“Fidelity – So Great A Cloud of Witnesses – 2015”

Sunday, January 3, 2016
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Readings

(1) This morning, as I lift up the lives, fidelity, and insights from some of those who died in 2015, I begin with some Yogi-isms. Perhaps, you are familiar with Yogi Berra, the talented baseball player for the New York Yankees who offered so much on the field and off.

Sportswriter Allan Barra described Yogi-isms as "distilled bits of wisdom which, like good country songs and old John Wayne movies, get to the truth in a hurry." Some of them are:

- As a general comment on life: "90 percent of it is half mental."
- On why he no longer went to Rigazzi's, a St. Louis restaurant: "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."
- In July 1973, Coach Berra's Mets trailed the Chicago Cubs by 9½ games in the National League East. The Mets rallied to clinch the division title in their second-to-last game of the regular season. Thus, "It ain't over till it's over."
- When giving directions to Joe Garagiola to his New Jersey home, which was accessible by two routes: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."
- "It's déjà vu all over again." Berra explained that this originated when he witnessed Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris repeatedly hitting back-to-back home runs in the Yankees' seasons in the early 1960s.
- "You can observe a lot by watching."
- "Always go to other people's funerals; otherwise they won't go to yours."
- "I really didn't say everything I said."
(2) One of those who delved deeply into the strangeness and wonder of this business of being human was Oliver Sacks (7/9/33 – 8/30/15), the British-born neurologist, and author who died last August and who chronicled parts of his last year. His medical stories of strange conditions and illnesses illuminated the normal, important things. And as he described it, “I love to discover potential in people who aren’t thought to have any.” (NY Times, 8/31/15)

He elevated narrative medicine to art, and about himself wrote, “I would like it to be thought that I had listened carefully to what patients and others have told me, that I’ve tried to imagine what it was like for them, and that I tried to convey this” to which he added, “And to use a biblical term, bore witness.” (Ibid.)

He was not only a doctor and author, but also a swimmer, biker, scuba diver; world-class weight lifter; for a time, a member of the Hell’s Angels, and later, for a while, addicted to amphetamines.

In his own life, he identified that he had primary issues life-long with “belonging, bonding, and believing.” When he realized he had terminal metastatic cancer a year ago, he wrote about his life over the course of his dying. He indicated, “I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and have given something in return.…. I have read and traveled and thought and written.”

A deep naturalism was his faith, and his character? “Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”

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Perhaps you recall an image of Amelia Boynton Robinson… the image of her, at age 53, unconscious, not moving, and laying on the ground having been bludgeoned by state troopers in Selma, Alabama. Amelia Boynton Robinson was cradled in the arms of young man, looking up in shock.

Another photo shows “a helmeted officer”, holding a gas mask and a billy club, standing over her. According to one report, “Someone told the trooper that she was dead, and he instructed the marchers to drag her body to the side of the road.” (NY Times Magazine, p. 26, 12/27/15)
Amelia Boynton Robinson, who died last August at age 104, not on that day in Selma, was near the front on the first attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. Two of the leaders at the head of the march were now Congressman John Lewis, then of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, and Rev. Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The purpose of the march was to respond to the police murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson two weeks earlier and to show support for voting rights and Constitutional rights for black citizens in Dallas County and throughout Alabama.

The brutality and wanton violence on Bloody Sunday galvanized civil rights support up to the Presidency, and the Voting Rights Act was introduced to Congress by President Johnson on March 17, 1965 followed by a successful march to Montgomery, with National Guard protection, completed a week later.

Amelia Boynton Robinson, born in 1911, lived a life of defiance. At age 10, in 1921 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment a year earlier, she joined her mother in suffragist efforts to encourage black women to vote. In 1934, at age 23, with a degree from Tuskegee Institute, she worked in Selma for the US Department of Agriculture teaching rural black women about food preparation, home-making, healthcare, and nutrition. Less than 1% of blacks were registered to vote, and this courageous, tenacious woman became one of them. And she enlisted others to do so too.

It was she who sought out Dr. King’s and the SCLC’s support for the Selma voter registration efforts. The strategy meetings took place in her small real estate office and around her dining room table… welcoming activists like Fred Shuttlesworth, C. T. Vivian, Constance Baker Motley, and Andrew Young.

Five months after being left for dead by the roadside at the Pettus Bridge, Amelia Boynton Robinson stood near President Johnson when the Voting Rights Act was signed on August 6, 1965.

A rightfully celebrated civil rights leader, she was the subject of an article last week by Nikole Hannah-Jones in the NY Times Magazine with the title, “Defiance Defined Her.”

Throughout those years, she displayed fidelity to matters bigger than herself… things like justice, equality, fairness, and freedom, defying those who would diminish others. And she found colleagues and support for her blessed journey.
Equally, a great a cloud of witnesses surrounds us throughout our days… kindred spirits, strangers, partners, (antagonists are few I pray), those who like us are curious, freedom-loving, and wonderfully created, only slightly lower than the angels.

