

Epiphany
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
01/06/08

Readings

1. *a slightly adapted excerpt from the unfinished manuscript of “[Stephen Hero](#),” by Irish novelist, James Joyce:*

By an epiphany Stephen meant: a sudden spiritual manifestation in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that epiphanies should be recorded with extreme care, seeing that they are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.

He told his friend that the clock that they passed each day was capable of producing an epiphany. His friend questioned the inscrutable dial of the clock with his no less inscrutable countenance.

“Yes,” said Stephen. “I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of the city’s street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.”

“What?”

“Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is *epiphanised*. It is just in this epiphany that I find the supreme quality of beauty.”

2. *The [words of Admiral Richard Byrd](#):*

I paused to listen to the silence. My breath crystallized as it passed my cheeks, drifted on a breeze gentler than a whisper. My frozen breath hung like a cloud overhead. The day was dying, the night was being born-but with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence—a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord.

It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe. The conviction came that that rhythm was too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance—that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole and that man was part of that whole and not an accidental offshoot. It was a feeling that transcended reason. The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was as rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the day and night.

Sermon

I admit: I love the Wise Men. It’s one of my favorite parts of the many stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. The Wise Men are such unique and mysterious characters in that story.

They’re so mysterious that we add a lot to the almost-maddeningly-concise story in the Gospel of Matthew that isn’t actually there.

First, we often call them Kings. The story talked about “Three Kings” Day. The song we’ll sing after this sermon, one of my favorites, is “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” There is nothing, however, in the text or in historical scholarship to suggest that they were “kings.” (This notion is thought to have arisen as people searched the Hebrew Scriptures for a foretelling of the event, and found verses such as Psalm 72: 10-11: “May the kings of Tarsish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.” It is thought by some scholars that these words were quite possibly referring to King Solomon’s coronation).

And, outside of the mistaken identity as kings, there is no particular reason to even think that there were *three* of them. Scholars imagine that we came up with *three* wise men because there were three separate presents: [anyone?] gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We even came up with three names from God knows where: anyone know those? Yes, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Well, those names became settled somewhere in the 8th century, having arisen amongst other suggested names somewhere back in the 6th century, but have, of course, no historical basis.

And I’m not trying to say it’s a bad thing to add to a story. I think it only points to our fascination with this piece of the story. But what, I wonder, can these wise men—however many there were, and whatever their names happened to be—what can these wise men tell us today?

I’ve been thinking of them this year in terms of Epiphany. Epiphany is, of course, the holiday that is celebrated in many Christian churches today; the holiday that is often associated with the arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem. But epiphany is also a word that we use in other contexts. A dictionary defines epiphany as: *A realization or comprehension of the essence or meaning of something or someone; an inspired understanding arising from connecting with profound insight, awareness, or enlightened truth.* James Joyce, in the readings, relates epiphany to a sudden spiritual manifestation that allows us to focus in a particular way; that focus allowing us to see and recognize things as they are. “The moment the focus is reached,” he writes, “the object is *epiphanized*.” (I love that word. You can let me know later if this sermon *epiphanizes* things for you.)

How does epiphany (the word) relate to Epiphany (the holiday) and especially to the wise men?

As I was pondering this, I became aware that the wise men were unique in the birth story of Jesus because of something that *didn’t* happen to them. They *were not* visited by an angel. Almost every main character of the story, if you combine Matthew and Luke, is visited by an angel that tells them “Hey, listen up! No, don’t be scared, but pay attention here...” and then proceeds to tell them what will happen, what they should do, and what it will mean. An angel visits Mary; Joseph; the shepherds; even Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist...

The wise men don’t receive this visit. They are not granted the favor of being *told* what’s important by something or someone that is so totally outside the realm of their experience that they can do nothing but pay attention. They figure out the importance of things on their own...or rather, the spiritual manifestation that James Joyce speaks of arises out of their normal experience and their own awareness. I imagine it happening for them like it happens for most of us: no chorus of angels; no Divine pronouncements; no interpretation forthcoming.

Now I know, you may say, what about the star? Star of wonder, star of night; star with royal beauty bright...The star was almost like an angel’s visit, right, calling them miraculously to journey so many miles to see a Jewish baby born in humble circumstances in Judea?

But, the star, as miraculous as we might imagine it, was not outside the realm of their normal experience. Scholars imagine that the magi could well have been Zoroastrian priests from Babylon, and Babylon was a key center for the study of astrology around the time of the birth of Jesus. They were astrologers. The star was not so miraculous, remember, that *everyone* followed its bright beacon...(I used to wonder about that as a kid? What the heck did the other people think about this star, like a nine-zillion watt bulb, that rested over the stable? How could they ignore it?) No, only these magi recognized it, these astrologers, these students of the stars who, astronomers speculate, may have seen the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus, or a comet, or maybe a supernova. Whatever they saw, noticing astronomical events was a part of their everyday lives...and interpretation was up to them.

Later, one of the wise men has a dream that warns them not to return to King Herod (who remember has some evil things in store for Jesus, because he is threatened by a new King of the Jews), but to go back home by another route. It may strike you that having such a dream is not unlike an angel's visit, but again these Zoroastrian priests, these magi, were known for interpreting dreams. It was a common occurrence for them to explore their dreams for guidance.

So, stars and dreams, as magical as they may appear to us, were normal parts of the lives of the magi...and in both cases, the interpretation was up to them.

Unitarian Universalists, it strikes me, are *epiphanizers* of a sort. We have a focus on this world and seek to increase our awareness and appreciation of its wonders. We believe that meaning is made in the midst of our experience, not handed to us from outside. Realizing that we can't *make* epiphanies happen, we do believe that we can prepare ourselves for their arrival and we welcome, celebrate and proclaim them when they happen.

But we shouldn't leave our discussion of epiphanies without noting that epiphanies are not always pleasant. Sometimes an awareness of *what is* leaves us shaken. The interdependent web of all life, for example, while oftentimes experienced as the powerful feeling of harmony described by Admiral Richard Byrd in the reading, can also be...well, downright frightening. Listen to this passage

from Moby Dick, by Herman Melville

In which Melville's narrator, Ishmael, describes the rather perilous duty of holding onto his friend, Queequeg, by a rope from the whaling ship, while the latter inserts a "blubber-hook" into a captured whale.

...from the ship's steep side, did I hold Queequeg down there in the sea, by what is technically called in the fishery a monkey-rope, attached to a strong strip of canvas belted round his waist.

It was a humorously perilous business for both of us. For, before we proceed further, it must be said that the monkey-rope was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg's broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one. So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down to his wake...

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or

misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death... And yet still further pondering...I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases she or he, one way or other, has this Siamese connection with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die. True, you may say that, by exceeding caution, you may possibly escape these and the multitudinous other evil chances of life. But handle Queequeg's monkey-rope heedfully as I would, sometimes he jerked it so, that I came very near sliding overboard. Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it.

So interdependence, while on the one hand offering us a deep sense of *belonging* in this life, as Byrd described, can also offer a rather frightening sense of insecurity, as Melville described. Our epiphany does not always have to be experienced as joy to be important. Sometimes the epiphany awakens us to changes that we must make, no matter how risky they feel. Sometimes an epiphany sweeps away things we once believed, leaving a deep sense of loss in its wake. Sometimes an epiphany brings with it little or no comfort at all, except for that comfort we feel when we ground ourselves in our very best approximation of what is true.

This is one of the reasons I cringe when I hear folks say that Unitarian Universalists believe whatever they *want*. No...Unitarian Universalists believe what they *must*. If we are *epiphanizers*, leaving ourselves open to awareness, to a new and renewed focus on all that is, then we are open to what those epiphanies bring, not what we *want* those epiphanies to bring. Sometimes, the challenge is figuring out how to respond to the epiphanies we experience.

Poet, T.S. Eliot imagined a very different experience than the one we traditionally imagine in his poem entitled, "[*The Journey of the Magi*](#)." He begins with a picture of the journey itself:

*'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For the journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

And he ends with a picture of a wise man who does not know what to do with his “epiphany;” who cannot face the ramifications of seeing what he has seen:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death,
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

Eliot points out the possible danger of an epiphany: the new awareness we are granted can leave us uncomfortably out of place in our old existence; “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.” We may sometimes feel ourselves caught between two worlds, no longer able to return to our old one because of our new awareness, yet unwilling to enter the new one for fear of what might await us. When we covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, we often hear that as sort of a mamby-pamby, peace-and-love sort of statement that doesn’t say much, but looked at in this way, through the lens of an epiphany, we can see that spiritual growth is not a mamby-pamby matter: it takes courage! We *need* the support and encouragement of one another.

And, let’s face it, epiphanies can be ignored. They can be denied. They can be lost in the clutter of the days.

An epiphany is not a magical voice from outside; it is not a miraculous vision that transports us to another realm; it is not a Divine intervention nor the sort of transcendent experience that lifts us above or beyond the everyday world. It is, rather, a heightened awareness of what we often treat as negligible. A particular focus on what is plainly before us. An epiphany does not make a grand entrance; it is not loud nor flashy; rather epiphanies come, as James Joyce says, in moments that are delicate and evanescent. We must work to preserve them; to record them with care; to respond to them.

Can we afford to ignore them?

Think of an epiphany that may have arisen in your life. It might feel big or small; it may have been recent or long ago. Take a couple deep breaths as you let the feeling of that realization, that awareness, fill you again. Picture it as a light that you hold within you. Find a place near your heart where you can keep that epiphany with you. Imagine where this epiphany might lead you in the future.

Who knows what it may foretell?

Who knows what uncommon life may yet again unfold, if we but give it a chance?

Special Interests
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01/27/08

Opening Words – (#440 Phillip Hewett)

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

In this spirit we gather. In this spirit we pray.

Reading

From a 1986 interview with Noam Chomsky conducted by David Barsamian, excerpted from the book, [Stenographers to Power: Media and Propaganda](#):

The term “national interest” is commonly used as if it’s something good for us...So if a political leader says that “I’m doing this in the national interest,” you’re supposed to feel good because that’s for you. However, if you look closely, it turns out that the national interest is not defined as what’s in the interest of the entire population; it’s what’s in the interests of small, dominant elites who happen to be able to command the resources that enable them to control the state: corporate-based elites. That’s what’s called the “national interest.” And, correspondingly, the term “special interests” is used in a very interesting related way to refer to the general population...

In both the 1980 and 1984 elections, the [Reagan campaign] identified the Democrats as the “party of special interests,” and that’s supposed to be bad, because we’re all against the special interests. But if you look closely and ask who were the special interests, they listed them: women, poor people, workers, young people, old people, ethnic minorities—in fact, the entire population...This is a typical case of the way the framework of thought is consciously manipulated by an effective choice and reshaping of terminology so as to make it difficult to understand what’s happening in the world. A very important function of the ideological institutions—the media, the schools, and so on—is to prevent people from perceiving reality, because if they perceived it they might not like it and might act to change it...

Sermon

Humans, amidst all of our many and varied habits and preoccupations, love to *categorize*. We take the barrage of sensory information that surrounds us every day and we seek to make sense of it; one way that we do that is to separate things into groups based on perceptions of shared qualities, etc. We do this with everything, including people, so that we do not often talk about humanity as a whole but about categories that *separate* humanity into groups: movie stars and mothers and African Americans and Mormons and teenagers and sports fans and vegetarians and...well, the list goes on and on.

For instance, I reside in the categories of white men, married people, fathers, people with Norwegian ancestry, avid readers, disc jockeys (though that may be a stretch), middle-aged people, heterosexuals, liberals, ministers, recovering alcoholics, balding men, Unitarian Universalists (you didn't think I'd leave that out, did you?)...and depending on the perspective of the person categorizing and what categories are important to them, they could come up with very different assumptions about who I am and what I am likely to do.

David Berreby, author of [*Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind*](#), points out that scientists--and I think that I would include philosophers here too, perhaps—"scientists, when they turn their attention to people, usually talk about the entire human race or about the individual human being. Those are two faces of the same idea. Truth about all is truth about each; a theory about the mind or morality applies to everyone who ever lived, as well as to you in particular...They aren't nearly as comfortable with the categories in between one person and all people—the ones that researchers, like everyone else, use when they're off duty, away from their work. Categories like Americans and Iranians, Muslims and Christians, blacks and whites, men and women, southerners and northerners, doctors and lawyers...outgoing people and shy types, smart ones and lucky ones."

Yes, scientists may be uneasy with such groupings, but our everyday world is saturated with them. Mass media, popular culture, and especially politics is in love with the categories that we create that purport to tell us something about the people whom we have allocated to those groups. Soccer moms, NASCAR dads, evangelicals, gays, the middle class, Hispanics...assumptions are made about each of these groups that bind the individuals within the group together so tightly that we talk about them as if the group itself was an individual that will act/vote/think in a particular way. "What should African Americans base their vote on?" the Democratic candidates for President were asked. We talk about the concerns of *families* (as if that narrowed things down in some way). Sometimes we forget even to note that the category is made up of individuals, and we speak of the grouping as a single entity. I've heard this phrase repeated five or six times on CNN recently: "Mexico doesn't believe in the death penalty." *Mexico* doesn't *believe* in the death penalty? Does that mean *Mexicans* don't believe in the death penalty? Does that mean *all* Mexicans? And does that in turn mean that the United States *does believe* in the death penalty. Or, at least the states that allow the death penalty, that *Arizona believes* in the death penalty? And, thus, that *Arizonans believe* in the death penalty? You can see how absurd it can become when we categorize into groups, generalize actions from those categorizations, and assume uniformity of purpose and belief from those generalizations.

Before we jump into the implications of this, I want to take a step back and reflect on how these categories work in the minds of an individual. See if any of this rings true for you:

I think in categories. It is part of, as author David Berreby notes in the subtitle to his book, my *tribal mind*. I understand that, just as everyone else can be categorized based on attributes and choices, I, also, am a member of various groupings that help to define my own choices. However, I rely much more heavily on my assumptions about groups to define *others* than I do to define myself. Group identity is more of a determining factor in what *they* do than it is in what *I* do.

Berreby suggests that I am likely to explain my own actions in terms of circumstances, while I am likely to explain the actions of others in terms of identity. Let me give a quick example:

I am driving over the speed limit and run a red light. Why? I was in a hurry to get to church. I saw that no one was coming. That light is set way too fast. It's been a really stressful week. And if the person in front of me at the previous light had gone when they were supposed to rather than talking on their cell phone, I would have been fine.

But when I see someone else run a light:

It was a teenager, wouldn't you know it, they *always* are driving recklessly.

It was a woman, and you know what they say about women drivers? Well, there's the proof.

It was a fancy car. That figures. So rich they think they own the road.

See what happens? Suddenly the explanation switches from *what* (I did it because of what was happening around me) to *who* (*they* did it because of who they are.)

Even though I understand that I, too, am a member of different groups, I minimize the impact of that group identity on my own behavior and tend to maximize its perceived impact on the behavior of others. The groups that I find myself in by virtue of given or inherited attributes (white, male, middle-aged) have a minimal impact because of my enlightened and aware perspective, I tell myself, while the groups I have *chosen* to be in I have *chosen* precisely because they are *the right groups to belong to*. Heaven only knows how everyone else chose the wacky groups they belong to.

Rudyard Kipling put it this way [in a poem](#) entitled, "We and They":

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And everyone else is They.

Everyone else is they.

And I may say that this categorization and generalization is simply a rather comical part of the human psyche, nurtured by human evolution, and leave it at that...if it were not for the serious ramifications of:

Everyone else is they.

And I may justify my conclusions about *them* with real data, statistics, personal experience. It is shown, after all, that teen drivers have a higher rate of accidents, blah blah blah...but what does that have to do with a *particular* teen driver? It is shown that a particular form of Islam and the way in which it is taught (or distorted, some might say) may fuel terrorist activities, but what does that have to do with a particular Muslim? When it's pointed out that most serial killers are white males, I may feel that to generalize from such information does a great disservice to saying anything about me as an individual. Then, all of a sudden, generalizations are beside the point and each person must be seen as a unique case.

Yet everyone else is they.

I don't believe we will ever eliminate this tendency within ourselves, and that's why we must remain vigilant and aware of the assumptions we carry about *they*. Noam Chomsky, in the reading, talked about the Reagan campaign's manipulation of this tendency, but it is not confined to any one party or any one campaign or any one country or ideology or culture. Those who want to influence you will speak to, consciously or unconsciously, this tendency to categorize and mistrust *the other*. They will pit one group against another to manipulate your thinking.

They want your jobs.

They hate our freedoms.

They are not rational.

They are not religious.

They want to destroy the family.

They want to destroy our democracy.

They are socialists.

They are conservatives.

They are the special interests, only out for themselves, doing what they do because of who they are, and *they* are a threat to the common interest.

There is no doubt that the combined will of the American people is a more powerful force than any government or administration. It also appears that the majority of the American people agree on many points about the kind of society they wish for. It seems a relatively simple proposition to change the country to respond to what meets our interests.

So how do those in power respond to this potential of the people to harness that power? They spread confusion about what our interests really are. They present a landscape of fiercely competing interests that lead us to fiercely protect our own, not from the power of the government and the corporate-elite, but from one another as we imagine that *they* (other people) are the special interests that threaten *our* interests.

There are a couple ways to respond to this. One is by justifying the caricatures we have created about *they* and the groups they represent; by affirming that these assumptions are based on a clear look at reality.

The other, and one that I think may be more prevalent among Unitarian Universalists (if I can generalize for a moment), is to imagine that we don't do this. *We* don't separate people into categories and then generalize based on our assumptions about those groups...*They* do that.

How many of you watch Stephen Colbert, The Colbert Report? He does a parody of a cable news program and, in a running gag, his character is adamant about being "color-blind." "I don't understand

all this talk about racism and all; I'm color-blind. I don't see color." "Are you black?" he asks an African American guest. "I don't know. I'm color-blind. Am I black?"

He does a great job of showing the absurdity of pretending we don't have prejudices, that we don't have preconceptions, that we don't make assumptions about people, that we are somehow, because of our enlightened state, left unscathed by a culture and a history that is awash in racism and misunderstanding. What we deny we cannot change. When we talk about diversity within our congregations, for example, we are talking about a work in progress. And to the extent that we believe that we've already arrived at some nirvana of acceptance and understanding across all boundaries is the extent to which we have fooled ourselves into believing that we are color-blind, sexual orientation-blind, class-blind, education-blind, culture-blind... To be truly welcoming requires work, not just a passive affirmation of welcome. And to be welcoming oftentimes requires specificity, not just a blanket welcome that covers all.

The welcome we used in the past in our service said this:

We welcome diversity of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, age, abilities, and cultural and religious backgrounds.

I like that. It directs our attention to specifically what our invitation is and who it is for. *And*, in a list like this, it is likely that something will be left out, and indeed "political affiliation" was added after we identified this as a diversity that we held rather clumsily and that we wanted to invite and engage. This welcome is not a proclamation that we as a community have somehow elevated ourselves beyond all prejudices and stereotypes to an exalted state that others have not achieved. But this welcome *is* our way of committing ourselves to explicitly engaging the work that it takes to understand one another and to create a community together. And it means taking seriously the cultural and political context we live within.

The rainbow flag that Jay faithfully flies, along with the peace flag, has raised some eyebrows and led to questions about the statement that it makes. "Are we a gay church?" one person asked me. The tone suggested that this would not be a good thing. I wondered later what that meant to the questioner. What would a gay church look like? How would it be similar or different from this one? The implication was that it was somehow unfair to single out this group for particular welcome when there were so many other diverse characteristics that people held.

"We are," I said. "We need to be a gay church when gay people are still routinely victims of discrimination, prejudice, abuse (both physical and verbal), and judged as sinful or sick by many religious communities. It is important that we make a specific welcome in these circumstances." This is why I would welcome our congregation embarking on the Welcoming Congregation program that engages us in an intentional welcome to the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender community.

The other fear embedded in this question was that being "a gay church" would somehow preclude a welcome to all of us, homosexual and heterosexual alike. Again, it was thinking about particular groups of us as competing interests, in which specifically addressing the needs of one would explicitly withhold attention to others. Operating from a position of scarcity rather than abundance. Operating from a feeling of separation rather than unity. But special interests, defined in this way, are human interests.

The strength of our congregations lies in the fact that we believe our shared interests, as human beings, across all diversities, is stronger than any interests that may divide us. But this involves the hard work

of challenging our own assumptions, working to understand one another, and expanding always beyond the comfort of defining our "we" against an murky generalization of "they."

The Opening Words are especially meaningful in this context of our life together as a community.

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

In this spirit we gather. In this spirit we work together. In this spirit we move into the future.

110%
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
02/03/08

Opening Words – (#434 Anonymous)

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations, and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity. May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.

Reading

From a sermon entitled “The Faith We Never Lose,” by Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies (1902-1957):

No one can live by doubt. We can only live by what we do with doubt. When we act—and living is impossible without activity—we are bound to act upon some basis of belief. We must at least believe that life and work are worth continuing. As a matter of practical fact, however, we will find ourselves believing a great deal more. We cannot live alone; we must live in a human society. And so we must trust some other people—trust them when we buy our food or have it cooked, or when we take a journey, or consult a physician, or rely upon our friends.

As we cannot live without what other people do for us, we must trust the reliability of the things they do. We must believe that there is something that holds the human world together, even though it frequently lets us down. We must believe that our own minds are in the main dependable, although they sometimes lead us to the wrong conclusion. If we doubted it—doubted it substantially and practically—our entire lives would come to a standstill.

The truth is that faith is just as inevitable a part of human life as breathing or digestion. We live by faith because there is nothing else we *could* live by. Even what we know—or think we know—is in the end sustained by faith: faith at least in our own perceptions and trust in our own reasoning—both of which can be inadequate and carry us astray. Yet we believe in them. We do because we must. We could not move a single step or do a single thing without this sort of faith...

Why then should we not venture? Why should we not set forth upon a voyage full of purpose even when the storm is at its height? This is the time when we *must* be venturesome. There will be doubt. Unquestionably. There will be fear. There always is. But what of it? This is the time when faith can grow, because this is the time when we can find out all over again what it is that gives us faith. Why not trust the faith we cannot live without, and trust it to the uttermost?

Sermon

It's that time of year again.

What time of year, you ask? It's time to begin working on our pledge campaign, of course. It's time to dream and plan and talk about priorities and mission and budget and resources. It is time to consider what we can *give* to make the dreams that we plan for come true.

And something else happens at this time of year. (In fact, on this very day.) Sports fans will know what I mean, and the rest of you may not have been able to keep yourselves from knowing. It's that ever-special Sunday, so dear to football fans and advertising executives and snack food companies and Fox Network...Superbowl Sunday!

So my temptation is to take all the inspirational talk we hear in sports interviews to motivate you for our pledge campaign; to urge you to give 110 percent; to call you to not only volunteer, but to bring your 'A' game to every task; to step up to the plate in fulfilling our mission and to take it one principle, one source at a time. I want to tell you that we can be winners if we put in a total team effort, and as everyone knows, there is no 'I' in *Unitarian*...no, wait...there is no 'I' in *Universalist*...no, that doesn't work either...there is no 'I' in *congregation*? Dang, there's an 'I' there, too. And one in *community*...Wait, I've got it. There is no 'I' in *pledge*. There is no 'I' in *volunteer*. There is no 'I' in *we*. And *we* would be one. *We* gather together. *We'll* build a land.

But would such a speech encourage you to give all you can?

What is it that inspires generosity toward this community? What strengthens your commitment to this congregation and our mission? What would call you to give "110 percent"? What does it mean to give "110 percent"?

Does it mean, from a mathematical standpoint, that you should completely deplete your resources and then beg, borrow, or steal to give the remaining 10 percent? No, I don't think so. Giving 110 percent, to me, is not so much about numbers as the exhilarating discovery that we may have more to give than we imagined. By "digging deep," to borrow another sports cliché, by committing ourselves to the task at hand, we discover a false bottom within ourselves and a wealth of resources underneath. What we thought was everything we had was not everything we had. In giving, our gifts expand. Like the story of the loaves and the fishes, we find that the baskets are full because we have dared to share.

Why then should we not venture? Why should we not set forth upon a voyage full of purpose?

Well, that's just it. We need to believe that the voyage we share has a purpose. We need to believe that it matters, deeply. We need to remind ourselves that we are bearers of a Living Tradition that existed before us and that we are charged with passing it along to future generations. We are not simply surviving; not simply maintaining a warm refuge for us all to hide from the cold winds of greed and hopelessness that blow through our nation, though Lord knows that is needed sometimes. We are not simply *for us*, but we are for those to come, those who have not yet entered. We are not simply a *comforting* community, but also a *challenging* community, engaged in the work of transformation of each individual and of society as a whole. That is a purpose that matters, that calls for a meaningful commitment.

Why then should we not venture? Why should we not set forth upon a voyage full of purpose?

Because sometimes it's hard to believe that we can do it. We have a purpose that matters, but it is an intimidating mission. It is no small thing to transform the world...how can we be expected to do that? We *say* that we are the ones we've been waiting for. We *say* that we will build a land where justice shall roll down like water and peace like an everflowing stream. But will we? *Can* we? Who are *we*, after all? We're just ordinary people.

The Opening Words today were written by *the* most important person in all of history. (I'll wait while you look.) Anonymous. That's right...anonymous.

Despite our inclination to worship heroes, despite the unarguable impact of certain shining individuals, the great events in history would never have happened without the hard work, dedication and courage of people whose names we will never know. [Elizabeth Blackwell](#) is not a name I knew before this week, but what a story of courage and dedication and what a legacy she left, not to mention all of those unnamed people who encouraged and supported her in her work. Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama may argue back and forth about the importance of Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson in passing the Civil Rights Act, but none of it would have happened without Anonymous.

Lyndon Johnson [said in 1964](#), "There are those who predict that the struggle for full equality in America will be marked by violence and hate; that it will tear at the fabric of our society...But I believe there are other forces, that are stronger because they are armed with truth, which will bring us toward our goal in peace. There are our commitments to morality and to justice...nourished in the hearts of our people. These commitments, carried forward by [people] of good will in every part of this land, will lead this nation toward the great and necessary fulfillment of American freedom."

Commitments to morality and to justice nourished in the hearts of *unnamed* people; carried forward by *unnamed* people of good will.

This last week, I shared a Retreat Center with almost fifty ministers and Religious Education Professionals in our District. I helped lead a workshop looking at the Sources of our Tradition, and how we might think about revising them as we engage the process of reviewing these documents. One of the most interesting suggestions that came out of this workshop was not so much a *rewriting* as a *reordering* of the words in our Second Source.

Take a look at the Second Source with me. Second bullet point on the back of your order of service. Let's read it together:

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

Now the suggestion was to move the word *prophetic* to the beginning of the sentence, so that it reads:

Prophetic words and deeds of people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

See the difference there? It's not *prophetic women and men* or *prophetic people* but *prophetic words and deeds of people*. This gives us all entry. Few of us would describe ourselves as *prophetic*, but each of us may attain to *prophetic words and deeds* in our lives. Extraordinary things are achieved by ordinary people who are committed to a cause; who *believe* in something that has caught them up in its grasp; who give until it hurts, then give until it helps.

Will there be doubt? Unquestionably. Will there be fear? There always is. But what of it? This is the time when faith can grow, because this is the time when we can find out all over again what it is that gives us faith. Why not trust the faith we cannot live without, and trust it to the uttermost?

Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies, in the sermon you heard an excerpt from in the Reading, quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson as saying, "[People] live on the brink of mysteries and harmonies into which they never enter, and with their hand on the door-latch they die outside."

That sounds a little dark...but Davies sees it as a story of opportunity. "We have our hands on the door-latch," he says. "And it's a latch, not a bolt. The door isn't locked. It's just latched. Sometimes the latch lifts to our touch and the door begins to open. Then the storm comes and blows it shut. But we keep our hand still pressing on the latch. Why? Because there is a faith we never lose. Yes, and also because there is always something faith can take hold of."

And I use these reflections about faith, because I realize that pledging is an act of faith. There is no assurance that everything will turn out just as we plan; only a confidence that the mission we work toward is one that matters deeply. There is no guarantee that you will get your way; only an open invitation to take part in finding a way together. This is no game in which we can hope to claim final victory; there is no glory or fame awaiting us at the end; we offer only what poet Marge Piercy calls "the work of the world," "common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing well...has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident." She says that just as a pitcher cries for water to carry, a person cries for work that is real. We offer work that is real.

Many of you are traveling through some difficult and painful times. You have experienced here, from these people, the friend's embrace, the clasp of hands to show we care, the human touch that shows love's faith. You have not only received it, but you have given support to others, even through your own pain. The dedication you all show to the covenant we share and the work we engage ensures that those who come within our reach are kindled by our inner glow, in the words of our first hymn.

I am proud and privileged to walk with you into our future. As we plan the details, let us never lose sight of the great task we have set for ourselves. If we are to build a new land of justice and compassion; if we are to keep the light of liberal religion alive; if we are to nurture understanding across seemingly impossible boundaries; if we are to inspire intentional living in harmony with the interdependent web of all life; then we must be ready to give it our all and more: 110%.

Closing Words (#560 Dorothy Day)

People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one back brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.

Thank God for Evolution
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
02/10/08

Opening Words – (SLT #420 Annie Dillard)

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.

Readings

The two readings this morning are from books by [Thomas Berry](#), a theologian and environmentalist who takes our most profound scientific language and weaves a vibrant story of universe creation that celebrates all "modes of being" including our own human mode of being. The first reading is from "[The Dream of the Earth](#)" written in 1988:

Such a fantastic universe, with its great spiraling galaxies, its supernovas, our solar system, and this privileged planet Earth! All this is held together in the vast curvature of space, poised so precisely in holding all things together in the one embrace and yet so lightly that the creative expansion of the universe might continue on into the future. We ourselves, with our distinctive capacities for reflexive thinking, are the most recent wonder of the universe, a special mode of reflecting this larger curvature of the universe itself. If in recent centuries we have sought to collapse this larger creative curve within the horizons of our own limited being, we must now understand that our own well-being can be achieved only through the well-being of the entire natural world about us. The greater curvature of the universe and of the planet Earth must govern the curvature of our own being. In the coincidence of these three curves lies the way into a creative future.

