“A Stream of Light and the Future of Our Faith:
Now is the Time!”

50th Anniversary of the
Unitarian Universalist Association

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, May 8, 2011

Readings:

(1) Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, Minister Emerita, Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken, First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon

…the larger world needs us. We Unitarian Universalists are a very special people, unique in the world of religion. Where else do you find a religious people who understand that faith cannot be coerced, that belief has to have intellectual integrity, that each person is precious beyond measure? Who know that truth is where you find it and no place else, and that each one of us struck through with divinity? Where else do you find a religious people like this? There are so many hungering for spiritual food, and we are called upon at this time in history... to invite them to the table – the welcome table. (255)


The reviewer Janet Horowitz Murray begins:

Buried inside this long anthology is a short letter of almost unbearable intensity and spiritual beauty. It was written by Rose Schlosinger, a member of a German resistance group, on August 5, 1943, the day she was executed by the Nazis. She is saying goodbye to her young daughter, commending her to life and even to joy. “My dear little big Marianne,” she writes: “Now I must say farewell to you, because we shall probably never see each other again. Nevertheless, you must grow up to be a healthy, happy and strong human being. I hope that you will experience the most beautiful things the world has to give, as I have, without having to undergo its hardships, as I have had to do. First of all you must strive to become capable and industrious, then all other happiness will come of itself.”

She tells her daughter how to find a man worthy of her and how avoid feeling that she is cheated in love. “And then you must have children: when they put your first child in your arms, perhaps you will think of me—that was a high moment in my life too when for the first time I held you, a little red bundle, in my
arms. And then think of our evenings of discussion in bed, about all the important things of life—I trying to answer your questions. And think of our beautiful three weeks at the seashore—of the sunrise… and when I pushed you before me on the rubber float, and when we read books together. We has so many beautiful things together, my child, and you must experience all of them over again, and much more besides." She bids her daughter to be good to others and be “happy, as often as you can.” Then comes the parting: “My love for you shall accompany you your whole life long. – I kiss you—and all who are kind to you. Farewell, my dear—thinking of you to the end with the greatest love. Your Mother.”

“A Stream of Light and the Future of Our Faith: Now is the Time!”

Life is a gift. Our days are brief.

People are precious. Caring counts ultimately.

We need one another.

Deeds of justice summon us.

Service is our sacrament.

Be at peace even in doubt… Each day.

This is the day that has been given to us. Rejoice and be glad in it!

Perhaps you have noticed that I am working on my core faith statement, and such is today’s version, grounded in our Unitarian Universalist spirited values and possibilities. 51 words vs. the 286 words in our responsive reading….

“Unities and Universals”

It was in May of 1960, the Rev. Donald Szantho Harrington offered the sermon upon the celebration of the vote to consolidate the two historic traditions of the Universalists and Unitarians.

Dr. Harrington, our Minister here at Community from 1944 to 1982, was among those who helped craft our initial covenant – what we now call our purposes and principles – a covenant for our congregations… not a creedal statement for individual members, even though some turn to it for good reasons.
This morning along with many of our congregations throughout this month, we celebrate this 50 anniversary, which shall also be the theme at our General Assembly in June in Charlotte.

At the outset, I would note that Dr. Harrington on the Unitarian side and Kenneth Patton on the Universalist side pioneered what is commonplace today across the UUA: celebrations of Universal Truths, a kind of Universal Religion that remains honorable in its particularity and humility.

At the worship service in Boston’s Symphony Hall, Dr. Harrington echoed the theme of the “unities and universals” (of Clarence Skinner): the Unity of Life, what we now might call “the interdependent web of all existence” (which I admittedly find a little unpoetic as a phrase)...

The Unity of Life, the cosmos… a monistic process view of reality (Ok, that’s not too poetic either)...

The Unity of all things and the Universal truths of compassion, love, community, respect for one another and powers of reason that humankind continues to embrace as emergent wisdom throughout history, across the globe, across cultures… to live for values, ideals and dreams bigger than ourselves.

Unities and Universals….

“Welcoming Each to the Service of All”

Radical hospitality – a welcome to all was equally part of his vision, our faith’s vision. Here at Community, it was part of a bond of union from 1919 and upon the outside of this church building since 1948:

“Knowing not sect, class, nation or race, we welcome each to the service of all.”

And for what purpose? For creating the Beloved Community, where we come into “the presence of” one another “with joy and awe.” (Rev. Robert Walsh)

Imagine that! Really, imagine that: welcoming one another with joy and awe!

What the world needs!!

“To learn, to teach, to serve, to enjoy!”

This morning I turn to several historical notes that shall inform our future, and I begin with Julia Ward Howe and her role in creating Mother’s Day, and
especially to her life that embraced a curious passion: a passion for curiosity and a passion for action.

The life of the mind and the life of action.... It's a combination that our religious heritage as Unitarian Universalists has celebrated with a stubborn consistency.

Julia Ward Howe, today, is best known for writing words for the song "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." No other song more fully captured the imagination of those in the North at the time of the Civil War.

And Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian, like many other of the leading advocates for various social causes.

She was born on May 27, 1819, and her mother died when she was young. Under the strict influence of her father, she turned to her studies with fervor. Towards her life's end she wrote, "If I may sum up in one term the leading bent of my life, I will simply call myself a student."

Julia Ward Howe confesses in her memoirs that she felt under the influence of masculine models for much of her early life, but she was to become a leading suffragist in New England. She attended Theodore Parker's Unitarian church in Boston, and then that of James Freeman Clarke where she was a frequent guest preacher. With them she became involved first in the abolitionist cause, and it was Clarke who encouraged her to write the words for the "Battle Hymn of the Republic", which were first published in the *Atlantic* magazine.

After the war, the suffragist cause consumed her work for she wanted to open up women's lives to life of the mind, the life of action, and the wider life of culture and arts. She went on to found the New England Woman Suffrage Association in 1868 with Lucy Stone. She was also a founder of the New England Women's Club and a member of Boston's Radical Club.

She was president of the American branch of the Women's International Peace Association, and in 1870, at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, she conceived and promoted Mother's Day as an international peace movement, when women (with men welcome too) would speak out for peace. Julia Ward Howe's call to action would evolve into the modern Mother's Day, but was nothing like our increasingly commercialized holiday. Her 1870 Mother's Day Proclamation for peace was translated into French, Italian, Spanish, German and Swedish and distributed far and wide.

In 1908 at age 89, she was the first woman to be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

*It began this way:*
Arise, then women of this day!
Arise all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears.
Say firmly: we shall not have great questions settled by irrelevant agencies.
Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience...]

Mother's Day never really gained the goal which she aspired to, yet, this day, despite all the commercialization is one of her lasting gifts.

Abolitionist, feminist, author, lecturer, organizer, reformer, and mother of six – she played all of these roles. "What is the ideal aim of life?" she was once asked. Her response summarizes her ideals: "To learn, to teach, to serve, to enjoy!" (D. Robinson, THE UNITARIANS AND THE UNIVERSALISTS)

Unsupported in her work by her husband, she knew she was good enough to make a difference, to change the world, and to affirm her own worth and dignity and that of others, good enough to do all that.

And so are we... "To learn, to teach, to serve, to enjoy!"

That kind of stubbornness – to learn, to teach, to serve and to enjoy – to think and to act – has irritated, inspired and challenged the conventions of our society, and this is deeply part of our path.

Love is our Calling – the Universalists

Those familiar with the earliest days of our tradition know the name of John Murray, who first preached his faith in a God of Love here in this continent in 1770. A Universalist, he proclaimed a simple message against the sickly Calvinism infecting so much of Christianity at hand.

God is Love. And, he argued, if this is true... and surely it is, then such a God would not condemn anyone to hell eternally. All will be in God's presence... There is universal salvation.

Today, no longer seeing the world in ancient dualisms, of the natural and supernatural, for example, we still affirm that transcendent, sacred, holy power of Love in creation. And we are to be co-creators with it. Call this power of Love God, or not... Love itself saves.
Preaching up and down the east coast and settling in Massachusetts with Universalist churches gathering in 1793 into a convention, more than 200 years ago John Murray affirmed the power we have. He unleashed a mighty Spirit, a faith in the power of Love, saying,

You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men (and women.) Give them, not hell, but hope and courage.

**The Principle of the Free Mind – the Unitarians**

In addition to Universalist John Murray, those familiar with our Unitarian foundations recall William Ellery Channing, equally distressed by Calvinist teachings when he was attending church as a child in Newport, Rhode Island. He was depressed by the church and the revivalists that his father took him to hear. It was a Sunday-morning-only faith that spoke of an angry, unhappy God. The world is bad. People are bad, and the worst is yet to come after this life. Yet, the congregation would then sing songs of praise to this God. His father hummed happy tunes on the way home. The young boy, Channing, felt in his soul the radiance and beauty in nature, in the woods, in the sea, and was uplifted.

In his ministry, Channing sought to bring about reconciliation of those with differing points of view, yet the more conservative Congregationalists would have none of it. Channing encouraged respect for individual religious views and the use of reason in the practice of religion. As much as he sought to avoid sectarian strife, finally in 1819 he took sides clearly and enunciated his vision of human dignity rather than depravity and espoused the Principle of the Free Mind.

What guides us even today? In large measure, the Free Mind.

Your freedom to think, to choose, we honor it!

Channing finally accepted the label Unitarian – a heresy at the time – and articulated the need to be open to new truths. Capturing the mood of many, he took on a leadership role from his pulpit at the Federal Street Church in Boston, and more and more ministers followed his spiritual path. Soon, in 1825, the American Unitarian Association was formed, the same year our Church was organized here in this city. Later he was to add his life to those involved in the abolitionist cause, and because of his activism, he eventually in effect had to give up his ministry, even though he was one of the most distinguished ministers in all of New England. The mercantile interests – the benefits of slavery to so many of the Boston merchants and to so many Unitarians – were far greater than even his prestige in 1840.
In the 1830s, the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, as we know, expanded our faith and the principle of the Free Mind into the radical embrace of truths of Nature and spiritual insights of cultures and humanity wherever they appear.

