

“Spring’s Rain, Summer’s Sun”

A Sermon for All Ages by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Rain, rain go away,
Come again some other day,
We want to go outside and play.

I wonder how many of us remember this chant from our childhoods. I wonder how many children among us still sing it, while the rest of us think it.

“In time of silver rain, the earth brings forth new life again,” wrote the poet, Langston Hughes. Well, that may be, but couldn’t the earth wait until the weekend’s over? Last weekend it did wait, and the days were glorious. I don’t know about you, but after our service here and the dedication of our garden, it was beach time. Bring on summer, I say, a lover of summer since the first time I dipped my toe in water outdoors. I know, there are those among you who actually love the snow and the cold, even the driving rain. Here in New England, Mother Nature guarantees lots of choices, all hers, and she has a habit of changing her mind, quickly and extremely.

What are we called to do, when one day it feels like the heavens themselves are overflowing and the next delivers a postcard perfect blue sky and gentle surf? Perhaps at this time of year more than any other, I think of resilience, that wondrous capacity to move gracefully with whatever comes our way. It’s a practice of mind and heart. Lucky for each of us, it’s an acquired skill, though we’re each born with the potential to learn it.

Why do I think of it now, in early June? Because June brings graduations – graduation from nursery school, graduation from high school, graduation from college, graduation from graduations even. While I offer congratulations to all our recent graduates – and of course the 99 Cohasset High School seniors who are moving on – I ponder what comes with graduations. Of course there are parties. Of course there are picnics. Of course there are photo ops. Of course there are laughter and tears.

And there are speeches, speeches that challenge our graduates from four to twenty-four and more to go forth and succeed. Our youngest might be challenged to go forth to kindergarten or first grade, but even at this early age the pressure is on, not just to succeed but to excel. Work hard! Be popular, but be good! Mind your manners, but don’t take flack!

As our youngsters grow, the expectations and exhortations grow with them. Bring home those A’s! Play sports! Consider what will look good on those college applications! Grow up, but not too soon! Do it all, but use your head! As our children once content to play with stones and buckets on the beach become young women and men and head off to college, what’s the message tucked covertly into their departure? Study hard! Be a cut above! Choose your friends well! Ask what will look good on that resume! And when in four, or maybe five or six years or more, our offspring graduate from college, we sit proudly at their commencements and hear somebody say – usually somebody who seems to have taken every ounce of good advice and run with it – that now it’s time to get out there into the world and succeed. Now it’s time to show your stuff! Now it’s time to be the person we so desperately hope you will be!

But who is that person? What is success? What about all those times when our proud graduates will fall flat on their faces? Jobs are lost, love affairs ended, families divided, loved ones are lost – not in any particular rhythm, but along with those great jobs landed, love affairs becoming committed

relationships, and times of illness moving into times of new-found health. It's all there, just like spring's rain and summer's sun. There's no particular order to it. In fact, it's downright unpredictable.

When folks used to ask me what I hoped Sarah or Lisa or Shana, my children now in their 30s, would be when they grew up, I used to say, "Caring adults." Growing up is walking across a minefield. An at-risk child is anyone under the age of 18, at which point we graduate to becoming at-risk adults. We're at risk of all those things that can mess up life as we may have been led to believe it's going to be, and if we're not paying attention or if we simply pour all our energy into avoiding failure and sadness, life is not much fun, let alone a joy.

Let's go back to those words of Mary Oliver. I don't believe I mentioned the title of her poem. She calls it "Look and See."

This morning, at waterside, a sparrow flew
to a water rock and landed, by error, on the back
of an eider duck;

We're barely into the first few lines, and we hear about a sparrow's mistake in landing. So does the sparrow say to himself, "Woe is me! I'm such a screw-up?" Not at all:

Lightly it flutters off, amused.

Aha, a sparrow who can laugh at himself! But how about that duck who definitely didn't expect to serve as a runway for a sparrow?

Our poet friend, Mary Oliver, doesn't forget the duck, not at all:

The duck, too, was not provoked, but, you might say, was
laughing.

A laughing duck and a sparrow laughing at himself – all because of a mistake, an error, a failure of judgment. And then we're called to turn our head upward again, where

This afternoon a gull sailing over
our house was casually scratching
its stomach of white feathers with one
pink foot as it flew.

Imagine a gull scratching its tummy mid-air and with one foot, pink no less! That gull must have had lots of confidence in her other pink foot.

Of course, of course, we echo Oliver's response to it all, and sing out with her:

Oh Lord, how shining and festive is your gift to us, if we
only look, and see.

Most of us here have had ample bouts of spring's heaviest downpours and winter's fiercest storms, as well as days that shimmer with sunlight. Whatever is, may we be there for it, noting that waves are to be ridden not bucked and days are to be known not seized.

May we not miss a beat of those raindrops or a drop of that sunshine. And may we have the good grace to ensure enough umbrellas and sunscreen for all God's children. Amen.

Sources:

Langston Hughes, "In Time of Silver Rain," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 545.

Mary Oliver, "Look and See," *Why I Wake Early*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2004.