

“Living Your Faith”[©]
Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society
The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, Minister
November 9, 2008

PRELUDE

SOUNDING OF BELL

CALL TO GATHER

Come, Come Whoever Your Are, #188

Come, come, whoever you are;
Man, woman, parent, child
Whatever your religious journey,
Whatever your skin color,
Whatever your ability,
Whomever you love-
You are welcome here this morning.
You are welcome at our table.
You are welcome in this religious home.

Welcome & Announcements

Good Morning! Welcome to the Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society. I am Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, and it is my great pleasure and privilege to serve this congregation. We welcome all of you. If you are a newcomer, and haven't signed our guest book in the entryway, please do so before you leave so that we may send you a newsletter listing our activities. If you have questions about Unitarian Universalism or are thinking about joining this congregation, we invite you to join us for coffee/tea after our service today and to speak with me or a member of the Membership Committee. You can recognize them during coffee hour, because they wear gold nametags. (Ask if there is anyone wearing a gold nametag today to stand.)

Later in the worship service newcomers will have an opportunity to introduce themselves, and we hope that you will do so, so that we can give you a proper welcome.

To parents, children are always welcome to stay in the service, or join the other children in our religious education classes.

Announcements:

Important parts of our community life are the invitations we give to one another for activities beyond our morning's service. Please note the announcements in your order of service.

If there are any other MUUS related announcements, you are welcome to share them now (look for people to raise their hands. Have them use the portable microphone.)

Here ends this morning's announcements.

***Chalice Lighting & Responsive Reading #442 (antiphonal reading)**

We Bid You Welcome

We bid you welcome, who come with weary spirit seeking rest.

Who come with troubles that are too much with you, Who come hurt and afraid.

We bid you welcome, who come with hope in your heart.

Who come with anticipation in your step, Who come proud and joyous.

We bid you welcome, who are seekers of a new faith.

Who come to probe and explore. Who come to learn.

We bid you welcome, who enter this hall as a homecoming,

Who have found here room for your spirit. Who find in this people a family.

Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are on your journey,

We bid you welcome.

***Hymn No. 307, "The Human Touch Can Light a Flame"**

COVENANT (in unison)

Love is the spirit of this society,
Dwelling together in peace,
Seeking truth,
Helping one another,
Serving human needs,
Honoring the Earth and all that is,
This is our covenant.

OFFERTORY

As we take our collection, we invite first time visitors to let the plate/basket pass them by, you are our guests today.

Let us now take an offering to sustain and strengthen this place, which is sacred to so many of us; a community of memory and of hope, for we are now the keepers of the dream. (Braddock Lovely)

SHARING JOYS & CONCERNS

If you are visiting for the first time, or have come back after a long time, or if you are still getting to know us, we would love it if you would introduce yourself to us. It is purely optional, but we'd like to give you a proper welcome. Please raise your hand so we can bring you a mic.

Let the congregation say, "Welcome!"

And, now for our Joys and Concerns:

If you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak.

May all that is shared at this time be seen as holy.

Ring bowl.

Concerns:

- (1) Let us remember people in the Congo who are fleeing for their lives to Uganda, in the midst of civil war.
- (2) How many of you have spouses or friends who voted differently than you this past week? Does this trouble you? Does it strain your relationship? Let us remember that our principles call us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people. I ask you to know that whenever we aspire to live in right relationship with others, and in covenant with another, we are always called again to assume of the other that they have good intentions. Let us never doubt that people of fierce convictions, hold their beliefs because they are ultimately and deeply concerned about the same issue that concerns you so greatly. Let us remember that to live by our highest aspirations, calls us to reflect deeply on the beliefs and convictions of others and to seek to bridge the divide.

Many joys and sorrows live in the heart, and we recognize their presence, even as they are offered in silence. It is in our sharing that we care for one another. May we find solace and joy in each other's caring. Amen.

Ring bowl.

SINGING THE CHILDREN ON THEIR WAY

As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace;

Know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.

PRAYER & MEDITATION

In Words

Prayer

Let us, as a community, hold in our hearts the concerns and joys expressed today:

These words form Elizabeth Tarbox¹:

“When the day is too bright, or the night too dark, and your feelings are like an avalanche barreling down the mountain of events outside your control, when you look down and you are falling and you cannot see the bottom, or when your pain has eaten you and you are nothing but an empty hungry hole, then there is an opportunity for giving.

