

**2004-4-24 What's This All About?
Mark Belletini**

Opening Words

We are here,
as women and men and children
woven of stardust and wonder, to worship:
our time of "yes!" to joy, honesty, and caring,
our time of "no!" to everything
which is neither wise nor just.
And so, in simplicity and peace,
with song and story, mind and heart
we celebrate life, beginning with these words:

**May we live fully, speak truly, learn daily and love deeply that
we might together leave the sacred legacy of a better world...**

Sequence

I remember them.
I remember the hours of the week.
I remember images of caskets draped in flags.
I remember seeing tears on cheeks.
I remember vague threats and bombastic bravado.
I remember seeing tornado rubble
in my mother's homeland towns.
I remember the commercials and the spin.
I remember the frustrations and all the little disappointments, all
stacked like wobbly cards.
All of these memories wear me out,
leave me limp, drain me of life.
But I remember other things too.
I remember what pours life into me.
I remember that very bright star in the evening,
beckoning near the crescent moon.

I remember the magnolia trees at the end of my street, and the fingers of the redbud.
I remember talking to my mother this week and admiring her spirit.
I remember talking with Kevin this week, and how glad we are he is coming out to visit me.
I remember a postcard from David, a letter from Warren, a conversation with Tony, some laughter with Alice...and remembering all these,
I return to myself, sit still for a moment, and wrap myself up in a dark, warm comforter of silent, silent peacefulness...

silence

I remember all the people who came before me, and all those who companion me on my way, and all those who will outlive me... the most tender among these I remember now too, in this sacred time, so that I might live in gratitude today and tomorrow...in silence I remember them. In the common air I name them...

naming

I remember in gratitude that I have not made myself, that I am part of the rhythm of stars and moon and sun and spinning earth, that I am living in the promised land right now, that the swing of branches in the spring wind and the tap of my heart to the music IS the meaning of it all.

Readings:

The First Reading comes from the famous *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which the remarkable Mary Wollstonecraft wrote all the way back in 1792. She was an English Unitarian, and a friend to Unitarian minister and scientist Joseph Priestley and poet William Wordsworth.

Let us submit to the authority of reason.
For if it can be proved that prerogative only rests on a chaotic mass
of prejudices, they may escape who dare to brave the
consequences, without any breach of duty.

The Second Reading *is a poem by David Whyte called Sweet
Darkness, written just 7 years ago.*

When your eyes are tired,
the world is tired also.
When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.
Time to go into the dark where the night has eyes to recognize its
own.
There you can be sure
that you are not beyond love.
The dark will be your womb tonight.
The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.
You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.
Give up all other worlds except the one
to which you belong.
Sometimes it takes darkness
and the sweet confinement of your aloneness
to learn that anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too
small for you.

Sermon

Well, the way I see it, this morning's talk can only be a weaving of several important events which have recently touched my life...

1. As most of you know, I was just in Hawaii, to perform a wedding for the son of a former church member of the Hayward Church.
It was a moving event for me, as there were four other couples present whose marriages I had performed years ago.
2. I am deeply impressed that over 30 people from this congregation are in Washington D.C. this morning, marching for the freedom of women to have a say in everything that concerns them. *The March for Women's Lives* is expected to draw a record-breaking crowd.
3. We are coming to the end of our annual congregational canvass, which, in this critical year after construction, has asked us each to respond to our liberal religious community with thoughtfulness, care, generosity and hope for an uplifting future.

So I find myself engaged by all three of these things: the personal event, the justice event and the congregational event. I find myself wanting to find a connection which links them all together.

And, perhaps not surprisingly, I do. The tie holding them all together in my heart consists of the remarkable historical stories, all of them involving women, that help me to answer the question, "What is this all about, anyway?" You know, "Why is such an organization necessary at all? Why a *liberal* church, a Unitarian Universalist congregation? Why be joyous and proud in supporting such a thing? What could possibly be so important about all these people getting together to sing, breathe, think, and feel together,

and to cultivate a sense of belonging, of challenge, of hope and heart?”

For me, the answer rests in history, the history that is largely invisible, hidden in the dark recesses of stories, libraries, and even forgetfulness. And this morning in particular, because of the March on Washington, I am attracted to the stories of women in liberal religious history. And because I have just come back from the Big Island of Hawaii, I am attracted, not just to our own Unitarian Universalist history, but the history of women in liberal religious history all over the world.