The Second Reading is from "[The Great Work](#)" written in 1999. The title "The Great Work" refers to humanity's periodic efforts to alter the failed or failing social, political and economic paradigms which govern our behaviors:

In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe.

Sermon

It was 5th grade, I believe, and I was sitting in a science class and the teacher was explaining something about how we all got here. (It is rather indicative of my disinterest in science at the time that I don't remember specifically what she was talking about...could have been human evolution or natural selection; she might have been reaching all the way back to the Big Bang and the birth of the Universe.)

And I don't remember if it was in response to a question or if it just arose spontaneously, but at the end of the no-doubt interesting scientific explanation she was giving, she offered us an alternative viewpoint. "Or," she said in a rather exasperated fashion, "or you can just believe that God slapped it all together in about a week."

I was rather taken aback by this sarcastic dismissal of precisely what I had been raised to believe. And frankly, at an age when I was looking for ways to attack the entire educational system, this seemed like a golden opportunity to bring my parents to my side by exposing the anti-religious bias that I was being exposed to daily.

Well, my parents, while they agreed with me that this was unfair to believers in the Biblical creation story, and while they promoted a distrust of science and what my father called "educated fools," they did not turn this circumstance into a campaign against the teaching of evolution. There was no Cedar Rapids Iowa Monkey Trial in the early 1970's. They didn't talk to the School Board or the teacher, even...Disappointing, isn't it?

No, wisely, they just told me to stay true to what I believed and to weigh *everything* I was being taught against those beliefs.

It is interesting now to look back on this situation. It is, admittedly, a little embarrassing to imagine that my fifth-grade self may gladly have led the charge for the teaching of Intelligent Design, if such a movement had existed at the time. But, while a little embarrassed, I am also full of questions about what was really happening.

What was happening with the teacher, for example, that led her to refer in such an indelicate manner to the creation story from the book of Genesis? Had she been receiving flak from parents? Pressure from the school board? Was she frustrated with a classroom of students that seemed to pay little or no attention to the vast and majestic wonders of the universe that she found so awe-inspiring?

And what about me? It is clear to me, in looking back, that, while I may not have been paying close attention to the details of the science she was teaching, I was sensitive to the fact that the scientific explanation for how things came to be that she was teaching was at odds with the religious explanation of how things came to be that I had been taught. I heard her comment, was almost anticipating her comment, in the context of a foregone conclusion (at age 11!) that science and religion were at war. She--in her frustration, possibly--reenforced my preconceptions by presenting the scientific view and her caricature of the religious view as an either/or proposition. You can believe *this*, or you can believe *that*.

And she may have seen that as an obvious choice: how could one ignore the mind-boggling and ever-unfolding story of existence itself, painstakingly pieced together through human reason and efforts--the wealth of information and speculation gathered, refined, revised, and reenvisioned through the ages as humans strove to understand the universe they lived in--how could one deny this in favor of an old fairy tale that ignored the beautiful intricacies and blithely attributed all of this to a Divinity that simply spoke it all into existence?

And I, too--my fifth-grade self, well-schooled in the doctrines and arguments of my faith--may have seen this as an obvious choice: how could I give up the story of the God who gave us life; who not only set everything in motion but gave it meaning; who imbued the whole of the universe with His Spirit--if scientific explanations sought to eventually explain away God's Presence, then they would also leave us adrift in a universe of meaningless, mechanistic processes, stripped of purpose. We would know *how*, but not *why*.

These two positions can still be heard in many of the debates that are going on today between and amidst educational, religious and scientific communities. While some have written books attempting to convince us that we must indeed choose sides in the struggle of science vs. religion, others have attempted to call off the fight, saying that science and religion each have their own clearly-marked territories of expertise and that the secret lies in a very simple warning: No Trespassing.

Each of these approaches strike me as, if not mistaken, at least a bit unrealistic. Neither science nor religion are showing any indication of disappearing soon. And while we humans have a capability of compartmentalizing certain aspects of our lives, I would argue that a healthy religion encourages an integration of all aspects of our lives to create a meaningful existence.

But what, you may ask, are the alternatives? Isn't it obvious that science and religion (or at least most forms of religion) are at odds? Religion, after all, seeks to build upon immutable truths; science is always on the move, striving to refute, revise and refine even the most certain of its results. Wouldn't science be stifled by an implicit responsibility toward religion? (Hasn't it been so stifled throughout history?) And isn't it unfair to attempt to shoehorn ancient religious stories into the uncomfortable footwear of modern scientific understanding?

It should be noted that there are a number of other books coming out now that take the position that there really is no conflict between science and religion. Rather, they say, science informs religion and religion completes science. These two disciplines work together to provide meaning and purpose to our lives.

I took the title of this sermon from Michael Dowd's new book, [Thank God for Evolution](#). The subtitle is "How the Marriage of Science and Religion Can Transform Your Life and Our World." Dowd calls he and his wife, Connie Barlow, "evolutionary evangelists," and they travel the country doing just that: evolutionary evangelism. They are convinced, and the book describes, explains and illustrates *why* they are convinced, that the teaching of evolution is not only *compatible* with religion, but *instrumental* in a deep and wide understanding of religious traditions.

They are not alone. Francisco J. Ayala, Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, has written [Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion](#). Dr. Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project and one of the world's leading scientists, has written [The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief](#). Thomas Berry, who you heard in the Reading, was a historian of world religions and cultures who became also a historian of the Earth and its evolutionary processes. He writes about nature from a decidedly religious viewpoint, but also one that is deep in scientific understanding.

As I read through some of the work of all of these writers, I was reminded of a story that Michael Dowd tells in his book. When he and his wife, Connie, adopted their mobile lifestyle, spreading the good news of evolutionary evangelism, they adorned their van with a Darwin fish *and* a Jesus fish...*kissing*. "Many passersby flash a smile when they see it," Dowd writes, "although disapproving responses are not uncommon. A retired biology professor in Lawrence, Kansas, took one look at the decals and laughed, 'Oh great! Now [you'll tick] everyone off.'"

There was a part of me that agreed with that professor as I read these books. Many scientists will bristle at the attempted justifications of religious truth in scientific language, and many religious believers will be angered by the radical reinterpretation of religious stories to correspond with scientific truths.

There is another sense in which I applaud their challenge to us all...and it *is* a challenge. They are not simply calling for us to tolerate one another, across the boundaries we have erected between science and religion. They are asking us to work on integrating the two to create something new...something new and necessary.

All of these authors are clear in their call for science and religion to come together, not only because they *can*, but because they *must*. If we are to truly understand how to best respond to the fact of our interdependence with all of life (indeed, our utter dependence on this web of life), then we must understand not only *how* to do it, they say, but it must *matter* to us at the most profound level. Our religion must quickly evolve out of a human-centered approach to what might be called a *web-sensitive* approach.

Let me return for just a few moments before we close to my story...(because this "web of all life" stuff is all well and good, but really it's all about *me*, right?)

So, on the following day in my fifth grade class...Ok, Ok, I'll fast forward a bit.

As I grew into my teen years and young adulthood, while my religious beliefs were in flux, I held onto a deep suspicion of science. I was convinced that the great truths were found, not within facts, but within the less exacting revelations of art, literature, music, painting. I reluctantly allowed some of the "softer sciences" in, like psychology and philosophy, but only because they seemed safely devoid of facts, too. I would have agreed with Albert Camus that we learn more about ourselves and the world from our own perceptions of the heavens than from a scientific explanation of what makes a star.

Ironically, it wasn't until I decided to study for the ministry that I had something of a "born-again" experience in relation to science. I was sitting in my Pima Community College Anthropology class learning about the footprints that were found at Laetoli. These footprints were something like 3.6 million years old, left by evolutionary ancestors of ours and the earliest evidence for walking upright. I can't say exactly what it was...maybe my dawning understanding of the vastness of time, as I thought about 3.6 million years and then looked up at the timeline of life on earth to see the tiny sliver of time in which hominids of any kind had existed at all. Maybe it was the enticing speculation about who had left these footprints, two or three sets, one individual apparently burdened on one side as that foot sank deeper (was it a female carrying a child on her hip as they fled the volcano, the ash of which helped to preserve their footprints for some 3 million years?) Maybe it was the idea of ancestors who were *not quite* human. Maybe it was those footprints of our ancestors left alongside the prints of birds and mammals, and even the prints of raindrops, and the realization that struck so much deeper than a simple intellectual assent that *we are all related! We, all of life, we are family!*

Whatever it was, I felt shaken, awestruck, *changed*. I knew that I had learned something--and *received* it—in such a way that I would not be able to ignore or deny it. I knew also that I had lost something: the belief in a God that cared most about humans; the idea that meaning came from above or beyond; so many things that I thought were certain....all gone. I knew that the realization I had experienced through the image of those long ago ancestors would stay with me, and that I would be forced to grapple with it as I sought to create meaning in my own life, and to encourage the creation of meaning and purpose in the lives of others. I was scared, and I was grateful at the same time. I felt lost and found simultaneously.

Can science and religion come together to the benefit of both? Maybe. Michael Dowd quotes philosopher [Alfred North Whitehead as saying](#): "Religion will not regain its old power until it faces change in the same spirit as does science." If that is the case, Unitarian Universalism may well be at the forefront of a religious awakening.

"In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth," says Thomas Berry. "In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity." May we fulfill our role with compassion and understanding; may we learn to respond to our interdependence with dignity; and may we pay attention, always, so that this fantastic universe need not play to an empty house.

“Peace, Peace,” When There Is No Peace
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
02/17/08

Opening Words – (SLT #577 Mohandas K. Gandhi)

If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead in nonviolent action, the winter of despair can, in the twinkling of an eye, be turned into the summer of hope.

It is possible to live in peace.

Nonviolence is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.

It is possible to live in peace.

Nonviolence, which is a quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain. It is a plant of slow growth, growing imperceptibly, but surely.

It is possible to live in peace.

If a single person achieves the highest kind of love it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.

It is possible to live in peace.

If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.

It is possible to live in peace.

The future depends on what we do in the present.

It is possible to live in peace.

Sermon

Another sermon about peace. Another service devoted to a pursuit of that which seems to elude this violent, troubled world. Another prayer that this winter of despair be turned into a summer of hope. Another plea for a renewed commitment to peacemaking, peace building, peace creating peace peACE PEACE!...when there is no peace.

The Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah, said in the 7th century BCE, (Jer. 6:13-14):

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

“The Roman Empire is often celebrated for what is referred to as the Pax Romana, or the Roman peace—a period of more than two hundred years” beginning in about 27 BCE. The Roman peace? David Korten points out in his book, *The Great Turning*, that while there was no naval battle during these two hundred years in the portion of the world ruled by Rome, this “Pax Romana” was scarcely peaceful. Augustus Caesar continued his military expeditions to conquer new territories. Tiberius ended his reign in a paranoid fit of random and ferocious torture and executions, including those of his own generals and members of the Senate. The infamous Caligula was legendary for his cruelty, extravagance, debauchery, and despotism. He executed his own military commanders and closest supporters and confiscated the estates of nobles to support his own lavish lifestyle. Emperor Claudius, himself the target of numerous assassination attempts, invaded and conquered Britain, as well as territories in North Africa and Asia, and for a time expelled Jews from Rome. Nero mercilessly persecuted Christians, and even executed his mother and his first wife. Similar patterns prevailed during the reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. The Roman peace? “Overall,” writes Korten in emphatic understatement, “it is a curious idea of peace” (119). While recognizing some of the positive contributions the Roman Empire made to human progress, he says, “Those who put forward the Roman Empire as a model for world peace and governance...are on weak ground. Its accomplishments came at a cost in lives, liberty, and corruption that is arguably unsurpassed in the human experience” (120).

They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

But if Pax Romana was built on weak ground, we should keep in mind that our present United States foreign policy is built on precisely this same weak ground. In a report created by a group called “Project for a New Century,” such recognizable names as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Jeb Bush, hearkening back to the Roman ideal, called for a “Pax Americana,” the American peace.

This is from the conclusion of [their 90-page report](#):

“Keeping the American peace requires the U.S. military to undertake a broad array of missions today and rise to very different challenges tomorrow, but there can be no retreat from these missions without compromising American leadership and the benevolent order it secures...Global leadership is not something exercised at our leisure, when the mood strikes us or when our core national interests are directly threatened: then it is already too late. Rather, it is a choice whether or not to maintain American military preeminence, to secure American geopolitical leadership, and to preserve the American peace.”

Realizing that the absolutely free reign of the U.S. Military to strike at will, to lead preemptive attacks, and to exercise unprecedented dominance over the world may be a hard sell to the American public, they allowed that this “transformation” could be more easily achieved by—and I quote--“some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.” This report was published in 2000.

Pax Americana. The American peace.

They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

The recent tragedy of the shooting at Northern Illinois University cannot help but raise the ghosts of Columbine. At that time, then-President Clinton issued a statement, [saying](#):

"We also have to take this moment, once again, to hammer home to all the children of America that violence is wrong," he said. "Parents should take this moment to ask what else they can do to shield our children from violent images and experiences that warp young perceptions and obscure the consequences of violence, to show our children, by the power of our own example, how to resolve conflicts peacefully."

Michael Moore points out in his movie, "Bowling for Columbine," that the day of the Columbine shooting was also the "largest one day bombing by the U.S. in the Kosovo war." The residential part of a village in Serbia was bombed, with targets including a hospital and a primary school. President Clinton said in a news conference one hour before the Columbine shooting that "the U.S. wanted to minimize harm to innocent people," even while the bombs were dropping.

They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

[President Bush said in 2006](#), "I don't see how you can be a partner in peace if you advocate the destruction of a country as part of your platform. And I know you can't be a partner in peace...if your party has got an armed wing...it means you're not a partner in peace. And we're interested in peace."

You can't be a partner in our peace if you prepare for war. You can't be a partner in our peace which is based on war if you make war. Only we can make the war, which protects our peace. We fight them over there so we don't have to fight them here. That would interfere with the peace, which is supported by war, which is fought over there so it's not over here.

[President Bush said](#), "Bring 'em on." [John McCain sings](#) "Bomb Iran" to a Beach Boys tune. Suddenly there's talk of being in Iraq for 100 years or more. And we're interested in peace.

They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

I saw the pictures of the displaced Iraqi families on [Bill Moyers Journal this past Friday](#), those who had fled to neighboring Jordan but had not, unfortunately, escaped without scars; deep scars, brutal treatment, unimaginable devastation. Rapes and stabbings and mutilation and betrayal. Photographer Lori Grinker said of the people she had met and photographed, "...they're followed by the war now and will be forever...the war doesn't leave them...they're living it. And they're living it all the time. And these people will be living it forever." We can talk about winning the peace. We can talk about partners in peace. We can say whatever we want about peace, but there is no peace.

And here's what happens: I get so frustrated and angered by the insane use of violence to achieve peace; the talk of war as a last resort with the implication that *violence is the only option that really works*; the hypocritical concern about the military buildup of other nations as we starve our social programs to feed ours; that I want to strike out, strike back, hurt someone or something. I want peace, peace, but there is no peace. Singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn captures this mood in his song:

[If I Had a Rocket Launcher](#)

...here comes the helicopter -- second time today
everybody scatters and hopes it goes away
how many kids they've murdered only god can say

if i had a rocket launcher...i'd make somebody pay.

i don't believe in guarded borders and i don't believe in hate
i don't believe in generals or their stinking torture states
and when i talk with the survivors of things too sickening to relate
if i had a rocket launcher...i would retaliate

i want to raise every voice -- at least i've got to try.
every time i think about it water rises to my eyes.
situation desperate echoes of the victims cry
if i had a rocket launcher...[somebody] would die.

A tragic irony of the human condition is that we can want peace so badly that we would kill for it. We actually believe in a peace that rests on war. We think we can keep it over there so it doesn't come over here. We are offended when it falls on *our* country. We are shocked when it erupts in *our* neighborhood. We are devastated when it touches our family...We have been told it can be removed from us, like the trash that is miraculously whisked away never to be seen again. We foolishly rely on leaders to protect us from it; we believe them when they say they want to "win the peace;" we are shocked and shocked again, until finally we are immune to another shooting, another troubled young man, another tragedy...and all the while, wishing for peace, peace, we have no peace within.

They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

One of the current Study Action Issues put forth by the Commission on Social Witness of the Unitarian Universalist Association is Peacemaking. The question is put forth to congregations like this:

Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?

Peacemaking. This puts us back in touch with what we can do, and *how* we can go about it: seeking just peace through nonviolent means. It implies a commitment that says, we have given up on war as a last resort or a first resort, and most especially given up on violence as a means of achieving peace.

And it also reminds me that I have to start with myself.

There is the joke about the Buddhist and the hot dog vendor. "Make me one with everything," the Buddhist says. Wait...there's more. The hot dog vendor loads up the bun with all the condiments, gives it to the Buddhist and the Buddhist hands him a twenty. After a few seconds, the Buddhist asks, "Don't I get some change?" "Ah," says the hot dog vendor, "change must come from within."

"Nonviolence," says Gandhi in our Opening Words, "is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being."

Change must come from within. Peace must come from within.

If you want to have peace you've got to make peace,
If you want to know peace you've got to grow peace,
If you want to see peace you've got to be peace...

There is no way to peace, peace is the way.

It is possible to live in peace.

Two days before the shooting at Northern Illinois University, a 14-year old boy, Brandon, shot a 15-year old boy, Lawrence, in Oxnard, CA. The boy who had been shot was declared brain-dead and taken off a ventilator on Thursday. This is an excerpt from a letter to the editor written by my colleague who serves the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura, The Rev. Jan Christian:

We are left with so many questions. The questions we ask matter, even when the answers elude us. Real justice for Brandon and for our community will not come by asking what laws were broken and what the punishment should be. Real justice and real safety will come from asking about the brokenness in Brandon and in our families and in our communities and about what can be done to repair the brokenness and to heal the human family.

People in our congregation have close ties to both boys. The larger truth is that we all have ties to both boys. We are all connected. What hurts one ultimately hurts all. We learned that in new and awful ways this last week. But there is hope, because it is also true that what heals one helps heal all. May each of us have the courage to choose healing and to insist that our institutions choose healing as well.

It is possible to live in peace.

Closing Words (SLT #578, Olympia Brown)

We can never make the world safe by fighting. Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share the wealth of the world. You may say this is impracticable, far away, can never be accomplished, but it is the work we are appointed to do. Sometime, somehow, somewhere, we must ever teach this great lesson.

Akhenaten: Child of the Sun
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
03/02/08

Opening Words – (Akhenaten - paraphrased)

O fool, fool, the pains which you take to hide what you are, are far more than the pains it would take to make you what you want to be. And the children of wisdom shall mock your cunning when, in the midst of your security, your disguise is stripped off and the finger of derision is pointing right at you.

Anthem

“*Lord, How Great You Are! (Psalm 104)*” by Steven Pearson

Joyful Noise Singers

Lord, how great You are!
You are clothed in splendor and majesty!
Lord, how great You are!
You are clothed in splendor and majesty!

1. You stretch forth the canopy on high!
(Your) chambers, Lord, are vaulted in the sky.
The clouds are made Your chariots, O Lord.
The winds and lightning bear Your Word!

2. (The)firmament of earth was set by Thee,
covered by the garment of the sea.
But, then, at Thy rebuke and Thy command:
the waters fled, giving forth dry land!

3. Many are the wondrous works we see:
All that is, it has been made by Thee!
Your Spirit sent, all life is given birth;
Your breath withdrawn, all returns to earth!

4. Lord, Your glory will forever be!
May we ever sing our praise to Thee.
And may our meditations e'er be true,
as our lives rejoice in You!

Lord, how great You are!
You are clothed in splendor and majesty!
Lord, how great You are
throughout all eternity!

Sermon

Who was the very first Unitarian?

Ok, I may have given it away by the title of the sermon.

But *an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh? Really? Why Akhenaten?*

First of all, if I answer that Akhenaten is the first Unitarian in recorded history, we should realize that, like oh so many answers, this is only a provisional answer. A possible answer. A partial answer...and one that requires some explanation.

First: what do we mean by *Unitarian*?

If Unitarianism, historically speaking, has something to do with believing in the “one-ness” of all, Akhenaten may well qualify as, while not a Unitarian in any sort of strict sense, certainly heading in that direction.

Margaret Dulles Edwards made Akhenaten known to a whole generation of Unitarian children by writing a book published by Beacon Press in 1939 entitled, *Child of the Sun: A Pharaoh of Egypt*. In it, she imagines Akhenaten’s first announcement of this “new religion” amidst the celebration of his twentieth birthday.

Akhenaten, who was still Amenhotep IV at the time, rises and says to the chief priests who have gathered:

“You speak of gods. Let me never hear that word again. You have brought here the images of your gods. Let me never see their faces again...there is but one God, and that God is the life-giving spirit of the sun. Aten is his name, and he is life and power and love. He dawns glorious in the morning and fills every land with his beauty. He has made the world and all [the creatures within it]. Aten binds them all with his love.

“There is no other god but this God. Away with all your images and symbols. They must be destroyed. Strike their names from every temple. There will be but one sign of our worship—the simple circle of the sun whose rays reach down like loving hands with gifts for all people. This is our God—this is the God of the whole world...”

Now, how do you think that went over?

While he changed his name [from Amenhotep IV](#) (the name Amenhotep paying tribute to the Egyptian god, Amen) to Akhenaten (which means “He Who Is Of Service to Aten.”), his radical theological proposal earned him a name among many that was quite familiar to both our Unitarian and Universalist forebears: *Heretic*. His revelation had ramifications well beyond the name and number of deities that were worshipped.

For one thing, the style of worship was changed. Whereas people had traditionally worshipped outside the temples while the priests were the only ones allowed inside, performing their priestly functions in the dark, mysterious rooms within, Akhenaten believed that all people should worship Aten out in the open, together, under the sun’s life-giving rays. And at these services, [the Hymn of Aten](#), presumably written by Akhenaten, might have been read or sung. Here is a small excerpt:

You arise beautiful in the horizon of the heavens
Oh living Aten who creates life...

When you rise from the horizon the earth grows bright;
You shine as the Aten in the sky and drive away the darkness;
When your rays gleam forth, the whole of Egypt is festive.
People wake and stand on their feet
For you have lifted them up.
They wash their limbs and take up their clothes and dress;
They raise their arms to you in adoration.

When this hymn was discovered in the tomb of Ay, Akhenaten's chief courtier and later king of Egypt, Biblical scholars noticed the similarity to Psalm 104, written much later, which you heard a version of in the Anthem today. Not only were there similar themes, and the unique comparison of the Hebrew God to the sun that is found nowhere else in Hebrew Scripture, but some lines seemed to be Hebrew translations directly from the Egyptian poem. Scholars are still scratching their heads over how exactly to trace this apparent connection between the two.

And that is only one of the things scholars scratch their heads over when it comes to Akhenaten.

What was it, for instance, that led Akhenaten to establish this new religion; to bravely (many say recklessly) challenge the religious institutions that represented the beliefs of virtually the whole population; to move the capital city from Thebes to Akhetaten ("The Horizon of the Sun God")? Was it, simply, a revelation, a realization that he could not help but proclaim?

Scholars point out that Egypt was very stable and prosperous in the time that Akhenaten was growing up. In this type of secure environment, they say, people are more likely to engage in theological exploration. Akhenaten had the luxury, one might say, of religious innovation.

Others point out that his actions had political ramifications. By adopting the new religion, Akhenaten usurped the power of the priests who had acted as mediators between the people and their gods. He established himself as the primary servant of Aten, *the* mediator between the people and their god, and thus the focus of not only political power but religious power, too.

Still others believe that Akhenaten's very famous wife, Nefertiti, might have been the inspiration behind this religion of Aten, as it seems that she played a very prominent part in the worship services as well as Akhenaten's rule as a whole.

Indeed, there are many representations of Nefertiti in this period, some alone and some with Akhenaten. And the representations of this time are unique in and of themselves, as there are scenes of the Pharaoh's life that would have been considered far too intimate and "normal" in previous times: for example, a tender scene of Akhenaten and Nefertiti playing with and holding their small children. Not quite the image of the untouchable Pharaoh.

And scholars believe that Akhenaten asked the court artists to portray him more realistically, rather than idealistically as Pharaohs had been portrayed in the past.

Which leads to another mystery: Akhenaten's unusual appearance. He has an elongated face and jaw, long, spindly fingers, wide hips, a protruding belly, and breasts. In an article published in 1995, A. Burridge suggested that Akhenaten may have suffered from Marfan's syndrome, which is associated

with “a sunken chest, long curved spider-like fingers, a high curved or slightly cleft palate, among other symptoms. Marfan's sufferers tend towards being taller than average, with a long, thin face, and elongated skull, overgrown ribs, a funnel or pigeon chest, and larger pelvis, with enlarged thighs and spindly calves. Marfan's syndrome is a dominant characteristic, and sufferers have a 50% chance of passing it on to their children. All of these symptoms appear in depictions of Akhenaten and of his children. It is interesting that recent CT scans of TutanKHAMun, quite possibly a son of Akhenaten, report a cleft palate and a longer head than normal.

Yet other scholars look not to the medical world for an explanation of how Akhenaten is portrayed, but back to the religious world. Aten, the Sun God, is portrayed as male *and* female in the role of Creator and Sustainer of all. Akhenaten, they say, in identifying with Aten, wanted to see himself portrayed with androgynous characteristics to more closely match the deity he served, and to have himself associated with that deity by the people.

But nobody knows for sure.

And the questions don't stop there: In the twelfth year of their reign, Nefertiti disappears, drops out of the record completely, no more pictures of her, no more mentions of her...what happened? Possibly, she died in childbirth. Possibly, she was caught being “indiscreet” and Akhenaten had her removed. Others propose that, as the tide turned against Akhenaten's religion and Akhenaten himself may have compromised, she remained faithful to Aten and cloistered herself away among the faithful.

So much of Akhenaten's life seems to inspire wild speculation. Sigmund Freud suggested that Moses may have learned about monotheism from Akhenaten. Others propose the possibility that Akhenaten and Moses were one and the same! There is some evidence that Akhenaten had an intimate relationship with the male co-ruler he selected after Nefertiti's departure. It is possible he later married one or more of his daughters (which apparently was not unheard of for Pharaohs). And there is the possibility that Tutankhamen, the King Tut of Steve Martin fame, is Akhenaten's son.

For those who love the mystery in history, there is plenty to explore in the story of Akhenaten...but what significance does it have for us today? How do we interpret the enticing clues we have? How do we make a consistent story out of the variety of possible interpretations? And is it worth the effort?

While there is much I respect in the story of Akhenaten, I am aware that many in Egypt saw him as an utter failure. His reign was, purportedly, a disaster for the Egyptian empire, as he paid little attention to using military might in protecting interests on the outer edges of the kingdom. There is archaeological evidence to suggest that many people kept representations of the forbidden gods in their homes even during Akhenaten's time, and they quickly reverted back to their old habits of worship after his death. His name, along with that of Tutankhamen (originally TutanKHATen), was omitted from the list of kings inscribed on the walls of Apidos. There was a concerted effort to simply write him out of history.

Akhenaten may have said, as he shared with Nefertiti the heady power of ruling a nation and sought to transform the religion of a people toward what he knew in his heart was true: “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”

But the results of his efforts seemed to end up like the great statue of Ozymandias:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Unless...unless, perhaps, there is something that you and I can carry forward.

I don't want to romanticize or falsify, but I think, if we move carefully, there is something here for us. The book, *Child of the Sun*, unashamedly views Akhenaten as a liberal religious hero, but also has this note:

*Adults using this book with children should read carefully the author's comments on pages 109-111 (where she documents the sources used and details what she added) and keep in mind the controversial nature of **any** interpretation of Akhenaten at the present time. Therefore teach this book as one interpretation, not as final truth.*

That is the sort of intentional openness to context and changing interpretation and further revelation that makes me proud to be a Unitarian Universalist.

So with that in mind, let me tell you what impresses *me* at this time about the story of Akhenaten from what I know of it.

I've called Akhenaten the first Unitarian. He's been called the first monotheist. Most impressive, perhaps, he's been called the first *individual*. Amidst the lock-step of Egyptian empire, Akhenaten truly dared to be different. I think that he could not be otherwise. He saw the folly of trying to be other than who he was. Whatever the cost of being himself, it was less than the cost of living a lie.

I choose to believe that, whatever other motivations there might have been, Akhenaten and Nefertiti were propelled by a sincere belief in the religion they espoused. I do see it as a historic touchstone for our liberal religious tradition as they literally brought worship out into the light of day and made it accessible to all. What, after all, is more accessible than the sun itself?

And I think Akhenaten's call for a naturalistic foundation for religion is echoing today, as we seek to ground our spiritual understanding in our relationship with the interdependent web of all life and to honor the source of life.

Think of what you heard from the Hymn of Aten. Think of what the Joyful Noise Singers sang from Psalm 104. Now listen to this, written by contemporary cosmologist [Brian Swimme](#), and receive it if you choose as a Psalm, a Hymn, a song in the tradition of Akhenaten:

"Ninety-three million miles the light has to come, and already we're being warmed up by it...It's just this vast fire that enables all of life to take place here...Every second, four million tons of the sun is being transformed into this light...and if it weren't for that ongoing bestowal of energy, we wouldn't have any life on earth. So one way to think about the sun, every time you see it at dawn, is to think of it as an act of cosmic generosity. It's this vast giveaway of energy that enables us to survive, enables all of life to thrive. We are surfing around the source of ongoing cosmic generosity."

And in that, I like to believe that I hear the voices of Akhenaten and Nefertiti over the expanse of more than 3,000 years, praising Aten.