Go outside and plant a tulip bulb in the ground: that is an act of rebirth. Sprinkle breadcrumbs for the squirrels or sunflower seed for the birds: that is claiming of life. And when you have done that, or if you cannot do that, go stare at a tree whose leaves are letting go for its very survival. Pick up a leaf, stare at it; it is life, it has something to teach you. You are as precious as the birds or the tulips or the tree whose crenelated bark protects the insects who seek its shelter. You are an amazing, complex being, with poetry in your arteries, and charity layered beneath your skin. You have before you a day full of opportunities for living and giving. Do not think you know all there is to know about yourself, for you have not given enough away yet to be able to claim self-knowledge.

Do you have work to do today? Then do it as if your life were hanging in the balance, do it as fiercely as if it mattered, for it does. Do you think the world doesn’t need you? Think again! You cleanse the world with your breathing, you beautify the world with your giving, you perfect the world with your thinking and acting and caring.”

May it be so.

In Silence

In Song – Spirit of Life, #123

Sermon

“Living Your Faith”

¹ Elizabeth Tarbox, *Evening Tide*, (Skinner Books, Boston, 1997), 1 (*Rebirth*).

A disclaimer: Being a minister, you may find that sometimes I use religious language. Please do not assume that my definition of a word is the same as yours. When I write the word G*d, as I some times do, it is written with an asterisk substituting for the letter “o”. It refers to an expansive understanding of that which is beyond definition. Very often it refers to that which brings health and wholeness to our lives or to it may refer to nature or to a quality that transform relationships or to that which Tillich calls, “The Ground of All Being”². Sometimes, I will use the word “Amen” and I may invite you to, also. That is your choice. I would have you know that the definition of “Amen” is the word “verily,” as in “so it is,” or “yes, that is true.” Occasionally, if I’m really excited and something has struck me to my core, I will use the word “Hallelujah.” It means that I am joyful and awestruck by something. It means that I am overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude for someone or something that has touched my soul. You may join me, or not. What I would have you understand, is that I refuse to give power over to other people, particularly the religious right, to define my own language and thereby shape my ideas, and limit my voice. It was too much hard work and took me much to long to find my voice. What I share with you is my language, and I invite us to discover the meanings of words we use with one another, even as we use them, so that we may understand and respect each other’s language.

I wonder where you were at, when you first discovered Unitarian Universalism. Did you come with your full voice? Or did it need to be released from a prison others created for you? Perhaps you were simply searching, looking for something different, looking for something to inspire you in the midst of uncertainties you were facing. Perhaps that is still true.

When I first came to Unitarian Universalism, I was conflicted and searching for something that would sustain me and give me new direction in a job that was demoralizing. I was looking for something that would help me feel grounded. Help me find my voice and values. Something like a compass that would help me assume control and shape the direction of my own life in ways that resonate for me.

But, I get ahead of myself. Where did I come from and how did I get to the point that I was ready to discover the freedom and liberty of Unitarian Universalism? I will tell you my story, and hope that, in time, you will tell me yours.

For me, I had been brought up in the Army, and we had moved on average, every year till I was 18.

² Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* (1951-1964) [vol. 1 and vol. 2] defines religion as the most ultimate of all human concerns, identifies god with the ground of all being, and treats religious language and ritual as symbolic. <http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/t9.htm> November 8, 2008.

When I was in 8th grade, we were stationed at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. Though my parents were Presbyterian, I didn't know what I was or wasn't. And, searching for some stability as only a 12 year old can – I started attending both the Catholic mass and the Protestant service at 9 and 11 am at the post chapel.

I didn't know I wasn't supposed to be at the Catholic mass, or that I wasn't supposed to take part in the communion. I thought God would want me to kneel at “his” altar and participate in his ritual. That was how I understood God, then.

I remember sitting between the services, and watching the chaplains change the icons, symbols, and hymn numbers. As easily as turning a picture from front to back. It seemed entirely normal to me, showing me different faces of God, different ways to worship. I didn't realize until much later how watching the staging change between services, would lay a foundation for a Universalist outlook on life and God.

