

**Coming Into Focus**  
**A sermon delivered at the**  
**Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario**  
**Sunday, December 9, 2012**

**Reading #1: “Moments of Grace”** David Weale

Essayist David Weale asks his students:

[Have you] ever been swept away by a song or piece of music?

[Have you...] stood at night and gazed up at the stars, and experienced a mysterious connection with objects millions of light years away?

[Have you] ever been “in the zone” while participating in a sport, which took [you] beyond [your] ordinary level of awareness and competency?

[Have you] ever experienced such a deep solidarity with other members of a choir or team or audience that individual personalities dissolved into a single identity?...

[Have you] ever become so absorbed in a task or hobby that time disappeared:

[Have you] ever, during extremely difficult or sorrowful times, been filled suddenly with the deep certainty that everything was going to be fine?

Or [have you] ever had [your] heart momentarily melted by an unexpected gesture of compassion?

[Each of these is a moment of grace.]

[from David Weale, *Chasing the Shore: Little Stories About Spirit and Landscape*, p 30; quoted in Arthur Boers, *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions*, p 51]

**Reading #2: “Paul’s Letter to the Romans”** Romans 7:15-16

**<sup>15</sup>I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... <sup>18</sup>...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.**

And in another, more modern translation:

**Weymouth New Testament**

For what I do, I do not recognize as my own action. What I desire to do is not what I do, but what I am averse to is what I do.

**Sermon: “Coming into Focus: What Matters”** by The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

Albert Borgmann is a philosophy professor emeritus from the University of Montana in Missoula. Albert was born and grew up in post-war Germany. He did his graduate work in the States, met his wife Nancy, stayed in the US, and raised three daughters. Albert still has a bit of a German accent, a shock of white hair, menacing-looking dark eyebrows, and a thin, almost gaunt-looking runner’s build. A very self-disciplined man. Scary on first meeting. [I had my first school nightmare after taking one of his philosophy classes.] But upon getting to know him, Albert is an intense but charming man.

Albert’s field of expertise is the philosophy of technology – how technology impacts our lives – how we live our lives, how we make choices. A person visiting Albert’s office might be surprised to see no computer on his desk. [I know that my laptop seems ever-present in my life.] Well, if asked about it, Albert would smile a bit, open a drawer where his laptop resided, and he would tell you he was “just putting technology in its place.”

Albert Borgmann wonders about how technology – the ease of it, its ubiquitous nature – the fact that it seems to be everywhere in our lives [why, even clocks – how many digital clocks did we have to futz with during last month’s time change?] Albert wonders about how technology not only makes life easier, but also how it makes life busier, more

disconnected, more frenzied. [How much time do we spend with emails? How much time do we, and our kids and grandkids spend playing online games, tweeting, on Facebook?

Is technology taking us away from what matters? From a truly good, centered, focused life?

My point – and Albert’s point – is not that we should abandon contemporary technology. Many of us in this room are alive because of modern techniques of medicine. And it’s lots easier feeding the fire when you have a chainsaw to expedite the cutting of wood. And, after spending several Alaska winters with only a Franklin stove for heat, chopping wood & kindling for my small fires, I was ever-so-happy to move into a small house that also had a propane heater. Turn the knob. Heat. Bliss!

But, Albert wants us to consider what makes for a truly good life, a full life, a life that matters, a life suitably filled with resonant moments.

And, to this purpose, Albert writes about what he calls focal things and focal practices.

The word *focus* comes from a Latin word that means fireplace or hearth. In earlier times a hearth would focus our energies, our time, our attention. Our energies would be focused on gathering the wood or the peat or the coal to keep the hearth fire glowing. Our time would be captured, building the fire, using the hearth as a place to cook food, a place before which we could eat and talk, knit, read, nap, warm frozen toes and fingers. A hearth, its orange and gold flames flickering, draws our attention, our energies, our time. A hearth would be the center of a room. A focal point.

Maybe you’ve seen it, or heard about it – the channel that features a 24/7 picture of a roaring fireplace. Albert asks: how is watching a televised fire satisfying? How does it engage our senses?

Those of us who have fireplaces, or spend some time during the year in front of a campfire – feeling the heat, hearing the crackle, watching the colors – we know a flat screen TV’s depiction of a fire is a sorry substitute.

So, Albert writes about focal things and focal practices.

When we lived in Missoula, Tim and I hosted a number of Japanese girls who were taking English classes at the local university. Ours was a ranch style house, where the dining room was contiguous with the living room, where our TV sat. Our usual practice was to eat dinner while watching the evening news.

Well, with the girls there we focused instead on having a meal together. The girls taught us how a traditional Japanese meal always starts with what we might call grace – “Itadakimasu!” we would all say – “thank you to all who made this food possible”. And when we finished: “Gochiso samadeshita!” – “Thank you, again. It was delicious!” In between we each would talk about our day – its troubles & triumphs. Dinner together became a focal practice.

And so, when Albert talks about focal practices, focal living he includes activities like cooking meals and sharing meals together, making live music in a group, extending hospitality to neighbors and friends, walking or hiking, gardening. Focal practices take time, energy, attention. Focal activities are energizing, illuminating, sometimes enchanting.

Almost every morning I walk our dog, a 10-year-old Lhasa Apso named Renegade. Rennie is a boy dog, and so his main goals during a walk are the maximization of his sniff & pee opportunities. And, for me, over the five years we've had him, our walk has been an opportunity to see what is going on in the neighborhood, what the weather is like, what Lake Superior is doing, and a chance to get a bit of exercise – in between a whole lot of reading & fiddling at my laptop.

