

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF LOUISVILLE

~ A member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association ~

CELEBRATION OF LIFE

April 24, 2005

*The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow
to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.
Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed. — Mark Morrison-Reed*

Call to Worship & Celebration ~ by the Rev. Maryell Cleary Rev. Norm Stewart

For untold centuries people have drawn apart from the workaday world to worship, to celebrate [life] and to wonder at things beyond and within themselves.

So *here we have gathered* to raise our sights and look at new horizons. Life is more than toil for bread; life has meaning and purpose.

As we celebrate life together, let us seek harmony within ourselves, with one another and the world, and find our lives uplifted and made whole.

Welcome to this, our Celebrations of Life.

Opening Song *Here We Have Gathered* – # 360 All sing

Chalice Lighting ~ from Passover Haggadah

May the light we now kindle, inspire us to use our powers
to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder,
to bless and not to curse, to serve you, Spirit of freedom

A Reading for Many Voices

Liberation Is Costly

~ by Desmond Tutu ~

Liberation is costly. Even after the Lord had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had to travel through the desert.

They had to bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom.

There was starvation and thirst and they kept complaining.

They complained that their diet was monotonous.

Many of them preferred the days of bondage and the fleshpots of Egypt.

We must remember that liberation is costly. It needs unity.

We must hold hands and refuse to be divided. We must be ready.

Some of us will not see the day of our liberation physically.
But those people will have contributed to the struggle.
Let us be united, let us be filled with hope, let us be those who respect one another.

(From *Singing the Living Tradition* – # 593)

SINGING *I Wish I Knew How* – # 151 All sing

READING *Passover Prayer* from Vanessa Southern

I invite you into a place of quiet and reflection that some call prayer as you listen to this Prayer for Passover from the Rev. Vanessa Southern.

Bound as we are in common life, we gather in prayer and in meditation.

Some of us are praying to God, others to a spirit of life, some praying to the best that is in ourselves and in the world. Together we cry out our dreams and our brokenness.

We pray this day for all who are oppressed.

For those trapped by poverty;

For all whose bodies and minds and spirits are enslaved by addiction, by mental illness;

For all held captive by false doctrines, serving cruel gods;

For those whose circumstances have blinded them to larger possibilities for the human race and for themselves;

For those who have been crushed by disappointment and loss and forgotten the ache of freedom and hope;

For captive and for captor;

For oppressed and the one who oppresses;

For us and for them;

For a world bound together in hope and hopelessness;

For today's beauty and tomorrow's promise;

And for today's pain and tomorrow's evil

We pray for liberation and a rebirth of hope.

We pray for freedom, this day.

We pray for the love that sees its own errors.

And for a world that is filled with hope, banished of cruelty and alive to the promise and the grandeur of each day.

We pray for peace.

by Vanessa R. Southern, minister, The Unitarian Church in Summit, New Jersey

Musical Guided Meditation *Hard Old Memories* by Pete Sutherland

Musical Response *Dipper of the Stars* – arr. Niki M. Davis

Reading

Theologian Bernard Loomer wrote:

Church is for the increase of stature, the enlargement of spirit, and the greater freedom of self. Freedom is not an end in itself, it exists in order to enrich our communal life. Church is for encouraging us to actualize our most creative possibilities. It is also the critic of our limitations and our pretensions. Church is for understanding and for being understood. Church is for confession, for repentance, and for the compassion of forgiveness. Church is for reminding us that we are all members of the web of life, that no man or woman is an island, and that no person is an individual outside of the context of this web.

Sermon *Hard Old Memories* Rev. Norm Stewart

If you have read the book, *Our Chosen Faith* by John Buehrens and Forrest Church, you have read that quote before. I was re-introduced to it at our UU Roots class. UU Roots is our Chalice Night program for members and friends who want to learn more about the history, the polity, and some of the thinking that has fed the two streams of Unitarianism and Universalism which joined together in 1961 to become the *Living Tradition* we now call Unitarian Universalism.

This is the first time I have ever held this particular class. We are not finished with it yet and I am already planning to run it again in October for any of you who missed it this time.

We've had a great group of mostly new members and friends but a few long-time UUs as well. I have been pleasantly surprised that the number of attendees has grown each week.

One clue that some of the newer participants in the class already have a strong inherent Unitarian Universalist core sensibility is that they exhibit little or no fear about asking questions – especially questions that challenge the minister. Anyhow, a couple of the folks in the class reacted to the passage from Bernie Loomer that I read a moment ago. One was uncomfortable with what was perceived to be the authoritative tone of it. The other had a particular reaction to the words “confession” and “repentance.” It seemed like those were two words this person was trying to get away from when he came to a UU church.

I admitted that while they were not words that I or probably most Unitarian Universalists would normally use these days, I was nonetheless struck that the two words would have as much power over this person as they apparently did.