Later, when I was 19, and eager to leave home, I married someone who was Greek Orthodox. To be married to this man, I had to become Greek Orthodox. That was fine with me. Another prism . . . through which to know and understand something I understood then, as God.

And, so, though I probably didn't know it, I had an expansive view of God, and little concern for exclusive religious dogma. I had seen how different religious views could work perfectly well in different settings, for different people, and even for the same person, myself.

By the time I met my second (and last) husband, Bob, I guess you could say I was a liberal Christian, though I wouldn't have known what liberal meant back then. Bob was Unitarian Universalist. OK – haven't heard of that before. What is it? Oh. You say, Jesus is a great prophet? Not God? But, what about the trinity?

You say, you respect what I believe? But, aren't I right (and you wrong)?

Nevermind, I love you.

And so, a bit confused by Unitarian Universalism - such a long name – so hard to define and categorize, I married this man (with Unitarian Universalist roots going back 300 years). We've been married for 29 years now, and have a 23 year old son named Brenton.

Twenty nine years.

And, I, the liberal Christian, I tried to save him! As in save him so that he could go to heaven (with me). For the first 13 years of our marriage, I tried.

And, you see how well that worked!

Neither he nor his family tried to convert me. They may have been amused from time to time, but they didn't let on. And, they made space for me and my values. It was like the steady drip drip drip of water on the soul.

Finally, the tipping point was when a UU World magazine arrived at the house (courtesy of his mom) focused on the theme of Universalism. Universalism. The inclusion of all the world's sacred religions. Hmm. Presbyterian. Catholic. Protestant. Greek Orthodox.

Respect for the merit of different faiths for different people. Viewing God, like through a kalidoscope, changing the prism, but seeing God, or something that seemed True, in the center. Knowing that God was too good to damn us, and that all would be saved (or reconciled) to God in the end.

It was one of several conversion points. That's how conversion happens, most often. Not so much like Saul, with one great big change into Paul. But, more in baby steps. Bit by bit, as you find values and people who bring resonance to your life.

As I was finding those values, I still carried in me other values with which I struggled. I had high expectations of myself. I'd been raised in an environment that stressed survival and service, adaptability and accomplishment. I tried to live a life that reflected Jesus' life, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” “forgive seventy times seven,” and other rules that were less constructive. Outside “rules” that made it difficult for me to find my own voice.

I was trying to be a good person, someone living by other's standards, but rarely understanding who I was in here. Rarely in touch with that deepest spirit inside, which I have come to call the soul.

The results were tortured. It wasn't that I was such a bad person, just that it was a distortion of my true self – as must be the case when one lives from the outside in – instead of the inside out.

I was living a life where the course was chartered by the lives and sayings of prophets and other people but not mine. This, instead of listening to my heart. This, instead of finding my heart.

Parker Palmer has written in his book, “Let Your Life Speak”³:

“Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”⁴

He points us to the necessity that each of us find our vocation. The word vocation is rooted in the Latin for “voice.”⁵ So, it does not mean a goal to be pursued, but a calling to be heard.

Palmer says, “You must listen for the truths and values at the heart of your identity, not the standards by which you must live – but the standards by which you cannot help but live.”⁶

“Thus, if you pursue your vocation as an act of will, of grim determination that your life will go this way or that, whether you want to or not, it becomes a way of life that the self will surely resist. True self, when violated will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honor its truth.”⁷

Palmer points out that there is an American myth that we all suffer from, that each of us, can be or do whatever we desire. He gives as an example, “It is clear, as I enter my sixties, that I cannot and will not be president of the United States, even though I grew up surrounded by a rhetoric that said that anyone could rise to that lofty role. I no longer grieve this particular limitation, for I cannot imagine a crueler thing. Still, encouraged by the myth of the limitless self, I spent many years trying to deny this ecological truth.”⁸

He calls it an ecological truth, because he sees that like nature, we each have our place in the body of the whole, each with our gifts and limitations, or what I like to call growing edges.⁹

Palmer tells this story about his own journey in a Quaker community.¹⁰

³ Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak, Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

He says, “During my tenure as dean at Pendle Hill, I was offered the opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution. Vexed as I was about vocation, I was quiet certain that this was the job for me. So as is the custom in the Quaker community, I called on half a dozen trusted friends to help me discern my vocation by means of a “clearness committee,” a process in which the group refrains from giving you advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own *inner truth*.”

