And if this is the case when it comes to the seemingly mundane things like household projects and errands and emails, it is all the more true when it comes to the most meaningful parts of our personal lives: family and relationships, or career, or fulfilling our wildest dreams. And also true, I believe, when it comes to work for justice in the world. *More unfinished than complete.*

As human beings, I think, we strive for completion and yearn for wholeness. We hope for the satisfaction of getting the whole thing done. We want to reach all of our goals. In the long division of our lives, we hope that everything comes out evenly with no remainder left at the end. In the words of the poet, we do our calculations, hoping for “the whole numbers, the counting numbers.” A rounded integer, a complete set.

And yet, completion is so often just out of reach. Why? As Philocrites says, “life interferes!” And so, we accomplish only the part, not the whole. Or, something is broken or lost, and goes un-mended or un-replaced. We are left with unfinished business. Important matters remain unresolved.

God created the whole numbers, the poet tells us, but to tell the truth about our experience, she says, we “need less than this.” Our human lives, more often than not, can only be captured in “fractions, percentages, and decimals.” Only these can describe “what we keep in our many-chambered hearts.”

So, here we are, you may have noticed in the midst of a sermon which is telling you something that you already know too well: life isn’t perfect. We aren’t perfect. No big news here, of course. But I think that it’s important, at least every once in a while, to remind ourselves of this fact in a gentle and loving way. In fact, I think it’s one of the most important spiritual practices we can do together.

Now, having said that, I also acknowledge that sometimes our unfinished business can be a pretty good motivator. I was talking to a friend about this sermon, and he told me that being aware of the things he still wants to do in his life—like volunteering for an organization he cares about or hiking the Appalachian trail—keeps him moving in the right direction.

That same sentiment was captured in a *New York Times* article<sup>4</sup> about so-called “life lists.” According to the reporter, more and more people are creating lists of all the things they hope to do in their life. He theorized that these lists are a sort of antidote for over-worked and time-stretched professionals, who don’t want to lose track of their other creative desires to do things like learn a language, or visit a new continent.

When I read this article, I thought, “that’s a great idea.” I liked the idea of a practice like this that can keep us dreaming about the possibilities for our lives.

But, on the other hand, I think there is a flip side to focusing on all it is we haven't done. Both my friend and I agreed: when we get too caught up in what we haven't finished, we risk losing site of what it is we have done and do have in our lives already. A life-list may keep us motivated, but when it goes unfulfilled, we can feel let down, demoralized, despairing.

Thandeka writes:

*Despair is my private pain, born from what I have failed to say,  
failed to do, failed to overcome.*<sup>5</sup>

And so it is with us. We will fail to say, and do, and overcome something. Important matters will go undone. *More unfinished than complete*, we are reminded.

The question is: what then? How do we keep from despairing? How do we live in the face of what we have failed to do?

Well, here's what I've been trying to get at by way of Philocrites' "unfinished reading" and our back porch story and the wisdom of the poets:

I think that the only way to live with the unfinished business in our own lives and in our world is first by accepting that we will always have it. By remembering what we already know: that life isn't perfect, and it certainly isn't always fair.

Here is the paradox: only when we let go of worrying too much about the unfinished business, can we get down to business at hand—living in the present moment and loving deeply in the time that we have.

This is not easy. It is very hard work.

But if we can do it, if we can work toward accepting that we won't get it all done, if we can stay present to the fact that we may not have time to finish everything, then we can make room in souls to appreciate and savor what it is we do have, what it is we have already accomplished.

Only fractions, perhaps, these pieces of our lives, but they are the gifts of love and beauty and joy that are given to us. Fractions they may be, but surely "holy" fractions. Sacred pieces of our human experience.

Permit me to share one last story with you, that has a lot to do with this. A couple of years ago, Ben and I attended the funeral of a young man was only in his late thirties when he died after a long battle with cancer. Peter<sup>6</sup> had touched many lives through his own life—his "wild and precious life," as Mary Oliver would put it.

As you can imagine, the grief was deep and real at that memorial service, as was the gratitude for his life. After several reflections by other family members, friends, and teachers, his wife spoke, and she talked a lot about the spiritual journey that she and her husband had embarked on after his diagnosis. She talked about how, in the face of his illness, Peter had lived deeply as he always had, so deeply, continuing to appreciate and love his life, his family, and his friends.

She also said something extraordinary, that I want to share with you. She said that Peter's life, though short, was complete. Despite all he had not lived to do or finish, his life was complete.

In her poem "What's Left,"<sup>7</sup> Kerrie Hardie begins:

"I used to wait for the flowers, my pleasure reposed on them. Now I like plants before they get to the blossom. Leafy ones – foxgloves, comfrey, delphiniums."

Later in the poem, she goes on to write:

"Perhaps this is middle age. Untidy, unfinished, knowing there'll never be time now to finish, liking the plants—their strong lives . . . I know more or less how to live through my life now. But I want to know how to live what's left with my eyes open and my hands open. I want to stand at the door in the rain listening, sniffing, gaping. Fearful and joyous, like an idiot before God."

Listening and gaping, the poet writes.  
Fearful and joyous.  
One fraction at a time, one day at a time.

*Much unfinished, and yet somehow complete.*

This how we live what's left with our eyes open and our hands open. This is how our despair is transformed to hope.

This is how, in our imperfect world, we sing hymns of joyful praise.

May it be so with us, now and in the days to come. Amen.

Notes:

---

<sup>1</sup> This sermon is adapted from a version I originally preached at the UU Society of Wellesley Hills in September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.philocrites.com/archives/003705.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Goodfellow, "The Invention of Fractions." *A Pilgrim's Guide to Chaos in the Heartland* (Kirkland, WA: Concrete Wolf Chapbook Series, 2005) Reprinted with permission at:  
<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/programs/2007/02/19/index.html>.

Scroll down to Friday, February 23, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Williams, "Ten Things to Do Before This Article Is Finished," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Thandeka, "The Legacy of Caring." *Singing the Living Tradition* (Unitarian Universalist Association), #666.

<sup>6</sup> I've changed the name for privacy reasons.

<sup>7</sup> Kerrie Hardie, "What's Left." *Cry for the Hot Belly* (County Meath, Ireland: The Gallery Press: 2000).