

White Bear

Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 7 March 2010

Real Time

The Reverend Victoria Safford

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651/ 426-2369 vsafford@whitebearunitarian.org

FIRST READING

from A. Powell Davies (Minister, All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., 1950's)

Let me tell you why I come to church.

I come to church – and would whether I was a preacher or not – because I fall below my own standards and need to be brought back to them.

It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened – sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and reasonable thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe my fellow men [and women]. I must not only hear about it, *but feel it*. In church, I do.

I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world – unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Work-a-day enthusiasms are not enough. I want to experience human nature at its best – and be reminded of its highest possibilities, and this happens to me in church.

It may seem as though the same things could be found in solitude, but it does not easily happen so. In a congregation, we share each other's spiritual needs and reinforce each other. In some ways, the soul is never lonelier than in a church service. That is certainly true of a pulpit, for a pulpit is the most intimately lonely place in the world – yet it is a loneliness that has strength in it. Perhaps this is because the innermost solitude of the human heart is in some paradoxical way a thing that can be shared – that **MUST** be shared -- if the spirit of [the holy] is to find a meaningful entrance into it.

We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls' deepest yearnings. But in church we do – in a way that protects us from all that is intrusive yet leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual loneliness, the same need of assurance and faith and hope. We are brought together at the highest level possible. We are not merely an audience, we are a congregation.

I doubt whether I could stand the thought of the cruelties and misery of the present world unless I could know, through an experience that renewed itself over and over again, that at the heart of life there is assurance, that I can hold an ultimate belief that all is well. And this happens in church.

Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places. The soul will always seek its nurture. This is why I come to church.

SECOND READING*For the Children**Gary Snyder*

The rising hills, the slopes
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or maybe the one beyond that,
they say
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light.

Real Time

Gary Snyder's poem was brought to us last summer by someone taking part in the group we convened for people affected by the economic crisis. Most had lost their jobs, some had lost hours or income, two were in danger of losing their homes, almost nobody had healthcare. ...*the slopes of statistics lie before us... the steep climb of everything going up, up as we all go down...* The image seemed apt, and it still does in this frightening time- but so did the final lines:

To climb [the] coming crests
One word to you, to
You and your children:
Stay together
Learn the flowers
Go light.

We talked a lot in that group about losses and fear, confusion and shame, but over the course of ten weeks other impulses kept surfacing. People kept orbiting ideas or convictions that would

not let them go, old concepts like *commonwealth, community, covenant, mutual care*. Even words we thought we understood, like *wealth* and *worth* and *value*, words like *abundance, security*, took on new meanings (old, recovered meanings). By Labor Day, Doug Federhart had collected all these words on index cards, dozens of them, into a defiant vocabulary, the very simple but very subversive language of hope, a supple and poetic language. Now we could speak and remember the lessons of hope: basic, ancient, obvious, but so easy to forget if your life and livelihood are unraveling, and all the things that define you are falling apart (job, income, title, status). The lessons of hope are simple and old: *Stay together. Learn the flowers* - meaning know what matters, and know what is within your control and what is beyond it; be grateful for beauty you did not create and for life that is still an astonishing gift. *Stay together. Learn the flowers. Go light*. This was wisdom we already knew, but we needed to come together to speak it, to define our terms, to remind each other every Monday morning in that circle.

Congregations exist, religions and religious communities exist, in part, so that people can live in two worlds at once. Congregations - whether gathered downtown at the Cathedral or us in our smaller Unitarian Universalist operation here, or the people in the local synagogue or mosque, or an ancient circle gathered round a fire or a ring of standing stones – congregations exist and always have so that people may live in two worlds at once, be fluent in two languages, walk two different landscapes. The congregation holds a story that its people know by heart but easily forget in the daily crush of sorrows and indignities, the daily grind of ordinary routines and extraordinary cruelties (in your small world or in the wider world). The congregation holds a story that its people know by heart and easily forget and long to hear again, in fact need to hear again, week after week. It is the story that sustains them, it sustains their life (our life), gives meaning, shape, direction to it. It may be told from the pulpit (the pulpit really has no other purpose than to tell this story) or it may be told in a series of small summer conversations, or by fourth graders gathered with a teacher -- who is most likely not a “teacher” at all, but an accountant or a cashier or an engineer, an attorney or an artist or an electrician, a nurse or a baker or candlestick-maker whom Janet Hanson has recruited and trained to be a resident theologian, this week’s trembling expert on God, death, Jesus, suffering, sin and grace. Whoever they are, they’re charged with telling the story to children, and hearing it back from children through the prism of their own young lives, their voices and experience. It’s a story sung in songs by the choir, prayed in prayers, and acted out in ways that don’t necessarily make logical sense: opposing wars our own government is waging, challenging laws and definitions (of marriage, for example) that our own society says are sacrosanct, building houses with poor families, sending not just condolences but real money to Chile, Haiti, New Orleans, Nicaragua, Iraq, Indonesia, and a thousand origami cranes to a UU church in Tennessee, shattered by a shooting there on a Sunday morning in July. The card from our teenagers said “We’re standing on the side of love with you, and we are not afraid.” The story that we come every week to hear, come to share, that the church exists to tell, runs counter to every prevailing mythology about money, materialism, militarism, nationalism, individualism, fundamentalism, power, violence and control. It is as old as all of these, and equally tenacious. Congregations of varying kinds in various ages have told it in countless shifting and evolving versions. In Christianity it is the gospel; in Judaism it is the covenant between Yahweh and the people, echoed by the inconvenient prophets who won’t stop asking and answering one question: *what does the Lord require? Do justly; Love mercy; walk humbly*. In the Qur’an Muhammad says the same: *What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being. To feed the hungry. To help the afflicted. To lighten the sorrow of the*