He says, “Looking back, of course, it is clear that my real intent in convening this group was not to discern anything but to brag about being offered a job I had already decided to accept! He goes on, “For a while, the questions were easy, at least for a dreamer like me. But, halfway through the process, someone asked a question that sounded easier yet but turned out to be very hard:

“What would you like most about being a president?”

“The simplicity of that question loosed me from my head and lowered me into my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond. Then, very softly and tentatively, I started to speak:

“Well, I would not like having to give up my writing and my teaching . . . [nor] the politics of the presidency, never knowing who your real friends are . . . I would not like having to glad-hand people I do not respect simply because they have money . . . I would not like . . . “

“Gently, but firmly, the person who had posed the question interrupted me: “May I remind you that I asked what you would most like?”

Responding impatiently, I said, “Yes, yes, I’m working my way toward an answer.” Then I resumed my sullen but honest litany:

“I would not like having to give up my summer vacations . . . I would not like having to wear a suit and tie all the time . . . I would not like . . . “

“Once again the questioner called me back to the original question. But this time I felt compelled to give the only honest answer I possessed, an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it.”

“Well,” said I, in the smallest voice I possess, “I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word, president, under it.”

PAUSE

I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence – a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan.

Finally my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up – and cracked me wide open: “Parker,” he said, “can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?”

PAUSE

What he is telling us by this story, is that we are not all suited to do everything. That when we exceed the limits of our interests, our personalities, our makeup, it has consequences on our soul, and on others around us. We end up distorting ourselves, others, and our relationships, all because we sometimes have a hard time listening to what our life is telling us.

Each of us has gifts. Each of us has growing edges. We cannot be perfect in all things, otherwise we would lose those unique qualities that make each of us the unmatched self that we are.

By our gifts, we share. By our moments of growth, we learn from others. It is by sharing and growing that we make community that did not exist before.

Before I took Unitarian Universalism into my soul, I had been living by lofty ideals, but I was not in touch with my true center. I was doing a good job at appearances, but I wasn't living the life that, if I would only listen, would eventually, make itself known to me.

In time, I came to understand the purpose of my life as ministry. But, not clergy – at first. At first, it was lay ministry.

Finding that spot where my life, my values and the world's needs intersected, was like moving from a two dimensional life, into a three dimensional life. Everything and my place in it looked different. More colorful. Richer. More meaningful.

I came to believe that it is important that each of us find that intersection where our gifts, the world's needs, and our Unitarian Universalist values, come together so that we may live our lives spiritually grounded and in service to others.

I call this ministry. Lay ministry and professional ministry. The word ministry means for me, to minister unto others, to care for them, to be present to them in their joys and sorrows, to strive for justice with a compassionate and loving heart.

I believe that everyone is called forth from beyond or from within to live their faith, their values, in the world.

And, I believe it is often difficult to do this in our daily lives, sometimes in our congregations, and, especially in the secular world. It is entirely possible for us to sit side by side in worship and never know the struggle each one is dealing with to live their faith in the congregation, on the job, or at home.

I believe that we, as a people, need encouragement and opportunities to learn how to:

- articulate our faith to others
- discover our gifts and discern where our passion & the world's needs meet
- deepen our spiritual grounding so that we have the courage to live our ethical principles in the congregation, on the job, and, in the home.

Lastly, I believe we need congregations whose purpose is to hold its members in care, providing guidance and support so that members' lives will speak through the practice of their faith in their daily lives.

PAUSE

Let us fashion a religious community where the friend and stranger among us can find their true self, listen to their heart, and find their life's vocation, find their voice.

Blessed be, and Amen.

REFLECTION & RESPONSE (congregation)

***Hymn No. 118 "This Little Light of Mine"**

***CLOSING WORDS: #692** – read antiphonally to one another

If here you have found freedom, take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort, go and share it with others.
If you have dreamed dreams, help one another, that they may come true!
If you have known love, give some back to a bruised and hurting world.
ALL: Go in peace.

CHORAL BENEDICTION

EXTINGUISHING OF THE CHALICE

Please join hands for the extinguishing of the chalice.

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Let the congregation say: AMEN!