

“Reaching for Five Smooth Stones”

Walk with me in your imagination down the street from my home in Holliston,
Down a quarter mile, to the right and then to the left,
Under a canopy of trees and there you will find a small lake tucked away –
Lake Winthrop – that freezes when there is winter,
if there ever will be winter again,
And that in the summer is a haven for children to wade in and swim,
and catch frogs and fish.

“Is this water clean?” ask the adults. Don’t ask.

On cool nights just before sunset, after the lake is empty
and everyone has gone home,
My kids and I wander down to the shore and share one of our favorite activities,
One that my dad did with me on the shorelines of my childhood.

“Go,” I tell them, *“Go find stones. Don’t pick up the ones that have sharp edges.
Find the stones that are smooth.”*

And they do; they carry them to me in the pocket of their t-shirts folded up,
And in their hands cupped together,

And then I pull out my favorite childhood toy – here it is –

A wrist-rocket sling-shot and we put stone after smooth stone into the sling.

“With each stone, I tell them, make a wish, but keep it to yourself!”

And then they pause,

they close their eyes to think of a wish they have for themselves

And the world that is around them,

And then we launch them into the blue-black water, one, two-hundred yards out,
Each stone breaking the surface of this large, wide body of water,
their stone, their wish sending tiny ripples
In all directions.

This morning I am thinking of this image, and I find myself thinking of us.
In the story Kate shared for us - small, young David is slinging 5 smooth stones
At the large, overwhelming Goliath, ultimately knocking him out with one shot
and giving inspiration for 'underdog' stories for the rest of time.
It's a great story, but like much of the Bible, it's also a little violent (just a little).

So imagine with me instead

That we are like David and we are standing on the shoreline of that lake
– small, young, underpowered -
and that the Goliath in our midst is not some big man, some big soldier,
some overwhelming force
but instead is this big, wide, blue-black lake –
This lake filled not with water, but churning instead with the needs of the world,
Waves of tragedy over there, waves of beauty of here,
Waves of inequality and injustice sometimes right here,
And oh look, here comes the tidal wave of the another national election.
Here comes the wave of blame-game politics and 'God n Country' religion.
Here comes the wave of contraception politics (how did that happen?),
Here comes the wave of fundamentalists on the right and on the left
Fog-horning their way through hours on CNN and Fox News.

Can I hear a collective ‘Ugh?’ Can I sense that sometimes
We worry will be swept away?

So this is what I’m wondering as you and I stare out at this lake that is our world:

What would it mean for us to be like David

And stand our ground and bear witness against all that we see?

What are the smooth stones we can put in our slings

And then send out one, two-hundred yards into those churning waters,
each with a wish that may

Send ripples in all directions?

Or in other words, how do we as religiously progressive people stand and lead

With grace and power, even though our numbers tell us we are the underdogs?

Inspired by one of our faith’s best theologians, James Luther Adams,

Minister in Wellesley in the 1930’s and professor of divinity at Harvard

And then at Andover-Newton until his death in 1994,

Whose orange book of selected essays I keep on my nightstand,

Let me suggest that we can reach for these five smooth stones

And place in our sling:

Stone #1: Revelation Is Always Happening

You see this Bible? This Bible was given me as a child

By my grandmother, a note written inside.

It is beautiful and moving; its stories and messages are no less a part

Of me than my own name. In other words, it is part of my identity;

It is a piece of who I am.

And for the longest time – until I arrived at the doorstep of a UU church, actually –

I was taught that God, the sacred, the Holy (pick your word, please!) spoke

Once and for all time only in these pages.

Not in the world. Not in my life. Not in poetry. Not in music.

Certainly not in the traditions of some other religion.

Instead, I was told:

*If you want to know God, if you want to enter the gates of heaven,
you must know and study this book alone,, and know and study these creeds,
and know and study these doctrines.*

And so I did, and I did it well.

But then there came a time for me, as perhaps there has come a time for you,

When out of a deep loneliness for holy company or a deep longing

For a refreshed world

We stood on those shorelines, watching all those Goliath waves,

And longed to know that the Sacred was still speaking,

that the Holy didn't only speak THEN

In some ancient text to some ancient people,

But is also speaking NOW...HERE.....to Me and to You.

This stone is for times like these,

When we look at the world and feel maybe overwhelmed

By all the unnecessary destruction and churning,

Asking: where is the good? What does all this mean? Even, where is God?

It's then that we reach for this stone and sling out it over the water:
PAY ATTENTION! It says. **REVELATION IS STILL HAPPENING!**

Grace over there, calls for healing over here,
 gentleness there, and little victories of love way, way over there.

Can you see it? **PAY ATTENTION!**

Because while this stone is small, and we may be underdogs,
 Even small stones can send ripples of revelation in all directions.

Stone #2: Respect in Human Relations

Thinking of this stone I am thinking of thinking of the bumper sticker I saw there
 In the parking lot of the prison after visiting Daniel, Daniel one of two (soon three)
 Prisoners we are mentoring as they get their college degree.

"I would be a humanitarian," it read, *"if people
 Weren't such jerks."* Except that it didn't say jerks.

