

# **White Bear**

# **Unitarian Universalist Church**

**Sunday 25 October 2009**

**Association, Union, Sympathy, and Cooperation**

David Schwartz, ministry intern

---

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

## **Association, Union, Sympathy, and Cooperation**

The first week I was here, the first week in September, I walked through the whole building, exploring. In the loft of the social hall, I found bookshelves filled with old books. There are copies of the monthly journals of the American Unitarian Association from 1860's. There are books on all sorts of topics, photos and drawings, the lovely black and white print of the former church building.

And what I was most delighted to find were the books of photographs.

There's one labeled "58-86" and my favorite pages are the first dozen: photos from the early sixties, the roots of this church.

What I notice first are the incidentals: the plaid suits, and the way the color orange blanketed every surface –

There is a little church with those white plastic chairs with the metal legs that had just been invented and orange carpet and a brown upright piano topped in a layer of sheet music and hymnals, and an overhead projector. (Some of us here today may not know what an overhead projector is – it's like an analog computer monitor) choir has nine members. There are two orange banners hanging behind them with words lettered in brown felt: one with the opening words and one with the closing—

“love is the spirit of the this church and service is its law...”

“may peace dwell in our hearts, and understanding in our minds...”

Those words were the tangible symbol and reminder was important. And to me, archaeologist of the past, trying to understand: where, as a church, did we come from, those words hung at the front of the sanctuary, framing the room, unavoidable, and even if I had never seen a UU church before in my life, I would have said to myself: that covenant and that prayer of hope and dedication – these must be the most important things to this church.

The first thing I noticed was the physical space, but the most striking thing was the people. These photos are filled with the same mix of emotions, expressions, postures, and people here today. There are young folks, and old folks, there are people in every stage of baldness. (as a future bald person, I think I can get away with that) and there are children: everywhere in these photos there are kids little and big, overflowing the frames of these photographs.

In the abstract, it's easy to feel a sense of nostalgia for what old photos symbolize. A sense that they were somehow simpler, or easier or more straightforward. As if those

people are so at home in themselves and their community, that many hands made the work light, while we today labor at times; that their lives were abundant while ours are scraping by.

But the closer I look at those photos, it becomes more clear: this world and those lives were just as complex then as they are now. I see myself, my friends, my family, all of you reflected back in those photos.

I saw a photo that's looking down at a little blonde by one year old, standing up in a blue sweatshirt holding onto a chair. I have a one year old daughter Josephine, and I believe the parent or parents of that child were every bit as joyous, confused, overwhelmed, excited and exhausted as Teri and I are with Josie.

It seemed to me, new to this community, that those photo books are not nostalgia for something lost: just the opposite, I see us, here, today reflected back in them. I held those photos in my hands and walked into this sanctuary, to see the rows of pews and chairs, the balcony, these gorgeous windows, this warm wood. And I feel every confidence that forty years from now, some intern will be at a pulpit in some future incarnation of this church holding up an old photo and saying: "gray pews! Can you believe they used to sit on gray pews! What were they thinking!"

What is clear is that forty years ago this was a little, living, vital fellowship. And equally clear is that this story is our story too, though we may have joined the church a decade ago, or a year ago, or the beginning of September, or are here for the first time this morning.

The story gives us direction, tells us who we are: a community of people choosing to bind ourselves together in the face of all the pressures that urge us to be separated from each other and from the Holy.

Every week you come, first time visitors and long time members, you come carrying with you the burden of your days. Carrying with you the weight of your own experiences and those you love: hurting and celebrating.

In our mediation, we all say together the names of someone we hold in our thoughts. We hear those names layering one over the other, to hear them blend together. We hear them as crisply spoken words and we hear them as indistinct murmurs that cannot be distinguished one from the other. In every syllable and whisper, I hear that we are not alone. When we speak them, we speak them together as one mouth, we say them as one voice.

Saying those names is like the water communion we did the first Sunday of this year: in that great glass bowl at the front of the sanctuary, so many of you brought a little vial or flask of water, and poured it in together. And there, this is what we do speaking the names of those we hold – we merge together our joy and sorrow and hope and fear, until our individual concerns are merged into the whole body of the congregation, and opening

our eyes, looking up, looking around, we discover we are not alone – that is the substance of communion.

To come together, to be in community, is a difficult and radical act some times.

A family story:

My great grandfather spent a good chunk of his life on his own. He was the Western American: tall, barrel chested, working in the Yukon, running a newspaper for gold miners in the Sierras. He was that rugged individualist, the quintessential American male we all read about in High School English class books. A Hemmingway sort of man: hard drinking, depending on no one, wife and children distant. I've been to museums and seen those immense canvases of huge western American scenes: canyons and mesas and sunrises over the plains, and in the midst of all that America I imagine a tiny speck of a person who is my great-grandfather, determined, alone.

