

*Life Stories*

The Rev. Paige Getty

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

Sunday, October 8, 2006

**Call to Worship** (by Erika Hewitt):

As we enter into worship, put away the pressures of the world  
that ask us to perform, to take up masks, to put on brave fronts.

Silence the voices that ask you to be perfect.

This is a community of compassion and welcoming.  
You do not have to do anything to earn the love  
contained within these walls.

You do not have to be braver, smarter, stronger, better  
than you are in this moment  
to belong here, with us.

You only have to bring the gift of your body,  
no matter how able;  
your seeking mind,  
no matter how busy;  
your animal heart,  
no matter how broken.

Bring all that you are, and all that you love, to this hour together.  
Let us worship together.

**Reading:** *When Someone Deeply Listens to You*, by John Fox

## Sermon:

Recently I attended a meeting in which we were asked to introduce ourselves by explaining to the group what were the roots of our sense of public responsibility in the world. It was a diverse group of women and men, of different races and ethnicities, ages and religious affiliations. I heard stories of a black woman born to an alcoholic mother in Southern Georgia; a self-described “cowboy Jew” from Arizona; a Latino raised on the Texas / Mexico border; and a white man from the American Midwest who has always believed the world is a safe and loving place. In that gathering I was struck by a sense of self-awareness about the four things that have most shaped my engagement with the rest of the world—that I am a *white, Southern female*, born and raised in a privileged *middle / upper-middle class* family. And, I might add in retrospect, I have always been driven by an intense desire to please other people.

In our two-hour gathering that night, fifteen of us talked only about ourselves and the personal experiences that had led to that moment of our sitting in a room with other leaders in a nascent movement to make Howard County a better place for all who wish to live and work here. We did not talk about issues or agendas or elections or petitions or ideas. We talked about us—about our stories. We left that night with the sense that we knew one another a little better, and were a little more invested in one another’s lives and passions and hopes.

A few of us in that gathering were ministers, which got me to thinking about the Divinity School Address, preached by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1838, before the senior class in Divinity College at Harvard. He said,

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. ... A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, — life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the

world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a freeholder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of his biography.

“The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, — life passed through the fire of thought.” The “true preacher,” yes, but I dare say the truly engaged member of society... whether activist, organizer, or any individual of good will who simply wishes to be a part of something greater than oneself. She must deal out to the people her life, passed through the fire of thought.

To deal out one’s life... I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently, and about the difference between human beings and human doings. I’ve been asking myself if I’m satisfied being defined and controlled by the things that fill my calendar. At least two of you in the past week have asked me how I was doing, and got caught in an exchange you probably didn’t anticipate—I actually answered the question, reflecting on this still-new effort I’m making to balance full-time ministry and parenthood, and how I seem to be saying “yes” all the time to things I want to do, but I’m not sure that I’m doing any of those things well, blah... blah... blah... Had I been more grounded in those interchanges, I likely wouldn’t have rattled on so uncontrollably. But the fact is, I *have* felt that I was at the mercy of a calendar recently, with one meeting or activity after another, and very little time in between to make any *meaning* of those activities.

But, of course, some of those activities are in themselves especially meaningful. In the past month, I’ve conducted two weddings and a couple’s renewal of vows ceremony; two memorial services; and a private baby dedication. The memorial services, I admit, are my favorites, because they are especially meaningful. I cannot count the number of times someone has said to me after a memorial service, “I had no idea he had done some of those things!” What a gift it is to me to be able to spend time with a family and then help tell the story of their loved one’s life—not the list of civic organizations and careers she participated in (which you can find in the obituary), but the impact he had in people’s lives, the character and passion by which she’ll be remembered, the stories that illuminate the kind of person he was to the people around him. This week, the widow of the deceased told me that even she had learned some new things about her husband of more than 60 years. It is, at once, both a gift and a tragedy that we learn so much about a person at his memorial service. Why, I wonder, are we not taking the time to know one another better while we’re living?

In our service about Yom Kippur a couple weeks ago, I asserted that the act of personal atonement—and, in particular, seeking forgiveness from one another—is especially relevant to Unitarian Universalists because we claim as a statement of faith that *relationships are sacred*. We do not hold up a single text or creed or dogma as sacred,

but we do affirm that our *relationships* are sacred. Our relationships with ourselves, with the holy in our midst, and with one another, are the very expression of what it means to be human. And the purpose of our gathering as a religious community is to enhance and strengthen our human *being*.

That sounds good, doesn't it? But do we really live as if it is true? Do we genuinely devote ourselves—our time, our energy, our calendars—to the building and strengthening of relationships? Do we ask (and listen to!) one another about the passions that make our hearts sing? Do we have any clue as to why the person sitting next to us this morning (not your spouse!) is drawn into this Unitarian Universalist community? Are we willing personally to open up and actually share those passions with someone who asks, who is genuinely interested?

