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 Arlington Street Church
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Only You

Late one night many years ago, just after college, a friend and I rode a Red Line train home to Somerville. We'd been burning the candle at both ends: In the mornings, I was organizing with the Clamshell Alliance and she with The Hunger Project; and in the evenings, we were were working for Massachusetts Fair Share, whose offices were just kitty-corner from here. We were so tired we weren't even talking. We were so tired that my friend took off the button she always wore, which said, "Ask Me about the Hunger Project."

And then, at the same moment, our weary eyes went to a placard above the seats across the aisle. Who knows why the U.S. Forest Service was advertising on the Boston subway, but there he was — Smokey the Bear. And under his giant, furry countenance were those immortal words, "Only You."

Only You. My friend reached into her pocket and put the "Ask Me" button back on.

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An iteration of a quote from the great Rabbi Hillel asks, *If not you, who?* So much good comes from answering the call implied in, "Only you," and, by extension, "Only We."

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Do you know about plogging — with a P? The Swedes finally gave a name to what a lot of us have done for years: picking up trash while walking or out for a run. The word is from the Swedish *plocka upp*, meaning "to pick up." According to the nonprofit Keep America Beautiful, cleanup costs the United States \$11.5 billion dollars each year. To plog, you simply put on a pair of gloves, grab a bag, and go — bending over to *plocka upp* trash and then posting a picture of it to Instagram. Note that you don't have to pick up everything — only what's in your path. Last year in the United States, Turkey, China, and Australia, in a huge field of

competitors, Plogging — also known as Trash Running — was named the fitness trend of the year.¹

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Beginning in April of 1994, within one hundred days, as many as a million Rwandans died at each other's hands — as much as twenty percent of the total population. Five years later, I had the honor of bearing witness to sessions of storytelling by both Hutu and Tutsi survivors of the genocide.² Their stories were violent and terrifying, but they knew not to free-fall into the morass of those memories of humanity's inhumanity. When the horror and despair threatened to sink us all, a ripple would go through the Rwandans, and someone would call for a dance. Standing in place, then circling the room, they accompanied themselves with tunes that began gently and grew louder, now clapping and stomping, alone and then arm in arm. I sat in my seat, my eyes smarting with tears of deep sorrow and sheer awe at their determination and resilience. But no one stayed seated for long. *Up! Up!* they called. And so we danced. We danced, and then we sat again, strengthened for more remembering, more telling.

On the final day of our gathering, the Rwandan women brought me the gift of a long, wide swath of brightly batiked cloth, and wrapped it around and around my waist. *Don't forget to dance!* they said. Remember, tell, and don't forget to dance.

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My friends of blessed memory, Ruth and Peter Fleck, escaped the Nazi invasion of Holland. They were my first authorities on living in the face of depravity. Many years ago, despairing at the state of our country, I asked Ruth what I should do. Her answer was like a koan, a puzzle, whose solution I continue to strive to live into. She said, "Just keep doing what you're doing."

I'm thinking about Smokey and plogging and the Rwandans and Ruth Fleck because I've found it true that while achieving great things might feel exhausting and hopelessly out of reach, we are called, as Mother Teresa said, to do small things with great love. We, all of us, are called — Only you, Only We — to pick up the trash, both literally and figuratively; to remember, tell, and dance ... and just keep doing it.

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¹ Linda Poon, *Pick Up Trash While You Exercise. It's Called Plogging*, 3/1/18. Please see citylab.com/life/2018/03/plogging-exercise-trash-running/554456/

² I am eternally indebted to Ambassador Swanee Hunt for her invitation to be a member of Women Waging Peace, her international peacemaking initiative.

There's a story from the Holocaust I heard only recently. The headline is that a Japanese gentleman named Chiune Sugihara saved thousands of Jews with his handwriting.

In the words of psychologist Philip Zimbardo, “the very same situations that inflame the hostile imagination in some people, making them villains, can also instill the heroic imagination in other people, prompting them to perform heroic deeds.” Two characteristics of those who rescued Jews are that they exhibited a streak of independence and that they were possessed of a strong moral compass. Chiune Sugihara was defiant. In 1934, he was serving in Manchuria as Japan's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, but resigned in protest of his government's treatment of the Chinese. And he exhibited a heroic imagination. While the vast majority of the world disregarded the plight of Jews, Chiune Sugihara could not and did not.

In 1939, he was sent to Lithuania to run the Japanese consulate. Soon, he was confronted with Jews fleeing German-occupied Poland. He cabled his embassy asking for permission to issue visas to the refugees. His superior telegrammed back, a firm *Nō* ... “no exceptions.”

There is a samurai maxim that says, “Even a hunter cannot kill a bird that flies to him for refuge.” While most saw throngs of desperate foreigners, Chiune Sugihara saw human beings. He discussed the situation with his wife, Yukiko, and their children. They decided that despite the inevitable destruction of his career, he would defy his government. He knew he could save the refugees through a very simple but essential action: writing visas. In an interview years later,³ he said, simply, “There was no other way.”

Day after night after day, Chiune Sugihara wrote — at least 6,000 visas for refugees to travel through Japan to other destinations. When he finally fell into bed, exhausted, Yukiko would massage his aching hands. In 1940, when Japan closed the Lithuanian embassy, he took the stationery with him and continued to write visas that, in actuality, weren't legal, but worked because he signed them and affixed the government seal. When he was forced to leave Lithuania, he gave the consulate stamp to a refugee to forge more visas, and he literally threw visas out of the train window to people standing on the platform. In many cases, entire families traveled on a single visa. It has been estimated that over 40,000 people were saved because of one man.

³ 1977

“I told the Ministry of Foreign Affairs it was a matter of humanity” he said. “I did not care if I lost my job.” He was summarily dismissed, and went from being a foreign service officer to working menial jobs. He never spoke about his wartime activities. Even people close to him had no idea he was a hero ... until 1968, when a survivor named Yehoshua Nishri found him. He had been a teenager in Poland, was saved by a Sugihara visa, and was working at the Israeli embassy in Tokyo. Finally, Chiune Sugihara’s lifesaving contribution was recognized.

His son, Nobuki Sugihara, remembers his father as “a very simple man. He was kind, loved reading, gardening, and most of all, children. He never thought what he did was notable or unusual.”⁴

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Obviously, the image of Chiune Sugihara being faced with incoming waves of refugees fleeing for their lives, writing visas while others were bolting the gates of entry, brings to mind the horrific crisis at our southern border today. I invite us to keep the image of 6,000 handwritten visas before us. Just one person, inundated, exhausted, *defiant*, refused to close his eyes to the chaos and despair and chose, instead, to follow his moral compass, open his heart, and take action — a life-giving, death-defying answer to despair.

And while Chiune Sugihara might well have forged ahead alone, I am deeply moved that he included his family in his decision-making — all in. When Smokey says, *Only You*, he also means, *Only We*. To deeply encounter despair is both a personal commitment — *Only You* — and a communal commitment — *Only We*.

This is American poet Mary Oliver’s *Wild Geese*.

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of rain
 are moving across the landscapes,

⁴ as told by Rabbi David Volpe of Temple Sinai in Los Angeles, 10/15/18

over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

Beloved spiritual companions,

It's up to us — Only You, Only We —
 to keep doing what we're doing.
 May we do small things with great love.

We don't have to pick up all the trash,
 but we are called to clean up what is before us.
 Remember, tell, and don't forget to dance.

If you are despairing,
 I encourage you to find your people here —
 your pack, your tribe, your beloved spiritual community —
 and, in the face of all the forces mitigating against open-heartedness,
open your heart.

Let us love each other well.
 Together, let us answer despair with love.