Closing Words (Akhenaten)

O living Aten, who creates life... . You stretch forth the canopy on high! (Your) chambers, Lord, are vaulted in the sky...we stand as grateful recipients of your cosmic generosity.

Who Do You Say That I Am?
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
03/23/08

Opening Words – (Responsive Reading #623, Mark 16)

On the first day of the week, at early dawn they came to the tomb, saying:

Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?

They looked up and saw that the stone had already been rolled back, and on the right they saw a young man. They were alarmed. But the man said to them:

Why do you seek the living among the dead?

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing, for they were afraid?

Reading

From *Jesus for the Non-Religious* by John Shelby Spong, pg. 123

We need to trace the Easter story developmentally. It was first, above all else, an ecstatic experience. Second, that ecstatic experience became the subject of exclamation, an ecstatic cry without details. Only in the third stage does the exclamation get turned into an explanatory narrative. In the Easter moment the ecstatic experience was the dawning realization that death could not bind the God presence the disciples had met in Jesus of Nazareth. The ejaculatory exclamation was, “Death no longer has dominion over him” (Romans 6:9)—that is, death cannot contain him. The explanation then evolved into the narrative of an empty tomb, a grave and grave clothes, all symbols of death that were unable to contain or to bind Jesus.

One should note that the later stories of Easter were all developed from Mark’s original narrative, in which no one sees the risen Christ. In Mark’s gospel the women followers simply stare into a tomb that has not been able to contain him. By the time we get to John’s account, some thirty years later, Thomas seeks to feel the nail prints. That is quite a journey.

“Death cannot contain him” is finally a negative claim. There is also a positive exclamation, however. The positive claim is that the disciples’ eyes have been opened so that they can say, “I have seen the Lord.” It is the explanatory side of this positive explanation that finally produces accounts of sightings of Jesus. To see him “raised,” however, does not necessarily mean to feel his flesh; it means to embrace his meaning.

Sermon

Jesus asked some very provocative questions in the records of his life that are included in the Gospels. In the tradition of great spiritual teachers, he would reflect questions back to the questioners in ways that compelled *them* to offer the answers, further illuminating their own lives in the process.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? (Matthew 7:3, NRSV)

Telling the story of the Good Samaritan and the hypocritical religious leaders, he ended with a question: *Which of these was a neighbor?* (Luke 10:36)

Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing, he asked in the Sermon on the Mount. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? (Matthew 6:25b, 27)

And he once asked his disciples a very simple question that still rings out over 2000 years, and maybe never moreso than on Easter:

Who do you say that I am? (Mark 8:29)

Let me set the scene here by reading you the whole passage:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Phillipi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him (Mark 8:27-30).

Like today, there was obviously a great variety of opinion about who Jesus was, even at the time when he stood right before the people; when they could reach out and touch him. And even if we assume that Peter got it right in saying that Jesus was the Messiah—and, indeed, in the gospel of Matthew, unlike Mark, Jesus praises Peter, saying:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17).

--But even if we allow that Peter may have gotten it right, we have to know that "Messiah" could be interpreted in many different ways also, and that the meaning of that word in the Jewish tradition has often been lost in the developing understanding of who Jesus is in the Christian tradition.

And if that isn't all mysterious enough regarding the identity of Jesus, look at how this passage ends: Jesus doesn't say, "Yes, you're right, go and tell everyone, proclaim the coming of the Messiah!" No, in both Mark and Matthew he ends with a stern warning to tell no one.

This is very different than the picture of Jesus in the gospel of John, who, far from being secretive about his identity, is always proclaiming who he is:

I am the bread of life (John 6:35).

I am the light of the world (John 8:12).

I am the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

In fact, the whole preaching style of Jesus in the Gospel of John is quite dissimilar to that found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Is this the same man?

And think of the many portraits of Jesus that have arisen since the Gospels. Think of the religious strife that has ensued throughout the centuries in the attempt to establish orthodox doctrine regarding Jesus. Think of the intense, wide-ranging, and ongoing scholarly debate that engages the question: Who do you

say that I am? Think of the millions, *billions*, of sheets of paper that have been covered with attempts to answer that question. Look at the number of titles that have come out just in the last few years:

Marcus Borg talks about *The Jesus We Never Knew*.

John Shelby Spong offers us a *Jesus for the Non-Religious*.

Popular writer, Anne Rice, known for her vampire novels, is now embarked on a multi-volume life of Jesus: *Christ the Lord*.

In a brand new title, Deepak Chopra introduces us to *The Third Jesus*. There is the historical Jesus, he says. There is the institutional Jesus, the Jesus of faith who is found within Christian churches. But there is a third Jesus, he says. A cosmic teacher that lives beyond the boundaries of any one religion and calls us not to believe certain things about God, but to experience God.

I find the wealth of interpretations exciting, enriching, but also somewhat confusing as I consider Jesus' question: Who do you say that I am?

It is interesting to me that, in the passage from Mark, some were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist. I have just recently been reading about the religious community of Mandaeans, followers of John the Baptist, in Iraq, numbered at some 60,000 before the United States occupation began and now dwindled to somewhere around 5,000. They are routinely persecuted by other religious factions within Iraq and, as conversion to their faith is not recognized--one must be born into the Mandaean tradition--they are in real danger of extinction. They practice the water baptism that John practiced, not once only as Christians do but numerous times throughout their lives. They believe that John was the prophet of Truth and that Jesus may indeed have distorted his message and led people away from the truth.

Indeed, as we look at the Gospels, we find many mysteries surrounding the relationship of John the Baptist and Jesus. John baptizes Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (which raises questions for those who consider Jesus "sinless"); he purportedly recognizes Jesus as Messiah and superior to himself, the one for whom he has been waiting, yet much later, from prison, he sends his followers to Jesus to ask: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" Jesus, never one for direct answers it seems, says "*Go and tell John what you see me doing.*" In other words, "Who do you say that I am?"

Biblical scholar and author, John Shelby Spong believes that Jesus had indeed been a disciple of John. As this was widely known, and as John's movement had many followers, the Gospel writers had to figure out a way to include John the Baptist in their accounts, but to make him subordinate to Jesus and, indeed, to have him be one of the first to proclaim Jesus as Messiah. They sought to pull John's followers over to this new Jesus movement.

Could the modern-day Mandaeans of Iraq be children of this original John the Baptist movement? Well, scholars seem to think that they owe more of their beliefs to later Gnostic groups than to the original John the Baptist, but nevertheless they are examples of the religious diversity that existed at the time and continues to this day.

A wide diversity of beliefs and perceptions.

We would like to believe that the closer we get to the time and place in which Jesus existed that it will be easier to answer the question: Who do you say that I am? The search for the historical Jesus is part of that attempt. Others say the historical Jesus is unimportant: it is the Christ of faith that matters. Still others reconstruct Jesus in various fashions, seizing upon particular aspects of his ministry, making him a socialist, a Buddhist teacher, a women's rights advocate...(It has been pointed out that the Jesus that emerges from these portraits, mysteriously enough, always agrees completely with the authors who write them.) Still others write him off as something of a religious nut who thought he was God and proclaimed the imminent end of the world.

Who do you say that I am?

Why do I think this question matters?

Understand that, just as there was a diversity of opinion about Jesus in his own time, I fully understand that there is a diversity of opinion within this congregation. Those of you who for whom the life and teachings of Jesus are important in your own personal journeys have developed a variety of interpretations. And there are those for whom questions about Jesus are simply not relevant. You would not declare Christianity to be a source for your own personal understanding of life and your place in it, nor do you particularly care about Jesus' teachings, except as they may overlap with the wise counsel of many spiritual and secular teachers throughout history. So why this sermon?

A couple reasons:

First, I think that we should be aware of the fact that the answer to this question about the identity of Jesus was instrumental in the history of both Unitarianism and Universalism.

Rev. William Ellery Channing, in his sermon entitled "[Unitarian Christianity](#)," in which he answered the critics within the Congregationalist church of the liberal theology he espoused, devoted a section of the sermon to his view of Jesus. Rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, he also rejected the "orthodox" view captured in creedal statements that Jesus was of two natures, fully human and fully divine.

We believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. We complain of the doctrine of the Trinity, that, not satisfied with making God three beings, it makes; Jesus Christ two beings, and thus introduces infinite confusion into our conceptions of his character. This corruption of Christianity, alike repugnant to common sense and to the general strain of Scripture, is a remarkable proof of the power of a false philosophy in disfiguring the simple truth of Jesus.

Later on in the sermon, he says:

The greatness of the work of Jesus, the spirit with which he executed it, and the sufferings which he bore for our salvation, we feel to be strong claims on our gratitude and veneration. We see in nature no beauty to be compared with the loveliness of his character, nor do we find on earth a benefactor to whom we owe an equal debt. We read his history with delight, and learn from it the perfection of our nature. We are particularly touched by his death, which was endured for our redemption, and by that strength of charity which triumphed over his pains. His resurrection is the foundation of our hope of immortality.

The Unitarian Christianity that Channing taught is no longer an exhaustive description of the theological orientation of Unitarian Universalism as a whole, of course. But I want us to understand and be proud of the sturdy roots from which we have grown. I think that we can be proud of a tradition that unabashedly celebrates the humanity of Jesus, displayed so profoundly in his life and teachings. Maybe especially in this time and place where, ironically enough, it is not fashionable in many Christian contexts to talk much about the life and teachings of Jesus.

[Kurt Vonnegut wondered](#) aloud why Christians seemed so eager to post the Ten Commandments in every courthouse, but no one suggested that the Sermon on the Mount be displayed.

An Easter banner in a Lutheran church showed a manger and a cross and read “Born To Die.” As if nothing that happened in between mattered in the least.

We come from a tradition that says it matters what happened in between. We come from a tradition that says it is only through the life and teachings of Jesus that we can begin to answer the question: *Who do you say that I am?* We have sought throughout our history, with all the powers of reason and scholarship and reflection, to, as John Shelby Spong put it in the reading, embrace his meaning.

So what about Easter? What do we Unitarian Universalists make of this event?

It seems to me that, in general, we have always been more comfortable with Christmas, as Christian celebrations go. Easter, and the events leading up to it, hold such tortuous theological pitfalls: Jesus as Lamb of God, sacrificed for our sins? Jesus resurrected bodily, promising that we too will be raised from death to life? And the recognition that Easter is the most important of Christian celebrations, offering what seems to be an either/or proposition: “*If Christ has not been raised,*” writes St. Paul, “*...we are of all people most to be pitied*” (I Corinthians 15:17, 19). Is there an entry point to this event for a Unitarian Universalist congregation?

We have most commonly celebrated it as a Spring festival. William Schulz, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and former director of Amnesty International, [remembers a cartoon in which](#):

[T]he wayside pulpits of an Episcopal church and a Unitarian Universalist church were both visible on a street corner. It was Easter, and the title of the Episcopal rector's Easter sermon was "The Truth and Power of the Risen Christ" while across the street the Unitarian Universalist [minister] was preaching a sermon entitled "Upsy-Daisy."

The message of Easter is not a trivial one. We may approach it from a variety of directions, and we may reject the accuracy of the details of the story entirely, but I think it would be a shame if we ignored the power of its message: that in the depths of despair, a new day can arise. John Shelby Spong points out that Easter for him is not a specific event, but that *something* that happened between the crucifixion, when the apostles had utterly abandoned Jesus, to Pentecost, when they came back together, empowered to take up the cause of Jesus in the face of persecution and martyrdom. “The strength of their conviction was such that no threat or fear could now separate them from the God they believed they had met in Jesus” (pg. 118).

What is it that you and I could proclaim with such conviction? What is it that has revived you when it feels like you are entombed in despair? What is the burning coal at the source of our tradition that can

provide warmth for a cold, desperate world? What is it that assures us, even when our very breath is being squeezed out of us by the pain of broken relationships, failure, anger, sickness, what is it that assures us that abundant life awaits us still if we but take another step?

As we celebrate Easter today, I would ask you to return, not to any particular story, but to your own source of hope and passion and compassion, that source that even death cannot contain.

Closing Words (#510 Jane Rzepka)

O Spirit of Life and Renewal,

We have wintered enough, mourned enough, oppressed ourselves enough.

Our souls are too long cold and buried, our dreams all but forgotten, our hopes unheard.

We are waiting to rise from the dead.

In this, the season of steady rebirth, we awaken to the power so abundant, so holy, that returns each year through earth and sky.

We will find our hearts again, and our good spirits. We will love, and believe, and give and wonder, and feel again the eternal powers.

The flow of life moves ever onward through one faithful spring, and another, and now another.

May we be forever grateful.

Alleluia.

Amen.

Sabbath
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
06/01/08

As a kid of ten or eleven years old, being raised in a religious Lutheran home, I found the Ten Commandments really quite comforting. I mean, if this was THE list of THE rules laid down by God, I figured that I was doing okay.

I had not, and had no desire to, make any graven images to worship. The God explained to me by my parents was just fine, thank you, don't need to worship any other gods before him.

While I was possibly finding some swear words rather enticing to use in particular situations by that point, I steered clear of those that would take the Lord's name in vain.

I had not murdered anyone.

Refraining from committing adultery was not much of a problem.

I did not steal.

I did not bear false witness against anyone else.

And I had a hard time figuring out what coveting *meant*, let alone doing it.

As I grew into my teen years, and as my understanding of the commandments expanded a bit, they became less comforting and more challenging.

Honor your father and mother? Well, I did a pretty good job, but if "honoring" meant *always obeying*, as in *not doing what you know they would not want you to do...*well, yeah, I had some strikes against me.

Then I read Jesus' words at the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, saying, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire'" (NRSV Matthew 5:21-22).

Wow! This hardly seemed fair. I was doing fine avoiding the actual murder of anyone, but all of a sudden Jesus changes the rules and says I can't be angry with anyone; if an insult slips out when I'm angry, I'm doomed; and if I call them names, it's a ticket to hell.

Not only that, he does the same thing with the commandment on adultery, saying it's not just about actually committing adultery but includes "everyone who looks at a woman with lust." This was dire news for a teenage boy.

Suddenly, I lost all childhood smugness about keeping *all* the commandments, and instead was grasping desperately for a few that I could still obey.

“You shall not bear false witness.” Don’t lie, in other words. I could not claim a spotless record there.

And yes, I’d taken the Lord’s name in vain a few times by then...

“You shall have no other Gods before me”? That was pretty safe...but, well, I had been reading these books that led me to question some things. If I was doubting God, could I say that I was really keeping this commandment?

And I’d learned enough about *coveting* to know that I was not immune...there was stuff that other people had that I wanted.

The pickings were getting very slim but finally I landed on good ol’ number three: “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” *That* I could still do, even as a teenager...I loved to read on Sunday anyway, and that didn’t seem to interfere with keeping that day holy. There’s one in my column!

Imagine my dismay, then, when I read this story in the Gospel of Mark (NRSV 2:23-24, 27-28):

“One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are the doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’...[H]e said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’”

What!?!?!

Here is Jesus--the same Jesus who reinterpreted the other commandments so strictly that I couldn’t keep them anymore—now he’s saying that the third commandment, the only one that I seem to be able to keep with no trouble, he seems to be saying that *this* commandment...*well, you know, it doesn’t really matter that much.*

Is that what he’s saying?

There are various opinions on that. Some scholars believe that the whole Sabbath debate was a later controversy, as Christianity began to take on its own identity, and that this debate was superimposed back onto the story of Jesus. Others believe that Jesus was simply pointing out that the *meaning* of the Sabbath should not be lost in favor of hyper-sensitive adherence to the rules. It is true, generally speaking, that Christianity has carried a certain ambivalence regarding the importance of the Sabbath.

But understand, please, that my interest in the Sabbath today is not because it is one of the Ten Commandments from the Jewish tradition. I am not interested in which day is recognized as Sabbath in the various denominations and faith traditions. I am not concerned with the particular laws that detailed what could be done and what shouldn’t be done to honor the Sabbath. But I *am* interested in what “remembering the Sabbath,”—or “observing the sabbath,” as it says in the Book of Deuteronomy (NRSV Deut. 5:12)—might mean to us today. Because the truth is, I don’t do a very good job keeping this commandment either—and I think I’m missing out on something important because of that.

First of all, where does the notion of “Sabbath” come from in the Jewish tradition? It comes from the very first story in the Torah, the story of creation. God, it is said, created all that is in six days and rested on the seventh day: “therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it,” says the book of Exodus. On that day, “you shall not do any work,” says the commandment given to Moses.

You shall not do any work...now that sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Isaac Asimov wrote that “sabbath” is derived from a Hebrew word that means “to break off” or “to desist.”¹ Now you can desist, can't you? Break off (or take a break maybe) from your work. *Stop.*

But toward what end?

That's a question that arises, isn't it? “You mean do *nothing*?...I can't get *anything* done?!?! I *have to* rest?” Well, no, you don't *have to*. It's a commandment, yes, but even if you are seeking to follow the commandments, the Sabbath was made for humans, as Jesus pointed out, not humans for the Sabbath. You don't *have to* keep the Sabbath...but what might you gain if you did? What if you took the time to do nothing?

That is a distinctly counter-cultural idea. Yes, we, as Americans, can be lazy, but we are also enamored with work, with *doing things*, with avoiding the almost unimaginable tragedy of *having nothing to do*...we can barely grasp the possibility of *choosing to do nothing*.

A woman in another congregation told me a wonderful story about her and her husband and their new baby and a torrential rainstorm when they lived out East. She said that the rain started coming down in thick sheets, and the thunder and lightning began and she, intent on soothing her child, lost track of her husband. Anxious that they all be together during this storm, she began walking from room to room with her baby looking for him. She looked upstairs, main floor, basement (where the water was leaking through the windows) and could not find her husband. Finally, she poked her head outside and found her husband, with a small pot from the kitchen, squatting by one of the window wells frantically attempting to bail the water out from around the window where it was leaking into the basement. One problem: it was raining so hard that the water was pouring into the window well approximately twice as fast as he could bail it out. “I don't think that's going to work, honey,” she said as nicely as possible, hoping that he would come inside. Exasperated, he shouted over his shoulder, “At least I'm *doing something!*”

Sound familiar? That is not an uncommon stance, that somehow *doing something—anything!*—is better than *doing nothing*. Why do we take that for granted? What if we didn't? What if we took seriously the Buddhist's admonition: “Don't just do something; sit there!” See how silly that sounds? But it's not. Lord knows, we are often *just doing something*. We are not doing it for any good reason, except to be doing something—because then we can say, “At least we're doing something!” But so what? What if we didn't?

Sabbath, to me, helps to bring that wisdom of Buddhism to a Western mind. The power of quiet, of rest, of stillness is found in many religious and philosophical traditions. We ignore it to our own detriment.

One of my mother's favorite Bible verses is Psalm 46:10a: “Be still, and know that I am God.” She had been someone who always liked to keep busy, whether it was painting rooms, or cooking, or refinishing

¹ Asimov, Isaac, Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The New Testament (New York: Doubleday & Co. 1969) 184.

furniture, or visiting shut-ins, she was always, as she would put it, “on the go.” She found a great lesson in this verse that urged her to “be still, and know...” She experienced her God a different way because of it.

Be still. Don’t just do something...Break off. Desist.

If we’re always talking, we can’t expect to hear what’s going on around us; and if we’re always *doing something*, we can’t expect to be aware of what’s happening around us. What if we were to just sit there? What if we were to “break off” from our normal round of activities? What if we were to desist from work? From *doing*? What if we were to intentionally *do nothing*?

What is so scary about that?

Wendell Berry started writing what he calls his “Sabbath poems” in 1979, and they’ve come out in a couple different collections (*Sabbaths*, *The Timbered Choir*) over the succeeding decades. Poems “written in silence, in solitude, mainly out of doors,” he says, they are “about moments when heart and mind are open and aware.” The one that Karen read was the very first one, and I find it interesting that he mentions being afraid right away. There is something scary about silence, about resting, about doing nothing, but...

*“Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings and I hear its song.*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings and I hear its song.”²*

To hear, we must be *quiet*.

In a Sabbath poem written in 1997 (from *The Timbered Choir* pg. 205), he writes:

*“Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet, but first
you must have the quiet.”³*

Finally, there is a practicality to honoring the Sabbath that I appreciate. Granted, there is a certain arbitrary nature to it. Whatever day or time you choose to honor, the question arises: what makes this day or time any more special than any other day or time? Answer: nothing. Absolutely nothing. However, by honoring in part, you acknowledge the whole. Let me say that again: by honoring in part,

² Berry, Wendell, *Sabbaths* (New York: North Point Press, 1987) 5.

³ Berry, Wendell, *The Timbered Choir* (Counterpoint, 1999) 205.

we are acknowledging the whole. Can any of us live in a perpetual state of Sabbath? Doing nothing; listening deeply? No, not for very long and still keep our lives running. But by setting aside the time to allow for a renewed awareness of the world around us, we acknowledge the wonder of that world even at those times when we cannot attain the same awareness. By setting aside the time to allow our inner lives to surface, we acknowledge that depth even when we do not have the time to explore it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his address to the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School, called the Sabbath:

*the jubilee of the whole world; whose light dawns welcome alike into the closet of the philosopher, into the garret of toil, and into prison cells, and everywhere suggests, even to the vile, the dignity of spiritual being. Let it stand forevermore, a temple, which new love, new faith, new sight shall restore to more than its first splendor to mankind.*⁴

And for all that it may offer us, part of the beauty of a Sabbath to me is that it contains its purpose in its stillness. It is not meant to go anywhere else, and we are not meant to go anywhere else...only to be.

Wendell Berry says:

*“There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.”*⁵

⁴ <http://bartleby.com/5/102.html>

⁵ Berry, Wendell, The Timbered Choir (Counterpoint, 1999) 214.

Self-Evident Truths
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
07/13/08

Opening Words – Clinton Lee Scott #565 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.

It is easier blindly to venerate the saints than to learn the human quality of their sainthood.

It is easier to glorify the heroes of the race than

To give weight to their examples.

To worship the wise is much easier than to profit by their wisdom.

Great leaders are honored, not by adulation, but by sharing their insights and values.

Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes gather up the stones to build the prophet's monument.

Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.

Readings

From the Declaration of Independence:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--

From a 1990 essay entitled “Machiavellian Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy: Means and Ends,” by Howard Zinn, included in his book, [*Declarations of Independence*](#) (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1990, pgs. 12 & 15):

In our time we find [great] hypocrisy. Our Machiavellis, our presidential advisors, our assistants for national security, and our secretaries of state insist they serve “the national interest,” “national security,” and “national defense.” These phrases put everyone in the country under one enormous blanket, camouflaging the differences between the interest of those who run the government and the interest of the average citizen.

The American Declaration of Independence, however, clearly understood that difference of interest between government and citizen. It says that the purpose of government is to secure certain rights for its citizens—life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. But government may not fulfill these purposes and so “whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government.”

The *end* of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* [, on the other hand,] is clearly different. It is not the welfare of the citizenry, but national power, conquest, and control. All is done in order “to maintain the state.”

In the United States today, the Declaration of Independence hangs on schoolroom walls, but foreign policy follows Machiavelli...

Undoubtedly, there are Americans who respond favorably to this idea, that the United States should be a “great power” in the world, should dominate other countries, should be number one. Perhaps the assumption is that our domination is benign and that our power is used for kindly purposes. The history of our relations with Latin America does not suggest this. Besides, is it really in keeping with the American ideal of equality of all peoples to insist that we have the right to control the affairs of other countries? Are we the only country entitled to a Declaration of Independence?

Sermon

I read recently that the Declaration of Independence will be on display in St. Paul, Minnesota from Sept. 2-4 to coincide with the Republican National Convention.

“A national political party convention is about so much more than just the nomination of a candidate,” St. Paul Mayor [Chris Coleman said](#). “It is a celebration of democracy and American civic pride, and having the Declaration of Independence on public display provides another dimension for residents and visitors to participate and enjoy all that a convention brings with it.”

Secretary of State Mark Ritchie, whose office is orchestrating the display, says the Convention is a great time for Minnesotans to see “the very birth certificate of our nation.”

Apparently, the Declaration of Independence is vitally important to who we are and what we do as a nation...or is it?

We should note that this document has not been universally admired. Ambrose Serle, a patriotic young Englishman who served as civilian secretary to Admiral Howe of the British forces at the time that the Declaration of Independence was first announced, said the document served only to underscore “the villainy and the madness of these deluded people...A more impudent, false, and atrocious proclamation was never fabricated by the hands of man” ([1776](#); McCullough, David; Simon & Schuster, 2005, pg. 141).

While one could expect such passionate opposition to it from a representative of the power that was challenged by it, there was ambivalence about its importance even among Thomas Jefferson’s peers and colleagues. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, an eminent member of Congress, had dismissed it as a “skiff made of paper.” (A skiff, the Dictionary tells me, is a flatbottom, open boat...one made of paper would presumably not carry you far.)

Pauline Maier, author of a book entitled *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, [points out that](#) the Declaration of Independence, in its time, was really more of a press release than a philosophical statement; its purpose was to announce the decision that Congress had made in favor of independence from British rule. “The parts that we remember with such reverence got very little attention in the 18th century,” she says.

Further, it was not the unique and solitary document that we sometimes view it as today, but rather a culmination of a number of “declarations of independence” that arose from towns, counties, and local militias throughout the colonies as a way of applying pressure on the state legislatures to allow their delegates to the Congress to vote for independence. Maier found 90 such “declarations” in her research and presumes that there are many more waiting to be discovered.

Still, though it was not unique in its purpose, and though it was in large measure the work of a committee (prey to the wordsmithing of many who had very strong opinions about the way things were worded; sound at all familiar?); still, this particular Declaration of Independence had the benefit of its primary author, Thomas Jefferson’s eloquent prose.

Thomas Jefferson described its creation this way: “Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion” (*Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, Willard Sterne Randall, HarperPerennial, 1993, New York, NY, pg. 273). It seemed to do the job. Late in his life he held the Declaration of Independence as one of his proudest achievements. If it restated ideas that were everywhere in the air, it did so in a way that still resonates in the American, indeed the human, soul.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Doesn’t that just sound nice? But did you hear what it says?

Howard Zinn puts it this way: All people have an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If, in fact, there is inequality in those things, society has a responsibility to correct the situation and to ensure that equality. Law is only a means. Government is only a means. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—these are the ends. And “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government” (*Declarations...*, pg. 109).

Now, I’m sorry, but that doesn’t sound so much patriotic as...well...revolutionary! If we rescue the Declaration of Independence from the dusty pages of our history books; if we dare to bring its message into the present; if we, as citizens, truly honor its words as we are urged to do—no, not honor its words, but follow the direction of its vision; think of the possible ramifications!

It shouldn't be surprising that the Declaration has been used as a model for countless pleas for liberty and equality down through the years, [including](#):

The Working Men's Declaration of Independence of 1829

The laws and municipal ordinances and regulations...have deprived nine tenths of the members of the body politic, who are not wealthy, of the equal means to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which the rich enjoy exclusively...

The Declarations of Sentiments and Resolutions presented at the Woman's Rights Convention, July 1848, Seneca Falls, NY

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal ...

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.

The Negro Declaration of Independence presented by the National Independent Political Union, February 1876, Washington, DC

We, colored men, representing nearly all the States and Territories of the United States, believing with the fathers, that the happiness of the people is the sole end of government, ...do hereby denounce it [Republican Party] as being the primary cause of all the wrongs committed against us...

The Declaration of **Inter**dependence of the Socialist Labor Party, July 4, 1895, New York, NY

When, in the course of human progression, the despoiled class of wealth producers becomes fully conscious of its rights and determined to take them, a decent respect to the judgment of posterity requires that it should declare the causes which impel it to change the social order...

The Declaration of Workers' and Farmers' Rights and Purposes presented by the National Unemployed Leagues, July 4, 1933, Columbus, OH

When our forefathers crushed the tyranny of kings, America was born. When the men of 1860 destroyed chattel slavery, America's development as a great industrial state was made possible. And when the men and women of today shall finally crush the tyranny of bankers and bosses, America shall at last be free.

And that only bring us to 1933...

Radical statements. Powerful challenges to the status quo. Uncompromising calls for change. This seems to be what the Declaration of Independence inspires.

You'll excuse me if I find it hard to believe that this same Declaration of Independence is *truly* welcome at the Republican National Convention or any National Convention. You'll excuse me if I find it hard to believe that the Declaration of Independence is truly embraced by anyone who holds power within the present Administration, or indeed any Administration, past, present, and future. It's not *meant* to be embraced by the government; it's meant to hold government accountable.

Howard Zinn reports that early in the Vietnam war an army lieutenant name John Dippel had tried to pin the Declaration of Independence to the wall of his barracks. This was not permitted by the commander of the base, and the army's legal office in Washington advised Dippel that he had no First Amendment right to do this (*Declarations of Independence*, pg. 193).

Apparently, the Declaration of Independence should only be viewed under safety glass, and becomes dangerous in the hands of ordinary citizens.

It is put on display so that you won't read it. It is made into an object of worship so that it can be put at a safe and sacred distance. Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision. To worship the wise is much easier than to profit by their wisdom. And sometimes we acquiesce to this plan; we give in to this inclination; *I* do. Because I don't want to be seen as...what?...as an *extremist*, and that has become a very bad word, hasn't it? No one wants to be an *extremist*.

[Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote](#) this in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," responding to eight white clergymen who questioned the use of "extreme measures" of civil disobedience in fighting for racial equality:

Was not Jesus an extremist for love -- "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice -- "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ -- "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist -- "Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist -- "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist -- "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist -- "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice--or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

What if we vowed to be extremists for the cause of justice? What if we blew the dust off the Declaration of Independence and re-imagined it for the present day and the present global community? Are we the only country entitled to a Declaration of Independence? How does the unalienable right to life play out when people are dying every day for lack of drinkable water? What does the right of liberty mean in the midst of the "war on terror," which is used to justify indefinite detention, "enhanced coercive interrogation techniques," and invasion of privacy? How do we separate, in this country, the pursuit of happiness from the unmindful, careless, and often criminal wasting of the earth's natural resources? What would our **Declaration of Interdependence** say, taking into account not only human rights but human responsibility toward all of life on earth? What would our **Declaration of Utter Dependence** say, calling us to a recognition and adaptation to the growing awareness of our ever-more precarious position in the natural world if we continue as we are? Could we, the people, collectively, across the globe, hold our leaders accountable to our demand that they respond to these realities or be summarily replaced? Howard Zinn recalls British historian Arnold Toynbee's words (*Declarations...* pg. 296), surveying thousands of years of human history, and despairing of what he saw in the atomic age—the words seem appropriate to our time, too. He reportedly cried out, "No annihilation without representation!"

In closing, it strikes me that Jefferson made a truly bold statement in affirming "self-evident" truths. In other words, these truths are so clear as to be beyond discussion. And what were they? That all men (and let's help Jefferson out here—that *all people*) are created equal. Now many have trouble with this supposedly self-evident truth: it's just not so, they say...people are endowed with different physical and mental capacities, and with different talents, drives and energies. But this is a misreading of the Declaration of Independence, Howard Zinn says (*Declarations...* pg. 150). There is no period after the

word “equal,” but a comma, and the sentence goes on: “that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...” In other words, people are equal not in their natural abilities but in their *rights*, in how they should be treated. In this sense, it is not unlike our First Principle, which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of each person. That is less a philosophical or theological proposition about *human nature* as a covenantal statement about how we have agreed to treat other human beings.

But let me leave you with this question: what are the truths that you hold to be self-evident? What are the truths that are so clear to you as to be beyond discussion, that undergird your own relationship with the universe, that guide your journey through this life? May those truths increase your compassion for yourselves and each other; may they illuminate your way and keep you steady in the darkness; may they call you into being extremists for the cause of justice.

We hold these truths...together.

Mercurial Musings
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
08/03/08

Opening Words – (#440 - Phillip Hewett, Responsive Reading)

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

In this spirit we gather. In this spirit we pray.

Readings (Roland Bockhorst)

1. From [*Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*](#), by Michael Ward:

For C.S. Lewis, there was life in the old god yet. Mercury was not a dried up mythological cliché to be swept aside...Rather, the god of quicksilver remained a current and vibrant metaphor for the poetic synthesis of disparate materials...Lewis [said], "...the poet has found the proper scraps of ordinary seeing which, when put together, will unite into a new and extraordinary seeing." Not that such unities are stable or permanent. The fusing action of Mercury is only temporary and is just one half of an influence which is continually joining and parting. Lewis [appreciated] in Mercury...[this] faculty of...separating and uniting.

2. From [*Mercury*](#), a science fiction novel by Ben Bova:

For centuries astronomers believed that Mercury's rotation was "locked," so that one side of the planet always faced the Sun while the other side always looked away. They reasoned that the sunward side of Mercury must be the hottest planetary surface in the solar system, while the side facing away from the Sun must be frozen down almost to absolute zero.

But this is not so.

Sermon

After the news of the shooting last Sunday at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, I was ready to scrap this whole sermon theme. Many weeks ago, when I came up with the idea of doing a series of sermons about the planets and the Roman gods who they were named after, I thought it would be fun to explore a little planet lore. Ancient myth could possibly open up some stories that would be relevant to us today. But after I received the news that a man had walked into one of our congregations with a shotgun during a Sunday Service and began blasting away...well, how could I talk about Mercury? Who cares about planets? What good can a Roman god...what good can any God do in the

aftermath of such a tragedy; in the wake of senseless murder; in the midst of inescapable trauma for those who were present?

So I pushed Mercury aside, and I began to reflect on what had happened. I tried to name the feelings that were swirling within me. I attempted to make some sense of all this; to pull some meaning from it; to imagine what I could possibly offer in the way of consolation. Where was the handle that would allow me, not to *explain* this event, certainly not to excuse it, but to carry it forth and offer some insight into it? What was the key to unlocking and presenting its tragic lesson?

I thought about this country's love affair with weapons. We can talk about guns not killing people, it's *people* killing people, yet why is it that the right to own a weapon is held more sacred than the right to healthcare; held more sacred than the right to a living wage; held more sacred than the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? We can point out that gun control would not have *really* helped *anyway* in this or that situation, but we must ask ourselves why the NRA is the most powerful lobby in our country. We can pretend that we are being sensible about guns, that it's just a few crazy people that are the problem, but then ask ourselves why the recent Supreme Court decision has inspired a man in Knoxville, TN,—not the shooter, Jim David Adkisson, but a different man, and [this is reported in the Knoxville paper](#) just four days after the shooting at the Unitarian Universalist church there—the Supreme Court decision has inspired this other man to go to court for the right of felons to also have handguns in their homes. They need protection, too, don't they?

While we as a culture rail against these violent acts, we also glorify violence at every turn. “Go ahead, make my day,” says a movie actor. “I got a 9 mm, ready to go off any minute so you feel it, cuz of the law I have to conceal it, but if you mess around you gonna make me reveal it,” says a rap star. “If you can read this, you're within range,” says a sign on the rural property. “Bring 'em on,” says a President. “Wanted: dead or alive.” Violence is always a last resort, we say with a wink...but what a satisfying last resort it is, right? It puts the final word to any disagreement...

And a deeply troubled man, twisted in mind and soul, feels it is his duty, as expressed in a four-page letter that was found in his car, to offer his own final word to a vicious argument that is raging within him, and he sets out to kill some liberals. A deeply disturbed man has no trouble getting hold of a weapon to do it and, encouraged, it seems, by the crude and cruel rhetoric of people who make millions off hating or pretending to hate liberals--there were books by Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Bill O'Reilly in his home—and he goes to a church that has had publicity for being open, affirming, and welcoming to the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender community, and, during the worship service, as children are up front for a special presentation that has brought members and friends not only of this congregation but of a neighboring UU congregation, the Westside Unitarian Universalist Fellowship--in the middle of these sacred and vulnerable moments, he opens the guitar case he has carried inside, pulls out his gun and begins shooting.

So I move from being angry about guns to being angry about our glorification of violence to being angry about the hate-filled rhetoric that we tolerate, that we listen to, that we...that *I*...have sometimes given voice to, carelessly, without shame, without a second thought.

But I realize that anger is not all I am feeling, maybe not even most of what I am feeling. I am sad. Some small piece of the anguish that must be felt within those congregations reaches me, eliciting the empathy that we naturally feel when other humans suffer. And--it would be dishonest of me not to say it--they are Unitarian Universalists which, no, does not make this more important or more tragic or more

anything, but it strengthens the ties that I feel to this incident because we are bound together in this living tradition that we share.

They, like us, keep this chalice lit to welcome all, to provide a home where you—any and every *you*--can be who you are and who you are called to be. They, like us, do their best to actualize the principles of Unitarian Universalism in their work in the world. They, like us, gather together each week to celebrate community and to celebrate that which transcends community and to celebrate the many and varied names and descriptions for that which is greater than but available to all. They gather together faithfully because they have found something, as we have found something, in the history and mystery of liberal religion that speaks to them and that they wish to keep alive and available for others. And in the midst of their service, one in a string of Sundays that had bound them together in common mission, came terror and death.

So I am sad, too...and not only sad. There is some small measure of fear. Are we really so radical, so maligned, that we could become a target? How are the messages we carry interpreted by hearts plagued with despair and minds in turmoil?

And the fear is quickly transformed into new resolve as I read about how members of the congregation responded and are continuing to respond; how congregations throughout the world have responded and are continuing to respond. This is no time to hunker down, they are saying. What would we offer a world suffering under the ravages of despair and disease but precisely what we share with one another here? We can put in place some reasonable emergency procedures; we can educate ourselves and one another about how to respond to the unexpected, not knowing what form the unexpected will take. We cannot, however, ever control what may happen. We can choose our responses, and by carefully, compassionately choosing our responses, we may join in shaping the messages that travel along this interdependent web of all life. We cannot close our doors, or put up a metal detector, or search people before we welcome them and still be the community that we are. We will always risk hospitality for the strangers in our midst.

And I feel, suddenly, courageous...the only way that I can begin to honor the memory of Greg Kendry, who stood protectively between the gun and the sanctuary where the children were performing and who was killed at the scene, and the memory of Linda Kraeger, a member of Westside UU Fellowship who died later at the hospital—the only way I can begin to honor the people who tackled and subdued Adkisson after only three shots and held him until the police arrived; the only way I can begin to honor the members of both communities who were directly affected, the families and friends who suffered the anguish, the members of the UU Trauma Response Team who gathered people to begin the healing process from this devastating occurrence; the only way that I can begin to honor this undeniable *connection* that I feel is to be as courageous as I can be. To stand in solidarity, feeling the fullness of compassion and pride in who we are and who we are called to be.

And as I was striving to bring all of these emotions into some kind of focus, I realized that it was something like trying to nail mercury, the very substance of mercury, to the table. Each time I would strike a hammer blow for anger, suddenly it would split into compassion and fear. I would try to hammer fear, and it would split into sadness and courage. And I passed through, and am still passing through, these emotions, not in an orderly fashion, but back and forth and round and round and each time I have settled on how it is that I feel and what it is that I can do and I think that I have it nailed down, it splits again.

And I realize, along with C.S. Lewis, that there is life in the old god, Mercury, yet! We will never have a single explanation for what occurred in Knoxville, nor will we agree on a single lesson that arises from it—if we try to pin it down, it will split, believe me--yet that doesn't lessen our resolve to come through this together. We, Unitarian Universalist, explicitly allow for differences in theologies, political beliefs, life experiences, cultural traditions, sexual orientation, religious understandings...we celebrate the unique qualities of each individual, trusting in the loving synthesis of disparate materials, believing that the joining of each of our visions "will unite into a new and extraordinary seeing." We know, too, that the fusing action of our community, like the fusing action of Mercury, is not a once-and-for-all synthesis...it is continually joining and parting, because life is breathed through it and life is change. That is the vibrant life of our congregation and an active and challenging piece of the shared ministry of this community. We are, in one sense, the First Church of Mercury! We know that there is no one answer, no one explanation, no one way to think or worship or be...yet we come together and share a mission. "If we agree in love," said Universalist minister, Hosea Ballou, "there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good" (SLT #705).

And what of Jim David Adkisson? He apparently expected the congregation to cower in fear, allowing him to indiscriminately shoot people until the police arrived to kill him. He did not expect a large, loving man to stand before him who was willing to die protecting his congregation. He did not expect a courageous group to rush him after just three shots were fired, literally *holding* him, preventing him from doing any more harm, until the police arrived. What horrors does he now face? What do the members of that congregation feel toward him? What do *you* feel?

I have noticed that many of the articles talk about "the Unitarian church." I understand that Unitarian *Universalism* is a mouthful, and I understand that it just uses up more valuable copy space, and I don't mean to be nitpicky, except to say that Universalism may have a message for us today. Understand, please, that I am not trying to tell you how to feel, only to share a reflection from our Universalist heritage with which we may want to wrestle.

There will be those who say that Jim David Adkisson is beyond redemption. There will be those who say that he, and all people who commit such senseless and brutal acts, do not deserve to live. There will be those who say that *some people* are just evil, evil beyond hope. Just as, for centuries astronomers believed that Mercury's rotation was "locked," so that one side of the planet always faced the Sun while the other side always looked away, there are people who believe that human nature can be divided into just such categories. Just as astronomers reasoned that...the side facing away from the Sun must be frozen down almost to absolute zero, theologians reasoned that some human souls were frozen to the point that no warmth could enter.

Like modern astronomers who discovered in their research that light came even to the dark side of Mercury, Universalist theologians, researching the Scriptures, studying their own experience, reflecting on their own experience of God, came to the conclusion that no human soul stood outside the reach of love. There are those who say there is a place that the light cannot reach, and we, as Universalists, say: this is not so.

Let's be clear: it is no act of courage to split people up into clear categories of black and white, dark and light, good and bad. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of thinking that offers justification, however twisted, of the brutality that occurred last Sunday in Knoxville. *They are liberals, they are gay, they are beyond reasoning, beyond hope, they are out to hurt me, they deserve to die...*and this happens across political and religious spectrums and wherever it happens we commit to challenging it. It is no act of

courage to split people up into good and bad, with us or against us, worthy or unworthy...it is an abject failure to deal with the real complexity of this existence.

And, listen, it is no act of cowardice to admit the complexity. We don't need to be apologetic about refusing to subscribe to one single, simple dogma. Albert Einstein said, Things should be made as simple as possible, and no simpler. Why should we force our religion to be simpler than life itself? Why should we not embrace the complexity within these walls as we are challenged to embrace it outside of these walls?

On Monday night, there was a Service of Healing held at the Presbyterian church next door to the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. This is the Presbyterian congregation that provided refuge for the children during and after the shooting.

The children, who had been in the middle of performing pieces from the Broadway musical "Annie," on Sunday when the shooting happened, stepped forward on Monday evening at the front of the sanctuary and began singing the well-known theme song from the play, "Tomorrow." Annette Marquis, District Executive of the Thomas Jefferson District, attended this service and writes, "The congregation spontaneously joined in singing with the children and after a few seconds—when the impact of this moment sunk in—the crowd erupted into applause, tears, shouts, cheers, and many more tears.

The cast—these beautiful children who had been exposed to so much horror—had finally had a chance to offer their grande finale. They took their long-awaited bows to an adoring, grief-stricken, audience.

The sun'll come out
Tomorrow
So ya gotta hang on
'Til tomorrow
Come what may
Tomorrow! Tomorrow!
I love ya Tomorrow!
You're always
A day
A way!

'Proud of my faith' does not even begin to describe my feelings as I stood there with hundreds of other devastated members of a large interfaith community, cheering our UU children into a brighter future. Out of this tragedy, there are already signs of hope re-emerging. Blessings on this remarkable community for their love, their support, and their ministry to one another."

May our welcome to the world never falter and may we meet every tomorrow standing together in courage and compassion.

Closing Words (Nancy Wood SLT #688)

Hold on to what is good even if it is a handful of earth. Hold on to what you believe even if it is a tree which stands by itself. Hold on to what you must do even if it is a long way from here. Hold on to my hand even when I have gone away from you.

To Hell With It
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
08/10/08

Excerpts from [The Inferno](#), by Dante Aligheri (1265-1321), translated by Robert and Jean Hollander:

Sermon

It's not fair! It's *not fair!*

Do you ever say that? Do you ever feel that way?

There are countless circumstances which we could reference in support of this one major claim:

It's...not...fair!

Life, we mean. *Life* is not fair. And when *you're* feeling that way, it's fairly easy for me to say, "Yeah, but, you know, that's life. What ever made you think that life was supposed to be fair?" We say that to one another...we say that to our kids...I'll bet we all *heard* that as kids.

Not what you'd call great consolation, right? Because when *I'm* feeling like life's not fair, you can bet that this is the last thing in the world I want to hear from you.

But it's the only response we have, really. You very rarely hear someone respond, "Actually, life *is* perfectly fair. Everyone gets precisely what they deserve. All circumstances and situations are perfectly balanced so that everyone receives their due, be it reward or punishment. Divine justice reigns in every instance and we live in the best of all possible worlds."

Now you might hear: "There's a reason for everything," but that is not the same as saying that life is fair...and, again, it's easier for me to *say* "there's a reason for everything" when *you're* suffering than for me to *hear* when *I'm* suffering.

You might hear that, from our present perspective, we cannot understand everything that happens, leaving a door open, if only by the thinnest of slivers, for the *possibility* that everything *is* fair, but just not fair in a way that we understand right now.

This, too, lacks in genuine consolation. If I am told that life is fair, but not in any way that I've ever understood fair, and not in any way that can be explained as fair, it doesn't change the fact that life is not fair as I understand fair. Right?

It has been said that religion is, at its heart, an answer to the question: "Why do humans suffer?" Buddhism begins with the realization and acceptance that life is suffering or, more aptly, disquietude. Life is *dukkha*, in Sanskrit. (And I'm imagining the bumper sticker: Dukkha Happens.)

Harold Kushner wrote a bestselling book addressing this question from the Jewish Scriptures, [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#).

Bible scholar and author, Bart Ehrman, has a new book out called [God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer](#).

These are just a few examples of the untold number of words amongst a whole array of religions and philosophies that have sought to address this basic question: Why is life so unfair?

And while we often approach it from the standpoint of the innocent, asking ourselves why there is so much suffering, there is another question that we sometimes ask, though we don't like to admit it: Why isn't there *more* suffering? Why isn't there *more* suffering, not in general, but targeted to those people who *deserve* to suffer?

The flip side of "when bad things happen to good people" is "when good things happen to bad people," and that is almost as difficult to accept sometimes. People who *cause* suffering don't seem to receive it in the measure that we think they deserve...in fact, they often strike us as willfully ignorant of their responsibility and blissfully heartless toward the pain they have created in the lives of others. They are not touched, as far as we can tell, by conscience, by karma, or by compassion. For all the bad things they have done, it looks like, in this life at least, they *get away with it*.

And that's where *hell* comes in. I think that, at least partially, it arises from that sense that existence is, or should be, *fair*. And if, plainly, not everyone gets their just desserts in this life, then be assured that they will get it in the next. After death comes the court date that you can't postpone, with the divine verdict that you cannot appeal. *You will get yours*.

But is that *justice*? Is this what we mean by *fair*? What do we wish to have happen, and for how long, and to whom?

If you find yourself somewhat ambivalent on this matter, adverse to the doctrine of hell and yet drawn to some kind of just system of rewards and punishments that would set things right for the inequities in this life...you are not alone. Indeed, the Unitarian and Universalist streams of our tradition struggled with this and often came to differing conclusions from one another.

Hosea Ballou, a Christian Universalist minister who lived from 1771-1852, did not believe in hell. Rather, I should say, he did not believe in hell as punishment that occurred after death. He believed that the punishment for sin occurred in this life, and that the rewards for good living occurred in this life, too. He believed that God was calling *everyone* to eternal salvation, no exceptions, no child left behind.

William Ellery Channing, a Christian Unitarian minister who lived from 1780-1842, disagreed. Channing attacked Ballou's position in a sermon entitled, "[The Evil of Sin](#)," when he criticized "some among us who maintain that punishment is confined to the present state." Sin is *not* always punished in this life, he says; just look around. Sometimes sinners prosper. It is obvious, therefore, that retribution must be made in the future life.

Further, while the reality of hell served to punish sinners in the next life, it was hoped that the prospect of hell would serve to reform sinners in this life. Universalists were held in some suspicion because it was thought that belief in salvation for all would lead people to engage in immorality without fear of consequences. But [Hosea Ballou](#) believed that people, assured of salvation and infused with God's love, would reap the benefits of goodness in this life, just as sinners would feel the punishment in this life.

They would choose to live ethically and compassionately because they would have discovered a much greater fulfillment than could ever be offered by immoral or harmful actions.

A story goes that one day while Ballou was out riding his preaching circuit he was accompanied by an itinerant Baptist preacher and as they rode together, they argued theology. At one point, the Baptist preacher said, “Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist, and feared not the fires of Hell, I’d hit you over the head and steal your horse and saddle.” Hosea Ballou looked at him and replied, “My brother, if you were a Universalist the very idea would never occur to you!”

(Another example of Ballou’s practical nature and quick wit, he was once asked by a congregant who challenged his Universalist position: “What would you do with a man who died reeking of sin and crime?” Ballou replied, “I think that I would bury him.”)

This debate about punishment after death came to split the Universalists themselves into two camps: the “Death and Glory” Universalists, like Hosea Ballou, who believed that there was no punishment after death, and the “Restorationist” Universalists, who believed that there may be some remedial action for a limited period—up to 50,000 years, some said—that would restore formerly unrepentant souls to eventual and universal salvation. Some Unitarian ministers were open to the Restorationist view.

But it became clear to me that all of our liberal religious ancestors, even way back in the 1800’s, were moving away from the classical idea of hell. Now the concept of hell that I was taught growing up, an eternity of suffering, was said to be based on the Bible, and indeed there were some passages that could be interpreted to support this view. However, having read some of Ballou’s arguments, it was clear that the Bible could also be used to support Universalism, and the doctrine of Universal Salvation. One thing was sure, the Bible, if it even was really talking about hell, was less than clear on the details. But there was a poet who lived about 700 years ago who claimed to have actually visited hell and he wrote a book about it. *That’s* what I needed: a tour guide!

I had never read [*The Inferno*](#) before, and I must say, as a piece of literature, I enjoyed it immensely. But, (and I may have suspected this with my Universalist tendencies), Dante’s version of hell as Divine Justice does not hold up for me.

Briefly, Dante pictures Hell in nine circles, with the sins, and thus the punishments, becoming more severe as one gets closer to the center. Rather than a lake of fire, the innermost circle has a river of ice. At the very center, as you may have guessed, is where Satan lives. I don’t have time today to walk with you through all the circles, but I do recommend reading it if you’re so inclined. I was struck at how many literary, cultural, cinematic references I suddenly recognized from this one book.

But all that can wait for another time. Let’s see if we can at least get through the door, or under the archway.

Dante begins outside the circles altogether (Canto III). The first place he comes to, after passing through that famous archway that says “ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE,” is a “pre-circle,” if you will, but already he hears loud cries of suffering, voices raised in anger, screams, shouts, general pandemonium, and he asks his guide, the Roman poet Virgil:

*Master, what is this I hear, and what people
are these so overcome by pain?*

And Virgil replies:

*This miserable state is borne
by the wretched souls of those who lived
without disgrace yet without praise.*

*They intermingle with that wicked band
of angels, not rebellious and not faithful
to God, who held themselves apart...*

*They have no hope of death,
and their blind life is so abject
that they are envious of every other lot.*

*The world does not permit report of them.
Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
Let us not speak of them—look and pass by.*

Now who are these folks who are suffering outside the circles of hell, not even allowed to be part of *hell*? Those who lived without disgrace or praise, who were neither rebellious nor faithful. It reminds me of the words of Jesus from The Revelation According to John, when he says, “I wish that you were either hot or cold, but since you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.” In other words, if you’re shooting for the middle, trying to be that solid C-student of life, watch out! Dante says you’ll end up here.

Now, already, I’m having a little trouble seeing the justice here. I understand the admonition to show conviction, to stand up and be counted, to *live* one’s life rather than just trying to get through without offending anyone...but do these apparently well-meaning, if misguided folks, deserve this?:

*These wretches, who never were alive,
were naked and beset
by stinging flies and wasps*

*that made their faces stream with blood,
which, mingled with their tears,
were gathered at their feet by loathsome worms.*

Need I go on? Ok, moving on to the First Circle, also known as Limbo (Canto IV). Here Dante hears sighs of grief without torment coming from vast crowds of men, women and little children. Virgil explains that these folks *did not sin*. Okay, you got that? They’re in *hell*, but they *did not sin*. Isn’t hell all about sin? Punishing evil? Apparently not.

*...Though they have merit, (he continues)
that is not enough, for they were unbaptized,
denied the gateway to the faith that you profess.*

And if they lived before the Christians lived,

*they did not worship God aright.
And among these I am one.*

*For such defects, and for no other fault,
we are lost, and afflicted but in this,
that without hope, we live in longing.*

Now I highlight this because I think it is relevant to a real understanding of the concept of hell that is still taught in many churches today. Avoiding hell, in many theologies, is not reliant upon our *being good*, it is reliant upon our *being right*. It is about whether I bet on the winning doctrinal horse; whether I put my chips on the lucky sacred number. You see what I mean? It is not reliant upon the love that we share with the world; rather it is reliant upon the religious team that we have opted to join. *They did not sin*, says Virgil, yet they are in hell, doomed to live an eternity without hope. Hell is not about justice, it is about *just us*. Who will be saved? *Just us*. Who will escape the fiery torments of hell? *Just us*.

A few of those lines from the reading of Dante struck me in this regard:

*For when the power of thought
is coupled with ill will and naked force
there is no refuge from it for mankind.*

We have this desire for justice, for fairness, yet when we seek to give it divine sanction, to make it eternal, it grows inevitably perverted and dangerous, eventually looking nothing like what we started out searching for.

Universalism, as its name implies, includes everyone. The inherent worth and dignity of every individual. There is no *just us*. Universalism sentences no one to living without hope. Universalism says that we, all humans--all life, maybe—share a common destiny. Universalism does not ask: *Are you saved?* Universalism says: *You are saved. Now what?* And takes us from yearning toward fairness in the next life to ensuring it as best we can in this one.

As for the doctrine of eternal damnation, paradise for the chosen few, and the settling of scores after death? Well, to hell with it.

Closing Words (John Murray SLT #704)

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

Religion by the Numbers: 8
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
08/24/08

Readings

1. From "[*The Mystery of Numbers*](#)" by Annemarie Schimmel:

Already in antiquity 8 was regarded as a remarkable, lucky number: it was thought that beyond the 7 spheres of the planets, the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars, was located. As a "number of gods" it is found as early as in ancient Babylon. In Babylonian temples, the deity resided in a dark room in the eighth storey, and it may be that the association of 8 with Paradise is based on this custom...Dante places the triumphant church in the eighth heaven in his *Divine Comedy*. Muslims believe that there are 7 hells and 8 paradises, since God's mercy is greater than his wrath.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ mentions 8 beatitudes...just as the Buddha teaches the noble eightfold path leading to cosmic equilibrium and the basic rules for the aspiring Sufi in Islam are also expressed in the 8 sentences of the so-called Path of Junyard.

In China the 8 is highly esteemed, not only through the 8 symbols of Buddhism but also through the 8 precious items of Confucianism and the 8 symbols of the "immortals" in Taoism...It is likely that the auspicious character of 8 as number of good fortune and perfection may underlie the 8 X 8 = 64 configurations of the *I Ching*.

2. From "[*The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*](#)" by Thich Nhat Hanh:

The Buddha offered the Eightfold Path in his first Dharma talk, he continued to teach the Eightfold Path for forty-five years, and in his last Dharma talk...he offered the Noble Eightfold Path – Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

"A noble path of eight limbs" suggests the interbeing nature of these eight elements of the path. Each limb contains all the other seven...In fact, it is not possible to practice one element of the Noble Eightfold Path without practicing all seven other elements. This is the nature of interbeing...

Sermon

Unitarian Universalist Ministers in training will often talk about their upcoming interviews with "the MFC"—the Ministerial Fellowship Committee which has jurisdiction over all phases of ministerial credentialing--with something akin to the anxiety one might expect regarding the Last Judgment. UU ministerial students are all working toward this event, and yet can easily dread it for fear that, in all the preparation, they have missed the one essential thing that will be highlighted in the interview, that will swing the judgment against them.

I remember having that feeling.

I had to fly to Chicago early in the morning from Minneapolis for an afternoon interview, and the plane was late in departing (wouldn't you know it?) I made it to the hotel with a couple hours to spare, spread

out all of my study materials on the bed of the room I was renting only for the day, and realized that if I didn't know it by then, I was not going to pick up the knowledge I needed through cramming at that point in time. So I gathered up everything and went to the lobby to meet up with my fellow candidates who had traveled from Minneapolis.

The waiting was hell. Small talk grew even smaller, and conversations often ended in mid-sentence without the slightest comment from anyone. We knew that we were just filling time, trying to launch ourselves into a future when our interview was over and we had all received a "1."

(Briefly, you go before the Committee, give a ten-minute sermon, and then answer their questions for the next 40 minutes, after which you are excused while the committee consults and renders their verdict in the form of a number between 1 & 5, 1 meaning you're good to go in search of a congregation and 5 meaning you should consider "another path," preferably one that doesn't lead to pastoring or the pulpit.)

One of my friends, Barbara, was scheduled for 1:00 PM, while my other friend, Carol, and I were scheduled for 3:00 PM. When Barbara came back from her interview, we sat on either side of her, as if she'd returned from a mystical journey, and awaited her report.

"I think it went okay," she said, after a time. (Her confidence was later confirmed, as she received a "1" from the Committee).

"What did they ask you? What kind of questions?" we asked, with fear in our voices. (Hanje reminded me to note here that I wasn't cheating...the Committee makes a point of asking different questions to each candidate, assuming, I suppose, that interviewees will be talking about what happened as soon as they leave).

"Well...here was one," she replied, having now returned to us fully from her post-interview internal review. "One of the women said, '1,2,3,4,5...using those numbers, tell me something about world religions.'"

1,2,3,4,5...using those numbers, tell me something about world religions. I imagined being in the interview room with that question and I was...speechless. It was nerves, of course, but I drew a complete blank. "What did you say?" I gasped.

She coolly replied, "I said,

1. Unitarianism, Frances David's famous speech in Transylvania, God is One!
2. The Yin/Yang, two opposing yet complementary aspects of life reaching balance and harmony.
3. The Trinity of Christianity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
4. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism regarding the nature of suffering.
5. The Five Pillars of Islam being the foundation of Muslim practice.

My jaw dropped. "You are awesome," I said. "Yeah," she said humbly, "but I couldn't remember 'fasting' when they asked me to name the Five Pillars as a follow-up question."

Hardly a failure in my book.

I am happy to report that this is a pleasant memory I have, because I passed the interview later that day and achieved Ministerial Fellowship. But the other piece that stays with me is the importance that numbers play in the formation and transmission of religious and spiritual thought. This is part of the reason I'm embarking on an occasional series throughout this year entitled "Religion by the Numbers."

Now you may wonder why I'm not starting with "One," and how the heck I chose "Eight." August is the eighth month. I wish it were something more profound, but that's how I chose this number at this time. I wish I could tell you that I'll follow that monthly pattern with the others in the series, but it's not looking like I will. You'll have to be prepared for any number at any time!

Still, if the way I chose the number 8 was less than profound, the number eight itself proved to be rich in profundity, as evidenced by the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha.

To speak of the Noble Eightfold Path we need to first speak of the Four Noble Truths, and if that seems like cheating on the number eight, I would only point out that the Eightfold Path *is* the *Fourth* Noble Truth...let me explain.

