

Footprints on the Sands of Time
Abbey Tennis, Preacher
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All Souls Church, Unitarian, Washington, DC

Service Description: The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote "Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time." We each hope to leave behind something meaningful when our short time on earth is over. How do we measure the impact of our lives? What kind of legacy will we leave behind?

Reading:

Excerpt from [Unitarian poet] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's
"A Psalm of Life: What the young man said to the psalmist"

(First published in the Knickerbocker Magazine in October 1838. It also appeared in Longfellow's first published collection *Voices in the Night*.)

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,
 Life is but an empty dream ! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
 And things are not what they seem.

Life is real ! Life is earnest!
 And the grave is not its goal ;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
 Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
 Is our destined end or way ;
But to act, that each to-morrow
 Find us farther than to-day.

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant !
 Let the dead Past bury its dead !
Act,— act in the living Present !
 Heart within, and God o'erhead !

Lives of great men all remind us
 We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
 Footprints on the sands of time ;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
 Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
 Seeing, shall take heart again.

When I was young, my mother, a nurse with expertise in obstetrics, taught evening childbirth classes. She was outstanding at it – My mother had begun to help deliver babies as a hospital volunteer when she was 14, had co-authored the section on homebirth in the groundbreaking women's health work "Our Bodies, Our Selves," supervised a large staff, and had delivered 2 large babies of her own at home. The work was meaningful, she was well-suited to it, and she strove to make an impact in the lives of the parents she taught.

One semester, one of the pregnant couples walked up to my mother after the final class.

"Marsha, we just want to tell you how important this class was to us." They said.

On the inside, my mother swelled with pride – I can almost hear her internal voice now...

"Wonderful! They learned about healthy pregnancy and developed a birth plan that's tailored to their needs, and their child will start out on the right foot in life. I have made a difference!"

The couple went on.

"Every week, after class, we have gone out to an ice cream parlor together. We have loved that time so much. When we think back on this class, we'll just never forget the ice cream."

How many of you have experienced something similar to this? You want to make an impact in someone's life, but the impact that is made seems to have nothing to do with you. It can make you feel unbelievably irrelevant.

But, mind you, it's a two-way street. My mother often speaks lovingly of a minister who gave unbelievably boring sermons. Trusting that he wouldn't say anything of interest, my mother would simply sit in church and tune out - luxuriating in her only child-free 20 minutes of the week.

She has relayed this anecdote to me regularly since I decided to go into the ministry.

So, those of you who are here today not for this sermon, but just to have 20 child-free minutes to tune out the world, don't worry. I understand. Hey, there's even cake after church today.

But be warned - if there's anything to the idea of karma, you might meet the same fate as my mother - that child you are getting time away from right now will one day grow up to become a preacher. And you will have to listen to unending sermons for the rest of your life. ☺

But seriously, we all want our work, or our presence, to matter. We want our short lives to make a difference in the world.

This is perhaps why, despite it's outdated gendered language, Longfellow's poem continues to speak to us, 175 years after it was written.

Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime,

And, departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time ;

We yearn to be remembered for what we have done... we yearn for greatness... to leave a mark on the world. To leave behind us footprints on the sands of time.

I don't know about you, but the world has always been given the impression that greatness is determined by how many things you did "first," how many people love your work, and how long you are remembered after you die. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Monet, Harriet Tubman, Mozart, Michael Jordan, Amelia Earhart. These people are presented to us as legends – as if they were born for greatness and it was only natural that the world recognized them.

The paradox is, of course, that the greatness we attribute to these people is often so overly-idealized that the people themselves would not recognize themselves in our images of them.

Beloved leaders become heroes. History is oversimplified into a series of flashy events – speeches, battles, court cases – and we forget the endless tedious hours of meetings and paperwork that lead up to those events. We have created a standard for "greatness" that is impossible to fill. And we ignore the complexities of the people and events we consider "great" in order to maintain our reverence for an ideal.

These people made something that lasted. They tied up their unfinished business. They reached a standard of perfection.

If we set aside our idealizations for a moment, and tap into our own wisdom, we know that is not true. We both recognize and struggle to accept these 3 things:

- Nothing lasts
- Nothing is finished
- Nothing is perfect¹

Western standards of perfection do not make room for these realities, and so we pretend they are not true, and find ourselves striving to live up to impossible standards.

In Japanese culture, there is an aesthetic worldview that accepts these realities. It's called wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi is often described as beauty that is imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is beauty with character. An object whose loveliness has deepened with use, even as it has become worn down, could be said to be wabi-sabi. Something that is wabi-sabi is something that brings about, within us, a serene melancholy and spiritual longing.

Smile lines on a face. A slightly run down, yet grand, Sanctuary. A bittersweet goodbye.

¹ Powell, Richard R. (2004). *Wabi Sabi Simple*. Adams Media. ISBN 1-59337-178-0.

What if the impact we strove to create with our lives was not to be heroic; not to build something perfect, permanent and complete, but rather to play a role in deepening the world's beauty?

How would our lives look if we valued the importance of our lovingly wearing down the steps of this church as much as we valued the architect who designed them?

At the Rongwo Gonchen Gompa Tibetan monastery in Tongren, China, there is a monk named Hua Chi.

