Throw It Away

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak

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First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

I first heard this song over a cup of coffee with a friend, maybe 20 years ago. We were commiserating about not having enough - enough money, enough time, enough success, enough love - and worrying about life's uncertainties.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fbucba3S3sw

We were in our mid-to-late 40's, after all. That's what you do at mid-life - you look back at what you did and what you messed up and what you missed. And you look ahead and see the path diminishing and the way littered with unknowns.

So Wally popped this CD into the player and the Pat Metheny's mellow minor guitar chords reflected our mood.

And then this voice came into the room… and she sang those unusual words:

Throw it away. Throw it away.
Give your love, live your life,
each and every day,
and keep your hand wide open.
Let the sun shine through,
'cause you can never lose a thing
if it belongs to you.

This is it, Wally said. This is for you...

I was stunned into silence, mulling over the words and all the feeling she put into that one song. And the feeling it all put into me… Throw it away… throw what away, I wondered… throw your life away?

When we use a phrase like “throw it away”, it usually has something to do with garbage, with disposing of some unwanted thing. Discarding something with little concern for its value or purpose - just throw it away. But here she’s singing:

Throw it away: give your love, live your life each and every day.

This month’s theme is LOVE. And that is a risky venture. You’re sitting there wondering and worrying - about your own personal life and choices you need to make, perhaps. Or things you’ve taken on and are trying to manage. Or grieving loss or anticipating gain.

The congregation is transitioning, changing, looking ahead at that same road littered with uncertainties. And maybe you all wondering why I’d tell you to throw it away when all we
really want to do sometimes is hold on to the comfortable, to fiercely grasp at life and love... And so I repeat Abbey Lincoln's words of wisdom: *throw it away.*

Don't cling to expectations... don't grasp at certainty. What you hold tightly to will be your undoing, the cause of your sorrow.

> *Give your love, live your life, each and every day*  
> *And keep your hand wide open. Let the sun shine through.*  
> *Because you can never lose a thing if it belongs to you.*

You cannot lose what is truly yours. And what is truly yours no one else can claim. What is truly yours is not a lot of things or possessions but rather what is truly yours is your soul, your life, all you have to give. And sometimes you can only keep a thing - a thing like love or life - if you give it away.

Neither love nor life itself do well when they are hoarded, deprived of energy. Non-attachment, the Buddhists might call this. Opening constantly, letting your heart be bruised a little but strengthened by compassion and love. Do not cling or grasp but open your hands and your heart.

This song came out of Abbey Lincoln’s own life. It was recorded after she returned to performing after a long hiatus. And so like the most authentic wisdom we receive, is grounded in a deep soul.

She was born Anna Marie Wooldridge in Chicago on Aug. 6, 1930, the 10th of 12 children, and raised in rural Michigan. In the early 1950s, she headed west in search of a singing career, she took the name Abbey Lincoln, a symbolic conjoining of Westminster Abbey and *Abraham Lincoln*.

She is best known for the songs she wrote and sang - songs that come from the depth of her life experience as an African-American woman; whose life was always filled with music; who came of age in Jim Crow and segregation; who joined with so many other activists and artists in the civil rights movement; who composed and sang from the heart. In the 1950’s her singing and acting was decidedly glamorous, wearing a dress once worn by *Marilyn Monroe* for one album cover. But her encounters with different music, especially jazz, and then meeting drummer Max Roach, a bebop pioneer with an ardent interest in progressive causes, turned her life around.

She later recalled, that as her focus shifted to civil rights and the African American community, she put that Monroe dress in an incinerator.

In 1960 she worked on “*We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite,*” and this radicalized Ms. Lincoln’s reputation. During a visit to Africa in 1972, she received two honorary apppellations from political officials: Moseka, in Zaire, and Aminata, in Guinea.
It was then that she began to consider her calling as a storyteller - no longer just an actress or an interpreter of someone else's music - a storyteller focused on writing songs that came out of her own life experience and deep longing.

"I have a lot to say and I don't like the world that I found myself in, that I was created to be in,” Abbey Lincoln once said. “I was brought here, but I don't like this 'here.' …If I wasn’t able to access myself through the work, I would have dropped dead a long time ago. I couldn’t have stood it here.”

Her words echo the sentiments of so many African American artists, especially those of that era and earlier. Yet, as bitter as those words may sound, still Ms. Lincoln found - in the struggle and in her art - the promise of life - and this one song is a prime example.

But this sermon is not meant to be a lecture on music or on a particular artist. I want to invite you to hear Abbey Lincoln’s song, and her life and her music, as a balm to our very souls. We can be spiritually grounded in all kinds of music, this we know. And we can find our way through troubling or uncertain times when our souls are strong, when our minds our settled, when we are open to one another and the world.

Abbey Lincoln knew this and sang about it - she tells of an interconnected universe, reminding us of the roots that hold us close and the wings that set us free.