Radical Hospitality and a Rational, Enlightened Spirituality… a faith for today, a liberating faith so urgently needed in the face of the tribalisms, superstitions, and anti-rationalism that abound.

*Deeds not Creeds – Justice in the Making*

A faith for today in our faith in action… Deeds not creeds… Spiritual awe before creation and prophetic action as we seek to make a better world: militant mystics….

E. B. White, the wise essayist for the *New Yorker* magazine and the world, once wrote that he arose in the morning “torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

To improve, to save the world, or to savor it? Like so much, a false choice. Far better is the both/and….. To savor and to serve… “In more traditional theological language, we are both vessels and instruments of God.” (Richard Gilbert) We share the divinity of all things and are co-creators.

As my colleague Richard Gilbert has observed, “Promotion of ‘justice, equity and compassion in human relations’ is as vital as ‘acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.’"

All this was my experience growing up in a Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee… a humanist church with a deep Spirit present in worship and deed. Good, curious, free-thinking people who saw injustice and oppressions and were working for civil rights, peace, women’s rights, gay rights, environmental justice… and the list goes on... serving, savoring, saving… with love and humility…. A church where a few summers ago, an angry, disturbed individual went looking for some people to shoot and knew he could find his targets at that religious community… killing two and wounding six other Unitarian Universalists, who had been faithful in small deeds and big visions … faithful unto death.

*The World Needs Us*

Today, our society buckles at times in its idolatry of affluenza even amid a recession in which the ultra-wealthy are protected from sharing their wealth,

Our society buckles at times in divisiveness and tribalisms of church, politics, and class, even as the younger generation in our nation sees the world
increasingly through welcoming eyes... differences of whatever kind being increasingly of less concern... that is to say, seeing with inclusive eyes... like ours.

Those of all ages gather also looking for a spirituality that honors beauty and reason... like ours.

Coming with a yearning to give themselves to matters larger than personal ego and self aggrandizement....

Knowing not sect, class, nation, or race, welcoming each to the service of all.

As we undertake our pledge drive for financial support with mailings and phone calls underway, and conversations, what a wonderful spirit this spring and what a faith we pursue:

Radical hospitality. Enlightened, rational spirituality. Awe and action. Wonder and works.

Embracing the graciousness, the beauty, and the web of creation and social justice – all of which make us quite different... unique, spirited, liberating. Think of giving generously, and if you can, then add a little more....

On Mother’s Day...

On this Mother’s Day, I hope all is well with you and your mother, or with you and your children. And if it is not, I pray that you might find whatever forgiveness – whichever the direction – is yet required and begin again in love...

And on this Mother’s Day, celebrating our 50 years of two historic faiths bound together and the days and years to come, Julia Ward Howe remains a guide when she spoke of her life's goal, her faith "to learn, to teach, to serve, to enjoy!"

The world needs us, and sometimes even appreciates us, and I close with something of a Father's Day story, a parent's story.

Last June at the General Assembly in Minneapolis, in the middle of a rather ponderous business agenda of reports and resolutions, in a plenary session... during the official business, there was an interruption. A special guest had appeared: the junior Senator from Minnesota, Al Franken, known best previously as a comic and Saturday Night Live performer.

Al Franken was introduced, and he spoke for about ten minutes. Looking out at the several thousand delegates, he indicated he was setting aside some
prepared remarks and began by saying, “Your church is so cool that I decided to talk about religion. And about God.”

He told a story about his father, saying that when he was dying he allowed the local rabbi to visit him so that the rabbi would feel better. Franken said he asked the rabbi some time later what he and his dad talked about. “Oh he just tried to make me feel as comfortable as possible,” the rabbi said.

“That was my dad,” said Franken. He said his father went to temple mainly for social reasons and for sermons about “how Jews not only have to be just, but do justice.”

Franken added, “That’s informs a lot of what I try to do in the Senate.”

Franken said his father saw God not as a person, but [whatever God might be, it is] “something behind everything” including nature. “Everything is so beautiful there must be something behind it all.” “It wasn’t very different from our founding fathers” who were Deists.

He said his son Joe was asked once why he was so nice. He said, “I think it has something to do with my grandpa. And to me that’s what God is... God is my dad in my son,” said Franken, choking up a bit.

“So to be just and good is what I try to do every day in my work, whether it be about immigration or on GLBT rights.... I want to thank you for being the kind of church that embraces all different kinds of beliefs and for being a church that believes in social justice. You are my favorite kind of church. Thank you.”

As he left the platform to wild applause again, the UUA Moderator Gini Courter, [who so often joins us on Christmas Eve for our Messiah service, added.] “Senator Franken, I think you are our favorite kind of senator.” [uua.org]

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Think for yourself, and be at peace even in doubt… Each day.

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*We need one another, and the world needs us!*