I think admiringly of that on occasion, but then I think always, instead, of his wife: who did not strike out on her own, who did not live in the high mountain camps, who instead, raised her children, built her community, who did not turn away from the hard work, or escape, but with an iron determination stayed connected: stayed in community. Raised her children not by herself, but with her extended family, with her church.

As much as the romance of wandering the mountains appeals to me, I am descended from that great grandmother who staying in the valley, who stayed in community, who did the hard work of engaging with this world, when every instinct must have told her – just as it did her husband – to run, to close off, to think of herself first. The nobility of individualism is overshadowed by the nobility of staying together.

To join together in this communion is a radical act, because of the pressure right now “in these uncertain economic times” to back away. The message right now is loud and clear: you do not have enough, your resources are dwindling. What you thought you had will not go as far as it was supposed to. So it's time to pull back, to pull away, to close your door, to hoard your goods, and not to answer when a knock comes. As if isolation will cure the loneliness we have for each other and the Divine.

But that desire to lock the door, hoard what you have, it's a deep instinct that pops up in funny ways, even if you'd never say it out loud to another person.

My window looks out onto the patch of woods behind the church, and there is a squirrel who I have named Clarence. The squirrel has been out there all week burying nuts for the winter. Picks up a leaf, digs the hole, drops the nut, covers it up. Over and over, back and forth. And here's what I feel like telling him: Clarence: you don't have enough acorns! There's no way you will make it through the winter! You're too skinny to hibernate!

I'll walk out the door of my apartment in Minneapolis in the morning, and there's these big fat city squirrels who probably eat more French fries than acorns, and I'll chide them: you guys better fatten up for winter...

This is crazy! The message of scarcity has so permeated my consciousness that I am telling squirrels they don't have enough.

But it's true that's the message. We overextended ourselves. Financially, in relationships, in our time commitments. Spoken or unspoken that's the message: it's time to shut the door, to build the wall, to turn inward. Here's the message I hear: we can always invest in community again a few years down the road. Here's the message I'm hearing: I don't have enough. I don't have enough time. I don't have enough money. I don't have enough.

Hand in hand with that sense of scarcity comes a jealous sense of entitlement.

This is a central and unspoken faith question at the heart of the health care debate: if I've got mine, what do I care if you don't have it? If I'm lucky enough to have a health care plan through a big corporation, why should I care about you who pays \$12,000 a year in premiums, for the privilege of paying another \$10,000 out of pocket before coverage begins. Why should I care about you if I've got mine?

Association, union, sympathy and cooperation are the habits of the church that we practice and cultivate here because they are the habits of life we aspire to every day. To put the stranger before ourselves. To care for others and be cared for by them. To climb down from the tower of our own egos, and fears, and hates, and shames, and join with each other on the common plain of humanity. A common plain of sympathy and cooperation.

That is our faith, our hope for living, and it is not easy work.

We're coming here to practice that together. Our kids in RE are practicing together and you're practicing when you teach them. We walk through the art exhibit and talk about new immigrants to practice together. We walk the quarter mile from the district education office parking lot on a cold morning to practice together. We drink coffee, and chat, and welcome the newcomer, and mourn the passing of old timers to practice together. We sit and stand and sing and speak in unison to practice together.

To practice that habit of vision that lets us see the distance between us is not great, that we, that all people, are united by a common source and share a common destiny.

Learning to have eyes to see our common humanity and our fundamental unity is a discipline – it is what we have always been called to do as a movement and what the future holds.

Do you have hope for the future?  
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.

Yes, and even for the past, he replied,  
that it will turn out to have been all right  
for what it was, something we can accept,  
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,  
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,  
or what looking back half the time it seems  
we could so easily have been, or ought...  
The future, yes, and even for the past,  
that it will become something we can bear.

This is the hope I have for the past: that we have arrived at this point on this morning to be carried forward together.

It is a hope that I have for our liberal religious movement as a whole. Seen or unseen, we have centuries of tradition with us in this place.

Our somber black-suited Puritan forebears who covenanted to form a church together in 1648 declaring that “stones and timber are not a house unless they are compacted and united.”

Unitarian minister Henry Ware Jr., who wrote that church must be a “constant union of worship and action.”

The women and men and children who met on the white plastic chairs and orange carpet forty seven years ago who believed that association was so vital, it was worth coming together out of all the improbabilities of their lives.

These are our inheritance; our past and our hope for the future. There is no going back, there is no need to, but there is a story for us to claim: a story of a shared origin, a shared history.

A story that we come from people who in every generation have declared their faith in association not individualism, in union not isolation. In sympathy and an open hand instead of the locked door. We, all of us, are the inheritors of tradition of looking beyond ourselves and seeing the face of Divine in the face of each other and striving towards cooperation.

We walk this road with those who came before and those still to come.

With them, we affirm that:

Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law. This is our great covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

Amen.