The Four Noble Truths could also be called The Two Inescapable Truths and The Two Reasons for Hope. Thich Nhat Hanh describes the Four Noble Truths this way (pg. 51):

1. suffering
2. the making of suffering
3. the fact that suffering can be transformed
4. the path of transformation

Buddhism shows us the importance of *recognizing* suffering, before we rush to our *reactions*. See that there is suffering. The most painful suffering, says Thich Nhat Hanh, is the *unrealized* suffering.

Second, we explore *what makes* suffering. What elements come together to create suffering? What does this experience trigger in us that causes suffering? What emotions do we nurture that increase suffering? Hanh says we need to "recognize and identify the spiritual and material foods we have ingested that are causing us to suffer" (pg. 11).

Third, we acknowledge that suffering can be transformed. If we have explored how suffering comes about, and seen our part in its creation, we can change what we do. What a simple yet powerful realization!

Think of the Buddha as the doctor in the old joke where the man comes in and says, "Doctor, can you help me? It hurts every time I do this." The doctor, the Buddha, replies, "Yes, I can help you. Stop doing that."

Isn't it amazing how often we will return to something that causes us suffering, expecting that, this time, the outcome will be different. "Yep, still hurts. Yep, still hurts. Yep, still hurts." We fall into such a pattern of repetition that, after awhile, we convince ourselves that the suffering is unavoidable. "Life is so painful," we say, "Life is so unfair. It hurts every single time I do this...and I don't know why."

“The Buddha taught us how to recognize and acknowledge the presence of suffering, but he also taught the cessation of suffering. If there were no possibility of cessation, what is the use of practicing? The Third Truth is that healing is possible.”

The Fourth Noble Truth is the path that leads to refraining from doing the things that cause us to suffer. And what is this path called? The Noble Eightfold Path.

In *The Mystery of Numbers*, Annemarie Shimmel points out that the horse of the German God Odin has eight legs. “In many cases,” she writes, “8 seems to express an empowered 4.” This, I think, is true of the Eightfold Path in its relation to the Four Noble Truths. Given those 4 truths, we are then empowered to carry out as best we can the Eightfold Path that allows us to refrain from those actions that create and increase suffering. How do we do that? By understanding and nurturing:

Right View
Right Thinking
Right Mindfulness
Right Speech
Right Action
Right Diligence (or Right Effort)
Right Concentration
Right Livelihood

The word *Right*, in this context, means *what works*. What works to reduce, alleviate or eliminate suffering.

With the inspired help of Thich Nhat Hanh, let me see if I can give some brief descriptions of each and encourage you to explore the Noble Eightfold Path on your own.

So we begin with **Right View**, which has to do with identifying what is healthy and what is harmful. Hanh says that we must recognize that within our consciousness lie both the seeds of betrayal and the seeds of loyalty. Which will grow? Depends on which seeds we water. Within us we have the seeds of resentment and the seeds of forgiveness. Which will grow? Depends on which seeds we water. Just as we keep doing this (arm), though it hurts every time, we can find ourselves faithfully watering the seeds of betrayal and loneliness and bitterness and anger while we complain that these seem to be the only things that grow in our lives. But if we are to stop watering the seeds we do not wish to grow, we must first identify them. Right View is about seed identification.

Thinking, says Hanh, is the speech of our mind. **Right Thinking** makes our speech clear and beneficial so that, as thought leads to action, it results in Right Action (59). The trouble we have with Right Thinking is that, often, our mind is thinking about one thing while our body is doing another. In this case, when our mind is a million miles away from what we are doing, it is more apt to say (turning philosopher Rene Descartes’ phrase on its head), “I think, therefore I am not.” I think, therefore I am not here with you. I think, therefore I have no real idea of what I am doing.

Thich Nhat Hanh becomes wonderfully practical here and gives us a couple questions to ask ourselves that will promote Right Thinking:

Are you sure? Our perceptions can lead us astray, no doubt about that. Wrong perceptions cause incorrect thinking and unnecessary suffering. Ask yourself this question again and again, he says. *Are you sure?* Have you ever been led astray by wrong perceptions? I'm sure she did that because she wanted to show me up. I'm sure that he purposely ignored me. I'm sure they made this decision to hurt me. *Are you sure?*

Next question to ask yourself: *What am I doing?* If you're like me, this question will often catch you off-guard. *What am I doing?* I do so many things without thinking, literally unaware. I like to think that I know what I'm doing...but this question bears repeating because it brings me back to the moment and myself and allows me to be present to my tasks and to be a resource for others.

Are you sure? What am I doing? These questions will allow us to identify unfounded perceptions and to reacquaint ourselves with what it is we are actually doing, producing Right Thinking.

You can see how easy it would be to explore any one of these for a whole sermon, but for our purposes today, I will just touch on the rest:

Right Mindfulness is the energy that brings us back to the present moment.

Right Speech is described very well in what is called the Fourth Mindfulness Training:

Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small" (84). Can I please hear an "Amen!"

Right speech includes within it deep listening.

Right Action is the practice of acting in love and preventing harm.

Right Diligence, or Right Effort, is the practice of focusing our effort on worthy intentions. "If [our effort] takes us farther from reality or from those we love," writes Thich Nhat Hanh, "it is wrong diligence." *****More?

Right Concentration is a focus of mindfulness, it seems to me. As an extension of mindfulness, it is absorption in what is.

"To practice **Right Livelihood**," writes Hanh, "you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion." This, at least on its surface, is maybe the most challenging of all in a culture and a world such as ours has become. Political activist, journalist, and novelist Upton Sinclair said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it." To the extent that we can extricate, and provide support and encouragement for others to extricate themselves from employment, investments, and participation in those activities that perpetuate suffering, we are called to do so.

How many of the eight can you name? If they are starting to blur a little in your mind, don't worry. We will attribute it to what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "the interbeing" of the eight elements.

They are not consecutive. There is no correct order or method by which we engage these. Hanh assures us that if we start with any one, we will necessarily find ourselves practicing the others.

And the next time you run across the number eight, you may be reminded to practice, through whichever practice of the Eightfold Path you recall, the transformation of suffering into the joy beyond sorrow.

Fasting
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
09/07/08

Readings

1. From [Siddhartha](#) (1922) by novelist, Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), in which the main character, a spiritual wanderer, applies for a job:

“What is it that you have to give? What is it that you have learned, that you are able to do?”

“I can think. I can wait. I can fast.”

“And that is all?”

“I believe that that is all.”

“And what good is that? For example, fasting—what is it good for?”

“It is very good, sir. If a person has nothing to eat, then to fast is the cleverest thing he can do. For example, if Siddhartha had not learned how to fast, this very day he would have to accept any position whatsoever, either with you or anywhere else, because hunger would compel him to. But, this way, Siddhartha can wait calmly, he knows no impatience, he knows no distress, he can let himself be besieged by hunger for a long time and can laugh at the situation. That, sir, is what fasting is good for.”

2. From [Hunger: An Unnatural History](#) (2005) by Sharman Apt Russell:

Hunger is a country we enter every day, like a commuter across a friendly border. We wake up hungry. We endure that for a matter of minutes before we break our fast. Later we may skip lunch and miss dinner. We may not eat for religious reasons. We may not eat before surgery. We may go on a three-day fast to cleanse ourselves of toxins and boredom. We may go on a longer fast to imitate Christ in the desert or to lose weight. We may go on a hunger strike. If we are lost at sea, if we have lost our job, if we are at war, we may not be hungry by choice...

Hunger cannot be ignored. Hunger signals you to take what you need. Hunger makes you reach out your hand. Your brain, your stomach, your cells hunger. They break down matter and transform it into something else, the gestalt of your life. You cannot live without hunger. You cannot live with hunger. Hunger begins your exchange with the world.

Sermon

I had to go to the dentist last week. Enough said, right? No one likes to go to the dentist...but I thought, you just have to make it through the appointment and then you'll be free again.

However, this time, because of a particular minor procedure that they performed, they handed me a little informational card with some pointers on how to care for that area. It had things like:

- Don't touch the treated areas (okay...)
- Wait 12 hours to brush teeth (not a problem!)
- Wait 10 days to floss near treated areas (done...if I skip flossing all together, I won't have to worry, right?)
- (But here's the one that got me): Avoid eating hard, crunchy, or sticky foods for 1 week.

What?!? No hard, crunchy or sticky foods? I *love* hard, crunchy and sticky foods, preferably all on the same plate or in the same bowl or crammed in the same wrapper. No hard, crunchy and sticky foods for *1 day*, maybe...but a whole week? It seemed so...well, *medieval*, I thought...this is the 21st century, for goodness sake, isn't there some shot or pill or patch or tooth protector they could give me so I could start eating those wonderful hard, sticky and crunchy foods immediately without repercussions?

You can maybe guess from this admittedly embarrassing petulant outburst that I am no expert on fasting. If I balk at avoiding hard, crunchy and sticky for a mere week (and I admit that I couldn't even complete this quasi-fast, but I was really careful to chew on only one side)...well, it's doubtful that I have the discipline to complete a real fast.

But why should I?

That's the question that provided the genesis of this sermon. Why should I fast? Why *would* I fast?

Fasting is a component of many of the world's religions, and, indeed, the Muslim celebration of Ramadan which began this month, commemorating the revelation of the Quran to the Angel Gabriel and through Gabriel to Muhammad, includes fasting from sunup to sundown each day as its most prominent feature. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Jesus fasted forty days in preparation for his ministry. Siddhartha, before he was enlightened, fasted until it is said that he could poke a finger into his belly and touch his spine. Many branches of Buddhism include fasting as a piece of spiritual practice. In Hinduism, fasting occurs during festivals and on the New Moon. In Judaism, some celebrate Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, with a fast from sundown to sundown. Some Mormons fast the first Sunday of each month, while some Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays during Lent. Fasting is recognized in Taoism as well as in many of the Native American traditions.

Why so important? What makes it a religious practice? Why is it often a component of a spiritual journey?

The Greek writer from the fourth century A.D. who is called pseudo-Athanasius wrote:

Observe what fasting does: it heals disease, dries up the bodily humors, casts out demons, chases away wicked thoughts, makes the mind clearer and the heart pure, sanctifies the body and places the person before the throne of God (pg. 44, Russell, Hunger: An Unnatural History).

These are some pretty bold claims, but they point out the underlying notion that, by choosing to deny the immediate quenching of our physical needs, we can better focus on the more important spiritual goals of our existence. Indeed in many traditions, including Muslim practices during Ramadan, fasting from food is often combined with abstaining from sexual relations. St. Jerome, who also lived in the fourth

century A.D., “went so far as to say that the preservation of chastity required fasting. Alternately, a full stomach excited the body and the genitals” (pg. 44, Russell).

Fasting, then, became part of a spiritual process in which one denied the physical in order to accentuate the holy. By fasting, one could presumably achieve a closer relationship with God, and, because of the natural human tendency to test limits, the question became: *how close could one get?* Ironically, while fasting could be seen as a natural prescription for gluttony and over-indulgence, people found a way to over-indulge even in non-indulgence, seeking ever-greater holiness.

St. Jerome, whom I mentioned earlier as an avid supporter of fasting, particularly fasting pointed toward the preservation of female purity, ran into trouble when a widow whom he had encouraged apparently died from overzealous fasting. This incident persuaded him to begin warning against long fasts and strict fasts that permitted no food at all.

Interestingly, though, fasting continued its relative popularity among women in Christianity and, by the 13th century and for the next four hundred years, became something of a female specialty, according to author Sharman Apt Russell. Catherine of Siena ate only a handful of herbs a day. Clare of Assisi didn't eat on Mondays, Wednesdays or Fridays. St. Veronica often fasted for three days at a time, and reserved Fridays for her one meal of five orange seeds in honor of the five wounds that Jesus suffered at his crucifixion. Many women became famous for surviving on nothing but the Holy Host for *years*, the Holy Host being literally the bread or wafers of Communion and symbolically (for us, although literally for some) the body of Christ, so that they could be said to have survived solely on eating God.

But while fasting had been lauded on the one hand as a sign of obedience to Christ, it increasingly was suspected as an act of rebellion by women who resisted the urgings of their families to marry, settle down, have some kids...Fasting and the ascetic life was seen as a way to resist “the way they'd always heard it should be,” to quote Carly Simon. As such, priests began urging *against* fasting as a possible temptation from the devil rather than encouraging it as a path to purification.

But extreme examples of women's fasts continued into the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1807, an Englishwoman with two illegitimate children stopped eating, and news of her fast soon made her a celebrity. Her village benefited from the tourist trade, as tourists, doctors and religious seekers came to see her and marvel at her fasting feat. She soon gave way to the pressure to prove that she was truly not eating and, within a week of the local authorities keeping watch, she was quite obviously dying. Her daughter confessed to having fed her mother over the years through bits of food wrapped in unassuming napkins and transferred in kisses. There was little doubt that the woman had survived on very little nourishment for a long time, but it turned out not to be the miracle it was cracked up to be.

I thought that it was fascinating, in this respect, that not only can humans turn what may have been a moderating practice meant to discipline one's gluttony into something like an extreme sports event, but they can also turn what apparently started out to be a practice that helped to distance one from the world into a major-league media spectacle. And if you think that was all over long ago, remember that [magician David Blaine in 2003 fasted](#) for 44 days suspended 30 feet in the air in a Plexiglass box on the south bank of the River Thames in London.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus noted the tendency for fasting to become a performance in his time, and he told his disciples:

[W]henever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18, NRSV).

Don't make a big show of it, he says. It's not about proving how religious you can be.

But what *is* it about, then? We come full circle and ask the question that I began with: what is fasting about and what is its relevance to us?

Jesus says, "Your Father will reward you," and for some of us, that is a construct that may work. But even taking particular concepts of God out of the mix, if we simply said that there are rewards to be had from fasting, what would we imagine those to be?

Fasting has many faces.

One who fasts can display obedience to spiritual dictates and commitment to God by willingly refusing to satisfy for a limited period of time the normal cravings of the body.

But fasting can also be undertaken as a display of rebellion against traditional expectations by choosing to place oneself outside the normal cycle of human activity, a central feature of which is eating when one is hungry.

It may be undertaken as a very private and personal activity, chosen precisely to distance oneself from the everyday world in order to focus more intensely on the spiritual nature of existence.

But it may also be intended as a very public event, not only as media spectacle or offbeat entertainment, but as a way of focusing attention on particular injustices in the form of the "hunger strike."

Fasting can be seen as a radical disconnection from the physical; a turning of one's back on the world.

But it can also be seen as part of an even deeper connection to this existence that we share. That's the part that intrigues me.

I think that I rarely feel actual hunger. The times I have felt what I perceive to be real hunger, I have never been totally without the means to satisfy it in some fashion. That may have taken the form of popcorn or macaroni and cheese or those wonderful Ramen noodles that saved me more than once, but I could always find something to eat. Most often, instead of hunger, I feel a vague disquiet, maybe, the stirrings of emptiness in my stomach and I move to satisfy it. Sometimes I eat even before that occurs.

I related to the author you heard in the reading, Sharman Apt Russell, when she reported that in her fast it wasn't hunger that bothered her so much as boredom. *Boredom*. I eat for something to do. I eat when I'm distracted; when I'm watching TV; when I'm trying to figure out what to do next. I eat without tasting. I eat things that I probably would not eat if I took a moment to really think about it. I eat without noticing.

Without noticing. You see what I mean?

What raises our appreciation of something anymore than its absence? In the immortal words of Joni Mitchell, “Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘till it’s gone.” By letting ourselves feel hunger, we are putting ourselves in touch with the amazing processes of the body’s mechanisms of survival. By withholding, for a time, the taste of our favorite food, we may heighten the actual taste on our tongue. By feeling hungry, and intentionally staying with that feeling for a time, we may allow ourselves to become more personally involved in making sure that those who have no means to satisfy their hunger are provided with food!

It begins with awareness.

Understand, I am not committing to an extended fast, nor am I calling on us as a congregation to begin fasting as a requirement of membership, but what if we were to introduce some of the positive rewards of fasting into the life of our community? What if, the next time someone forgot to bring treats for coffee hour, rather than treating it like a tragedy of major proportions, we engaged that time as a wonderful opportunity for community fasting and each contributed what we could to the food shelf? What if we were invited to bring grocery items as we were able for the food bank to every congregational potluck? What if we planned our Circle Suppers such that we drew a wider circle to include those who regularly go without suppers, taking the time to write our elected officials and join organizations that push for political action on the gigantic yet achievable goal of ending world hunger? I recognize that many of you are individually involved in addressing this need, and I hope that we can bring the same passion to it as a congregation. In a couple weeks, the Empty Bowls service will bring an opportunity to nourish ourselves by making sure that others are fed. May there be many more opportunities.

What is it that you have to give?

I can fast, said Siddhartha.

But fasting was not an end in itself to the Buddha. He reached enlightenment only upon breaking his fast, and then he spent his life raising awareness and preaching compassion.

Magician David Blaine, weak and weary, came out of his Plexiglass box after 44 days of fasting and told an admittedly hostile crowd who had been taunting him throughout the ordeal: “I love you.” He went on to say, “I have learned to appreciate the simple things in life such as the smile from a loved one or a stranger, the sunshine and sunset.”

Sharman Apt Russell, after researching and writing a book on the many aspects of hunger and fasting, wrote this on the final page: *Hunger begins your exchange with the world.*

The next time you feel hungry, welcome that feeling not as something you suffer alone but as something that begins your exchange with the world. Our own hunger cannot be ignored; the hunger of others *should not* be ignored; hunger calls us to reach out our hands.

So may it be.

Closing Words (Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi #702)

Where hate rules, let us bring love; where sorrow, joy. Let us strive more to comfort others than to be comforted, to understand others than to be understood, to love others more than to be loved. For it is in giving that we receive and in pardoning that we are pardoned.

A Day's Work
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
09/14/08

Readings

From **Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America** (2001) by Barbara Ehrenreich, in which she joined the ranks of those employed in “unskilled” service jobs and tried to make ends meet on the wages that were offered :

[M]aybe it's low-wage work in general that has the effect of making you feel like a pariah. When I watch TV over my dinner at night, I see a world in which almost everyone makes \$15 an hour or more, and I'm not just thinking of the anchor folks. The sitcoms and dramas are about fashion designers or schoolteachers or lawyers, so it's easy for a fast-food worker or nurse's aide to conclude that she is an anomaly—the only one, or almost the only one, who hasn't been invited to the party. And in a sense she would be right: the poor have disappeared from the culture at large, from its political rhetoric and intellectual endeavors as well as from its daily entertainment. Even religion seems to have little to say about the plight of the poor...The moneylenders have finally gotten Jesus out of the temple.

From **Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream** (2005) by Barbara Ehrenreich, in which she goes undercover as an unemployed white-collar worker looking for a position in corporate America. Here she attends the Crossroads Jobseekers' meeting at a church in Atlanta:

[The speaker] launches into what I now recognize as Job Search 101: the need for an elevator speech, a polished resume, and of course the need to network, network, network. Networking is so central to life, he confides, that we should be taught how to do it in kindergarten and primary school. And who should be our first networking target? The Lord.

I'm sorry, this is too much for me...[Though an atheist,] I discover I'm a believer, and what I believe is this: if the Lord exists, if there is some conscious being whose thought the universe is—some great spinner of galaxies, hurler of meteors, creator and extinguisher of species—if some such being should manifest itself, you do not “network” with it any more than you would light a cigarette on the burning bush. [This man] is guilty of blasphemy. He has demeaned the universe as I know it...

What we want from a career narrative is some moral thrust, some meaningful story we can...tell our children. The old narrative was “I worked hard and therefore succeeded” or sometimes “I screwed up and therefore failed.” But a life of only intermittently rewarded effort—working hard only to be laid off, and then repeating the process until aging forecloses decent job offers—requires more strenuous forms of explanation. Either you look for the institutional forces shaping your life, or you attribute the unpredictable ups and downs of your career to an infinitely powerful, endlessly detail-oriented God...

My taxi driver back to the...airport is an immigrant from India who hopes to become a Pentecostal preacher. When I admit to not being a Christian, he squints back skeptically at me in the rearview mirror, as if he might have missed some telltale facial flaw.

“It's too hard to be a Christian,” I explain, “Jesus said that as soon as you get any money, you have to sell all you have and give to the poor.”

“Where does it say that?” he asks, genuinely curious.

Sermon

Did anyone read the Labor Section of today's newspaper? No?

No, you didn't read the Labor Section because there *isn't* a Labor Section. Not in the Sierra Vista Herald. Not in the Arizona Daily Star or in the Arizona Republic. Not in the Los Angeles Times or the New York Times, not in the Washington Post or the Christian Science Monitor...

There *is* a *Business* Section in most newspapers. That's where we read about the economy. But it's particularly focused on the economy from a business owner's standpoint, from a management perspective, from a corporate view, with investors in mind, the implication for workers being that if things are okay for these folks, then they're okay for the rest of us. But has that been the case?

In an online forum in which a question about a Labor Section in the newspaper arose, one man responded, "There *is* a Labor Section: it's called Help Wanted." And that was aptly put because, again, presumably when business is good this should be reflected in the positions and wages offered to those who are ready, willing and able to work...but have you checked out the Help Wanted section lately, whether through need or curiosity? It is a deeply dismal place.

We can talk about whatever the economy is experiencing presently as a cause, but the fact is that *business* has been riding high for quite a while, yet workers don't seem to be accruing any of the benefits of such apparent success. Corporate profits have reached never-before-seen heights, and yet working families need 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 jobs just to pay the bills. Investor elation, rather than including workers, often comes at their expense as stock prices soar in the advent of massive layoffs. [According to the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office](#), income for the bottom half of American households rose six percent since 1979 but, through 2005, the income of the top one percent skyrocketed - by 228 percent.

You see, in the fairytale world of recent Administrations, corporate profits will translate into widespread prosperity, corporate tax cuts will translate into job creation, absent any government regulations or the advocacy of unions, *the free market* (which is free only in theory) will bestow its blessings on all...Put more crudely, if we just keep stuffing as much money as fast as we can into the pockets of the very wealthiest among us, eventually their pockets will fill and some will spill out for the rest of us. But, listen, their pockets just keep getting bigger. They have the money to employ full-time tailors (at minimum wage, probably...or much less, if they've outsourced) and these tailors just sew bigger and bigger pockets for their corporate lords so the wealthiest have caught every dollar that we've thrown and they have room for more, as evidenced by the recent corporate bail-outs.

Message to the Presidential candidates: THIS PLAN IS NOT WORKING!

Message to religious and ethical leaders, religious and ethical communities across the country: WHERE ARE YOU?

I know that people are concerned about the attention given to religious voices regarding political issues. I am more concerned about the deafening silence emanating from religious communities regarding economic issues. Don't we--and I speak in the inclusive inter-faith *we*, including non-theistic humanist and ethical societies—don't *we* have a moral responsibility to speak out? There is not a religion or humanistic philosophy that I can think of that does not have as one of its core values, expressed in a

variety of ways, justice, equity and compassion in human relations. The Jewish tradition has at its heart the story of a people exploited for their labor, reaching toward liberation. Jesus, a member of an oppressed community, challenged people to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth by their radical generosity toward one another. Muhammad, living through the transition of Arab culture from tribal to a more urban society, challenged the increasing selfishness and the growing income gap that came with a rise in the potential for individual prosperity and called for social justice and a fair distribution of wealth.

But is that what you hear about these religions?

It is sad, but not a surprise to me that Barbara Ehrenreich's cabdriver, studying for the ministry, was taken by surprise by the revelation that Jesus had told a rich young ruler to sell all he had and give it to the poor. One could listen to a whole lot of Christian sermons and never find that out. Even sadder, when such passages *are* preached, they are immediately refuted or challenged by the very ministers that claim the Bible in which they are found as the inerrant Word of God. "Of course, he didn't really mean that the way it sounds," they say. "By making such an impossible request, he was really just showing that we can't make it to heaven by what we do, and so we should give up trying, throw ourselves on the mercy of the Lord, and we'll be assured salvation." I offer you this interpretation, not on the basis of one sermon, but on many I've heard throughout my life, preached on *this* passage, on the Good Samaritan, on the Hebrew Prophets...

Why is religion so reluctant to take on economic injustice? This is what drives me crazy!

And I say this not at all from any standpoint of self-righteous indignation. I feel like Barbara Ehrenreich that Jesus' invitation to sell everything and give to the poor is just too hard. I'm not going to do it. But I don't think that allows me to throw up my hands and ignore the challenge completely. How do I work toward it? How do I help to actualize justice, equity and compassion in human relations? How do I honor the inherent worth and dignity of each person?

I need help! That's just it; I need help. I need opportunities for helping from the society I live in. I want to pay taxes so that I know others in need will have a safety net. I want to help fund programs that ensure that no one can work a full time job and not be able to afford a roof over their head. I want to live in a community that is calling on me to support the common good, rather than one that is enticing me to reject the whole notion that such a thing is desirable or even possible.

Religion has been an utter failure in addressing the problems of poverty from a societal standpoint. I don't want to hear about a thousand points of light or the miracles of faith-based programs. I think religious communities can do more than be a triage center for the people that are systematically and intentionally debased, devalued and destroyed by the very society we inhabit. The most dangerous fundamentalism that exists today is not Christian or Islamic, it is Economic, and religions and secular institutions have spent too long bowing down to it in like fashion. And so we use God and the prophets, not to challenge the system that oppresses, but to urge us to acceptance of our inevitable plight and to teach us how to be a better fit for whatever slot awaits us. "Market forces" becomes the new phrase for "an act of God," and so we treat the homeless and the unemployed and the desperate struggles of the working poor and the dehumanizing pressures of the corporate world as if they were all results of a natural disaster...it *is* a disaster, but there's nothing natural about it!

Part of the problem we are talking about here can be summed up by way of [a parable, attributed to the famous 20th century social activist Saul Alinsky](#). Imagine a large river with a high waterfall. At the bottom of this waterfall hundreds of people are working frantically trying to save those who have fallen into the river and have fallen down the waterfall, many of them drowning. As the people along the shore are trying to rescue as many as possible one individual looks up and sees a seemingly never-ending stream of people falling down the waterfall and she begins to run upstream. One of her fellow rescuers hollers "where are you going? There are so many people that need help here." To which the woman replies, "I'm going upstream to find out why so many people are falling into the river."

You see, our compassion can pull people from the water, save them from drowning. But if we are committed to justice and equity, we need to find out why so many people are falling into the river, and then we need to address that problem. Compassion can be displayed individually; justice and equity are a societal responsibility. Religion and ethics should speak to both.

I highly recommend Barbara Ehrenreich's books for their insight into our economy from the individual stories of the people who struggle to navigate the nearly-impossible course of simple survival.

She shows how the poor pay more, by necessity because they are not offered the conveniences of "normal" life, whether because of their lack of an address, or a bank account, or a credit rating, or transportation, or any of the numerous things that many of us take for granted.

She discover that no job, no matter how lowly, is truly "unskilled." "Every one of the six jobs I entered into in the course of this project," she writes in *Nickel and Dimed*, "required concentration, and most demanded that I master new terms, new tools, and new skills—from placing orders on restaurant computers to wielding the backpack vacuum cleaner. None of these things came as easily to me as I would have liked...Whatever my accomplishments in the rest of my life, in the low-wage work world I was a person of average ability—capable of learning the job and also capable of screwing up."]

Reading Ehrenreich, I thought of my own time working as a Nursing Assistant at a nursing home in Tucson. I was continually struck by the dedication and compassion of workers toward the people in their care, though they were given only perfunctory acknowledgment at best by management. They would complain, as did I, about the wages we were paid, but even more often (and Ehrenreich points this out, too) they would complain about management getting in the way of them doing their jobs. They would complain about decisions that rendered them less able to give the care to the residents that they wanted to give. They took pride in their work, even though they knew that it was not valued in any substantive way by their employer.

And that is what bothers me. Low wage work is often very important work, vital work to the ongoing activity of society, but it is not rewarded; is even considered somehow shameful in the wider world.

We all want a meaningful story we can tell about our lives: we worked hard and we succeeded. Work hard and you will succeed. We are told that this is true, even though there is ample evidence to the contrary. If we are successful, we want to believe it because it validates our efforts. If we are not successful, we want to believe it because we want the hope that it will happen tomorrow. It separates us from one another, because if we are successful and believe it, then we have to believe that the poor person is doing something wrong. It separates us from one another, because if we are poor and believe it we have to believe that we have failed in some way that the successful person has not.

People who are struggling to survive are batted back and forth between religion and the economy but neither one dares to suggest that the system is broken. The economy urges us to spend as a patriotic duty and then chastises us for spending as a moral failure and then asks us to be grateful for any crummy job that is offered as a privilege. Religion offers God as a comfort in our plight or as the ultimate networking tool through prayer who will help us find the position we were meant for, but never as a voice that cries out through our own mouths for economic justice. Redistribution of wealth is seen as a grave sin, both by economists and preachers, but redistribution of corporate debt seems to be a given, God's will, the invisible hand of the market suddenly being redirected to a greater good that we should somehow all accept, though the goodness is hard to fathom.

So why is there no Labor Section, no voice for workers in the media at large? Why is it that employers require loyalty from their employees, but guarantee none in return? Why is it that we find a way to pay trillions of dollars to kill people, but cannot find the money to provide people with healthcare and to send them to school? Why is it that the people doing some of the most important and valuable work of taking care of the most vulnerable among us are paid some of the lowest wages of anyone in our society? Are these not ethical questions? Are these not religious questions? Are we not called to raise up the stories behind the story of the American Dream? What is it we should feel about a society that accepts such a ruthless economic structure as inevitable?

*[T]he appropriate emotion is shame, writes Barbara Ehrenreich in **Nickel and Dimed**, shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others...The "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else...*

Reflecting on her experiences, and thinking of what she hopes for the people she met and grew to respect deeply, she writes:

Someday, of course...they are bound to tire of getting so little in return and to demand to be paid what they're worth. There'll be a lot of anger when that day comes, and strikes and disruption. But the sky will not fall, and we will all be better off for it in the end.