Each of us as pilgrims on this journey between our birth day and our death day…

This morning in turning to some of the heroes of the human spirit, I return to a traditional text [Hebrews 12:1] that reads, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside any mistake that weighs upon us, and let us [too] run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

Thanks in abundance to all those whose lives inspire us in our peculiar and difficult times, who in voice and deed showed fidelity to deep values, and who just may give you strength and courage in your own choices.

The list of the well-known, and less well-known, this year as every year, goes on and on: those who in ordinary ways made choices… who were like you and me, characters in a story of hope… who, like you and me, make a difference by the stories we write…. The lives we create….

Out of so many, there are some that I turn to because of personal contact and appreciation.

One of those is Guy Carawan, who died at age 87, last May, and who was our pulpit guest speaker and song leader in 1988. In my life, part of the music of freedom that surfaces with pleasant harmonies throughout my life is the anthem of civil rights, “We Shall Overcome.” With it are the contributions of and encounters with activist, musician, and member Pete Seeger and with activist and musician Guy Carawan,

Songs of freedom and protest were part of church life in Knoxville, Tennessee at the Unitarian Universalist congregation, whose members like my mother were active in the civil rights movement. There were lunch counter sit-ins downtown, and other local efforts at desegregation.

Nearby to Knoxville in Monteagle, Tennessee was the Highlander Folk Center, which, then as now, was carrying on its programs of education, training, and general support for labor rights and civil rights. Its alums include Rosa Parks. The music staff at Highlander included Guy and Candie Carawan, who were frequent participants at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church.

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Some workers on strike against the American Tobacco Company in Charleston, SC brought an early version of “We Shall Overcome” with them to a training session in 1946 at Highlander, after adapting and blending two traditional African American spirituals.

They taught it to Zilphia Horton, one of the directors and co-founders of Highlander, who shared it with Pete Seeger, who taught it to Guy Carawan, whose sharing gave it to the rest of us.

It was Guy Carawan who in April, 1960 took the song to the organizing conference of SNCC, the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee that emerged after the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins in February of that year. From that event, and subsequent eruptions, the song swept the movement and the country.

I was too young in the early 1960s to appreciate the magnitude of the role of the Highlander Folk Center, or the power of music to empower social change and personal courage, but I did have an inkling that whatever the troublemakers were up to out there in the countryside, me and my kind at the Unitarian Universalist church – we were deeply supportive.

Guy Carawan was also a musicologist as well as activist and musician… popularizing songs like, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," "We Shall Not Be Moved," and "This Little Light of Mine"…. Guy Carawan: one in the great cloud of witnesses who died this past year.

Another, who was a mentor to me, is Rev. George Houser, whose Memorial Service I mentioned in November when I was speaking about “Black Lives Matter.” George died at age 99 last August.

For more than a decade in the 1950s and 60s, we at Community hosted the American Committee on Africa, which led efforts in this country at the United Nations to end colonialism in Africa. For decades, George, a co-founder and Director of the American Committee on Africa, also led increasingly effective campaigns against apartheid in South Africa, culminating in President Mandela’s election in 1994.

George Houser, a Methodist minister, had been a founder of the Congress of Racial Equality in the 1940s and was a co-leader with Bayard Rustin for the Journey of Reconciliation bus rides in 1947, a model for the Freedom Rides in 1961.

At his Memorial Service at Union Seminary a couple of months ago, filled with activists, I recalled my encounters with him over the years and his role as a mentor. For
me, some of the take-away messages for the struggles that summon us heart and soul are:

- Stand on principle…
- Show up … and build coalitions…
- Work for justice…
- Respect all peoples…
- Try to be on the right side of history…
- Have faith that small steps make a difference…
- Take the long view, and,
- at the same time, know that the moment for action is now.

On a lighter note, I think of one who was long-lived.

Bernice Madigan (7/24/1899 – 1/3/15) was the oldest living US supercentenarian and died a year ago today at age 115 in Cheshire, Massachusetts in the Berkshires. A nephew reported that she claimed her secret to longevity was a result of “two things – a glass of wine at every meal, and no children” … “No pills, no nothing – not even a vitamin.”

She herself also recommended eating a hot meal every morning for breakfast, “keeping oneself active and in the company of younger people and always looking to the days ahead, not those gone by.” Not long before her death she also reported that at 115 she felt just as good as she had at age 100.

Finally, she acknowledged that having a good attitude and being lucky were important for her. [http://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/ci_27252971/bernice-madigan-fifth-oldest-person-world-dies-at]

On a heavier yet helpful note, Jean Nidetch (10/12/23 – 4/29/15), age 91, born in Brooklyn, died last April. She was the co-founder of the Weight Watchers organization as she created a support group for herself and others as she sought to lose weight in 1961. Apparently, her system worked for her; at the time of her death she weighed 142 pounds, just as she had after losing 72 pounds, with her earlier success. I should add there are mixed reviews as to its effectiveness.

Another innovator who left his mark on everyday life was Vincent Marotta, age 91, (2/22/24 – 8/1/15). He is best known for being the co-creator of Mr. Coffee, one of the first automatic drip coffee makers…. [It was] introduced to the American consumer market” in 1972. He compared his three-year effort in designing it as comparable to that of Michelangelo. It is a product that I have at times owned and happily used, although I have thought other brands to be more stylish.
Politicians of note who passed away were former governor Mario Cuomo at age 82; Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, age 95, who was the first popularly elected African American Senator; and the civil rights activist, founder of SNCC, and Georgia legislator Julian Bond, who was a leader of the NAACP, author, and professor. He was 75 when he died last August.

