

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 28 March 2010

Pack Nothing  
The Reverend Victoria Safford

---

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

**READING**

from Alla Renee Bozarth

**Passover Remembered**

Pack nothing  
Bring only your determination  
to serve and your willingness to be free.

Don't wait for the bread to rise.  
Take nourishment for the journey,  
but eat standing, be ready  
to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind --  
fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need  
of the time -- to love justice and walk humbly with your God.

Do not take time to explain to the neighbors.  
Tell only a few trusted friends and family members.

Then begin quickly, before you have time  
to sink back into the old slavery.

Set out in the dark.  
I will send fire to warm and encourage you.  
I will be with you in the fire  
and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food and find refuge in new places.  
I will give you dreams in the desert to guide you safely to that place  
you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around the fires  
in the dark will make you strong and wise...

At times you will get weary and turn on each other  
from fear and fatigue and blind forgetfulness...

I am sending you into the wilderness to make a new way and to learn my  
ways more deeply.

Some of you will be so changed by weathers and wanderings  
that even your closest friends will have to learn your features

as though for the first time.

Some of you will not change at all.  
 Some will be abandoned by your dearest loves  
 and misunderstood by those who have known you since birth  
 and feel abandoned by you.  
 Some will find new friendships in unlikely faces, and old friends  
 as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame.

Sing songs as you go, and hold close together.  
 You may at times grow confused and lose your way...  
 You will get where you are going by remembering who you are.  
 Touch each other and keep telling the stories.

Make maps as you go remembering the way back  
 from before you were born.

So you will be only the first of many waves of deliverance on these desert  
 seas.  
 It is the first of many beginnings -- your Paschaltide.  
 Remain true to this mystery.

Pass on the whole story.  
 Do not go back.  
 I am with you now  
 and I am waiting for you.

- *Alla Bozarth-Campbell*

## **Pack Nothing**

*You shall not oppress the resident alien, the stranger or the sojourner;  
 You shall also love the stranger, for you know the heart of the sojourner,  
 for you were strangers, you were sojourners, in the land of Egypt.  
 Exodus 23:9, Deuteronomy 10:19*

*from among the oldest lines in the oldest books in the Bible,  
 the story retold at Passover*

---

The part of the story I like best takes place even before the story begins, before Moses arrives with his famous demands for the Pharaoh; before the terrible plagues of locusts and frogs, tornados, diseases, boils and slaughter; before the flight in the night with their unbaked bread and their hope and their history, the Egyptian army at their heels; before the Red Sea parts and

Miriam's dance with her tambourine; before the forty years of exile in the desert, which was a lifetime then, so that some died there of old age, they never made it out, and others were born who'd never known Egypt and never seen freedom. The part of the story I like best is a part I can only imagine; it's not told anywhere, explicitly, and so, in keeping with tradition, I pencil it in. It takes place when the people were still slaves, *oppressed so hard they could not stand*, and somehow, the spark of a glimmer of an idea was ignited in someone's mind, just an ember, and quietly, secretly, she blew on it, and then whispered it to someone else, who couldn't believe what he was hearing, and yet he couldn't contain it, and so he spoke it also, when no one was around, and so it travelled from slaves in the brickyard to slaves in the fields, from wet nurses to teenage concubines in the palace and grandmothers tending clay ovens, grandmothers whispering *Hush, not so loud! Someone might overhear you*. Some didn't believe it was possible; some couldn't wait to get going; everyone was afraid, everyone, everything tense. This must have all happened before Moses appeared, before he was given his commission at the burning bush, even before he was born, before his baby days in the bulrushes; it may have begun with those midwives, who lied to their mistress about killing the first-born Israelite children. By the time Moses came, the people knew what he was going to say and they knew how they would answer; the idea had grown bright and hot in their minds and spread through their whispers like fire. And in a single moment, on the eve of the full moon, without any guarantee that they would make it out alive, without any sense of where they were going or how they would get there, but with absolute conviction about why, one person put down his heavy mallet, and one person dropped his rake in the field, right where he stood, just before dawn; another put down his trowel and the tray piled with mortar and bricks to make pyramids; one stopped milking the goats she had tended since childhood and patted their flanks good-bye; one dried her hands on her clothes and quickly walked out of the kitchen, scooping armloads of flat bread into her skirt as she ran; one woke the old women, one woke the old men; and they silenced their children with something to eat, or maybe clean rags daubed with honey to suck on. They left in the dark, walking out of their slavery and into a different condition, an equally dangerous but entirely different condition. In the moment they laid down the hammers and buckets and lifted their heads, the moment when each took a sharp breath and then took a step, they were free.