I can only say: may that day come soon.

Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion: #1
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
09/28/08

Readings

I. From [*On Being Human Religiously* \(1922\)](#) by Unitarian minister and theologian, James Luther Adams (1901-1994):

Whatever the destiny of the planet or of the individual life, a sustaining meaning is discernible and commanding in the here and now. Anyone who denies this denies that there is anything worth taking seriously or even worth talking about. Every blade of grass, every work of art, every scientific endeavor, every striving for righteousness bears witness to this meaning. Indeed, every frustration or perversion of truth, beauty, or goodness also bears this witness, as the shadow points round to the sun...

Indeed, every meaning in life is related to this commanding meaning, which no one can manipulate and which stands beyond every merely personal preference or whim. It is transforming, for it breaks through any given achievement; it invades any mind or heart open to it, luring it on to richer or more relevant achievement; it is a self-surpassing reality...It is that reality which works in nature, history, and thought and under certain conditions creates human good in human community.

2. From [*The Bible: A Biography* \(2007\)](#) pg. 15, by Karen Armstrong:

Human beings seek a “stepping outside” of their normal, mundane experience. A major characteristic of a peak religious insight is a sense of completeness and oneness. In this ecstatic condition, things that seemed separate and even opposed coincide and reveal an unexpected unity. In such a state, divisions are transcended in a “stepping outside” from the conflicted fragmentary nature of ordinary life.

Sermon

Most of you know the story of David and Goliath from the Hebrew Scriptures. David is a young Israelite shepherd and Goliath is a giant Philistine soldier. When they meet in battle, David is armed only with a “slingshot,” yet proves victorious.

But in the lead-up to the grand finale, before the battle takes place, King Saul offers David suitable clothing and weapons for doing battle with this formidable foe.

“Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, ‘I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.’ So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose *five smooth stones*...and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine” (I Samuel 17:38-40, NRSV).

Beginning today with the first, and then focusing on the others periodically throughout this year, we will be exploring what is known as “The Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion.”

James Luther Adams (1901-1994), who created them, is called “the most influential theologian among American Unitarian Universalists of the 20th century” by the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society.

He was attempting to capture the principles that guide us in this handful of declarations, this handful of “stones” that we carry with us into our encounters with the world.

The first stone, stated in its simplest form, is this: *Revelation is continuous*. Revelation is continuous.

An interesting statement. Might pique one’s curiosity...but does it inspire bravery? Remember, this is one of only five stones that we are carrying into battle against a giant. We need more than interesting comments, we need *power!* Does this have power?

It may...you’ll have to be the judge of that. But first we have to unpack the meaning if we are to unleash the power.

We need to define our terms. What *is* “revelation”? What do you think of when I say the word “revelation”?

A common reference today, arising from the popularity of a particular Christian evangelical perspective in our culture, is the book of Revelation in the New Testament. It is often referred to as “Revelations,” although, to be accurate, the word is singular: “The *Revelation* to John.” *Revelation*, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, means “a dramatic disclosure of something not previously known or realized,” and, in theological terms, “a manifestation of divine will or truth.”

In other words, John--which is what we call the writer of Revelation, though we have no idea of the identity of the individual who wrote it—John is writing down what had been *revealed* to him, something that had not been previously known, something that, until this point, had been hidden or secret. And further, this was not just any revelation, this was a manifestation of divine will and truth.

Keeping that context in mind, I thought it would be interesting to see how the word “revelation” was being used currently, in popular media. I went online to Yahoo News, which collects a number of national and regional news sources together, and typed in the search term “revelation.”

The first story that came up dealt with a former defendant in the current O.J. Simpson trial who has now agreed to testify against Simpson. This, from the [AP Wire](#):

Asked why he finally accepted the plea deal, he said, "I prayed on the matter and I had a revelation that I did something wrong, and the Bible told me I should go tell the truth."

[The prosecuting attorney] asked whether God had spoken to him, and he said yes.

The [second story](#) that came up dealt with former American Idol contestant, Clay Aiken, and the recent “revelation” that he is gay.

Let’s look at this second story first. One would have to really stretch to say that the revelation that Clay Aiken is gay is “a manifestation of divine will or truth.” The word is being used here to mean “a dramatic disclosure of something that was previously hidden or secret,” (though there are those who would say that it was hardly a surprise.) This is the way “revelation” is used on the covers of the supermarket tabloids, splashed across headlines, usually preceded by the word “shocking!” Shocking revelations, secrets we would never have guessed, disclosure of the juicy tidbits from the lifestyles of the rich and famous that were formerly hidden...And with all of the tabloids and the entertainment shows

and the unauthorized biographies and the tell-all memoirs, it does indeed seem like “revelation is continuous,” though I don’t think this is what James Luther Adams had in mind.

Moving back to the first story: the witness in the O.J. Simpson trial says, “I prayed on the matter and I had a revelation that I did something wrong, and the Bible told me I should go tell the truth.” Was this something that was previously hidden or secret? Well, the man was on trial, so there were at least a few folks who already suspected that he’d done something wrong. But while the content of his revelation may not have been a secret, it was, for this man, “a manifestation of divine will or truth.” I prayed and God revealed to me...

Admittedly, these examples of “revelations” from the weekly news seem trivial.

Clay Aiken coming out of the closet, while important to Mr. Aiken and his family, friends, and fans, is hardly a revelation with cosmic significance.

Whatever one believes about God, we are all familiar enough with the concept to be less than surprised that God would tell someone to “go tell the truth.”

But, listen, though a revelation that follows one or the other definition can seem relatively unimpressive, a revelation that lays claim to both definitions can be explosive! If I say that not only have I had something disclosed to me that was previously hidden or secret but that this disclosure was a manifestation of divine truth...well, that is how religions are born!

Moses coming down the mountain with the tablets inscribed by God; Buddha, raised Hindu, reaching out to new awareness under the Bodhi Tree; the Jewish teacher Jesus saying, “You have heard it said...but *I* say!” The Prophet Muhammad receiving a new Scripture, the Qur’an, from the angel, Gabriel; Joseph Smith being led by the angel Moroni to a new Scripture, a buried book on golden plates...

Religions, by their very nature, carry the promise that they can reveal something to you that was previously hidden—maybe hidden right in front of your face, but no less hidden—and that that which they can reveal is of the utmost importance to your relationship with God, your relationship with other people, your relationship with all of life. Revelation is at the heart of religion...*and* revelation can also be a great threat to religion.

Consider: if I have accepted the truth of a revelation, or a group of revelations, and have joined a religion in which the content of those revelations has been instituted as a set of beliefs, sacred and beyond question, what do I do when a new revelation presents itself? What if new secrets are revealed? What if it changes the understanding of previous revelations? What if it alters the original revelations? What if it refutes the revelations in which I now believe?

This puts religions in the awkward position of championing the authority of their own revelations, while denying the validity of others and closing off the potential for any future revelations at all. How do they do this? They state it outright, teaching their followers, often within the context of the very revelation which provides their foundation.

Jesus says “No one comes to the Father but by me.” Christians say the canon of Scripture is closed; no more books allowed. Muslims say the Qur’an is the Final Revelation; Muhammad is the final Prophet. The book of Revelation itself, the final book in the Christian Scriptures, ends with these words:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev. 22:18-19 NRSV).

Particular strains of each religion claim that they are the full, complete, final word of God to humanity, of Truth, so that all other claims are necessarily false, and they guard this exclusivity as best they can, at times by arguing the tenets of their religion, at other times by thinly disguised (and sometimes blatant) threats. If the faithful are enthusiastic about where revelation begins in their particular faith tradition, they are also made to be very clear on where revelation ends: at the boundaries of their congregation, their Scripture, their history, their understandings. This far, and no farther. Revelation *happened*, it doesn’t *happen*. Revelation *was*.

The first smooth stone of liberal religion says: Revelation *is*.

“Revelation is continuous,” writes James Luther Adams, “Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism.”

One of the things I love about this is that it is a perspective that promotes humility in regards to one’s own beliefs, and encourages understanding in encountering the beliefs of others. It provides a direct challenge to the aggressiveness of fundamentalism and the enmity engendered by our point/counterpoint society. We engage enthusiastically in our individual searches for truth and meaning, realizing that the meaning we find in this life can only point toward what Adams calls “the commanding meaning, which no one can manipulate and which stands beyond every merely personal preference or whim.”

The criticism of liberal religion is that, not having any boundaries on revelation, we also have no means to distinguish what is authentic and true from the delusions of the mind and heart. As nothing is exempt from criticism, they say, then nothing must be worthy of our commitment...Ah, but they underestimate the power of this one smooth stone.

Karen Armstrong points out in her biography of the Bible that even religions that clearly circumscribe their sources of inspiration and revelation have the challenge of deciding what is authentic and true. Even if one accepts the Bible as a revelation of God to humanity, for instance, one still has to deal with the wide variety of interpretations that are engendered by that revelation.

The great Jewish sage, Hillel, who lived in the First Century, was reportedly approached by a man who promised to convert to Judaism if Hillel could summarize the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Standing on one leg, Hillel replied: “What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go study it.” There is no report on whether the man converted, but I think Hillel did his part.

You see, Hillel “taught that rabbis should attempt to reveal the core of compassion that lay at the heart of all the legislation and narratives in the scriptures—even if this meant twisting the original meaning of

the text” (Armstrong, 113). In other words, though the text offered revelations, it could be superseded by what Adams would call “the commanding meaning” that we are all called to love one another.

St. Augustine, in the Christian tradition, came to a similar conclusion:

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived (Armstrong, 167).

The mark of true revelation may then be that which increases our compassion for ourselves, for one another and for all of life. When we, as a congregation, affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all life, we are accepting the interdependence of all life as an element of that commanding meaning which draws all others to it. Revelation can only deepen our awareness and experience of this reality.

Karen Armstrong alludes to this when she writes that “human beings seek a ‘stepping outside’ of their normal, mundane experience [into an] ecstatic condition [where] things that seemed separate and even opposed coincide and reveal an unexpected unity.”

We can use the details and particularities of our own revelations to separate us from one another, but we will then miss the experience of an unexpected unity. We can view the revelations that speak to us as Capital-T-Once-And-For-All-Truth, but we will then close ourselves to the commanding meaning that sustains all such revelations and shows them to be incomplete.

On the other hand, we can embrace the concept of revelation as ongoing possibility, and thus open ourselves to the sacred quality of all of life that is so cleverly hidden in plain sight.

We can say “revelation *was*,” and then choose amongst the possibilities of where and when it happened. Or we can proclaim, with James Luther Adams, that revelation *is*...revelation is continuous.

And if revelation is *continuous*, it is less an activity or event than a posture we assume toward life. Revelation not only *can* happen; it *is*!

The challenges that we face in battling for human rights, equity and compassion are, like Goliath, gigantic, and they seem to be growing larger all the time. We have chosen to shrug off the cumbersome armor of any imposed and uniform religious doctrine, that promises safety but restricts our movements. But having chosen liberal religion, we need to gather our stones if we are to battle the forces of oppression and injustice and work to fulfill our congregational mission.

So put this one in your pouch and keep your sling in your hand...we’ve got work to do.

Closing Words (Sara Moores Campbell - #701)

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.

Days of Awe
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
10/05/08

Opening Words – (#707 – Deuteronomy 30)

It is written in the Torah:

“I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

Readings

From [*Hasidism and Modern Man* \(1958\)](#) by Martin Buber (1878-1965) pg. 159:

Each person must find their own self, not the trivial ego of the egotistic individual, but the deeper self of the person living in a relationship to the world. And that is contrary to everything we are accustomed to.

Rabbi Hanokh told this story:

There was once a man who was very stupid. When he got up in the morning it was so hard for him to find his clothes that at night he almost hesitated to go to bed for thinking of the trouble he would have on waking. One evening he finally made a great effort, took paper and pencil and as he undressed noted down exactly where he put everything he had on. The next morning, very well pleased with himself, he took the slip of paper in his hand and read: “cap”—there it was, he set it on his head; “pants”—there they lay, he got into them; and so it went until he was fully dressed. “That’s all very well, but now where am I myself?” he asked in great consternation. “Where in the world am I?” He looked and looked, but it was a vain search; he could not find himself. “And that is how it is with us,” said the rabbi.

Sermon

Rosh Hashanah was celebrated this last Tuesday and Yom Kippur will be celebrated this next Thursday. The days that fall in between these two Jewish holidays are known as Days of Awe...They are also known as Days of Repentance.

Repentance. That’s not a word you probably hear very much, is it? It is often associated with a particular type of religiosity; a type that many of us have left behind, or maybe never experienced.

But even religions where the act of repentance is treated with great respect have experienced a decline in the enthusiasm in which it is practiced by the adherents of these faiths.

Mark Oppenheimer, in an article in the online publication *Slate*, entitled “[Sin Offerings: How Jews and Christians Can Improve on Yom Kippur](#),” notes that Yom Kippur was never intended to be the *only* day of repentance and atonement, only the most important one, which is why the rabbinic sages suggested a *daily* prayer of contrition. But with the spread of Reform and Conservative Judaism, few of whose adherents pray daily, this practice faded away and Yom Kippur came to bear the considerable weight of (at least!) a year’s worth of regret for the past and best intentions for the future, not unlike the resolution-crushed secular New Years Day. Speaking of Yom Kippur, he writes, “For some Jews, it will be a day of real reckoning. But the day’s rituals probably won’t lead to lasting improvements in the

characters of most worshipers. If, somehow, Jews actually are better people in the first weeks of our New Year, we soon revert—before Hanukkah, I'd say—to our old sinful ways. We rediscover the pleasures of gossip, greed, and sloth. New Year's resolutions are New Year's resolutions, after all.”

But if Oppenheimer sees that his own Jewish tradition has grown a little lackadaisical in its recognition of the need for repentance, the same goes for many other groups.

“The Christian faithful, too, used to steadily make confession,” he writes. “But the Reformation nearly killed off the practice among Protestants, and in the 40 years since Vatican II, Catholics have also dropped the practice en masse.”

[James O'Toole, in *Boston College Magazine*](#), notes that the sharpest decline in confessions within U.S. Catholicism began in the mid-1960's. Parish schedules confirm this 20th century decline. “In 1900, for instance, Sacred Heart parish in middle-class Newton, Massachusetts, had settled into a pattern that would remain in place for more than half a century: Four priests heard confessions from 3:30 to 6 p.m. and again from 7 to 9:30, a total of five hours, every Saturday. In later years, as confessions declined, fewer hours were set aside. By 1972, with the decline fully underway, five hours were reduced to three (4 to 5:30 and 7:30 to 9 p.m.), and by 1991 that was cut to only an hour and a half (2 to 3:30), though the pastor was then also adding hopefully ‘anytime by appointment.’”

Repentance, through the intentional search for atonement, has become something of a dinosaur in the realm of religious practices in our modern world. Religion is no longer supposed to hold *us* accountable...we are to hold *it* accountable. What can I get from religion? How can it help me to grow? How will it increase my enjoyment of life? Will I be saved? Will I learn secrets? Wisdom? Will I gain understanding? Will I be happier with myself? Will I be accepted? Will *I* be understood? Welcomed? Fulfilled?

I think those are all valid questions. But here's the question I wish to ask today: is it wise to do away with repentance? Might repentance help to answer some of these questions? Help us to grow? To gain understanding? To find our selves, as Martin Buber suggested in the Reading, beyond the trivial ego of the egotistic individual?

If the knowledge and practice of repentance is increasingly rare, I think that liberal religion is at least partially responsible for its conspicuous absence. Remember Thomas Starr King, who lived in the 1800's, a Universalist and Unitarian minister before the two traditions merged, asked to describe the difference between them, said: “The Universalists think God is too good to damn them forever, while the Unitarians think they are too good to be damned forever.”

Now, rejecting the doctrine of hell, of eternal damnation for one's sins or errors, did not preclude the practice of repentance, but it certainly drained away some of its urgency. Further, in rebelling against the dim view of human nature held by Calvinism, we championed the inherent worth and dignity of each individual. In embracing views of the Divine that wandered well outside the notion of a personal God who kept track of our sins, and, indeed, in welcoming those with views of the universe that held no God at all, repentance became virtually untenable. Why repent? And to whom?

And, indeed, if repentance was only about escaping the wrath of an angry God, assuring one's personal position in a paradise after death, then I would say “Good riddance!” There really *is* no place for repentance in our tradition. But is that all that repentance is?

If we understand repentance as that which nurtures our moral character through a clear-eyed assessment of our failings, then I think the tradition can be said to have been kept alive by our ancestors, even if it has not been passed on to us explicitly in ritual or liturgical form. And we had reasons for abandoning those forms.

After all, we could see that, to a great extent, rituals of confession, contrition, and atonement had clearly devolved into empty acts; easy-outs that served to ease the conscience, but that did not really change behavior. We, Unitarians, believe in “salvation by character.” The power to improve ourselves is *within* ourselves, right? Not in any priest or any ritual or any recital of a confession of sins...

But I wonder...By making repentance--if we would even call it that anymore--by making it a purely personal act, engaged in exclusively at our own convenience and choice, have we robbed it of its power? Can we trust ourselves to always see our own selves clearly enough to hold ourselves accountable?

And why should we care?

Maybe repentance is on the wane because we just don't need it anymore. Let the past go. Onward and upward. Why wallow in remorse? Why worry about what's happened? We have a whole future ahead of us.

Governor Palin [expressed this sentiment](#) to Senator Biden many times in the Vice Presidential debate this last Thursday, saying at one point, “[T]here you go again pointing backwards again...Now doggone it, let's look ahead and tell Americans what we have to plan to do for them in the future.”

And Governor Palin was simply voicing a sentiment that is sewn into the fabric of our culture and is only now starting to come apart at the seams.

Those who hold power in this country have all been swept up, and *we* have all been swept up in varying degrees of participation, into the unreflective, unrestricted, unaccountable rush into the future and, guess what? The future is here!

That's what concerns me...We are beginning to experience what the ramifications can be for a society that has trivialized the need for reflection, let alone repentance, and now seems completely at sea as it looks to achieve some kind of atonement. Atonement: amends or reparation made for an injury or wrong. Reconciliation.

We have an opportunity now to turn—*turn*, which Martin Buber says is what true repentance should lead to, not wallowing in what we have done wrong, but acknowledging it and seeking forgiveness for it, and then turning from the harmful way we were headed to a better way, a great turning—we have an opportunity now to turn, but *can* we? Will we even know how?

The rediscovery of true repentance can help to teach us, I believe. But we have to turn away from the lessons of a consumer culture.

You see, there is a reason that [President Bush was completely tongue-tied](#) when he was asked by a reporter what his biggest mistake was after 9/11. There is a reason President Clinton chose to argue over the meaning of *is*, rather than being honest. There is a reason that neither of the Vice Presidential

candidates could speak for two seconds on their respective “Achilles heels.” There is a reason that a principled change of mind is known derisively as a “flip-flop” in modern political discourse. And though I’m picking on the politicians, I do that only because it is indicative of a greater problem in our society...we are not taught to *know* ourselves. We are taught that the most important thing is to *sell* ourselves. With such a paradigm, we don’t admit mistakes, we excuse them, or we explain them, or we justify them. We sell ourselves to voters, to employers, to teachers, to lovers, to *our own selves*. We have lost the practice of repentance because we are selling ourselves *to* ourselves. We don’t wish to look too closely, because we don’t want buyer’s remorse. There is no chance of returning this particular merchandise, after all. We have lost the art of repentance, because we don’t think highly enough of ourselves to think that we can weather the introspection. We lay out our designer clothes or our power suits or our appropriate uniforms carefully for the morning and, having dressed, say, “Where in the world am I?”

Repentance...a deliberate and thoughtful turning...could help us answer that. We are far stronger than we have been led to believe. We have far greater questions to answer than those about our preferences or opinions. We have such great and important work to do that *we cannot afford to justify what we have done!* We must face it fully, plumb the depths of our sins, and make the important choices. We must decide that we will not sell ourselves; rather, we will *know* ourselves.

It is written in the Torah: “I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

Doesn’t that verse have a profound resonance in these times? *Choose life* so that you and your descendants may live.

Repentance is just a piece of that choice. Though repentance is often associated with a life-denying attitude of remorse and guilt, it doesn’t have to be that way.

Martin Buber tells a story of an old rabbi who comes to trust a younger rabbi who has become a part of the family through marriage. He comes to the younger rabbi and says, “I’m so happy to be able to talk to you now. There is something eating at my heart. I am an old man, look at my white hair and beard, and I have not properly atoned.”

And you know what the younger rabbi says? He says, “O, my friend, you are thinking only of yourself. How about forgetting yourself and thinking of the world?” (pg. 162)

...Now wait a minute. Doesn’t this contradict everything I’ve been saying? The old rabbi was trying to repent and he is basically rebuked by the younger rabbi.

But Buber goes on to explain that this is really no contradiction at all. It is, rather, about the purpose of repentance. Everything, he says, begins with oneself. You must come to know yourself. Repentance is a vital piece of that knowing. But it begins with your self...it doesn’t end there. Repentance leads to turning, and that turning leads to your renewed and revitalized relationship to the world.

“To begin with oneself, but not to end with oneself;” Buber writes, “To start from oneself, but not to aim at oneself; to comprehend oneself, but not to be preoccupied with oneself” (pg. 163).

It is all too easy to lose ourselves amidst the stuff of life; to get dressed and wonder, “Where, in all this, am I?” It is easy to let our desires carry us along from one decision to another, vacillating wildly between compassion and self-interest. Without the compass of self-knowledge to guide us and humility to ground us, we will never learn the lessons that are taught every day by the life around us; rather we will continue to grab for what we *want*, without a clue as to what we *need*.

Repentance is one of the practices that help return ourselves *to* ourselves, so that we may make the greater turning from selfishness to relationship, from self-centered action to compassionate deeds...from death to life.

This is my prayer for all of us in these days of awe: May we have the courage, insight and strength to choose life.

Closing Words (Jewish Prayer SLT #507)

Grant us the ability to find joy and strength not in the strident call to arms, but in stretching out our arms to grasp our fellow creatures in the striving for justice and truth.

American Idol-atry
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
10/26/08

Reading

*From [The Left Hand of God](#) (2006) by Michael Lerner:
(pgs. 24 & 211-212)*

That very yearning for a world based more on love than on domination over others, for a world in which people respond with awe and wonder rather than with a purely utilitarian attitude toward other human beings and toward nature, is the core of a religious and spiritual tradition that I call the Left Hand of God...

So when people say to me today, “Do you see a candidate or a political leader that you think will be a champion for the Left Hand of God?” I respond: there are many decent and principled people in public life today, and there are many more who would like to be. But as the Good Book tells us, “Do not put your trust in the princes” (Psalms 146:3). Those people will respond when there is a social movement that makes it safe for them to do what their best instincts tell them to do. In fact, only at that point will they begin to hear the voice of hope and the voice of a politics that believes in the possibility of a world of love. And that’s not because politicians are unprincipled, but rather because they are just like the rest of us—and just as likely as the rest of us to ignore the pull toward a world of love, caring, and generosity as long as it seems that paying attention to that pull is likely to be self-destructive and put them at risk of humiliation and isolation.

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt met with a group of labor leaders in 1934 who were trying to convince him to support the Lehman Act, which would extend rights for union organizing, he listened intently for three hours. At the end he said, “You’ve convinced me and I fully support this legislation. Now go out there and force me to do this.” He was saying what I’m saying: social change can be helped along by people in power, but only when they themselves feel that some significant section of their constituents is pushing them very hard, and in a direction that has already received national support and attention from a movement that is not going away.

So we need to stop fantasizing that we are going to find a magical candidate who embodies all that we believe in and instead create a movement that makes it necessary for any candidate to respond to our message...we need to be actively championing a vision of love and generosity for our society and refusing to settle for less.

Sermon

I was sitting in one of my classes at theological school and the question that the professor posed is: what is *sin*? Sophisticated graduate students that we were, we tossed the question back and forth and used as many fancy theological terms as we could to come up with an answer that basically said: to sin is to do really bad stuff.

The professor pushed us a bit. Why is it that humans *do* bad stuff? And he gently coaxed us into helping him flesh out two answers to that question that, for him, delineated a difference between conservative and liberal theology (in this case, of the Christian tradition).

For the conservatives, sin is a result of *disobedience*. Humans, infected with original sin, rebel against God, disobey God's commands, and that's what gets them into trouble.

For the liberals, sin is, he said, a result of *idolatry*.

Now on first hearing, that may sound a little strange. Didn't idolatry go out with the golden calf back in ancient Hebrew times? Not really a modern problem is it? I always figured that "thou shalt make no graven images" was one of the commandments I didn't have to worry about.

But idolatry, in a wider sense, is still with us. Idolatry, in this sense, is worshipping that which is not worthy of worship. Sin, or bad stuff if you prefer, is caused by our focusing on the wrong things; relying on that which is not worthy of our trust; raising something or someone up to a level where they do not belong; getting messed up in our priorities. *Idolatry*.

This resonates with my own understanding of my life: I get into trouble when I place great importance on that which is not important, not least of all because that clouds my awareness of, and drains my energy for what *is* important. Paul Tillich described faith as "ultimate concern." Bad religion, or bad faith, results when we treat something as our ultimate concern that cannot bear the weight of our trust, of our expectations. If my ultimate concern is what clothes I wear (and you've probably all noticed how fussy I am about clothes, right?), then I am bound to be disappointed at some point in my life with the realization that *clothing* is not really worthy of the focus, the *attention*, which I have given it.

Understood in this way, I think we can all see that idolatry still exists. As a society, though it is described in a variety of ways from a variety of perspectives, there is a general sense that our priorities have become mixed up. And it may be that, even when we get our priorities in order, we fail at achieving our ends because we are still caught in a pattern of idolatry, mistaking the means for the ends.

For a short time, the item printed in your order of service regarding the TV talent show "American Idol" generating more votes than has ever been received by a presidential candidate was given a lot of press as an example of a widespread *disinterest* in our political process, and a concurrent deep interest in *celebrity*. It has also been pointed out, however, that the comparison was hardly fair, as the American Idol voting offered the convenience of voting from your phone (without ever leaving the couch) and also the opportunity for one individual to vote numerous times.

This presidential campaign season has already generated more enthusiasm and participation than any in recent history. Voters may give "American Idol" a run for their money in this presidential election, and that is great! But my overriding concern is not that "American Idol" generated more enthusiasm than a presidential campaign...my concern is that we have come to treat the two events in a similar manner. We watch the contestants, be they amateur singers or public servants; we rate their respective talents and qualifications; we vote for our favorite; the results come in...*and the season is over*.

Please please please please know that, whatever the results of this election, the season is not over.

I am not one of those people who will tell you that elections don't matter. This election matters in ways both big and small; in ramifications that we can predict and those that we cannot; it *matters* who wins the election...but it is only one piece of what matters. On November 5th, whether you are celebrating or mourning the results, know this: the season is not over. The work of democracy is not pointed solely toward electing a particular individual; electing a particular individual is pointed toward the much

greater work of democracy. A presidential campaign is *not* American Idol. And idolatry is not democracy. Indeed, it subverts democracy.

What do I mean by idolatry in this context?

First, let me say that I understand the need for heroes. I understand the fascination with celebrities. And I understand the yearning for great leaders.

Paul Johnson, in his recent book entitled [*Heroes*](#), writes that throughout human history, people have “needed to identify with...[people] of great capacity and accomplishment.” So, in its purest form, we honor and respect those people who show great capacity or accomplishment in areas of activity that are important to us, or directed toward purposes which we share. Unlike gods, heroes, sharing our common humanity, can inspire us to greater accomplishments ourselves. They strengthen our belief that seemingly distant goals can be reached, that seemingly insurmountable tasks can be accomplished, they *empower* us.

But heroes can also *disempower* us when we turn them into *idols*.

One definition of *idol* in the Merriam Webster online dictionary is:

an object of extreme devotion <a movie *idol*> ;

That would, presumably, be the definition, somewhat tongue-in-cheek of course, used by the producers of “American Idol.” They imagine that we will become so enamored of a contestants’ talent, charm, stage presence that they become our “idol.”

Apart from being an object of devotion, an *idol* is also defined as being a representation, symbol, or likeness of something, but not the real thing, implying that it can be mistaken for the real thing. The confusion of the representation with the real thing, the larger thing, is idolatry. We sometimes do this to our heroes, our leaders.

We exaggerate their achievements; overstate their accomplishments. They become objects of devotion; the focus of lavish and misplaced attention. We imagine them to be what they are not. We convince ourselves that they can do what they cannot. We convince ourselves that *they* will do what *we* will not.

You see, the temptation of idolatry is that it takes the pressure off of us. It takes the focus off of our own efforts. It simplifies things for us by putting the weight on the other, even though we can already see that it is doomed to fail, that we have pinned our hopes on, at best, a representation, an image, of what is really needed.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses went up Mt. Sinai alone to receive the commands of God. He was gone for awhile. The people grew restless. The book of Exodus reads, “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them,

formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’” (Exodus 32:1-4, NRSV)

This is an amazing story to me. The people enter into this idol worship completely aware of what they are doing. It is not like they have been convinced that this golden calf is a god; they *will* it to be one, even though they have seen that it is but the product of the gold rings and earrings they have contributed. Moses returns from the mountain and breaks up the party; but the fact is that the golden calf worship would probably not have lasted long anyway. How could it? The golden calf could never meet the expectations they had placed upon it *and they knew it!* They would have grown to hate it for not meeting the expectations that they knew it would not be able to meet from its very incarnation. But it was a mistake that the Hebrew people would repeat, and that we can see repeated throughout human history.

It is this type of idolatry that creates a love/hate relationship with our heroes, our leaders. We give them too much attention, and resent the attention that they are given. We place unreal expectations upon them, and then despise them for not meeting those expectations. We idolize them until their inevitable fall from the pedestals where we have placed them, and we enjoy their fall as due payment for being up on a pedestal in the first place.