I then shared something with the group that I have said from this pulpit in the past. It comes from my friend Michael Ryce, the same guy who with his wife wrote the commitment piece that I used in our Valentine's Day service. Michael says, that, “if you are in a relationship of any kind and there is something going on that is making you feel uncomfortable, there is a simple test to determine whether it is your stuff or the other's stuff. That test is, are you feeling it?” If you are feeling it then chances are good that it is your stuff.

That said, I asked the person in the class whether they thought the discomfort they felt in their relationship to the words “confession” and “repentance” was the other's stuff or their own stuff?

Do the words have some kind of inherent power over you or is it your stuff that is bugging you?

Probably most of you can answer that question.

Probably most of you have words or symbols that may seem to carry some similar power over you. The good news however, is that if it is in fact your own stuff, then you have the power to do something about that power over you. You can even possibly reclaim those words, or at least re-frame them to your own advantage.

More about confession and repentance later. The announced topic of the service is about the hard old memories some of us have from our childhood.

It should come as no surprise to most of you that not everyone who comes to this church, or for that matter probably to most churches, has had, or thinks they have had an ideal childhood.

Not everyone here had parents that were able to pick them up from school and take them to soccer practice or dance lessons or music lessons or whatever. Or who could even afford those things to begin with. Not everyone had a parent who was at home when school was over. Not all of us had parents that read to us.

Some of us did not have two parents at home. Some of us were raised by an aunt, uncle or grandparent.

Growing up, some of us had one or more parents who struggled with alcoholism and or some other addiction. Or some of us may have grown up with parents that were battling mental illness.

Some of us lived in homes where physical, verbal, sexual abuse, and or domestic violence were all too common occurrences.

And, some of us had parents who simply did not care for us very much at all or at best did not know how to show that they cared. They may have been too busy for us and they rarely if ever supported our emotional development with kind words, a gentle touch, or even a simple hug.

People respond to the challenges of childhood in ways that are as unique and different as the individuals themselves are. Some simply could not survive and died far too young.

I acknowledge with great sadness those casualties, unknown to most of us, and remember also those victims who are still too wounded to make it to this or any other church.

As I say this, I realize that I must acknowledge all of those people whose personal calling is to try to help every child survive whatever environment they were born into. I would lift up the work of the Center for Women and Families and the work that Janet Rink and her cadre of volunteers does at Tingley house; to name just one of many organizations and countless individuals in our community who do this difficult, and at times very painful work.

Some us do survive difficult childhoods. No doubt it contributes to the strength of character frequently found in survivors. Some make it to adulthood — wounded to varying degrees, but outwardly mostly intact and able to function in the community. Along the way, most that do survive have developed skills and behaviors to help them through life's situational gamut from unbearable abuse to benign neglect. As children, when some of us bring the coping skills learned in the home into the classroom or act out in ways one cannot at home, the results can be extremely disruptive for everyone involved.

On the other hand, one of the common, rarely disruptive coping skills, is to be among the smartest and best in your class. Any of you out there? You don't need to be the first to raise your hand.

Whatever works to survive.

Look around. I know there are plenty of survivors here in this room and I know there are many more stories right here in this room than you or I will ever know.

Frequently, when people are around the children of today, someone will say something like, “they are the future,” or “they are the future leaders of the world” – or the community – or the church. Look around you now folks. 20, 40, 60, 80 some years ago there were people saying that about you — yesterday’s children — and now here we find ourselves trying to create a religious community together. Trying to find our way out of the wilderness.

What sort of coping skills and behaviors have we brought to this place made holy by our presence here? Which of those skills and behaviors are serving us and this congregation well or not so well?

Listen again to what Bernie Loomer says: “Church is for the increase of stature, the enlargement of spirit, and the greater freedom of self.” I believe that implied in this statement is the notion that for some of us this church is a place to work on our own personal healing. If we have been wounded in our lives, church can help us move in the direction of more health and wholeness. If we have developed coping skills and behaviors as children which no longer serve us in healthy ways, we can examine our lives and our interactions with others to see how we might want to make changes to them.

Over 2400 years ago, Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Simply stated, we can ask ourselves if the coping skills and behaviors learned in our youth are still appropriate, or can we do better? In her article, *Walking in the Wilderness: A Passover Reflection*, the Rev. Roberta Finkelstein writes, “when the time comes, we have to give them up. This is often the most difficult piece in the recovery process for people who have been abused as children — recognizing that the defenses that served them so well and allowed them to survive unbearable situations are no longer serving them. It takes a real leap of faith to leave those old ways behind as we walk in the wilderness, whether that wilderness be the personal challenge of recovering from a loss, or the communal challenges of creating a new and healthier community.”

When I first visited here three years ago, I began to hear stories of bad behaviors that had been a part of some heated discussions here. After arriving I heard still more stories without hearing names of any particular individuals. I was almost convinced that the level of incivility here was somehow much worse than any place that I could possibly imagine. So I began to take note of behaviors which I thought might be considered bad behavior by others. I have been trying to see how these behaviors serve those people and how they impact the democratic process free churches hold so dear.