There’s a hand to rock the cradle;
and a hand to help us stand,
with a gently kind of motion
as it moves across the land,
and the hand’s unclenched and open.
Gifts of life and love it brings,
so keep your hand wide open
if you’re needing anything.

The hand unclenched and open - a benevolent universe, God, or the hands of people all around us - our families, our communities, this Unitarian Universalist congregation - all around us.

Gifts of life and love it brings.
So keep your hand wide open if you’re needing anything.

Picture again the man and the birds toward Thurman wrote about… we are the birds and we are the man. As another great musician - (Edward Kennedy) Duke Ellington - once said, “Unconditional love not only means I am with you, but also I am for you, all the way, right or wrong… Love is indescribable and unconditional. I could tell you a thousand things that it is not, but not one that it is. Either you have it or you haven’t, there’s no proof of it.”

*Throw it away. Throw it away.*
Give your love, live your life, each and every day.

No matter how stressed out we get... no matter how hard a time we're having, we can still keep our hands wide open. If in your personal life, you have known love and loss, you can be strengthened in keeping your soft, vulnerable heart open. If things have been difficult here at First Church... if you had a difficult experience here, if you're grieving the loss of a beloved minister, or relieved that some stress has been removed... still, with all these mixed feelings we know we are home... this is our home.

We aren't going to give up on this place, on this institution, on our religious home. And we will do all we can to sustain and nurture and grow it. And to do that we will, after all, have to throw it away.

Poet June Jordan offers this wisdom about the purpose and the promise of life, and of love:

"... maybe the purpose of being here, wherever we are, is to increase the durability and the occasions of love among and between peoples.

Love, as the concentration of tender caring and tender excitement, or love as the reason for joy...

Love is the single, true prosperity of any moment and that whatever and whoever impedes, diminishes, ridicules, opposes the development of loving spirit is `wrong`/ hateful."

The single, true prosperity of any moment... This moment... right now. This moment in history - in a troubled and troubling world.

This moment, right now, here... the moment of your own life... the moment of this congregation's history. We are invited to acknowledge with honesty and with compassion all that we have here - what we have received... the learning and growing we experience, the connection and bonds we develop... in the new relationships established as people come into this church; and in the kinship we share with those who have been part of the congregation in the past.

We are called to respond with gratitude for all that we have been given - if we open our hands and our hearts and receive, then the laws of reciprocity come into play. For what we receive, we must give. That is the law of love... Love itself flows beyond merit or demerit; there are no scales to weigh your portion or measure what I may give. Truly, the only balance in love is not found in giving and receiving being equally weighted... Love simply loves - that is its nature. It is meant to be thrown away, like a tree giving off its seeds, never counting the cost. [Howard Thurman]
To be the congregation, the community, you wish to be, you must loosen up the strings of your heart. There is a sense of grace, and freedom and space in giving.
Throw it away - give your love, live your life -
There is expansiveness and liberation in giving.
The hand, unclenched and open, brings gifts of life and love.
The more we give, the more room in our hearts there is for love and compassion.
So keep your hand wide open. Let the sun shine through.
Because you can never lose a thing if it belongs to you.
Let us share our gladness at being here, our gladness at being one.

Reading - *Indebted to a Vast Host* by Howard Thurman
from *Meditations of the Heart* (adapted)

One day a very ordinary-looking man was walking along the sidewalk. It was near the end of the day, when light was fading but darkness hadn’t quite set in. His coat and hat were as gray as the evening sky, and he was in a quiet mood, looking down as he walked. About three feet from the curb, a group of birds was pecking away at a small opening in the side of a pink paper bag. They were making quite a racket – it was like they were quarrelling as they pecked, as if each one of the birds was offering a suggestion about the best way to get to the crumbs that were hidden there.

The man noticed them and walked over to the spot. As he approached, those noisy birds quickly took flight, settling in the grass at a respectful distance, watching the man. With his foot, the man turned the bag over and examined it with some care. Then he reached down and emptied the bag and its contents of breadcrumbs. When he had done this, he resumed his walk. As soon as he disappeared, the birds returned to find that a miracle had taken place. Instead of a bag full of hidden crumbs, only a glimpse of which they had been able to see, here was now before them enough food to satisfying all their needs.

The man had gone on his way without even a backward glance. None of the birds flew after the man to thank him. They did not create a national holiday nor start a new religion to honor this event in their lives. They simply ate their full, perhaps feeling some sense of bird-gratitude. The man did not expect anything more than the pleasure of helping to feed those birds. He simply did a good deed for others he did not know.

This is the way life goes. Sometimes we can’t see all the good that is right in front of us, and we quarrel and fuss to get what we want. Sometimes the actions of one person can help us get what we need, or simply shows us a new way of looking at life. And sometimes it is up to us to take that step forward and help someone else, even when we don’t know who they are or what the outcomes will be; even when we might not receive any acknowledgement or thanks.

*We are all of us the birds and we are all of us the man.*