

Lay Sunday January 28, 2024

Homily: *In Unitarian Sugar*

By: Mark Leeds, President, The Unitarian Church of All Souls

Richard Brautigan's 1964 novella entitled *In Watermelon Sugar*, tells two intertwined parables. The main story, told in retrospect, is about a reckoning that takes place in a small, idyllic post-apocalyptic community of about 400 individuals. The community thrives on a social pact that places Quaker-like simplicity and transparency at the top of their value structure. In true 1960s utopian fantasy, envy and greed have all but vanished. Nothing is said about any of this of course; it's just understood.

Inevitably, a group of disorderly people becomes dissatisfied with this existence. Brautigan paints this group with a harsh brush, but that mostly just reflects the era in which he wrote. This group has determined that they alone are the only ones who truly understand the community's values. As this group grows, the larger community seeks to provide space, if not acceptance, for their dissatisfied worldview. But, inevitably, the two groups clash, and the dissatisfied group literally cut off their noses to spite their faces. Let's just say the message here isn't all that subtle.

The second story, however, is much more interesting and ambiguous. It is the story of a woman named Margaret, who was once the narrator's paramour. Margaret dabbled in, but did not embrace, the lifestyle and interests of those who rebelled against the passive tranquility embraced by the larger community. Our narrator, and many members of the pastoral community, turn their backs on Margaret after the dissidents have quite literally imploded. It's hard to reconcile this casual shunning with the accepting warmth that the members of the larger community show to each other. Even in hippie paradise, someone who questioned the status quo faced potential ostracism.

It's 60 years since Mr. Brautigan penned *In Watermelon Sugar*. But the basic conundrums addressed in the novella continue to resonate in everyday life. In every community, most people tend to cling to the positive forces that bring us together and create harmony. But there will always be a small but determined group that believes that the supposed harmony doesn't serve all well or equally. And those who question the majority position can find themselves on the outside. If you've read *Search* by Michele Huneven, you will recognize that this tendency can manifest itself in Unitarian Churches.

It is never black and white as to who is right in these kerfuffles. There are always truths in everyone's position. To quote Galen, everyone is 100% right at least 50% of the time. It's our ability to accept this and continue to treat each other with respect that makes All Souls stand out as a religious community. Acceptance of one another is part of our DNA. I've seen this principle followed over and over within our congregation.

We rarely see each other in the context of the broader set of communities in which we all live outside of All Souls. We can become contextually focused on each other. Without the fuller perspective of each other outside of Church, however, we risk losing valuable friendships as the community did with Margaret in *In Watermelon Sugar*. By that I mean we can lose comity and love with a friend over a matter that should not define the broader context of our bond of union with each other. I'll speculate that all of us would come out the same way on most of the issues facing our communities and Church today. We shouldn't let our disagreement over the other issues cause us to lose faith in each other.

When I studied Buddhism, I was taught that we can never appreciate another person by looking directly at that person. The only way to fully understand a person is through the reflection that a person has with others in their lives. This holistic approach is called "Indira's net." The net is composed of hundreds of pearls. Each pearl represents a different aspect of a person's life: parent, neighbor, mentor, etc. Each pearl is reflected in every other pearl. And it is only when all of the pearls are reflected in each other can we fully see who we are looking at when we engage with that person. As Voltaire said, "The mirror is a worthless invention. The only way to truly see yourself is in the reflection of someone else's eyes."

When we interact with each other by focusing only on a particular perspective held by that person, we miss the bigger picture. That bigger picture likely tempers the perceived disagreement. Our community offers love and acceptance, but the fact that it is not perfect is not a reason to cut off our noses to spite our faces. We are not living in *In Watermelon Sugar*. We are so lucky to have each other.

Everyone has lot of pearls. Mine include business, marriage, childrearing, Church, Burning Man and music, to name a few. Each has provided me with a different perspective and a diverse network of friends and compatriots. When the tide has receded on one community in my life, I have been blessed that the tide of other interests come in to fill the void. I wish this for all of you. And the tide always returns to the shore. That I am here is proof of that.

When I agreed to stand for the Board and then volunteered to serve as President, I wanted to help bridge the challenges and develop opportunities for everyone here. I hope that I achieved at least a little of that. We can move forward with love and mutual respect. I have faith. I have faith in you. Let's do it!