Examples of the behaviors that I am talking about include, but are certainly not limited to, acting out in some way or another, shouting at one another, passive aggression, highly emotional outbursts, walking out in disgust, dismissive gestures or utterances in response to other people’s ideas or opinions, etc.

You can add your own favorite examples to this list.

Most, if not all of us will occasionally exhibit some of these or other behaviors that might be deemed inappropriate. However, in my experience the number of chronic offenders has actually been quite small. They can, however, be very disruptive to good process in a church where congregational polity is the model of governance to which we aspire.

We currently serve some 500 children, women and men in some way or another here during the course of a year. While I have not been keeping a tally sheet, my guess would be that we are

talking about 1 or 2 dozen somewhat chronic offenders.

It is always interesting to me how often I will say something like this and people who I wasn't thinking about at all will come up to me absolutely convinced that I was talking about them. Rarely do they tell me that they plan to do better – even if they sincerely do.

When we talked in our UU Roots class about this kind of self-examination and trying to make some changes in how we act, one of the astute members of the class said, “sounds like confession and repentance to me.” It's kind of like the 12-step thing where I came to realize I had a problem and then decided to do something about it.

Also, in the UU Roots course we discussed the frequently asked question, “what does your church believe?” The answer posited is that our church doesn't believe anything – the people in it do.

In a similar vein some folks say, “the church needs conflict resolution and management training.” While I and probably most members of the Learning Team agree with that – and will recommend that we make some sort of civility training regularly available for all members of this congregation – I also recognize that in the meantime we can all observe what some might describe as bad behaviors, both in others and in ourselves, to see how they are serving us, our church, and our process. And how we might personally do something about our own behaviors.

Now, relax, take a deep breath, I promise we are not going to start having behavior police come to church functions just yet. However, consider this for just a moment.

Who can tell me how one becomes a UU?

Do any of you belong to the UUA?

There are no individual members of the UUA. Only churches can join the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Does the UUA somehow identify and recognize you some other way? Not that I know of.

Does signing our Membership Book make you a UU?

No, it makes you a member of this autonomous congregation.

Can you be baptized into this faith as a young child?

Not in most autonomous UU congregations.

I believe that the only way that anyone can ever become a UU is to self-identify as a UU.

Hopefully you self-identify yourself as being a Unitarian Universalist after some study and participation here for a while, followed by a thoughtful, self-examination of your personal beliefs and convictions. After that self-identification process you may make the decision to join together with other self-identified UUs in a local autonomous congregation.

By similar thoughtful self-examination, I am hopeful that most of us can self-identify our own behaviors that are not helping us or our church as we try to deal with the challenges we face here. I have personally found that such self-examination generally goes smoother with the help of trusted friends and colleagues.

As a child growing up, some of us had to endure nearly unbearable abuses that we were mostly powerless to change. As individual adults, by a little honest self-examination, and perhaps even

some personal confession and repentance (and by repentance I simply mean doing whatever we personally decide is right), each one of us can, in the words of the hymn, begin to “break the chains holding me.” They are the chains holding us back from what we really want to become. We can break the chains of abuse, addiction and bad behaviors from our childhood that have linked together generation after generation in unhealthy ways.

As adults we can say “no” to the abuse, addiction and bad behaviors that we could not question as children.

As a liberal religious community we can, and from time-to-time may need to say “no” to our children and even to one another. Unless a particular issue is a absolute “deal-breaker” for you, we can agree to disagree on some things and still find much common ground where we can walk together.

We cannot change our personal or our communal past. We cannot change our history. We cannot change the behavior that has gone on in this church up to this moment. We can redeem ourselves from this moment forward by not letting destructive coping skills and behaviors from our past continue to diminish the connections and meaning we can experience as adults. It has been said that “forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.”

Let me repeat that: “forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.”

If we can give up all hope for a better past, we can begin to live “our own life again.” We can begin as individuals and as a community of faith to make more positive contributions to our own personal health and wholeness and the health and wholeness of this congregation. We can begin to heal and we can begin to *actualize our most creative possibilities*. It is going to take all of that and more to make this the church that some of us want to see.

Blessed be — Amen — Asé

Sam Keen says that, “faith is dancing in the dark.” Ric Masten says, “Let It Be a Dance.”

Closing Song

Let It Be a Dance – # 311

Closing Words

~ by Robin F. Gray

We are the children of yesterday,
Fully alive today, and, yearning toward tomorrow.
As people with a history – we accept the lessons of the past,
As people joined in community – we rise to meet the
 challenges of the present; and
As people of faith – we call forth the visions with
 which we will create tomorrow.
We commit ourselves and our resources to:
 uncovering the past,
 creating community,

and seeking a brighter future.

Blessed be – Amen – Asé