Something within them, something unspoken, within them, among them, must have said something like this:

*Pack nothing -*

*Bring only your determination to be free...*

*Don't wait for the bread to rise.... eat standing, be ready to move at a moment's notice.*

*Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind - fear, silence, submission -*

*Only surrender to the need of the time –to love justice and walk humbly...*

*...begin quickly, before you have time to sink back into the old slavery.*

*Set out in the dark.*

*I will give you dreams in the desert to guide you safely to that place  
you have not yet seen.*

*At times you will get weary and turn on each other from fear and fatigue and blind forgetfulness...*

*Sing songs as you go, and hold close together.*

*You may at times grow confused and lose your way...*

*You will get where you are going by remembering who you are.*

*The stories you tell one another around the fires in the dark will make you strong and wise...*

*Make maps as you go, remembering the way back from before you were born.*

*Remain true to this mystery.*

*Do not go back.*

Passover begins tomorrow night, on the eve of the first full moon following the vernal equinox. Its purpose is the telling of this story. For thousands of years, over and over, not in the temple but around the more holy altar of the kitchen table, the Jewish people have gathered to reinvent the future by remembering the past. The seder table is set for a beautiful feast at the center of which is this history, this family legend, which is told in different voices, in different versions in different households, different countries. Each traces the same outline, each dating back centuries to specific historical events, but each is tinged with its own accent and embellishments, twists and turns. Each has deliberate places at which children are encouraged to barge in and ask, “Why? Why did they do that? Why did we do that? How did they get there? How did we get here? What happened next? Why do you say *We were slaves in Egypt* when we’ve always lived right here? What did they do, what did you do, what did we do next?” Children are encouraged to barge in because they need to understand the inheritance they carry, as former slaves, exiles, strangers, and also therefore as welcomers of strangers. The story is told so the people will remember not only what happened in the far away, biblical, mystical past, but what is happening right now. They tell it over and over to aid and abet in its continuing unfolding, the unfolding of freedom and justice, and so they will recognize new Exodus stories, new narratives of liberation and oppression, when they hear them, when they read it in the news, when they see it in the mirror. Pharaoh may have a new name in our time; the plagues may all have new names (toxic waste, nuclear weapons, climate change, genocide, racism, AIDS). I’ve been to seders at which the ideology of Zionism is named as the oppressor, and the slaves who walk to freedom are called Palestinians. In the traditional telling, Egypt is called *mitzrayim*, the narrow place, the difficult place, the place – or the moment - of unbearable heartbreak and tension. You may well have your own name for that, in any given moment of your life. The Promised Land you’re trying to reach may have a new name, in your own history, or in our common history. It has a thousand different names.

I love that chapter in the story from before the story begins, when they get the inkling, the subversive idea of survival and freedom, when they lay down their chains and decide to walk out. I love it not for the history, but for all the times I’ve seen it in the present, in my lifetime, from grainy newscasts 40 years ago on a black and white TV from Greensboro, Birmingham, Selma; to a rally of immigrants just this past Sunday with busloads of allies from all over the country, including Minneapolis; to the kid from here who gave her senior high school speech last week to a packed auditorium, on her coming-out journey as a young lesbian; to so many quiet conversations, when a person lifts up his head and says “I have got to stop drinking.” Or

gambling. Or “I have got to stop lying to myself and breaking the hearts and the lives of the people I most love.” Or a person lifts up her head and says, “I will leave my abuser.” Or says for whatever reason, with whatever reason and history behind him, behind her, “I have got to start living my life now, as I am called to be, without shame, without fear, without any excuses.” Or: “I will forgive the person who injured me, because the weight of this has become a chain around my heart.” Or: “I will ask forgiveness of the one I injured.” Sometimes people tell things that are so difficult to speak that the very act of speech is like stepping into the Red Sea, into the churning ocean before the waters have been parted and the ground is not yet safe; they could drown in the telling, they might just go under, so scary and unknown are the implications of speaking the truth. You can see why Jewish tradition makes something sacred of the act of telling a story and the act of hearing (which extends a hand to the person roiling in the water); this is part of welcoming the stranger who has come from *mitzrayim*, the narrow place, but now must cross the desert without knowing where it ends. *Wade in the water, children*, the dangerous water. The old song comes out of this story, and it coaxes not only the traveler, but also the person who wades in, arms open, lifeline extended, risking not rescue, but radical hospitality.