I learned long ago that Rennie's goals are not at all the same as my goals for our walk. So, either I was going to have to spend a lot of time dragging along a 16-pound ball of fur & muscle, or I needed to re-frame the purpose of the walk. I decided to do the latter. Our walks are truly "dog walks" not people walks – the destination and pace primarily set by Rennie. And, by adjusting my expectations, by treating our outing like a walking meditation, I have been forced to practice patience. But I have also reaped mighty benefits.

A couple weeks ago, while Rennie was dawdling about, eating a first milk bone [and truly, I think Rennie was a Tibetan monk in a previous life – every milk bone deserves a slow, thoughtful, 1000 chews...]; so, while Rennie was eating that first milk bone I heard what I thought might be a woodpecker in the park across the street. Well, we continued our slow-paced walk. Rennie decided he needed a second milk bone before he could proceed. Waiting, watching the Lake and a neighbor's yard I saw some movement, and was pretty sure I caught sight of the white underwings of a large bird. We stopped to greet a new neighbor dog and talk with its owner. And, during yet another dog stop, the pileated woodpecker landed on a neighbor's pine tree.

And the next day, during one of Rennie's forced stops [sometimes my patience does wear a little thin with all his meandering], I once again caught sight of that same pileated woodpecker in the park across the street.

Rennie, and his dog walk, have become a focal practice in what otherwise often seems a very disjointed, piecemeal day.

Focal practices take time, energy, attention. Focal activities are energizing, illuminating, sometimes even enchanting.

At a symposium in Missoula Albert Borgmann commended his listeners to pay attention to "the moments of grace where things are properly centered in a way that we don't have to unsay or surpass at a later moment." These kinds of experiences are beyond our control and usually fleeting. Yet they sustain and encourage us.

Sitting in a graduate philosophy class, Albert once asked us when was the last time we were able to say to ourselves:

There is no place I would rather be.  
There is nothing I would rather do.  
There is no one I would rather be with.  
This I will remember well. [LIF 185]

Albert calls these his "focal affirmations."

There is no place I would rather be.  
There is nothing I would rather do.  
There is no one I would rather be with.  
This I will remember well. [LIF 185]

And so, when Albert talks about focal practices, focal living he includes activities like cooking meals and sharing meals together, or walking; he believes that in focal practices, in focal things there is no place we would rather be – whether in the garden, in the woods, in the kitchen. There is nothing we would rather be doing – checking the tomato plants, listening for a deer in the woods, chopping vegetables for the stir fry. There is no one we would rather be with – whether the dog, the cat, alone, with a friend or spouse, with the crowd at the hockey game. And this we will remember well – this is a highpoint, of the morning, the day, the week, maybe even in our lives.

Focal practices take time, energy, attention. Focal activities are energizing, illuminating, sometimes enchanting.

Focal reality has a commanding presence. We are engaged with the activity, with our surroundings, engaged mind, body and spirit.

Focal things and practices have a centering power – drawing in the past, the present, the future. Think of the woman quilting – an old & thrifty craft, using scraps of fabric, taking care with each stitch, making a piece of art and hominess that will endure for generations.

Think of the man fishing – maybe an art learned from his grandfather, an activity that will provide food for tonight's supper table, a skill he will teach his granddaughter [and she her grandson, and he his granddaughter]. Past and present and future are bound up in a slow and patient way.

Focal practices take time and patience.

In this holiday season, it will take time to prepare food, time for conversation [and, depending on your family, maybe a lot of patience, too.]

Putting up a tree, decorating, writing cards, baking, singing carols – whatever practices make the holiday season full and bright and meaningful to you – all these activities will take time and patience. If they energize, illuminate, bring a feeling of joy and serenity – then we may consider them focal practices, focal things.

If you're feeling nothing but frazzled and over-busy, maybe it's time to consider – to reconsider – what is truly life-nourishing for you in this holiday season.

If hearing the 47<sup>th</sup> rendition of “The Little Drummer Boy” makes you want to punch a hole in the wall, maybe what is needed is some time of concentrated quiet and contemplation of more satisfying holiday activities. Our culture promotes frenzy, provides too many opportunities for distraction, for inattention, a nervous restlessness.

Focal practices take time and patience. Patience takes practice. Patience is acquired gradually. Patience and time and practice produce a vigor in our life's activities. Patience and time and practice – reminds me a lot of *sisu* – perseverance in the face of life's many bumps and bruises, perseverance in doing what is right and good and true.

May we – in our lives, in this upcoming holiday season – pay attention to those

moments of grace when life is centered, in focus, good enough, right enough, joyful enough.

During this over-busy holiday season, may we sometimes be able to say to ourselves:  
There is no place I would rather be.  
There is nothing I would rather do.  
There is no one I would rather be with.  
This I will remember well. [LIF 185]

May we fly through our chores and focus on what we truly desire to do. Maybe just to sit and think. Maybe just to sit.

May there be times in our lives when “everything feels properly ordered, when all seems right with the world, where nothing more is needed.” [LIF 185]

May we be dazzled by the white fire of a great mystery.

May we feel one with the stars; one with the music.

One with the task at hand.

One with our companions, at peace with ourselves.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed be. And amen.