Every day for the past 20 years, Hua has arrived at the temple before sunrise. Wearing traditional burgundy tunic and pants, and carrying a set of maroon prayer beads, he looks younger than his 70 years. As he rounds the corner of the temple, he turns each of the metal prayer wheels hung around the building's perimeter. Arriving at the threshold of the building, and standing in exactly the same place every time, Hua begins his prayers. Over and over he kneels down, slides his hands forward until he is lying flat on the floor, then rises again to repeat the prayer.

In his younger days, Hua would complete 2,000-3,000 prayer cycles a day. Now, at age 70, he says he often can only complete 1,000 prayers a day.

For Hua, the prayers are a way of living a faithful life; as a Buddhist monk, he strives to spend his life in meditation so that after his death, his spirit will not suffer.

Hua has repeated his prayers so many times that his footprints have become deeply ingrained in the hardwood floor – over an inch deep in places. Perfect imprints of his feet - as if he had merely stepped with bare feet into a piece of wet clay.

Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another, sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother, seeing, shall take heart again.

The younger monks at the monastery say that Hua's footprints inspire them to renew their own dedication to prayer and contemplation.

Now, I'm not going to lie.

When I first saw pictures of Hua's footprints online, my first thought was "they must be fake."

I kept researching. They aren't fake.

My second thought was "they're not fake? Wow. That's beautiful. That's dedication. That's some serious wabi-sabi."

My third thought was "huh. What kind of footprints am I leaving?"

Process theologians would say that Hua's footprints exemplify our interrelatedness with the world. We are not independent beings – we leave every interaction slightly different, and the world around us is slightly different for every interaction with us. We take on part of the world, and the world takes on part of us. As the years went by, the temple floor has taken on some of Hua, literally molding itself to his prayerful feet. As the years went by, Hua too, took on some of the floor – he became slower, more brittle, able to do fewer prayer cycles every day, and I'm sure he has callouses that perfectly match the floor. The footprints in the wood are the evidence of repeated prayers – repeated interactions between man and floor.

Hua chose to dedicate his life to prayer, and his footprints speak to the voracity of his dedication.

Now, most of us in the west don't choose a life with such a singular focus – we tend to go for breadth rather than depth here. But that doesn't mean we don't dedicate our lives to something.

Our own Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "A man will worship something ... That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

We must be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.

In Unitarian Universalism, though we share diverse theological beliefs, I believe most of us would say that we dedicate our lives to Love, and to making the world a little better.

We may not stand and kneel in prayer thousands of times a day like Hua, but we leave footprints on the world all the same.

In the age of facebook, it can be easy to fool ourselves into believing that our impact on life is like a series of digital photo albums taken at beautiful places and important events, edited to only the most flattering pictures of us and whoever we are currently on good terms with.

But I think our life's impact is much more like one extended time-lapse photograph – a blur of color and movement and overlapping images. Places where we spend more time come out more clearly on the photograph, but none of our movements are lost in the final image.

Our impact is not the self-selected list of accomplishments we're most proud of, it is the accumulation of a life's worth of footsteps.

What if these are the footsteps that Longfellow was talking about? – What if “leaving footprints on the sands of time” is not only for people who have made the history books. Each of us – famous or not - invariably leaves footprints throughout our lives. What if the question is not “whether we'll leave a mark” on this world, but “what kind of mark” we'll leave?

What if the question was not “does my life matter” but “how will I choose to make my life matter?”

So, this is the part of the sermon where you indulge me for a minute.

As you know by Rob's announcement if nothing else, I'm the intern minister here, and today is my last day at All Souls. Tomorrow, I will pack up my apartment and later this week, my cats and I will climb into my car and begin the drive back to California for my last year of seminary.

Before I go, though, I want to describe some of the footprints you leave on my heart.

Because each of you is like one of Hua Chi's prayers. This year, one thousand of you have stepped into my heart, knelt down, and reminded me of the transformational power of love. Every day for the past year, each of you have stepped into my heart, knelt down, and showed me the radiant beauty of the Beloved Community we strive to build.

You have taught me about deep yearning and unyielding pain. About staying present to conflict. About deep, true, comfortable relationships. About grief. About finding renewed strength after a fall. Dying with grace. Giving birth with serenity.

We have shaken hands, high-fived each other, hugged. You have let me kiss your babies and, during the blessing of the animals last summer, you even let me lovingly tackle your runaway pets.

Your music has renewed my faith in God. Your kindness towards each other has renewed my faith in humanity. Your tireless work for justice has renewed my faith in a bright future for our world.

You have stepped into my heart and knelt down over and over again in honor of Love.

You have made me into a minister. And I am so grateful.

You are the monk. I am the floor. I leave this place carrying the imprint of you with me, and I know that part of me will always remain here with you.

My friends,

Our lives are not made up of some important interactions and some throw-away interactions.

Our legacy is determined not by our greatest achievement, nor by our greatest failure.

Our legacy is determined by the degree of love we bring to each footstep of life.

Nothing lasts. Nothing is finished. Nothing is perfect.

But, still, each of our lives matters.

Still, love flows on.

Amen.