

DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN

From Rev. John R. White – The First Congregational Church of Dudley, MA – United Church of Christ
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The country-western singer Toby Keith asked his friend Clint Eastwood, as he was about to turn 88:

“What keeps you going?” Eastwood replied: “I get up every day and don’t let the old man in.”

I love that. To me, this means remembering to pause each day to appreciate something beautiful, to pause in wonder and awe, to allow some time for the mind to wander and to rest, to allow yourself, despite the stresses of whatever day, to be filled with gratitude and even to find some time for play.

My wife Sarah and I were fortunate to spend the first two weeks of July in the desert, visiting our daughter Emily, who works as a yoga instructor, and son-in-law John, nearing retirement from the military, following more than 20 years of service in the Navy, currently working as an emergency room nurse at the naval hospital on the largest marine base in the United States.

While surrounded by cactus and jackrabbits, and as we felt the earth move during an earthquake, I considered how different the landscape is for those living in 29 Palms, California and those where I live in Dudley, Massachusetts. Yet then I peered up at the moon and stars and realized we were seeing the same.

Emily and John’s neighbors, serving their country as marines, are from American Samoa, a U.S. territory covering 7 South Pacific islands and atolls. They were holding a family reunion during the time of our visit. On our final evening there, dozens of people gathered in their backyard for a time of family worship which included song. Their singing, rising under the same heavens which covered their neighbors back home in American Samoa, songs rising under the canopy of a desert sunset, brought heartfelt tears to my eyes.

Last month and over the past couple of years, humanity has been celebrating first steps on the moon and our first glimpse of seeing the earth from space. Our journeys into space have helped us realize the truth of ourselves, floating around on this tiny blue-green ball in the middle of a vast universe, only one of countless universes. With all the stunning diversity this tiny world gives to us, how precious is the home we share.

Psalm 148 in the King James Version of the bible is beautiful poetry which can, I hope, be appreciated by anyone, of any religious tradition, even by those of no tradition at all, simply appreciating these words as being written by those looking around themselves in wonder for all the life which surrounds them. It reads:

“Praise ye the Lord. Praise ye the Lord from the heavens: praise him in the heights. Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts. Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light. Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord: for he commanded, and they were created. He hath also stablished them for ever and ever: he hath made a decree which shall not pass. Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps: Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling his word: Mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all cedars: Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl: Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth: Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children: Let them praise the name of the Lord: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven. He also exalteth the horn of his people, the praise of all his saints; even of the children of Israel, a people near unto him. Praise ye the Lord.”

It takes a bit of childlike wonder to perceive the world like this, so yeah, don’t let the old man or woman in. Take advantage of this summer heat by stepping outdoors when you can, wearing as little clothing as possible. If you’re in a totally private setting...perhaps stepping out in your “birthday suit” or “skinny dipping” in some pond, if this is what you need to fully awaken childlike wonder within you. Do something you’re accustomed to chiding someone else for doing, yet secretly wish you were doing...not something immoral...just something liberating and fun. Instead of telling someone: “Why don’t you act your age?” try telling yourself: “Perhaps I’m not too old.”

Yes, your body will change over time, so we need to put in some effort to keep it as young as we can. Your mind and your spirit can remain as young and flexible as ever though, simply by choosing them to be so.

May you, in your way, express your gratitude for Earth, our island home; for sky filled with planets, moons and stars, for oceans, streams, mountains and wind, for trees and grass and desert sand. Even as our physical bodies age, remember the mystery we are part of, the agelessness of our spirits, yesterday, today and throughout eternity. Be filled with appreciation for all we have, the wonders of creation, of science, of artistic expression and imagination, of the healing power of forgiveness, kindness and love. May our hearts be filled with wonder, so we may sense the promise in this blue-green planet and feel convinced that our role is to care for it; as we feel convinced that our role is to care for one another. Happy summer friends, Pastor John