*You shall also love the stranger, for you know the heart of the sojourner,  
for you were strangers, you were sojourners...*

I'm thinking of the steady stream of volunteers that is flowing through this building now in the afternoons and evenings, bringing snacks, toys, games, and most of all your presence to the guests who are staying here, mothers, fathers, children. Someone offered to bring puppets, someone offered massages, someone saw that the plastic tubs for toys were all cracked and broken and went right out to buy new ones, and Bobbi Freeman makes the weekend breakfasts, and Dee Smith bakes sweet breads all week long. Some of you are sleeping on cots yourselves, and some holding babies, which you've not done for years and years, or maybe never, so a young mother can have 5 minutes to herself in the bathroom, or so she can make a phone call, or go outside and smoke – whatever she needs to get through this moment, this day, the night ahead in this strange stopping place. One of you told me about a conversation last week with a young man who's been here all month, about trying to tell him he really didn't need to put a dime in the basket when he got a cup of tea from the Social Hall, and his response about why he did need to put that coin in the basket. “It's what I can do,” he said. “I know it costs more, but it's what I can do.” They are walking through the desert. They've packed nothing but determination. They are in the wilderness of this moment in their lives. Who knows what act of imagination gave them the courage to get on the bus and come out here? Who knows where they've come from, or where they are going? We must learn to pack nothing, no assumptions, presumptions, no prejudgments at all, just to show up, open-hearted, as the need arrives. They are sojourners, as any one of us could be in any moment, literally, figuratively, physically. They are sojourners, and you have welcomed them in.

Grace Paley was a wonderful writer who died some years ago. She said, in a memoir about growing up in New York,

*I lived my childhood in a world so dense with Jews that I thought we were the great, imposing majority and kindness had to be extended to the others because, as my mother, said, everyone wants to live like a person. In school I met my friend Adele who together with her mother and*

*father were not Jewish. Despite this, they often seemed to be in a good mood. There was the janitor in charge of coal and my father, unusually smart, spoke Italian to him. They talked about Italian literature because the janitor was equally smart. Down the hill under the Southern Boulevard El, families lived, people in lovely shades of light and darkest brown. My mother and sister explained that they were treated unkindly; they had in fact been slaves in another part of the country, in another time. Like us? I said. Like us, my father said year after year at seders when he told the story in a rush of Hebrew... In this way I began to understand in my own time and place that we had been slaves in Egypt and brought out of bondage for some reason. One of the reasons, clearly, was to tell the story again and again – that we had been strangers and slaves in Egypt and therefore knew what we were talking about when we cried out against pain and oppression. In fact, we were obligated by knowledge to do so. [I grew up among] people who love history and tradition enough to live in it and therefore by definition be part of its change.*

I have been reading this month about an interfaith project in southern Arizona, called *No Mas Muertes, No More Deaths*. In 2004 a coalition of congregations and others gathered to address the crisis in their state along the Mexican border: 4,000 men, women and children had died in Sonora Desert since 1998, chased into dangerous regions by increasingly harsh immigration laws. The coalition determined that an around-the-clock, non-violent humanitarian physical presence in the desert would be the single most effective way to prevent more people from dying, so they have gathered hundreds of volunteers from all over the country, who work in shifts dropping water jugs, food, and medical supplies wherever the migrants will find them, rescuing the sick and injured, notifying authorities when bodies are found so they may be returned respectfully, and standing with people in court if they are apprehended. They document abuses by authorities and vigilantes and publish these to the press. Their statement of “Faith Based Principles for Immigration Reform” begins

*We come together as people of conscience to express our indignation and sadness over the continued deaths of hundreds of migrants attempting to cross the US-Mexico border... We believe that such death and suffering diminish us all. As religious leaders from numerous and diverse traditions, we set forth these principles, by which immigration policy must be comprehensively reformed:*

*We must recognize that the current militarized border strategy is ill-conceived, inhumane, ineffective, and also damaging to the fragile land.*

*We must address the status of undocumented persons currently living here, and clear a reasonable legal path to residency and eventual citizenship.*

*We must make family reunification and family unity the cornerstone of the American immigration system.*

*We must recognize that the root causes of migration lie in environmental, economic and trade policies rooted in greed and inequity, and work with the international community to rectify this.*

A lead partner in this work is the UU Church of Tucson, which calls itself “a diverse congregation whose mission is to envision a world where justice and compassion cross all borders.”