We are, of course, shaped in large part by the culture in which we live. It is a culture that defines success in terms of money, superficial beauty, formal education, popularity, public authority, quantifiable achievement. And it is a culture that is, with each passing day, more defined by the gadgets that enable us to be disconnected from one another as we delude ourselves into believing we are more connected. When was the last time you sat down face-to-face with a person and talked not about a shared task or a job responsibility or some other product, but about yourselves? When was the last time you had such an interaction with your partner, not to mention someone with whom you don't live? *I* get to have these kinds of interactions with you as part of my job, and yet I can count on one hand the number of times in the past month that I've had such one-on-one, face-to-face conversations.

And then there are the face-to-face conversations that simply aren't as “engaged” or effective as they could be...

In *The Sacred Art of Listening*, Kay Lindahl writes [that] “There's something beyond technique when two or more people are deeply listening to each other. It is an awareness that not only are we present to each other, we are present to something that is spiritual, holy, sacred.”

But this kind of “deep listening” goes against the cultural grain. Lindahl cites research studies by the International Listening Association which report that we spend about 45 percent of our time listening, but we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75 percent of that time. The average attention span for adults is about 22 seconds. Immediately after listening to someone talk, we usually recall only about half of what we've heard; within a few hours, only about 20 percent. (Brussat, “Deep Listening”)

As a teenager, I learned a definition of “sin” that resonated with me, and still resonates today: Sin is anything that separates a person from herself, from other persons or from God. It is a definition consistent with my earlier premise that the most sacred thing in Unitarian Universalism is our relationships—with oneself, with one another, and with the holy. And, I fear, we are missing the mark... often. Whether because of our own personal priorities, or the demands of this society in which we have chosen to live, there is much room for improvement when it comes to keeping the sacred, sacred.

In the announcements this morning, I encouraged you seriously to consider attending the candidates forum being held tonight at Oakland Mills High School, sponsored by PATH—People Acting Together in Howard (County). Tonight’s meeting isn’t about personal relationship building, but it is about public relationships. It’s about demonstrating to those who have (or want) political power, that they are going to be held accountable by another power in this county—a power built on relationships that cross sectarian lines. We are going to gather with Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Quakers, Baha’i... and in our gathering, we are going to say that we are interested in promoting the good of Howard County—not only a “Unitarian Universalist” message, not only a liberal political message, not only a single issue that will live or die once it’s legislated, but a message that says the good of all depends on all of us caring genuinely and deeply about one another.

And this model of community organizing is based on personal relationships that many of those in attendance have been building over the past year or two or three. Edward Chambers is a community organizer, and the author of a book titled *Roots for Radicals*. In describing the relationships on which effective organizing is built, he says,

A solid relational meeting brings up stories that reveal people’s deepest commitments and the experiences that gave rise to them. In fact, the most important thing that happens in good relational meetings is the telling of stories that open a window into the passions that animate people to act. (45)

The relational meeting is not a search for those who share our faith, class, politics or other views, [like] ideologues on the right or left [who] seek consistency and certainty. (52)

When a good relational meeting occurs, two people connect in a way that transcends ordinary, everyday talk. Both have the opportunity to pause and reflect on their personal experience regarding the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be. And in that moment, a new public relationship may be born, through

which both will gain power to be truer to their best selves, to live more effectively and creatively in-between the two worlds. (53)

I believe in the potential for this approach to be truly transformative—not only across differences in Howard County, but also across differences in this congregation and in other parts of our lives. If you weren't planning to come tonight, I hope you will. But more importantly, I hope you will consider in the near future engaging one new person in real conversation, opening yourselves to one another and to each other's life stories.

As I reflect on my own life story, I recognize, yes, that I've been defined to my core by being female, white, Southern, and privileged. But I am unmistakably aware that my life's chapters are defined by the people in them—from my family of origin, to the influence of my Aunt Kathryn, to my first serious romantic relationship in my early 20s, to my second serious romantic relationship that transformed into a life partnership, to the call for me to serve as minister to this particular congregation of persons, to the birth of our child earlier this year.

I hope my years together with you last long enough for me to hear about the important chapters in *your* life that have inspired and shaped and animated you.

The rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about sitting on a beach and watching two children playing in the sand—working hard at the water's edge to build an elaborate sandcastle, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just as they finished their project, a large wave swept over it, reducing their castle to a pile of wet sand. He says he expected the children to burst into tears, devastated over the loss of their work of art. Instead, though, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and settled in to begin building another sandcastle. What struck him in that moment, he says, is that all the important and complicated structures in our lives truly are built upon sand. Sooner or later, a wave will come along and knock down what we've worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only those who have a hand to hold will be able still to laugh.

*Your* life is unique and powerful in its own right. What stories do you have to tell? Whose hands will you hold as we move forward in this life we share?

I invite you to think—and act—on these things.

Amen.

## **Benediction:**

Annie Dillard writes, *We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each others beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.*

May you go from here knowing you are not alone—  
may we share with one another our lives, our stories, our truth.  
With hands to hold, we face the future together.

Amen.

## **Works Referenced**

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, “Deep Listening: Hearing Others with Open Minds and Loving Hearts” 07 October 2006  
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Edward Chambers *Roots for Radicals* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003).

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