sorrowful. To remove the wrongs of the injured. That person is beloved of God. This story, this narrative, this good news, runs counter to our own private inclinations toward cynicism and despair, our all-too-natural inclinations toward despondency, apathy and weariness. It wakes us up; it calms us down. It reminds us what we love and whom we love, and that we're lovable ourselves, love-worthy ourselves.

Over and over, relentlessly, unceasingly, the congregation tells the story of justice and forgiveness, the story of hospitality and generosity, the story of courage (not bravado) and humility (not shame). It is the story of kindness, the story of sacrifice, the story of vulnerability, not glittering success. It's the story of active non-violence, radical love or agape, radical hope (which looks crazy), radical acceptance in a world of exclusions, peacemaking in a world of war, creativity in a world of brokenness. The church exists, congregations of all kinds exist, to preserve and spread this alternative story, reminding us that we do live in two worlds at once, the world as it is and as it might be, the world as it is and the one we are constantly reinventing, reimagining, reclaiming, rehabilitating, reviving with our faith, our hope, our love, our gladness. One writer says it's about speaking poetically when all you can hear, for miles around, is the flattened formulaic prose of the market or the state. The church exists not to push a rosy, happy, feel-good story, which would be just another insidious myth, but to proclaim possibility, to call us to our better selves, to coax us toward the vision, the values we mean to uphold even when we're falling short, to charge us with the goal of being noble, not small. This story is not easy; it can in fact be harsh, demanding, searing (it will ask of you your life), but it is beautiful, in the way that truth is always beautiful.

Louise Erdrich, the novelist, has a character in one of her books, an old man named Shamengwa. The narrator describes him:

Few men know how to become old. Shamengwa did... Anyone could see that he had been handsome, and he still cut a graceful figure, slim and medium tall... He was fine-looking, yes, but there were other things about him. Shamengwa was a man of refinement, who practiced clean habits. He prepared himself carefully to meet life every day... Owehzee is one of the [Ojibwe] words used for the way men get themselves up – neaten, scrub, pluck stray hairs, brush each tooth, make precise parts in our hair, and these days, press a sharp crease down the front of our blue jeans – in order to show that although the government has tried in every way possible to destroy our manhood, we are undefeatable. Owehzee. We still look good and know it. The old man was never seen in disarray, but yet there was more to it.

He played the fiddle. How he played the fiddle! Although his [bad] arm was so twisted and disfigured that his shirts had to be carefully altered and pinned on that side to accommodate the gnarled shape, yet he had agility in that arm, even strength. With the aid of a white silk scarf, which he chose to use rather than just any old rag, Shamengwa tied his elbow, ever since he was very young, into a position that allowed the elegant hand and fingers at the end of the damaged arm full play across the fiddle's strings. With his other hand and arm, he drew the bow.

Here I come to some trouble with words. The inside became the outside when Shamengwa played music. Yet inside to outside does not half sum it up. The music was more than music – at least what we are used to hearing. The music was feeling itself. The sound connected instantly

with something deep and joyous. Those powerful moments of true knowledge that we have to paper over with daily life. The music tapped the back of our terrors too. Things we'd lived through and didn't want ever to repeat. Shredded imaginings, unadmitted longings, fear and also surprising pleasures... Thus, Shamengwa wasn't wanted at every party. The wild joy his jigs and reels brought forth might just as soon send people crashing on the rocks of their roughest memories and they'd end up stunned and addled or crying in their beer... No, we can't live at that pitch. But every so often something shatters like ice and we are in the river of our existence. We are aware. And this realization was in the music, somehow, or in the way Shamengwa played it.

I love that image of this deliberate person, wearing his age, his infirmity and his dignity on his sleeve, quietly smashing people open with his violin, casting them into the wild water of their own existence. There's something there that reminds me of our life together here, our deliberate life. Sorrows and joys come in, and old grief and recent regrets, great hopes, deep remorse, daily courage, wild love, profound gratitude, ice cold fear, insanity, imagination, wonder about God and mystery, heart and soul, all are on the table, all are in the music, in the classroom, all brought in like offerings and made holy by our presence. This is our abundance.