Here in Minnesota there are among us now some 65,000 – 80,000 undocumented people. 85% of their families have mixed immigration status, meaning that when a raid at a factory occurs, when people are detained or deported, families are ripped apart, children severed from parents and parents from each other. Their legal cases often take more than 20 years to resolve.

My favorite image from the *No More Deaths* website is a photograph of the beautiful, desolate desert landscape, this treacherous and vast lonely wilderness. In an outcrop of rocks someone has wedged an old door torn from a pick-up truck, and the door is a welcome mat, a beacon emblazoned with spray paint, *Bienvenidos, amigos! No mas muertes!* And gallons of water are strewn all around.

*You shall not oppress the resident alien,  
the stranger or the sojourner;  
You shall love the stranger,  
for you know the heart of the sojourner,  
for you were strangers,  
you have been sojourners, in the land of Egypt.*

Writing in the *New York Times* this week, an observer shared his experience of two concurrent demonstrations in Washington last Sunday:

*A few hundred [people] clustered on the south end of the Capitol on Sunday, fouling the crisp spring air with shouts of violence and loathing. Instead of pitchforks, they hoisted revolting signs. Some showed [the President] as a whiteface Joker, and some as Mao and Hitler... The eruption had an underground source, ugly and not always unspoken. [They] hurled racist and antigay epithets and spat at congressmen... [Hate]throbbed in the ears, like an infection. I escaped it at the other end of the National Mall, at a rally that far eclipsed the Tea Party in size, hopefulness and decency. Many tens of thousands of immigrants and allies were pressing for immigration reform. It's an issue for which they have marched and waited, marched and waited — their hopes dashed repeatedly... If anyone has reason to fear government, it is immigrants like these... The government has violently invaded their lives, broken into homes, torn parents from children and sent them away to distant prisons. They have law-scoffing sheriffs and brutal employers and unjust laws aiming just at them. This is a fear the Kill-the-Billers will never know. No matter how darkly they loathe Medicare, unemployment insurance or Social Security, the safety net is theirs for life... Here were two rallies: one good, one loathsome. One hopeful, one paranoid. Kill the bill! Sí, se puede! Same beat, different drums. I'll take the one that rings with patience and hope. Sounds more American.*

It sounds more compassionate, more loving, more deliberate, and also harder, more challenging, more risky, more full of unknowns. Who are these exiles, these strangers? Can we afford to take them in? Is there room, are there jobs, for all of us? We realize that we need the poet's

admonition as much as any traveler: *Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind - fear, silence, submission. Only surrender to the need of the time –to love justice and walk humbly...*

*I will give you dreams in the desert to guide you safely to that place you have not yet seen.*

*At times you will get weary and turn on each other from fear and fatigue and blind forgetfulness...*

*...Some will be abandoned by your dearest loves and misunderstood by those who have known you since birth and feel abandoned by you.*

*Sing songs as you go, and hold close together.*

*You may at times grow confused and lose your way...*

*You will get where you are going by remembering who you are.*

That is our constant work, to remember who we are, what manner of people we would be. One rabbi, Ben Kamin of Cleveland, writes of Passover:

*It whispers to you first as the winter is receding and you are reopening the drawers of your household and the chambers of your soul. It beckons to you at the seder table with the lyrics of your ancestors. It calls to you from the troubled, ancient shores of the Nile, and it has been heard about in our time along the Rhine and the Mississippi [and the Rio Grande] and so many others rivers of hate. It awakens you with the symphonies of benevolence that have played – from a single set of Egyptian bulrushes to the learning academies of Babylon to the teaching tents of Africa to the spiritual pagodas of China to the caring sanctuaries of Europe to the underground railroads of so many freedom campaigns. It is relevant for every child of every color ever born of a mother who knew how to give the milk of kindness.*

*When you hear the voices of your parents; when you hear the music of your heritage; when you hear the singing of springtime birds; when you hear the speech of your lover; when you hear your heart telling you to care; when you hear the bells of freedom; ...when you are moved by these melodies, and you begin to repair the world around you that is when you are truly thinking Passover.*

## Sources

Grace Paley, quoted in *The Shalom Seders*, New Jewish Agenda, New York: 1984

www.nomasmuertes.org (paraphrased from web text)

Lawrence Downes, “Two Rallies,” *The New York Times*, 3.23.2010

Ben Kamin, *Thinking Passover: A Rabbi’s Book of Holiday Values*