Who would put a sticker like that on their car? I had only to wait a minute.
 Yes, one of the security guards.

Can we acknowledge the truth looking out at that lake of moving, diverse, less
 Than perfect people? That people – yes, even you, even me –
 can sometimes make it very hard to like them?

The good news is that our faith does not ask us to do that.
 Instead we are asked a different question.

We are asked: *Can I be loving more than I want to be right?*

Can I respect someone without respecting their ideas?

Am I am my brother and sister's keeper?

Friends, I want us to listen closely to our leaders this season

As we stand on the shorelines and hear them use faith-talk to win arguments and influence voters.

Are they appealing to the parts in you that call you to fight, divide, disrespect,

Or disavow whole swaths of people?

Or are they appealing to the parts in you that invite you to stand up for your values and also honor the person whose values you oppose?

As people of faith we make it clear what side we are on.

Our covenant and UU principles tell us we stand for something on

The shoreline; We say *Love is the Spirit of this church;*

We say we *affirm the worth and dignity of all persons.*

Speak the truth in love. Dwell together in peace. Help one another.

We utter these words week in and week out and at times

feel like we're talking to ourselves alone in an empty room.

What difference does it make? What power do we have? Is anyone listening?

But never mind our doubts, just this once.

This stone that is showing respect toward others may be small,

We may be the underdog,

But even small stones send ripples in all directions.

Stone #3: Establish a loving community

This stone is for all those 'none's' out there, not nun as in Sister Antonio

Who taught me second grade,

But none as in – *I want none of that religious community stuff,*

I'm not this, I'm none of that. I'm more private. My church is an hour spent in the Woods; my religion is an hour spent listening to classical music in NPR.

Sound familiar? Describe anyone you know?

It should; the none's numbers are increasing.

All of you who find community in a place like this are supposedly decreasing.

Apparently ministers like me are the equivalent of the last wagon-wheel makers.

And so the stone we send to the 'none's' in those waters is this: *Join us.*

Are you not hungry for companions?

Do you not long for a place and a people who will help

You breathe in and breathe out,

who will help you create a loving and livable world,

Who will not run screaming from the room

When your idea of the holy does not fit theirs?

Join us and drink from this old well of First Parish

that for 327 years has been a center and a source of strength,

That through hurricanes and loss and war and lean times and great depressions

And great recessions has been a gathering place for people who believe

that justice and equity and diversity are religious values worth preserving.

We may be relatively few in number, our stone may be small,

we may be the underdogs,

But even small stones send ripples go in all directions.

Stone #4: Make Good Things Happen

We didn't think we get through one sermon without my giving us some word etymology, did we? The word is *'Holy.'*

I've been using it all sermon long,

provoking the inevitable question in the receiving line:

"But, Nathan, what do you mean when you use that word?"

So it will help as we think about this stone number four that *Holy* shares the same root as 'whole' and 'heal,' as in:

we are called to be a healing people, a whole people,
a holy people responding to a world that needs healing.

As Unitarian Universalist we say something pretty radical;

Rick Santorum would definitely rip apart his sweater vest if he heard it.

We say that the Holy is made manifest not by the priest or the ritual or the doctrine;

Instead we say the Holy is made manifest in us, by us, between us,

When we make good things happen.

In other words we are religion of deeds, not creeds;

We are a religion of preaching practiced, not practiced preaching.

People will ask, facing those rising, overwhelming waves:

what is the sense of our small effort?

And we reply: *no one has the right to sit on their hands and feel hopeless.*

There is too much work to do to feel hopeless.

Make something good and holy happen. It needn't be large or dramatic.

You are just one person. We are just one community.
But the thing about this stone is that even though
It is small, when it breaks the surface of the water it can send
Ripples in all directions.

Stone #5: Positive Change is Possible

To borrow from MLK, can I tell us: I have a dream.
I have a dream that one day optimism will again be fashionable!
That irony and hipster resignation won't be the temperaments of choice,
That those of us working to build and create communities
of love and justice like this one won't be accused of being hopelessly out of touch,
Or, worse, a Pollyanna, as I recently was.

We Unitarian Universalists live with the reality of war, greed, oppression, disease,
You name it. We get it; we know.
That lake is big, wide, deep, the waves are tall, the waves are numerous!

And yet this we believe: that you and I can be agents of change.
That our souls are meant for spending, not saving.
That miracles abound in this world and not some other world.
That religion can be a source of blessing and not just abuse.
That we can create communities where people can be
Themselves without fear.
That soul-force is stronger than violent-force.
That transformation is possible.

That healing is probable.

That in the end love wins.

This is our good news. This is our gospel.

It may not be well-known,

But when it is shared it

Can spread out like ripples in all directions.

My friends, it can be difficult and lonely to live this faith of ours.

It can be hard to be like David on the shore, facing Goliath

Waves and wondering how or if we can make a difference.

From our slings into the waiting, hurting world we say:

Pay attention to holy revelation.

Honor all people.

Join together in loving community.

Make good things happen.

Positive change is possible.

In this season of stewardship

I want thank you for standing your ground and bearing witness.

Amen.