Sometime I wonder: What do you think you're doing, what do you mean to be doing, when you come to church on Sunday? What do you expect, hope for, require, count on? What story to you come to hear? What do you imagine will take place, around you, in spite of you, because of you, within you? What happens – not in the sermon necessarily, but more likely in the silence, or in the music, or in the speaking of names or the affirmation of the covenant, or in the hallways, the classrooms, the parking lot? What happens here, what's going on, not on Sunday necessarily, but on Wednesday night around a table that someone has prepared for you (or maybe you've prepared it), or on Thursday night, when the classroom is cleared and a bed is made in the corner for a small child and his mother, who are sleeping here this month, who will ever afterwards think of this place, this whole house, as a “sanctuary” in a way that most of us cannot imagine? What story are we telling here, writing here, living here? I wonder if we come, like Shemengwa, to learn how to grow old in a certain kind of way – to learn it from each other.

Last year, someone sent me a poem he'd written in the middle of a desperate time. I share it with permission:

*My heart aches.
My mind races.
My stomach knots...
If only I had a friend.*

*I look on the web.
I log in to Facebook.
464 Friends and not a one I can confide [in].
Such is the new world order.
We know of people but we don't know them.
They know of us, but they don't know us.
We don't trust them, we only lead them to believe.*

Just as they would lead us to believe.

*464 friends on Facebook and no one to turn to.
I look at the pictures. I look for some understanding.
Yet I don't trust. I don't confide. I don't ask for help.
I need to lead them to believe that I am strong;
that I am wise; that I am wonderful.
Yet the truth is I am lonely, so lonely and I can't tell
any of my 464 friends that.
I would trade my 464 Facebook friends for one true friend right now, right here...*

It's like a modern-day lamentation from the book of Psalms. There's something about the gathered community, people showing up on purpose, in person, **in real time**, full of loneliness and doubt, full of brokenness and uncertainty – something in our showing up that tries to answer this despair. The congregation is a kind of anachronism in the 21st century; the very idea that you have to be physically present seems out of step with our virtual times. But a congregation is visceral thing, embodied, incarnate; we show up and literally breathe as one the breath of life. In this way what we do here is old-fashioned to the brink of ancient, this habit we have, this discipline, of gathering around the fire of our stories. It's a practice that runs counter to efficiency. It produces nothing you can sell. What price would you put on the opportunity to reach out your hand to the shoulder of the person who sent me that email, your tangible, flesh and blood hand?

Someone else sent a poem this week, a fragment of a song that came into her mind:

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home...*

She thought of it, she said, as she reflected on the kindness of strangers, in her case, literally life-saving kindness and courage. Earlier this week, she got a phone call in the night saying her son, in his twenties, had had a terrible bike accident and was in the hospital. He'd hit a patch of ice and crashed, and was laying unconscious in the middle of a busy St. Paul street. It was one in the morning, on a freezing cold night, but a passerby saw him, dragged him out of the road, called 911, and stayed by him till the paramedics arrived. He came to and tried to argue that he didn't need to go to the emergency room, but the paramedics disagreed and the stranger stayed until the young man was convinced. He was in the hospital with a concussion for several days.

His mother wrote, (and I share her words with permission), *What if people had thought he was just a scruffy guy with a beard, too drunk to ride a bike? Who rides a bike at 1:00 a.m. anyway? Without the blessed guy who stopped and the insistent dispatcher (and his helmet), he might not have survived. I will take this with me, she wrote, when I spend the night at church this week with people whose stories I don't know, and treat them with the same dignity that strangers treated my son.*

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home*

What disposes us to kindness? To courage? To radical hospitality, and radical inclusion, and imagination? What disposes us toward gratitude and generosity, to reach out our hands when we ourselves are depleted? What disposes us to love, to hope? How do we remember over and over the real story that we're living in, and decide, by grace and will, the real meaning of our lives?

I come to church, said A. Powell Davies, and would whether I was a preacher or not – because I fall below my own standards and need to be brought back to them.

It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion [or a status update on Facebook]. It could all too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened... I must feel again the love I owe my fellow men and women. I must not only hear about it, but feel it. In church, I do. I need to be reminded there are things I must do in the world- unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Work-a-day enthusiasms are not enough. I want to be reminded of human nature at its best. This happens to me in church.

In some ways the soul is never lonelier than in a church service. Perhaps this is because the innermost solitude of the human heart is in some paradoxical way a thing that must be shared- if the spirit of the holy is to find a meaningful entrance into it. The soul will always seek its nurture. This is why I come to church.

I told the Pledge Committee that I would urge you today to take part in the Conversation Circles and that I would urge you also to make a generous pledge to support our operating budget for the coming year. I'm not sure how to do that, except to offer you in closing these words from Davies, who makes the case so well:

We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our soul's deepest yearnings. In church we do, in a way that leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual loneliness, the same need of assurance and faith and hope. Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places.

We are not merely an audience, we are a congregation.

-
- Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*
 - Church member, "Looking for A Friend (464 Facebook Friends)"
 - Church member, e-mail 3.3.10
 - Joan Osborne, "One of Us" (song)
 - Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*