When we witness this syndrome in the supermarket tabloids, we may regard it as comically tragic. When we adopt this process of idolatry as a substitute for real participation in our democracy, the results are devastating, as we have witnessed. We move into a cycle of unreal expectation, inevitable disappointment, unreal expectation, inevitable disappointment, unreal expectation, inevitable disappointment, until we simply collapse in apathetic cynicism or delude ourselves into becoming true believers in the idols that we have created. We no longer hold the goal of a just, compassionate and equitable society, we simply grab hold of team spirit. We no longer work toward transformation of society, we only want a “win” for our side.

I fully believe that we are at a major crossroads in the history of this country, and most likely in the history of the world. We cannot afford to fall into idolatry.

The Hebrew people, for example, were facing a serious question: what now? We are in the wilderness. Our leader, Moses, has apparently abandoned us. We are unsure about which direction to go. At that point, they might have come together to discuss their options. They may have decided upon some of their own priorities as they moved forward. They may have chosen capable leaders from among them that would have fairly and courageously represented the people. But instead they said, “Give us something to worship. Give us something outside ourselves to believe in. Give us *something* that we can blindly, *in willful ignorance*, trust.”

Idolatry is born from an intentional attempt to avoid responsibility, even with the recognition that our attempt will be futile. We cannot afford to abdicate our responsibility.

Yes, we *must* bring our best intention and hard-won wisdom to bear on voting for leaders who we imagine are capable, compassionate, and responsive, but, as Michael Lerner wrote, “we need to stop fantasizing that we are going to find a magical candidate who embodies all that we believe in and instead create a movement that makes it necessary for any candidate to respond to our message...we need to be actively championing a vision of love and generosity for our society and refusing to settle for less.”

The future needs heroes, not idols. We can trust in our own best selves and in a community that will call us back to our own best selves when we have gotten lost. We can trust in our deepest understanding of what is truly important about this existence we share, and the continuing growth of that understanding as we listen to and work beside one another. We can trust in truth, as best we can describe it. And we can trust, always, that love will guide us.

We Remember Them
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
11/02/08

Readings

From [Halloween: The Past in the Present](#)

An article by Elspeth Sapphire (a contributor at <http://www.ecauldron.com>)

Anthem

[“Breaths”](#) words: Birago Diop, music: Ysaye M. Barnwell

Sermon

This service is an invitation for us to take some time to *be with* death. To remember those who have died, to honor the memories that are now in our care and to recognize the influences that live on within and among us. In the spirit of Halloween and Samhain; in the spirit of All Saints Day and All Souls Day; in the spirit of Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead we seek not only to make a place for our remembrances, but to make a place for the acknowledgment of death’s inextricable ties to life itself, to look upon it without blinking or flinching, as best we can...

But that’s not always easy.

There are a whole lot of unofficial rules that surround the subject of death. A whole lot of do’s and don’t’s arise as we struggle with the emotions that accompany the deaths of people who are close to us and the prospects of our own inevitable deaths.

We are told to mourn and grieve when we experience the death of someone close to us, or we are told *not* to spend valuable time mourning and grieving, depending on who is doing the telling. If we don’t seem sufficiently mournful, we are told we’re not dealing with our grief properly which will hinder us from really living. And if we do seem to be grieving, we are told not to get so fixated on death when we should focus on life. If we hold a service, we ask ourselves if this is what the person now dead would have wanted, and if we honor the dead person’s wishes, we are reminded that services of remembrance are for the living, after all! We are given varying opinions about the minimum and maximum times to allow for the mourning process, and we are sometimes made to feel like we have failed if we can’t testify to reaching that sometimes-elusive state known as *closure*.

Many people have told me things like, “When I die, I don’t want any somber memorial service. I don’t want people crying; if they’re going to get together, I just want them to have a good time and maybe raise a toast to me and celebrate life rather than be sad about death.”

I understand the sentiment. They don’t want people to be sad. They don’t want their loved ones to suffer. [“Do not stand at my grave and weep...”](#) But I want to say to these folks, “That’s not something that you can control.”

You can ask people to throw a party when you die, but you can’t expect that they will necessarily be in a celebratory mood. You can ask them not to weep, but you can’t control what they will feel; what they will need; how or whether or not they will grieve. Depending on the people, and depending on the

circumstances, it may be easy for your friends and family and acquaintances to come together, remember you fondly, and celebrate...but, then again, it may not be easy. It is not a bad thing for people to cry upon your departure from this existence. On the flip side, there may be people who indeed want to celebrate your passing, but not at all in the way you prefer, right?

We do oftentimes feel like there is *a proper way* that we should deal with death; we search out sage advice from the experts. Some of this sage advice comes from self-help books; some of it comes from well-meaning clergy; some of it comes from novelists and poets and songwriters.

Like the poem that is included at the bottom of the page in your order of service. Or the song that Burt sang for the Anthem. They are beautiful pieces. The idea of the spirit, the influence, the voice and presence of a beloved person, of our ancestors, coming to us anywhere, everywhere, through the wind and rain and rock, if we but listen...that is a powerful affirmation.

But is it true?

Yes...and no.

Let me give you an example: "Do not stand at my grave and weep...I am not there..."

I get that. If I'm standing at the grave because I think that's where they are, then I've missed the reality of death.

*The dead are not under the earth
They are in the rustling trees
They are in the groaning woods
They are in the crying grass,
they are in the moaning rocks
The dead are not under the earth.*

*I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am a diamond glint on snow.
I am sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain...*

Beautiful. Beautifully resonating with what we suspect to be true. I understand it on a deep level. The cosmology. The theology. The science, even. Through death, they have become part of a bigger life, less-defined but more encompassing. They are no longer *here*, they are *everywhere*. I get that. And the thought of encountering the ongoing presence and spirits of those we have loved and lost in the wind and the snow and the rain, in the rustling trees, the groaning woods, the crying grass, and the moaning rocks is a beautiful portrait of a transcendent experience.

But let's be real: there is a trade-off. The price of those we love who have died, the price of them being *anywhere* and *everywhere* is that they can no longer be *somewhere* in particular, and we experience that as a loss. We who still reside among the living--as moved as we are when we can connect with those fleeting moments that put us in touch with *anywhere* and *everywhere*, those moments that seem to hover just beyond the boundaries of our daily attention—we who reside among the living still feel the necessity of the *somewhere*. So we go to their graves; we go to a favorite spot; we come to a service to

speak the names, to remember, to honor those who have died, to recall their impact on our lives, to face our own feelings about life and death. And when we do that, there is no right way to feel, no right way to proceed, no handbook on how to grieve, on how to remember, on how to *think about* death. It is a great mystery and an incontrovertible reality, which is why the customs that surround death that we recognize today can be traced back into the most distant history of our species and will most likely continue into the distant unimaginable future. Death is *there* always, as complex as life, and we can only bring to it whatever we have to bring, whether it be anxiety or peace, laughter or tears, grief or acceptance, anger or sadness or some impossible-to-explain mixture of all of the above...and that is okay.

Do not stand at my grave and weep. Quite frankly, I don't think that the person who has died gets to decide that. The implication is that, if I am standing at their grave and weeping, I am weeping for *them*. I am weeping because I think that they expect me to be sad. And if that is the case, if I am only there because I feel that it is my duty, then I would probably appreciate being let off the hook...but that may not be the case at all. I may come to their grave and weep because that's what *I* need to do, in which case it is not helpful to me if they forbid such activity from beyond the grave. I am weeping for me, for the irretrievably-altered future, for lost opportunities, for ambivalent feelings I never got to sort out with them, for plain old loneliness...whatever it is, I may have felt the *need* to weep.

And I want to acknowledge that we may have conflicted feelings even about the people we love who have died. We sometimes feel our emotions forced into socially acceptable modes of expression when death arrives. "Don't speak ill of the dead." Really? Why not?

Understand: I don't mean to dishonor, disrespect, or disgrace those who have died...and I also say, death does not require you to lie to yourself about who they were or how they may have affected your life. Our feelings, our relationships, our very *lives* are rarely as neat and tidy as the eulogy that we are taught is appropriate. But acknowledging our conflicted feelings about someone can often allow us to truly honor them in death, to pay them the respect of telling the truth.

There is no *correct way* to approach death. Death is as complicated, and even more mysterious, than life...we can't help but feel that ambiguity and complexity in our emotions toward it. It has all the familiarity of necessity (it is happening every single day, every single moment), and it feels as strange and distant as the thought of visiting the farthest star (grief-stricken, we sometimes say, "I never expected it...it was so out of the blue.") We can't help but wrestle with the paradox of it in our mourning and in our celebration and in our lives.

In recognition of the variety of feelings we bring, of the range of experiences with death that we represent, I invite you now into our remembrance ceremony. We will begin with Responsive Reading #721, after which I will speak the names of some of those people that were members and friends of this congregation throughout its history, after which I will invite you to speak aloud the names of those important to your lives who you wish to remember and honor today.

Singing the Living Tradition #721 – Kathleen McTigue

In the struggles we choose for ourselves, in the ways we move forward in our lives and bring our world forward with us,

It is right to remember the names of those who gave us strength in this choice of living. It is right to name the power of hard lives well-lived.

We share a history with those lives. We belong to the same motion.

They too were strengthened by what had gone before. They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.

Those who lived before us, who struggled for justice and suffered injustice before us, have not melted into the dust, and have not disappeared.

They are with us still. The lives they lived hold us steady.

Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves. Their courage and love evoke our own. We, the living, carry them with us: we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

We take them with us, and with them choose the deeper path of living.

(Let us name those who lend strength in our lives.)

Mary Oliver says:

To live in this world, you must be able to do three things: To love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing that your own life depends on it; and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

I think sometimes that it is through feeling the loss that we are allowed awareness of the continuing presence of the dead; it is by experiencing the grief that we gain access to a new sort of comfort; it is by listening to the silence that we are allowed to hear the voice of the ancestors.

Those who have died have never never left.
The dead have a pact with the living.
They are in the woman's breast,
they are in the wailing child
They are with us in our homes.
They are with us in the crowd
The dead have a pact with the living.

So may it be.

Closing Words (John Hall Wheelock)

The fragile network of love that binds together
Spirit and spirit, over the whole earth,
Love—that by the very nature of things
Is doomed, is destined to heartbreak, mortal love,
Which is a form of suffering—here and now,
In its brief moment, yes even in its defeat,
Triumphs over the very nature of things,
And is the only answer, the only atonement,
Redeeming all.

What Now?
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
11/09/08

Readings

1. Excerpted from *[Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming](#)* by Paul Hawken (pgs. 187-189):

The people of the world...need *us* for their salvation, and *us* stands for the crazy-quilt assemblage of global humanity that is willing to stand up to the raw, cancerous insults that come from the mouths, guns, checkbooks, and policies of ideologues, because the movement is not merely trying to prevent wrongs but actively seeks to love this world. Compassion and love are...at the heart of this movement.

I believe this movement will prevail. I don't mean it will defeat, conquer, or create harm to someone else. Quite the opposite...I mean that the thinking that informs the movement's goals will reign. It will soon suffuse most institutions, but before then, it will change a sufficient number of people so as to begin the reversal of centuries of frenzied self-destructive behavior. Some say it is too late, but people never change when they are comfortable. Helen Keller threw aside the gnawing fears of chronic bad news when she declared, "I rejoice to live in such a splendidly disturbing time!" In such a time, history is suspended and thus unfinished. It will be the stroke of midnight for the rest of our lives...

What will guide us is a living intelligence that creates miracles every second, carried forth by a movement with no name.

2. From "*[The Small Work in the Great Work](#)*," by Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Safford; included in *[The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear](#)* edited by Paul Loeb:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope-not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of self-righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of "Everything is gonna be all right." But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we're seeing, asking people what they see.

Sermon

This week a presidential campaign that seemed like it might go on forever came to a momentous and amazingly trouble-free conclusion. People whose beliefs may have been scattered all across the political spectrum found themselves similarly moved by the deeply emotional and historical content of this event. The excitement generated, not only in this country, but across the world, and most notably among young people, seemed to crackle in the air as digital and cellular transmissions carried the news, as images from huge and happy gatherings filled our computer and television screens, as commentators sought to capture the event in measured terms even while tears showed in their own eyes, as we all soaked in the

realization that this would be one of those moments, spoken of in the future as: *where were you when?*...There was little doubt that *something big had happened!*

The question we are left with--after the gatherings have dwindled, after the tears have been dried, after we have torn ourselves away from cable news and finally gotten a good night's sleep--the question we are all left with is: what now? Whether you voted for Barak Obama or not, whether you greet the prospect of his Presidency with great hope or apprehension, the question is there before us all--because it is clear, at least to President-elect Obama, that the power lies with us:

"This victory alone is not the change we seek," [he said](#). "It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were...It can't happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice."

And so I ask: what now?

Though the election of the first African American president of these United States is a bright and shining moment for this country, casting a light on the proud history of those who have participated in the struggle for civil rights, illuminating not only what we have overcome but the bright prospect of what we *shall* be able to overcome if we stay true to our vision of a just and compassionate society; though it is a testament to a younger generation that may not choose to recognize the destructive divisions of the past; the fact is: racism, oppression of minorities, discrimination did not magically disappear. We have work to do. We as a country may have helped to clear a wider space in which to do that work, but we cannot afford to let it slide, as the shameful victory of propositions that discriminate against same sex couples in Arizona, California, Florida and Arkansas demonstrate.

And along with continuing discrimination, this country--indeed, the world--must face an economic crisis which finds no recent comparison in its devastating impact. Wars continue, with individual lives sacrificed at the pitiless altar of aggression each day. Climate change proceeds on its own timetable, regardless of our best *intentions* for the future. Unchecked greed and unaccountable power has brought us to the brink of disaster and many continue to seek profit in what can only result in peril. People are hungry. People are thirsty. Brothers and sisters across the globe are waiting for change...

So I ask you: What now?

I don't list all those problems to bring you down. It is not my intention to fill you with despair. However, I also don't wish to understate the enormity of humanity's task in the coming years. And I list those problems because, in the midst of the great unsettling feeling of our present circumstances, there is something that feels like Opportunity. Though it seems like the voice of doom that proclaims each new calamity should send us cowering under our covers in fear, there is another Voice that beckons us up and out into the world. Do you hear? Hear the cry fear won't still, hear the heart's call to will? All the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers--they are yours, mine and theirs--do you hear? There is a Voice that beckons us up and out into the world so that when an understandable response to the mountains of troubles might be for us to say: *What's the use?* I hear people asking rather: *What now?*

We are in the midst of undeniable change, facing challenges we have never faced before, and we are bound to be a little apprehensive, fearful even...but change brings with it huge opportunities to ask the questions that never came up before; to review priorities that we had assumed were set in stone; to align ourselves with our ideals rather than our disheartened expectations. Emboldened by the courage that

comes with fearless questioning, we can begin to find answers together. Rather than retreating, we can embrace all that we face, even that which is disturbing. We may say, along with Helen Keller, “I rejoice to live in such a splendidly disturbing time!”

And with all the eagerness of those who are ready, willing, able, and anxious to get to work, we ask: What now? What can we do? How can we help? Who can we join with? Where do we go? When do we start?

What now for *us here, as a congregation*? Where is our holy church in all of this? What now?

In one sense, the answer is simple. It's printed on your order of service each week. It's the mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona. What now? Same as before. Work to fulfill our mission.

But in another sense, it is not so simple. When we have answered “what?” we come quickly to another question: “how?” This congregation, too, is in transition as our numbers grow and the world changes around us, and this transition gives us the opportunity to answer those all-important questions about why we are here, how we are organized, and what we need to do our work. The Board has invited you into a conversation this year about governance structure and congregational organization not because it's so exciting to study congregational polity, not because we were doing anything *wrong* before, not because we all needed a class project, but so we can do everything possible at this particular time and place to strengthen our shared ministry.

Our shared ministry? Isn't ministry something a minister does? Yes...*and* it's something a congregation does. A minister has a particular role within the ministry of the congregation, but I am the minister, not the ministry. The ministry of this congregation had existed before I came and will continue long after I am gone. Ministry, quite simply, is all of those activities that contribute to the mission of this congregation. Ministry is everything we do in service to that purpose we have set for ourselves.

And so it is that everything we do as members and friends of this congregation *should be ministry*. You see what I mean? If ministry is everything we do in service to that purpose, that mission we have set for ourselves, then *ministry should be everything we do*. We don't have time or resources or *reason* to do anything extraneous to that mission, for it is wide enough and deep enough and large enough and important enough to call on our compassion and talents and energy and creativity and presence and dedication now and into the future. Shared ministry is all that we do.

And some of you may be skeptical. “C'mon...making coffee, testing microphones, setting up chairs...that's all *ministry*?!” The short answer is “yes.” But I understand the resistance to that notion, so let me give you a longer answer. (We ministers always have a longer answer up our sleeves.)

My mother-in-law was a long-time member of a Unitarian Universalist church in Minnesota, and was actively involved as a volunteer on many different levels, one of them being that she would make and serve coffee during the coffee hour on certain Sundays. When the lay leaders of the church were introducing this concept of *shared ministry* to the congregation, they sought to heighten awareness of it by explicitly using the term *ministry* in their various activities, down to the individual tasks. She was informed that she was now part of their “coffee ministry” team. Her reaction? What a bunch of...nonsense!

In the great Unitarian Universalist tradition of respecting a diversity of opinion, I can understand both sides. For my mother-in-law, it felt like they were trying to attach an artificial importance to a very simple task; trying to dignify it with a new title. It already had dignity; it had the dignity of her and other volunteers seeing that it was important and doing it. It did not need the imposition of dignity attached to the word “ministry.” It only served to embarrass the very practical minded people who made the coffee because it needed to be done.

On the other hand...you knew I was going to move to the other hand, right?...on the other hand, from my present perspective as your minister, as I watch many of you faithfully performing the hundreds of small tasks that make up our ministry, I want you to know that you are a vital part of that ministry with all that you do, even the smallest tasks! Further, I wish to invite you all into the shared ministry, with the realization that whatever time, talents, and resources you can offer is appreciated and respected as not only nice and generous but vital to furthering our *ministry*. It is all important.

As we examine our structure, we will be fashioning together with all of you some broad categories of ministry that each of our tasks fall under, and we hope then to pick up on any tasks that seem to be falling through the cracks. We want to provide greater awareness of and access to the specific tasks that need to be done and we wish to increase and encourage our appreciation of one another as we set about working together to live out the question: what now?

And I promise not to talk about coffee ministry, or chair set-up ministry, if you promise to take pride in the fact that the tasks that you perform in working toward our mission, however small they seem, are supporting the shared ministry of the congregation. Deal?

Think about it: great events, momentous successes, transformation movements are rarely (if ever!) the result of a single act; they are rather the culmination of a series of very small tasks faithfully performed by a vast number of people, each of whom probably feel at some point like their task doesn't really mean that much in the grand scheme of things...IT DOES! IT MATTERS!

Because as we work to create a welcoming community of caring people where we receive emotional support and intellectual stimulation as we live out our individual spiritual paths; as we work for justice and equality in our community and the world; as we work to increase the active and intentional respect for the natural environment; as we seek to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; as we accept and encourage one another; as we engage and inspire the free and responsible search for truth and meaning; as we uphold the right of conscience and a free-flowing and participatory democracy; as we promote a world-consciousness that transcends the divisions of nation and party in the pursuit of peace liberty and justice for all; as we seek to heighten awareness of and act in accordance with the fact of our interdependence with all that lives...

To the extent that we engage the tasks, big and small, in pursuit of these goals, to that extent we are messengers of Hope to a world that is sorely in need of some hope.

President-elect Barak Obama, [in his speech on Tuesday](#), honored *those who've been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve [who have nevertheless] put their hands on the arc of history and bent it once more toward the hope of a better day.*

Using this phrase about bending the arc of history, he was paraphrasing Martin Luther King, Jr., who in turn was paraphrasing Unitarian minister and abolitionist, Theodore Parker. We come from a long line

of clear-eyed, reasonable religious thinkers who nevertheless refused to accept the rationale for an unjust status quo, who refused to accept the proposed common-sense approach that advised lowering expectations for the future. They stood proudly at the Gates of Hope...and where do we, as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, facing the anxiety and fear and tragedy of deeply troubling times, where do we stand; where is our holy church?

We are, we must be, standing at the Gates of Hope, too. It will not be an easy place to be. However, we look forward not only to struggle, but to joy in the struggle. A person cries for work that is real, [says Marge Piercy](#), and I guarantee you this work we have taken up is real!

Where is our holy church? Where race and class unite as equal persons in the search for beauty, truth, and right. Where is our holy One? A mighty host respond; the people rise in every land to break the captive's bond. Where is our Paradise? In aspiration's sight, wherein we hope to see arise ten thousand years of right.

Where is our holy church? Right here in the holy unholy world; right here in this splendidly disturbing time; right here at the Gates of Hope.

Celebrating the Sacred Fig
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
12/07/08

Readings

1. *A slightly revised excerpt from [Buddha: A Story of Enlightenment](#), a novel by Deepak Chopra, (pg. 205-206):*

One of the younger monks said to Gautama, “Tell us your way.”

He replied, “Let the world be your teacher...Every experience that traps me is a worldly experience. The world is seductive and hard to interpret for what it really is. Yet this world is nothing more than desire, and every desire makes me run after it. Why? Because I believe it’s real. Desires are phantoms, concealing the grinning face of death. Be wise. Believe in nothing.”

It took many nights around the fire, but Gautama and the five monks came to an agreement. They would give their bodies nothing to live for in the world, no desires to fulfill, no cravings to become a slave to...They sat like statues facing a wall and waited. Gautama was so fervent that he expected to reach his goal soon. “Unhappiness is born of expectations that don’t come true,” a brother monk reminded him. “Even to expect nothing can be a trap.”

Gautama bowed his head. “I understand.” But this gesture of humility disguised the fire he felt inside. Gautama saw himself as nothing less than a great yogi. He chose a spot away from all shelter, sat down on a patch of rocks without clearing them away, and waited.

2. *From Deepak Chopra’s introduction to [Buddha: A Story of Enlightenment](#) (pg. v-vi):*

Buddha saw himself as “someone who is awake,” which is what the word *Buddha* means...Everything he knew, he knew from arduous, sometimes bitter experience. He went through extreme suffering—almost to the death—and emerged with something incredibly precious. Buddha literally became the truth...In all three phases of his life—Siddhartha the prince, Gautama the monk, and Buddha the Compassionate One—he was as mortal as you and I, yet he attained enlightenment and was raised to the rank of an immortal. The miracle is that he got there following a heart as human as yours and mine, and just as vulnerable.

Sermon

Life is sad. Life is hard. There is suffering. There is pain. There is worry about what will happen in the future; there is regret about what happened in the past; there is doubt and anxiety about the value of what we can accomplish in the present. When tragedy runs rampant and suffering seems so meaningless, yet unavoidable, indeed inevitable, what are we to make of life?

But life is not only suffering, you say. It is also sweet and joyful. There is love. There is pleasure. There is anticipation for the future; there are the warm memories of the past; there is the fullness of each present moment to be savored, appreciated, and cherished. Doesn’t this make up for the evil? The pain? The worry and anxiety? The doubt and regret?

Life *is* sweet and joyful, but the sweetness can turn sour and the joy fades like an apparition or a mirage. There *is* love, but love sometimes ends and loved ones leave and the people we cherish grow old and

die. There *is* pleasure, but the pleasure wanes, or turns into empty habits that deaden us rather than enliven us, that hurt us rather than heal us, and we seek out new pleasures in a futile search for that which will last. There *is* anticipation for the future, but every hope conceals the fear of hopelessness. There *are* the warm memories of the past, but they sometimes serve only to highlight the fact that those moments are past and we may find ourselves longing for what was. There *is* the fullness of each present moment to be savored, appreciated, and cherished, but by the time I have reached out to hold this moment, it is gone, and the next is gone all too soon, and the next and the next until I realize that I will never be able to hold onto a moment, never be able to hold onto a pleasure, never be able to hold onto happiness or security or love or *life!*

Everything changes. Everything eludes me. Life is hopelessly, stubbornly, eternally changing, lying outside of my grasp and thus sometimes more cruel in its joys than its pains because I know that nothing, *nothing* is permanent, and though I experience joy, I suffer with the knowledge that I will never be able to claim it, to own it, to create it; welcoming the presence of joy, I immediately fear its departure...

How can I free myself from this vicious circle, asked Siddhartha Gautama, this relentless cycle, this unsettled and unsettling state of being?

Today, on Bodhi Day, we celebrate the *Sacred Fig*, also known as the *Bo Tree*. It is a species of banyan fig native to Sri Lanka, Nepal and India, southwest China and Indochina east to Vietnam. This sacred fig, known in Sanskrit as the Plaksa, holds a special place in Hinduism as being the source of the Sarasvati river, planted by Brahma himself. On the Sunday closest to December 8th, some Buddhist traditions commemorate really the birth of Buddhism, the story being that Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment as he sat underneath this tree.

“Attained enlightenment.” Sounds so blissful, doesn’t it? So easy. So serene. But one thing that Deepak Chopra pointed out in his novel on Buddha is that this experience of enlightenment arose from intense struggle and turmoil, as a long-awaited answer to the kind of turbulent and anguished questions that I imperfectly described at the beginning of this sermon, and the sort of painful insight that Chopra describes Gautama having here as he observes his fellow travelers:

Gautama regarded them all with troubled eyes...Each person carried an invisible burden. The young monk was amazed that he hadn’t seen it before. Everyone walked or rode with their lives on their shoulders, a pack of memories that spilled over with disappointment and sorrow...And always there was the pall of age and sickness, the endless worry over money, the unceasing doubts about the future (pg. 183).

We picture our Buddha quiet and peaceful and smiling, but feel ourselves to be nervous, uneasy, and unhappy. We picture our Buddha serenely remote from the hubbub of the world, but feel ourselves to be hopelessly enmeshed in its struggles. We picture our Buddha seeking an *otherworldly* Nirvana, while we just hope for a little peace and joy in *this* world.

But the truth is that Buddha is right here with us, right in the midst of things, not because he is some Divine Being (indeed, he rejected any such notion), but because he reached this seemingly unattainable enlightenment, as Chopra noted, “following a heart as human as yours and mine, and just as vulnerable.” If we miss that, we miss what the Buddha offers. If we don’t recognize the turmoil and despair, we can’t fully appreciate the peace.

We are looking at the work of Eckhart Tolle in the classes that began in November and will be held on the evenings of December 11 & 18. We are listening to his tapes, and some of you have seen videos of his presentations and his conversations with Oprah Winfrey...There is such a calming and centered quality to his voice and his presence and one begins to think that he is just that kind of spiritual person that would be open to the type of insights that he speaks about. But if we miss the story of his struggle, we miss whatever value his insights may hold.

He wrote this in the first chapter of his book, [The Power of Now](#):

Until my thirtieth year, I lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression...One night not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of the furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train—everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless that it created in me a deep loathing of the world. The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point of continuing to live with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live.

That was the prelude to his particular enlightenment; the preparation for what he describes next:

“I cannot live with myself any longer.” This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with.” “Maybe,” I thought, “only one of them is real.”

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts...I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing,” as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that.

I was awakened by the chirping of a bird outside the window. I had never heard such a sound before (pgs 1-2).

And what is important about the story of the Buddha and the story of Eckhart Tolle and the countless stories of enlightenment that permeate our religious history and literature and philosophy is not even so much the answers that are given—you may or may not find those useful, applicable, relevant to your own lives—but even more important is that these stories testify to the fact that enlightenment is available to each and every one of us. These were ordinary human beings, often at their weakest and most vulnerable, who managed, in the midst of their turmoil and confusion, to wrest from life the truths that they needed to have life and to have it abundantly.

Someone asked me recently, “What *is* enlightenment?” And I think I said, in the grand tradition of Unitarian Universalist ministers across the globe, “What a great question!”

It is a great question. And maybe it can be answered, in a way...

Eckhart Tolle points out that “[T]he word *enlightenment* conjures up the idea of some superhuman accomplishment, and the ego likes to keep it that way, but [enlightenment],” he writes, “is simply your natural state of *felt oneness with Being*” (pg. 10). Buddha, the enlightened one, saw himself as simply “one who is awake.” Tolle describes his first experience awakening, which happened coincidentally just after he awoke from the transformative experience described earlier:

The first light of dawn was filtering through the curtains. Without any thought, I felt, I knew, that there is infinitely more to light than we realize. That soft luminosity filtering through the curtains was love itself. Tears came into my eyes. I got up and walked around the room. I recognized the room, and yet I knew I had never truly seen it before. Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marveling at the beauty and aliveness of it all.

That day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracle of life on earth, as if I had just been born into the world (pg. 2).

So we could say that *enlightenment* has something to do with awakening to a new perspective on the world...and yet if we want to ask about the content of that awakening, that can only be answered by each individual.

You see, when I said that “what is enlightenment?” is a great question, I wasn’t trying to sidestep the question—or I wasn’t *only* trying to sidestep the question. I firmly believe that it is a question that can only be answered individually; that is one of the reasons that I am a Unitarian Universalist. Why is it that we believe that questions are important.

“Let the world be your teacher,” Gautama said in the reading. Let the world educate you; let the world answer your questions; but first you must know what you are asking. The importance, to me, of the back stories to achieving enlightenment is so we can find out what questions were being asked. It is only then that we can make sense of the answers and possibly integrate them into our own lives.

Finding the precise questions, *our own* precise questions, is important. Questions are important because they will shape the content of our enlightenment.

I am reminded of the billboard that says “Jesus is the answer,” with someone scrawling underneath, “What was the question?”

What was the question? What *is* the question? What is *your* question?

I believe that, as Tolle notes, we tend to want to push enlightenment away from us. We imagine it as a feat achieved only by the most disciplined religious seekers. Or we imagine it to arise only from the most extreme circumstances.