Another pioneering leader was Marlene Sanders, who died at age 84. She broke down barriers for women in the television news industry. “She was the first woman to cover the Vietnam war from the field; the first woman anchor of a nightly newscast for a major network, and eventually the first woman vice president of the ABC News division. Sanders later became an Emmy Award-winning correspondent, writer, producer, and broadcast-news executive.” (Wikipedia)

In the music world, there are so many notables: B. B. King, Ben E. King, Percy Sledge, Kurt Mazur of the NY Philharmonic…. Cynthia Robinson played trumpet and was a vocalist with Sly and the Family Stone and is featured on “Dance to the Music.” She was 71 when she died.

Then there is Lesley Sue Goldstein (5/2/46 – 2/16/15), better known as Lesley Gore, the singer, songwriter, actress, and activist, who died at age 68 last March. Her hits included, “It’s My Party,” “Judy’s Turn to Cry,” and “You Don’t Own Me” – the 1963 proto-feminist hit.

“The New York Times” referred to ‘You Don’t Own Me’ as ‘indelibly defiant’.

In college, she realized she was a lesbian. In later years, having hosted PBS’ “L.G.B.T.” newsmagazine “In the Life”, and having spoken of her 33-year relationship with her partner Lois, she would claim, “I can’t come out of the closet, because I was never really in it.” Not all of course had stature and success to protect themselves from homophobic realities of our culture.

Two who confronted their own dying were both challenging and encouraging… encouraging in giving us courage by their examples. Psychiatrist Oliver Sacks in one of our readings, facing his own death near at hand, wrote, “I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude…. (to) have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”

Another witness, with fidelity to Life in all its pain, sadness, and strength, was Lisa Bonchek Adams (7/29/69 – 3/6/15) who died at age 45 last March. She chronicled
her experiences with breast cancer through her blog and social media for nearly nine years. She was a realist, unsentimental, and insisted on careful clinical descriptions of what was happening to her body. She had tens of thousands of readers who felt supported by her honesty and frankness.

She also gave advice, e.g., what to say to a co-worker who has a chronic illness: Instead of “How are you?”, try asking, “Has this been a good week or a bad week for you?”

As also described recently in the NY Times Magazine, Adams “wrote an essay titled ‘The Hardest Conversation,’ about telling her teenage daughter that her cancer had returned and was incurable.”

I told her, (she writes), that I understood that sickness could be scary.... that I didn't want her to be afraid of me as I got sicker someday....

The end was raw and tough to read. [She wrote in her blog] There are many tiny malignant lesions in... [my] brain (imagine salt sprinkled onto a bowl of popcorn). If you have had treatment for cancer, learn how to succinctly and accurately tell your medical history with names of chemo. I haven't seen the moon in months.

At her memorial service, Lisa Adam’s husband identified her thoughtfulness and caring even under such hardship. Just that week of the Memorial, he explained, “two mysterious boxes arrived at the Adams home. She [had] ordered birthday presents for her youngest child two days before she died.” (“Follow Me,” Elizabeth Weil, NY Times Magazine, p. 22, 12-27-15)

Finally, almost, there is Lawrence Peter Berra, 5/12/25 – 9/22/15)... Yogi Berra, the brilliant baseball catcher and home-run hitter for the New York Yankees in their prime of the 1950s and early 60s. He was an 18-time All-Star and won 10 World Series ... a Baseball Hall of Fame inductee in 1972.

He was of course also celebrated for his wisdom, insights, and sometimes compelling observations, some of which were in our first reading. In an interview rebroadcast last week, he was asked about some of his favorite Yogi-isms.

In response to one question, “What time is it?”, Yogi offered the essential answer:
“What time is it?” With a smile and a twinkle, his answer: “Now.”

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Be not afraid…. Stand on principle…. Show gratitude for the adventure…. Give something back…. When? Now!

Show fidelity to yourself and others and live with defiance if need be. Amelia Boynton Robinson crossed the Pettus Bridge, age 103 with President Obama last March on the 50th anniversary of Selma’s Bloody Sunday.

So great a cloud of witnesses; these are just a few, and you carry your own favorites….

Is there a uniting theme? Who are these witnesses? Despite their varying degrees of success, and their particular talents and skills, they seem to be much like you and me.

And who are we? Who are you?

Are you are a child of a blessed Creation, perhaps yea, even God? At the very least, which is so grand, are you are a child of integrity and kindness?

Isn’t that so much of our calling… to be just that – to honor our gifts and potential and to live with integrity? (Thanks to Rev. B. Pescan)

Isn’t that the simple truth? This great a cloud of witnesses includes you, me, all of us.

We belong to each other as we write our stories.

Thanks be to those who have lived with fidelity to a few deep things, signing the air with their honor… so great a cloud of witnesses who continue to live in us, just as we hope to live on in others.

“Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome…”