When I travel, whether for work or pleasure, I always read up on the place where I am going. Reading up on Hawaii was a remarkable blessing. And pleasure. And anguish. The anguish came from reading about the miserable, deceitful and violent treatment accorded the native Hawaiians by the U.S. government, as well as several European governments, at every turn and juncture. The pleasure came from reading of the many beautiful ways that the Hawaiians have coped, despite their constant harassment. And the blessing came from realizing that *liberal* approaches to religion are hardly confined to Western religion. No, the Hawaiians were testing their own traditional religion some time before Unitarians, like the great William Ellery Channing of Boston, and Universalists, like Hosea Ballou, were formally challenging the traditional religious ideas they grew up with.

The ancient Hawaiians, you see, believed in a system of *kapu*, or taboos. These taboos were arbitrary and often very strange to modern ears. For example, if the shadow of a prince fell onto a commoner, that was taboo. If a commoner surfed at a certain section of the water, that was taboo. If a woman ate with a man at the same table, that was taboo.

The punishment for breaking a taboo was death. Either the gods struck you dead personally, or a fellow citizen killed you, before the whole village suffered for your indiscretion by being wiped off the map by a tidal wave or lava flow.

When the first Europeans came to the Sandwich Islands, which eventually became known as Hawaii, they had no respect for the *kapu* system. They did as they pleased, ate with whomever, and didn't worry about shadows. The local priests explained to their people that the European gods were not interested in the *kapu* system, which was only intended for Hawaiians.

However, many of the women simply did not believe this. The cruel Protestant missionaries had not arrived on the islands yet, but these women did *watch* European and American visitors closely. They observed that the traders coming to the islands never suffered so much as a stubbed toe for all their considerable taboo breaking. So the women finally came to the conclusion that the traditional gods were all fictions, and that the taboo system was simply a way for men to keep power over everyone. And so, in the year 1819, two skeptical women in high places, namely Keopuolani, the Queen Mother, and Queen Kaahumanu, began to pressure the king, Liholiho, to overturn the taboo system. They urged him to do this by publicly breaking a taboo, and thereby defying the gods. They themselves would demonstrate this possibility by sitting down at his table when they were in private, thus showing him that the taboo could be broken without consequence. And so, finally, though he himself had his doubts, the king bowed to the pressures of the women, sat down at a public banquet right in the middle of the women's table, and nervously gobbled down a great quantity of food. The people reacted with initial shock and horror, but simply waited. Nothing happened. No eruptions, no tidal waves. So, on that very day, the townsfolk, seeing that their religion had not passed a reasonable test, tore down the local *heiau*, or temple, there in Kailua. They set fire to the wooden images housed there, and

rejected the conservative taboo system once and for all. News of this spread all over the islands, and everywhere the temples fell. The grand *kahuna*, or high priest, eventually agreed to this liberalization of the religion. But it was the women who really made this happen. These women gathered for one of the same reasons modern Unitarian Universalists gather...to find ways of living out our lives ethically and religiously without bowing to external and untested authority. And I need to add that liberal religion is not just a pack of people believing whatever they want, based on whim and cheap comfort. No, it's people gathering to ask honest questions about any received tradition and to never substitute mere authority for actual tested experience.

As so often, in our Western tradition, as in Hawaii, women led the way, in this regard. I also think of Mary Wollstonecraft, the English writer who wrote the famous book, Vindication of the Rights of Women. Abigail Adams adored her, the 19th century suffragists dedicated their books to her. As a young adult, she found the Unitarian Church at Newington Green, and its minister Rev. Price, who encouraged her to express herself. She felt that reason, not convention, needed to govern our social roles. Women and girls needed education just as much as men; they needed engagement, support, and were the equals of men in dignity and intelligence. The Western taboo system, which she calls a "prerogative" based only on "prejudice," keeps women separate from men in role and reality. Mary Wollstonecraft spent her life trying to undermine the whole idea that anyone had "a prerogative," that is, *special privilege*, to begin with, just based on gender alone. And in so doing, Wollstonecraft bridged from the first practice of liberal religion, namely, testing the truth of faith, to the second, which is that no one has a right to impose *their* truth, *their* power, *their* faith understanding on anyone else. No one can claim the right to establish taboos for anyone else. No one has special privilege via birthright. Each person is responsible, for his or her own spiritual expression and welfare.

Another woman that comes to mind, on this Sunday in particular, is Dorothea Lynde Dix. Born in Maine in 1802, her upbringing was apparently the stuff of nightmares, filled with instability and cruelty. She knew deep depression because of this, and remember, there were neither anti-depressant medications in those days, nor therapists. But as a young woman, she discovered the Unitarian Church in Boston, the church where the great William Ellery Channing was ministering. She helped to educate his children. And he mentored her. And slowly, but surely, she discovered her purpose in life. She found she was deeply disturbed by the way emotionally ill people were being treated in American society. They were locked up in jails and asylums, chained, beaten, utterly misunderstood. She visited many cells, and slowly her experience taught her that their lives were just as important to them as her life was to her...she saw their humanity in the midst of their wails, screams, wildness and frenzy. She understood, with the Hawaiian women, that a foolish taboo was involved here, a taboo against considering the mentally ill as human beings. She knew that the good life was impossible without the breaking of such stigmas. Or, if you prefer, in the words of the poet Whyte, Dix knew that anything that “does not bring you life is too small for you.” She could see that nothing was bringing life to these unfortunates, but only misery and death. And she knew, deep in her heart, that she had to do something.