On the other hand, sometimes we settle for cheap imitations. We imagine enlightenment can be had if we just find the right book or the right teacher. We package it and sell it like a one-size-fits-all commodity. We embrace the most fashionable opinions about enlightenment, but opinions do not touch us deeply and thus we never really awaken. *Do not be led by Holy Scriptures, or by mere logic or inference, or by appearances, or by the authority of religious teachers, says the Buddha. Be a lamp to yourself. Be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within yourself, as to the only truth.*

Hold to the truth...but that means you must find it. Enlightenment *is* accessible to us all. It is available to us even in our pain and confusion. But it is neither cheap nor easy. We cannot borrow enlightenment from the Buddha nor Jesus nor Eckhart Tolle nor Deepak Chopra nor Oprah Winfrey nor your mother nor your father nor your partner nor even your minister (believe me you don't want to do that!) Like the lonesome valley of the old folk song, we must walk it by ourselves. And it will not be without cost even when it comes, as we can gather from the teachings of those who have awakened. Deepak Chopra points out that, though some prefer to see Buddha as "a kindly teacher who wanted people to find peace," he may more aptly be portrayed as "a radical surgeon who examined them and said, 'No wonder you feel sick. All this unreal stuff has filled you up, and now we have to get rid of it.'" But, as a result of such radical surgery, Tolle assures us, we will be left in "a state of connectedness with something immeasurable and indestructible, something that, almost paradoxically, is essentially you and yet is much greater than you." A similar experience is described in our next hymn:

And for a moment's interval the earth, the sky, the sea – my soul encompassed each and all, as they encompass me.

In closing, may each of us let the world be our teacher; may we articulate our questions as clearly as we can, and listen patiently for the answers; may we offer compassion and understanding to one another and graciously receive the same; and may we *be awakened* each morning as we wake.

Happy Bodhi Day!

The Winter of Our Discontent
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
12/14/08

How are your holidays going so far?

This is a special season, isn't it, this run of winter holidays, one after another; this season when we find such relatively uncommon words as *merry* and *jolly* and *happy* and *joy* entering our vocabulary and our written communications on a regular, if time-limited, basis. We are set free to wish one another happiness and joy and merriment...and that's great! There's nothing *wrong* with that.

But sometimes--and not from any one thing necessarily, just a message from the culture at large--it almost feels like a command. "*Have a merry Christmas!*" Sort of like: you *will* have a merry Christmas, or think of all the people you will disappoint who have gone out of their way to wish that for you in spoken greetings and in cards and letters. "Happy holidays!" we say, magnanimously allowing for freedom of choice in choosing which holidays to celebrate, but the happiness is still mandatory. And if I don't feel particularly merry or happy or joyful, I can end up feeling like I have failed, or that I am hopelessly disconnected from what I *should* be feeling.

The comedian George Carlin [had a bit](#) in one of his stand-up acts about how much he hated being told to "have a nice day." "Here's the trouble with 'have a nice day,'" he said, "It puts all the pressure on you. Now *you've* gotta go out and somehow manage to have a good time. All because of some loose-lipped cashier."

Have a nice day. Have a Happy Holiday. Have fun. Have some more turkey...Have a merry, happy, joyful, blessed holiday season, ya got that?

Again, I do not want to call a moratorium on well-meaning holiday greetings, but I do want to investigate for a moment the cultural expectations that such greetings imply, and see if some of these expectations may contribute to the very opposite of that for which the greetings are intended. There is, first, the implication that joy is easier to come by during this holiday season, that it *should* come naturally at this time of year; and there is the further implication that one therefore has a duty to be joyful.

And if happiness and merriment and joy aren't enough to put on your to-do list, there is also *peace*: heavenly, heavenly *peace*!

Mind you, these rather lofty goals are all crammed on a to-do list that includes decorating and shopping for presents and sending out cards and planning meals and parties and family gatherings and congregational events, along with all of the things that are on your normal, everyday, regular-old, non-holiday to-do list. It is no wonder we end up singing about peace with such tender, intense yearning...we are waiting anxiously for it to arrive.

We are waiting...And for some of us, who celebrated Christmas growing up, that is part of it, isn't it? That anticipation of great things to come...that anticipation of the wondrous, the magical, the mysterious...and at this time of year, even adults were willing to enter into that world with us. And

there are those of us who may have easily carried on that feeling of wonder and anticipation from childhood into our adult years, and we greet the holidays with similar anticipation as when we were a child. There are those for whom the holidays have lost some of that original luster, but we seek to recreate that sort of experience for ourselves and our families. Or maybe we didn't have that experience growing up and wish we had, and we have sought to create it anew for our children or grandchildren or other children in our lives. Or maybe we had that sort of experience growing up, but it is very much a place of memory for us that we can freely visit, a place that we do not have the desire nor feel the need to recreate in the present. Or maybe this holiday season never really held that much importance in our lives, or maybe it's a source of painful memories, or maybe it's our very favorite time of year...it is impossible to capture the spectrum of experience that this congregation represents, and indeed the spectrum of experience that each individual in the congregation represents. We each hold a myriad of feelings and memories about this season, and any capsule description of how we feel would be oversimplified to say the least. But one thing that we cannot overlook is that there is something about the season that holds the potential for not only wonder and joy and happiness...but also for discontent, disillusionment, and sometimes despair.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned during Joys and Concerns that I was going to visit family over Thanksgiving, and I shared that as both a joy *and* a concern...and I saw many heads nodding affirmation in the congregation, assuring me that that statement needed no particular elaboration. Family gatherings, even in the warmest of families, can be a minefield, can't they?

I remember reading once that the phrase "dysfunctional family" was unnecessarily redundant. I don't mean to slight the real and serious dysfunctions that can and do occur in families, causing great suffering. But I think what the writer meant is that it would be hard to identify *any* family as "fully functional." Nobody's perfect, and at the holidays, in close quarters, rubbing shoulders with family members, those imperfections can sometimes rub each other raw. Running toward the bosom of our family we may also run smack dab into a wall of criticism. Confidently striding in, clothed in the identity we have created for ourselves out in the world, we find ourselves hurriedly changing into our family identity for dinner. Having come from the firm grounding of our own lives, we are suddenly submerged in a sea of unclear and unreasonable expectations, not only for ourselves, but for what this holiday time *should be like*.

And we can rarely achieve that expectation, right? The expectations we are chasing are often creations of Hollywood; of novels and stories; of paintings and music. We hold onto an *ideal* picture of what a holiday should be. And even the stories and films that reach for a more realistic view, those that allow for conflict, whether from a humorous or serious perspective, even these stories and movies must have a final chapter or a final scene, and that's when things turn out okay; not perfect maybe, but people learn something and the music swells and it feels like it was all worth it. These stories do not end with this vaguely unfinished feeling that we sometimes carry away from the holidays; this feeling that we may have missed an opportunity, or bungled our intentions; this feeling that we didn't meet another's expectation, or that they didn't meet ours, or that all together did not live up to what the holiday deserved from us and now it's over, but there is no music swelling, there is no particular lesson learned, there is only clean-up and sleep and the next day and a vague discontent.

[Novelist Richard Ford has his character](#) planning as best he can for "non-confrontational familial good cheer," trying "to skirt the spiritual dark alleys and emotional cul-de-sacs," attempting to "subdue all temper flarings and sob sessions with loved ones" so that "the holiday won't deteriorate into apprehension, dismay and rage, rocketing people out the doors." He bravely encourages cheerfulness,

even if it has to be invented or contrived, and to take care of oneself as you might do for jet lag (*The Lay of the Land*, pgs 25-27).

That's probably not bad advice. And it's a reasonable goal to shoot for: fake some cheerfulness and avoid bursts of rage or sob sessions. But is that the most we can hope for? Given the pitfalls of holding great expectations for this season, do we settle for just making it through? Or are we missing what this season might, in reality, hold for us?

As for myself, I'm not sure if I've given up on another promise of the season: *wonder*.

Hanje tells me that one of her very favorite movies as a child was Peter Pan: the version with Mary Martin as Peter. As a little girl, she was glued to the television whenever it was shown. Seeking to recapture some of that feeling, she watched the movie as an adult and found it to be less-than-wondrous. The wires that sent Ms. Martin flying through the air were painfully obvious and distracted from whatever pleasure she may have taken in it. She's okay with that. The movie is still a cherished childhood memory, but it's not one, she found, that can be re-lived as an adult.

Part of our loss of innocence as we grow, and maybe part of the gradual disappointment in our holiday experience, is that we are suddenly able to see the wires and we can no longer *not* see them. Letting go of that childhood wonder and innocence, we can sometimes feel like there is nothing else to grab onto. Taking our place on the stage crew of the holidays, the magic may feel like it's gone. Unable to let go of our history, family gatherings sometimes turn into a battle of ghosts. Cut off from the people we love, we can feel abandoned and alone when our hearts cry for connection.

Novelist Richard Ford in the reading quotes the well-known information that the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is "when more suicide successes, abandonments, spousal abuse cases, thefts, firearm discharges and emergency surgeries take place per twenty-four hour period than any other time of year except the day after the Super Bowl."

The thing about that information, which I had accepted as common knowledge from other sources, is that [it turns out not to be true](#)...at least not in total. Reported suicides, for example, were found to be either average or below average around the holidays, according to statistics from the Mayo Clinic and the National Center for Health Statistics. And I mention that because I don't want the *misinformation* to lead us to disregard the fact that the holidays are, undoubtedly, an extremely stressful time that can fuel depression, anger, loneliness, and family strife. It *is* true, for example, that there is a rise in domestic violence during the holidays. Those things that cause stress throughout the year--finances, illness, grief over the death of loved ones, family in all its various forms of complexity: severed or smothering relationships, geographical distance from family members, blended families, and the normal challenges of familial life—all of these stresses are intensified during the holidays. Add in the expectations we routinely place on vacation time off from work, along with the increased opportunity to indulge in "good cheer" in the form of alcohol, and you have a sharp increase in the opportunities for painful, if not tragic circumstances.

I want us to see that clearly so that we can be there for one another and for people outside of this congregation. It is precisely here that I rediscover the wonder of the season because I watch so many of you in the congregation reaching out to one another in beautifully compassionate ways throughout the year. I rediscover the wonder in thinking about the creativity and commitment of the people who created and performed that production of Peter Pan so that children across the world can watch in

wonder. I rediscover the wonder in the courageous attempts of people—flawed and imperfect as we are—the repeated courageous attempts to come together, as families, as friends, as congregations, as communities, to create meaningful and memorable times. I rediscover the wonder in forgiveness and faith and love that is displayed on our journeys, even when we stumble along the way. I rediscover the wonder in the truly awesome power of love within and beyond this community, that mindfully engages the noisy struggle for justice across the world and also lovingly enters the lonely silence of an individual in need. I rediscover the wonder in a congregation of people who have committed themselves to a mission that stretches out to the world and into the future.

So don't take this wrong, but thanks to you, I *will* have a happy holiday.

Dark Matter: The Winter Solstice Service
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
12/21/08

Reading

The Rev. Frederick E. Gillis, from [Celebrating Christmas](#), edited by Carl Seaburg:

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

There is something very powerful about the image of light. It has symbolized knowledge; hope; love. From ancient times it has been a sign of the Divine: the Eternal Light; the Inner Light; the Light of the World.

Light is the theme of festivals celebrated at this time of year when days are shortest and nights are longest. By affirming that we live by the light of hope we banish the power of the darkness that surrounds us.

The eight candles of Hanukkah proclaim our faith that freedom will not die out as long as there are steadfast and courageous people willing to uphold it.

The lights of Christmas bear witness to the Light of the World in the form of a child. What better symbol is there for the light of hope than the child—new and fresh, open to the future, able to make choices that change the course of history.

We light our lights this season to remind us that the darkness, however powerful it may seem at times, does not overcome us, that there always remains within humankind a spark of hope that can be fanned into a light illuminating the path to a new order of freedom, peace, and love.

May the light proclaimed in this season be in your lives now and always.

Sermon

This is the season of the celebration of light and there is, indeed, as the Rev. Frederick E. Gillis says in the Reading, “something very powerful about the image of light”...but I wonder sometimes if I, in the 21st Century United States of America, fully grasp the power of that image.

Buddhist teacher and writer, Stephen Batchelor, has written a wonderful essay on the all-important image of “the path” in Buddhism. *The Way. The Path to Enlightenment.* He questions whether we have been able to hold onto the power of that metaphor over the centuries:

“In those traditional societies where this metaphor of path evolved,” [he writes](#), “wilderness was dangerous and unknown. You would not walk alone on the paths that threaded through it. You would travel in well-organized caravans, in the company of those you trusted, armed to the teeth. Paths were rare and one’s survival depended on them. But this has changed. Today wilderness itself has become a ‘Supreme Rarity,’ a value in danger of being lost, the survival of which is under threat. While path (in its contemporary guise of roads, railways, air lanes, the information superhighway) is becoming a metaphor of domination rather than freedom.”

He goes on to suggest that the individual in search of awakening today may long “not for the security of the path but for those unknown places where there is little trace of marauding humanity. He or she may be more deeply inspired by the metaphor of open, untrammelled wilderness rather than that of a path.”

I wonder if the metaphor of light hasn't experienced a similar transformation. In a society where we have light at the flip of a switch, can we truly understand a Winter Solstice celebration of the return of the light? Yes, the days get longer and we notice that, but with the advent of electricity we can continue our day long into the night even in the dead of winter, and we often do. We often do...possibly to our detriment.

A book entitled, [Lights Out: Sleep, Sugar and Survival](#), suggests that the artificial extension of daylight with electricity has put us dangerously out of sync with nature. Whereas humans used to spend the summers sleeping less and eating more (as light triggers a hunger for carbohydrates) in preparation for winter when we would *eat* less and *sleep* more, artificial light allows us to stay up past our bedtimes, as it were, and indulge in those carbohydrate goodies (especially sugars and refined carbohydrates) the whole year through. We then seek to address the ensuing weight gain and health problems with diet and exercise, but the premise of authors T.S. Wiley and Bent Formby is that if we simply matched our sleep patterns with the seasons and the availability of natural light, we would automatically be healthier.

And so I wonder, can we truly understand the power of the Winter Solstice celebration in a world that is actually suffering from *too much light*? In a society that must address the problem of something we call *light pollution*?

Verlyn Klinkenborg has an article in the November *National Geographic* called “[Our Vanishing Night](#),” in which he writes:

For most of human history, the phrase "light pollution" would have made no sense. Imagine walking toward London on a moonlit night around 1800, when it was Earth's most populous city. Nearly a million people lived there, making do, as they always had, with candles and rushlights and torches and lanterns. Only a few houses were lit by gas, and there would be no public gaslights in the streets or squares for another seven years. From a few miles away, you would have been as likely to smell London as to see its dim collective glow.

Now most of humanity lives under intersecting domes of reflected, refracted light, of scattering rays from overlit cities and suburbs, from light-flooded highways and factories. Nearly all of nighttime Europe is a nebula of light, as is most of the United States and all of Japan. In the south Atlantic the glow from a single fishing fleet—squid fishermen luring their prey with metal halide lamps—can be seen from space, burning brighter, in fact, than Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro.

In most cities the sky looks as though it has been emptied of stars, leaving behind a vacant haze that mirrors our fear of the dark and resembles the urban glow of dystopian science fiction. We've grown so used to this pervasive orange haze that the original glory of an unlit night—dark enough for the planet Venus to throw shadows on Earth—is wholly beyond our experience, beyond memory almost. And yet above the city's pale ceiling lies the rest of the universe, utterly undiminished by the light we waste—a bright shoal of stars and planets and galaxies, shining in seemingly infinite darkness.

We have turned the night sky into “a vacant haze that mirrors our fear of the dark and resembles the urban glow of dystopian science fiction.” And with Klinkenborg's mention of science fiction, I couldn't

help thinking of a classic science fiction story from 1941 by Isaac Asimov entitled, "[Nightfall](#)." The premise for the story sprang from a quotation by Ralph Waldo Emerson, taken from his essay, "Nature":

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown!

Asimov, in his story, imagines a little different outcome, however. He writes of a planet with six stars, six suns, which keep the planet illuminated at all times so that the inhabitants never experience darkness (and have thus never seen the stars in the night sky). Scientists, exploring their stellar system, find out that the planet *will* experience darkness, however, as one of the suns experiences an eclipse every 2049 years when it is the sole light in the sky, resulting in a brief 'night.' This doesn't sound like a tragedy, does it, but to a civilization that has never experienced "nightfall," it rocks the very foundations of their society. Scientists and psychologists rush to prepare people for the experience of darkness; religions predict a cataclysmic end to the world with the coming of darkness; no one can fully accept the experience that awaits them, described in the wonderfully melodramatic prose of the Golden Age of Science Fiction:

With the slow fascination of fear, he lifted himself on one arm and turned his eyes toward the blood-curdling blackness of the window.

Through it shone the Stars!

...Thirty thousand mighty suns shone down in a soul-searing splendor that was more frighteningly cold in its awful indifference than the bitter wind that shivered across the cold, horribly bleak world.

...For this was the Dark -- the Dark and the Cold and the Doom. The bright walls of the universe were shattered and their awful black fragments were falling down to crush and squeeze and obliterate him.

...Hands groping at his tortured throat, he limped toward the flame of the torches that filled all his mad vision.

'Light!' he screamed.

...'Stars -- all the Stars -- we didn't know at all. We didn't know anything. We thought six stars in a universe is something the Stars didn't notice is Darkness forever and ever and ever and the walls are breaking in and we didn't know we couldn't know and anything -- '

Someone clawed at the torch, and it fell and snuffed out. In the instant, the awful splendor of the indifferent Stars leaped nearer to them.

On the horizon outside the window...a crimson glow began growing, strengthening in brightness, that was not the glow of a sun.

The long night had come again.

The crimson glow comes from the fires that people have set. In attempting to escape the darkness, and the realizations that the darkness holds about the universe, the civilization literally burns itself up. (And

before I go ahead, let me apologize for spoiling the ending for all those who wanted to read the story...it's worth reading anyway.)

Because, even though Asimov whisked us to another planet for this fable, and though we may feel a little distance from the particulars—many of you love your time under the night sky, I'm sure—I wonder if there isn't a message for us here. I wonder if, becoming virtually unacquainted with the darkness, we haven't lost an understanding of the power and the value of light. I wonder if the pervasiveness of light has not threatened our very survival. After all, light occurs against an overwhelming darkness that pervades the universe. Fantasy author, Terry Pratchett says, ““Light thinks it travels faster than anything but it is wrong. No matter how fast light travels, it finds the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it.”

Fine, you say. Darkness is all around us. But face it; we can only see things in the light. Very true. We are diurnal creatures, as Verlyn Klinkenborg points out, with eyes adapted to living in the sun's light. And, he writes, “we've engineered [the night] to receive us by filling it with light...This kind of engineering is no different than damming a river. Its benefits come with consequences...”

What are the consequences? Light pollution, as we've talked a little about...and what else? Well, what does light allow us to do? It allows us to see; it allows us to learn; it allows us to understand. All extremely important things, but I wonder if the artificial extension of daylight does not lead to a certain mental and visual exhaustion that causes us to begin to look without seeing; to investigate without learning; to examine without understanding. The light no longer seems like an opportunity, but simply an extension of what is always available. And, in another way, with a dearth of darkness, we may have been lulled into believing that we humans, in the eternal light of day that we have created, can see all; learn all; understand all.

Modern astronomy suggests the fascinating probability that most of the matter that makes up the universe is essentially invisible. It gives off no electromagnetic radiation and is known as “dark matter.” Ordinary matter, what you and I think of as matter—in other words, the matter we can see--makes up, according to recent calculations, about 4 percent of the total matter in the universe; dark matter—invisible matter--makes up about 22 percent; and the rest is, what was referred to on a [History Channel](#) special as “an enigmatic dark energy” that accounts for the acceleration of the universe's continuing expansion.

I point that out not because I am in any way qualified to give astronomy lessons, but because it parallels what I have been feeling about light and darkness and the celebration of Solstice in our time and place, here and now. What we know, the areas where we have managed to shed some light, make up a nearly infinitesimally small piece of this universe we share. If we lose our familiarity with darkness, we can fall prey to the illusion that we humans have somehow managed to banish darkness altogether. Not so. Thank God, this is not so. And as we begin to acquaint ourselves with the reality of all that we cannot see and all that we do not know, may we be more grateful for what we do know; may we use our knowledge more wisely and carefully, ever mindful of the life and light that we share with all other life on this earth; may we build and explore and seek to understand with the humility that is appropriate to our place in the awesome and impenetrable order of things...only then will we be able to fan the spark of hope “into a light illuminating the path to a new order of freedom, peace, and love.”

Klinkenborg writes this: “Unlike astronomers, most of us may not need an undiminished view of the night sky for our work, but like most other creatures we do need darkness. Darkness is as essential to our

biological welfare, to our internal clockwork, as light itself. The regular oscillation of waking and sleep in our lives—one of our circadian rhythms—is nothing less than a biological expression of the regular oscillation of light on Earth. So fundamental are these rhythms to our being that altering them is like altering gravity...In a very real sense, light pollution causes us to lose sight of our true place in the universe, to forget the scale of our being, which is best measured against the dimensions of a deep night with the Milky Way—the edge of our galaxy—arching overhead.”

So if you can, seek out the darkness that is afforded you; spend some time under the night sky, the city of God that Emerson proclaimed; when we reacquaint ourselves with darkness, we will be truly able to welcome and appreciate the return of the light.

May you have a Happy Winter Solstice!

The Work of Christmas
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
12/28/08

Reading

From [*Hundred Dollar Holiday*](#) by author and environmentalist Bill McKibben (pgs. 64-66, 84-85):

Once, working on a book, I watched every minute of TV that came across the hundred channels of what was then the world's largest cable system on a single day. These 2,400 hours of videotape yielded many insights, but if you distilled them down to a single idea, it would be this: You are the center of the world. You are the most important thing on earth, the heaviest object in the known universe. Each of your needs is of the utmost importance. Have It Your Way. This Bud's For You...

This notion, so central to a consumer society, is anathema to a religious one. Living a life of faith means, more than anything, putting something other than yourself at the center of your life.

Christmas offers the best chance all year to see those two ways of life for what they are. We're encouraged to make Christmas about us—or, more accurately, encouraged to make Christmas about our children. We are encouraged to buy them stuff. But if we make that the center of the holiday, we help school them in the notion that transcendent joy comes from things. Since that's a lesson the TV tries to teach them every day of their lives, one more morning of it may not seem so bad. But Christmas somehow seems to make that consumption holy, sanctifies with its aura of angels and stars the worldview of the mall and the breathless catalogue. If, instead, you emphasize others...it exposes them to the other truth, gives them some chance to see where real joy lies...

Some years ago, a wonderful Georgia-based group called Alternatives...put up a big poster [around Christmas-time] that asked: "Who's Birthday Is It, Anyway?"

Market capitalism, if it is as rational as its proponents always insist, cannot actually depend for its strength on the absurdly lavish celebration of the birth of a man who told us to give away everything that we have.

Sermon

The Bill McKibben reading was from a book published only ten years ago, but there is something about it that seems almost quaint, isn't there? *Christmas is too commercial; too materialistic. We need to think about others.* We've heard all that before.

Bill McKibben's name has become familiar to a much wider audience now than he had in 1998. He is a writer, environmentalist and activist whose primary concern has been addressing climate change. Though he has been very clear on the danger for a long time, the rest of our culture has only recently, by necessity and through simple observation of its effects, begun to take his warnings much more seriously. *Begun to...*

And we also, by necessity, must hear his words about the corrosive effects of a consumer society on Christmas in a deeper way than we might have, even last year.

Though newscasters did their best to cast a decrease in Christmas retail sales as the darkest and most tragic story of this century--and I don't question that it has serious ramifications for the economic security of many people--still, I couldn't help but being struck by the interviews with families, hearing distinctly, along with worry about the future, an unmistakable relief in their voices as they said, "We're not buying as much this year." We're not buying as much this year...and it will still be Christmas. We're not buying as much this year...meaning: we don't *have to* buy as much this year and it will still be Christmas. Meaning, maybe, we *never* had to buy that much...and it still would have been Christmas.

Now I don't mean to be flip about the serious circumstances that people are finding themselves in because of this economic crash. What I am suggesting is that, as we move to rebuild the economy, let's remember the work of Christmas which is precisely about addressing the needs of people. What I am suggesting is that, as we move to rebuild the economy, let's not *rebuild* it at all, let's build something new! If we are sick of the dissonance produced by an economy that says "You are the only person that matters" and a religious and ethical perspective--whether we practice Buddhism or Sikhism or Christianity or Judaism or Islam or Unitarian Universalism or Humanism or Hinduism--a religious and ethical perspective that says "Joy comes from putting something greater at the center of your life; joy comes from helping others; joy comes from compassion that calls us beyond the sole task of securing our own pleasure and comfort"...If we are tired of the dissonance of those two clashing ideologies, the maddening din, that chaotic and corrosive double-standard...if we are tired of sanctifying selfishness and worshipping at the altar of the false and failing Golden-Calf-God of a morally, spiritually, ethically, and *actually* bankrupt economic system, then let's build something else!

And what better time to start than Christmas?

When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers [and sisters],
to make music in the heart. (Howard Thurman, #615, *Singing the Living Tradition*)

This is a radical blueprint for what we might help to build...

And believe me it will not meet with overwhelming approval, especially from those in power. "This will never work," they'll say. "This is all well and good for your church services and your charity groups, but it's no way to run a country. Be practical," they'll say. "Be reasonable...be rational."

Rational? Market capitalism, if it is as rational as its proponents always insist, cannot actually depend for its strength on the absurdly lavish celebration of the birth of a man who told us to give away everything that we have, McKibben said...but it does, and he knew it, which is what led him to craft this gem of a thought: *Market capitalism, if it is as rational as its proponents always insist, cannot actually*

depend for its strength on the absurdly lavish celebration of the birth of a man who told us to give away everything that we have.

Have you heard the news reports since Christmas? Non-stop talking about retail sales, the effect of deep discounts on shoppers, so little time before the end of the year...

But I would like to say to all those people who felt a sense of relief at not having to buy so much for Christmas; I would like to say to all those people who, though understandably worried about the future, see this economic cataclysm as an opening toward possibility; I would like to shout from the rooftops to all those who feel cheated and abused and misused by the empty and emptying promises of a consumer society: **IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY!**

We can be free of this bondage. Now is the time of, not only liquidation, but liberation. Now is the time, not only of bailouts, but of jailbreaks. We have been imprisoned by an unjust system and we now have a chance for freedom.

And though the "rationality" of our present system has now been exposed as something decidedly-less-than-rational, with elected officials frantically pitching money into the gaping holes caused by this economic earthquake, there are still those who will urge us to return to more of the same. Go back, they say. There be dragons. Danger. Go back! Go back!

But there are no answers there.

The first chapter of McKibben's book is entitled "Christmas Never Was Christmas." "This book...is not an excuse for nostalgia, a search for some perfect and uncorrupted Christmas in the past to which we can return. Christmas has been, and always will be, a product of its time, shaped to fit the particular needs of people, society, and faith in particular moments of history...if we want to remake it in our image, we must first figure out what problems in our individual lives and in our society we might address by changing the way we celebrate. We need to search ourselves for clues as to how we might remake this holiday" (19, 39).

The same might be said for our whole economy at this moment in time. "If we want to remake it in our image, we must first figure out what problems in our individual lives and in our society we might address by changing the way we *do business*. We need to search ourselves for clues as to how we might remake this economic system."

And you can hear and you will hear more, louder, stronger warnings against making any drastic changes. We will be made to fear the road ahead. We will be told to leave it to the experts, the very people who brought us here. We will be sold slavery as security, and resold slavery as security because God knows we've been offered that deal before. We will be told that the old ideas are still sound while our new ideals are dangerous and frightening. And there will be those who believe it; who will wish to turn back.

One might assume, for example, that the Hebrews would have been glad when Moses led them out of their bondage in Egypt. But the challenge of creating a new life caused some to react quite differently.

“Weren’t there enough graves in Egypt?” they asked Moses with all of the bitter sarcasm they could muster. “Is that why you had to bring us out here? Didn’t we tell you to leave us alone? We had food back in Egypt! Better to live in Egypt than to die in the desert.”

What we propose will not be easy. “We must remember that liberation is costly,” says Desmond Tutu. “It needs unity. We must hold hands and refuse to be divided. We must be ready. Let us be united; let us be filled with hope; let us be those who respect one another” (#593 *Singing the Living Tradition*).

If we grasp this opportunity, we will need to “bear the responsibility and difficulties of freedom.” But we have a chance to choose a different center for our society, to move from profit to the prophets; from corporations to cooperation; from the stock market to the farmers market; from free trade to fair trade; from recession and depression to restoration and reconciliation... We have the chance!

“Fear not!” the angels said over and over again in the Christmas story. “Do not be afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy. A child is born.”

I bring you good tidings of great joy in the children of this congregation. I bring you good tidings of great joy in the lives of all of you here, who give of your time and your resources and yourselves to one another and to the wider world.

It’s all well and good to talk at the macro-level; to speak of overthrowing governments and changing economic systems; I can easily get swept up in the rhetoric of revolution. But what is it that really changes things? The courageous acts of individuals living out the principles that guide them every day. The courageous acts of small groups of people coming together to seek greater understanding and to join in compassionate action. You are all revolutionaries in the People’s Movement of Generosity and Kindness. Welcome, comrades!

This is not a somber revolution, but one that is filled with laughter! McKibben stresses in his book on Christmas that he is not recommending these changes in our celebrations so that we can live out some sort of sacrificial, altruistic duties, but so that we can experience more of the *joy* of the season. Emma Goldman rejected any revolution that would not allow her to dance. Howard Thurman says that the work of Christmas is not only to find the lost and feed the hungry, but to make music in the heart.

Greetings, fellow laborers! It’s time to get to work...