

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 18th July 2010

Commitment

Hello everybody and welcome to our time of worship here at Essex Church where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each week. This service is all about commitment and I'd like to acknowledge your commitment for being here today. I value your presence here. Firstly, it's just good to see you all, and secondly a church congregation is made by and made of people, all different sorts of people – who together make up the whole. Here in busy central London it's important that we are welcoming to the many visitors who walk through our doors – so if this is your first visit to Essex Church or if you manage to join when life brings you this way – do please feel at home here.

Story:

There once was a little donkey that worked on a very large farm. This donkey was a very hard worker, and was very much appreciated by his master who knew he could count on him do any manner of odd jobs and farm duties.

One day while hard at work, this donkey fell into a deep pit that the farmer had been digging to use as a well. The donkey cried and cried, and the farmer frantically tried to figure out a way to get the donkey out of the deep hole. However the sides were just too unstable to lower someone down with a rope to tie around the donkey, and as the donkey was panicky and thrashing about, the farmer had the additional concern of one of his farm hands being injured and stuck down the hole too.

Finally, with a heavy heart, the farmer decided it was best to bury the donkey and put it out of its misery. So he and several of his farm hands started shovelling dirt back into the pit.

However, after a few minutes of shovelling, the farmer noticed something. The donkey was shaking off the dirt and stomping it into the ground below him. As it dawned on the farmer what was happening, he called the rest of his farm hands to help shovel, and shovel-full after shovel-full of dirt, the donkey stomped it into the ground making the hole shallower by the minute. Soon the well became nearly filled with dirt and the donkey climbed out to the great relief of the farmer and his workers.

The story of the donkey in the well is timeless, and has circulated the internet more than I can even count. Its message is enduring, for many of us, too, have found ourselves stuck in a situation where we just didn't know how we'd get through. The metaphorical dirt was poured over our heads, and we either got buried by our problems with no hope of rescue, or we shook the dirt from us and pounded it into the ground to rise victorious.

We always have the choice to be victim or victor. So next time it feels as if you are in that well with no chance of being freed, think of the little donkey who refused to accept that his circumstances were beyond his control; he didn't give up and he didn't give in, and you don't have to either!

Prayer:

Let's join now in a time of prayer and reflection in which I call on the divine spirit of life and of love to be with us now and to bless all that we do and say together here today.

Spirit of Life, known by many names yet by no name fully known—we gather today with hopes and dreams and also with fears and wounds...

May we be reminded that all things come and go; that today's joys and today's sorrows will in time give way to those of tomorrow and that those of us who have strength to share today ought do so while we can, and that those who are in need ought allow ourselves to receive for tomorrow those roles might well be reversed.

Spirit of Life, mother and father of us all, help us to remember those who are not here with us today, those who need what we have found here and those who have what we here need.

May we always be open to growth and change, to movement, to grace. In the name of all that is holy, and in all the holy names that have ever been uttered (and those that have not even yet been imagined), may peace prevail, amen.

Address:

I don't know about you but for me there is something mesmerising about the printed word – if I see something in print I still have a tendency to believe it's true, with little other evidence of its veracity than the fact that it's there in front of me in black and white. I also believe just about everything that's given to me in an educational setting. In fact, now I come to think of it I probably believe everything I hear on Radio 4 as well. There is perhaps no end to my gullibility.

For years I have had a quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German poet, playwright and novelist stuck up on a notice board to inspire me – you may have heard it elsewhere or perhaps you read it in our Kensington Unitarians newsletter this month:

“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.”

This is a very popular quotation – much used in life coaching sessions and by motivational speakers – its popularity is not surprising is it – it speaks to that part of us that knows we ought to be getting on with something but just can't get out of the metaphorical, or real, armchair.

The words were actually written by a mountaineer William Hutchinson Murray in his book *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*. In the last line Hutchinson thought he was quoting Goethe from his famous play *Faust*.

*“Here is a fairly loose translation of the piece from Faust
Lose this day loitering – ‘twill be the same story
To-morrow – and the next more dilatory;
Each indecision brings its own delays,
And days are lost lamenting o'er lost days.
Are you in earnest? Seize this very minute –
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it,
Only engage, and then the mind grows heated –
Begin it, and then the work will be completed!”*

They're both powerful quotations, they both speak to the procrastinator within us all, the one who might put off till tomorrow that which could be done today.

It seems churlish then to speak even for a moment in praise of procrastination – especially when we've been told by a world famous German writer and a Scottish mountaineer that we should really get on with life and achieve something.

But anyone interested in a spiritual orientation in life needs to bring other teachings in for consideration before they condemn procrastination once and for all:

- To thine own self be true – the importance for each of us in discovering who we truly are and living our life in accordance with our true nature whatever and whoever we may be.
- There is a natural rhythm and balance to life – to recognise the natural ebb and flow of existence and to go with that rather than struggle against it. There will be times in life for action and there will be times in which to be still
- Our commitments will ideally be in line with our deeper values and principles
- And that we need to engage in self examination from time to time in order to know when our commitments are healthy and when they are not. Rabbi Rachel Remen writes in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom* of the difference between attachment and commitment:

“While attachment has its source in the personality, in what Buddhists refer to as the 'desire nature,' commitment comes from the soul. In relationship to life, just as in human relationships attachment closes down options, commitment opens them up. Modern life has made us people of attachment rather than people of commitment. Indeed, many people have found that it is difficult to tell the difference between attachment and commitment in their own lives. Yet attachment leads farther and farther into entrapment. Commitment, though it may sometimes feel constricting, will ultimately lead to greater degrees of freedom. Both involve in the moment an experience of holding, sometimes against the flow of events or against temptation. One can distinguish between the two in most situations by noticing over time

whether one has moved through this activity or this relationship closer to freedom or closer to bondage. Attachment is a reflex, an automatic response which often may not reflect our deepest good. Commitment is a conscious choice, to align ourselves with our most genuine values and our sense of purpose."

The mere fact that we are all here in church today shows that we are above the human average when it comes to commitment. Because so much of commitment starts from simply showing up in life – showing up because we have understood that our very presence makes a difference. – as Oriah says in *The Invitation* that we heard as a reading earlier on:

"I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair ... and do what needs to be done to feed the children."

This is not just speaking about parents of children – we can extend this into a metaphor for all of life – for ultimately we could say that all that we are doing is helping, or hindering, the lives of the generations that will follow us.

Considered in this way, commitment reflects our very commitment to life itself, and involves that alignment which Rachel Remen speaks – aligning the self to that which is for the highest good of all concerned. Now I know that I'm biased but I can't help but think that gathering together in the way that we do here today is indeed for the highest good and does make a difference – so thank you for being here today. I honour the commitment that brings you here.

Amen.

Benediction:

In the quietness of this time and place we perhaps have heard the whispering of our spirit:

That we may keep fresh before us the moments of our High Resolve, that in good times or in tempests
We may not forget that to which our life is committed.

May we keep fresh before us the moments of our High Resolve. *(H. Thurman)*

Go well, blessed be, amen.