So, with her liberal faith as wind in her sails, she set out on her journey. She traveled the country, visiting the monstrous places where those suffering from emotional disturbance were hidden, stigmatized and forgotten. And she knew that raising money for such work was central...money for more human facilities and treatment, money to promote social awareness and money to

educate new social workers to humane practice among the mentally ill. She described herself this way: “I come as the advocate of the helpless, forgotten, insane men and women held in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens, chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed...” Of course, others, those who wanted the system to remain changeless, described her as “a meddling busybody.”

Nevertheless, she went to legislatures, congresses, and philanthropic organizations. She asked, cajoled and argued for funds, and she got them. She fearlessly demanded that people stop their complaints about fundraising... she tried to teach them that compassion and cash were not enemies, but co-workers, in the harvest fields of the heart. And this remarkable woman, along with those she moved to her cause, changed the face of mental health treatment in this nation, and indeed, even in Europe and the Caribbean. Indeed, she was so well known in the world that the pope at the time, Pius the Ninth, compared her to St. Theresa. President Lincoln revered her, and a famous scholar from South Carolina, Dr. Francis Lieber, wrote to her, “You are saving thousands, not by one act, but by planting institutions, institutions of love.”

Did she grow weary doing all this work? No doubt. She often was exhausted, and had to take lengthy vacations in Europe to recover. She lost her vision at times, and was almost too tired to take another step. But she knew, again with the poet Whyte, that when “Your eyes are tired, the world is tired also. When your vision has gone, no part of the world can find you.”

So Dix learned to retreat into the strength of her faith, the faith growing like a lotus blossom out of the dark mud of history, to use an image from our children’s story this morning. She knew that women, and men, before her had faced every peril and turned away

every taboo to make the world a place more just, more honest, more true.

“Go into the dark where the night has eyes to recognize its own. There you can be sure you are not beyond love,” wrote the poet. And this is what Dorothea Dix did, finding in that time alone, in the dark womb of prayer and historical memory, that she could be reborn to her good work in the world, and continue it with strength.

And I say that this dark night of the spirit and history, kept alive in an institution of love like this congregation, “will give you,” assures the poet, “a horizon further than you can see.” And here, he adds, “You must learn one thing...the world was made to be free in. Give up all other worlds...anything that does not bring you alive is too small for you.” Absolutely.

So, as far as I am concerned, the history of the Hawaiians taught us the first point of liberal religion, namely: *a faith that is not tested honestly is just mindless foolishness, a mere arbitrary taboo that must be broken.* Mary Wollstonecraft taught us the second point of liberal religion, namely *a faith system based on privilege, one that preaches freedom and love to some, but not all, is a branch of faith without flower or fruit, worth being cut off the tree of life.*

Dorothea Dix teaches us a final point: *a faith which preaches compassion and social justice for the dispossessed, but refuses to generously support such a revolution of spirit with both cash and deep self-reflective study, is but shallow faith, a mere do-gooder faith, a self-congratulatory faith, and no real faith at all.*

So there you have it. There you have my summary of what this is all about, this church, this congregation, our mission in the world.

My personal trip to Hawaii, my admiration for our 30 some members marching in Washington D.C., and the approaching end

of our general congregational canvass are now officially linked and woven together.

And so, I close by saying: This is a house of freedom where we can test our faith, test hurtful taboos, and imagine an honest future for all women and men of the world. This is a house of freedom where we can question all claims of special privilege. This is a house of freedom where we are not ashamed of our deepest generosity: of the spirit and toward the institution. And this is a house of freedom where our history supports us, transforms us, and even suggests that history is not just hidden in the dark of the past, but is being made today... in this bright room, yes, but also in Washington, and anywhere in the world where religious liberals, of any kind, are questioning, speaking and acting with love and transforming compassion.

Offering (to be improvised and offered by Dan Weist)

Wisdomprayer

Like wine from the press of grapes,
rise, wisdom, from out of the press of history.
Like a lotus rising from the dark earth,
open, wisdom, from the small seed of memory.
Like a balance beam for the tightrope-walker,
catch me, wisdom, from falling toward
either affection or disaffection, toward profit or loss, toward honor
or shame.
Like a breath of air, singular and right now,
bring me life, o wisdom, bring me your life.