

2005-2-13 Impact and Intimacy
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
as a community of seekers
who struggle to be ever more honest,
ever more loving and generous of spirit
in a world of both trouble and beauty.

We would lift our hearts and cheer our minds
as we begin our worship with these words

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the
beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon
it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge,
deeper compassion and hope of peace.**

Sequence

I am feeling teachable today, O Love.
Teach me what the difference is
between you and want.
You and need.
You and self-worth.
You and control.
You and panic.
You and freedom.
I am feeling teachable today, O Hope.
Teach me what the difference is
between you and wish,
you and self-deception,
you and fear,

you and reluctance.

I am feeling teachable today, O Silence.

Teach me what the difference is

between you and the cessation of sound,

you and the laying down of arms,

you and the song sung right now by birds on the other side of the world,

you and the word that names you.

silence

I am feeling teachable this morning,

O World.

Teach me what similarities and differences

there are between myself and others,

in their joy and sorrows,

in their longing and leaving,

in their coming and their going.

Open my heart or my mouth

that I may name those whose

different lives live within me,

by love, remembrance, worry or struggle.

Teach me that I am one with you,

O World, and all others, in this naming.

naming

I am feeling teachable this morning

O Music.

Teach me what similarities there are between

my life and jazz, between my life and rhythm,

between my life and the release of song.

Readings

The First Reading this morning is from Harriet 15 year old book, The Dance of Intimacy.

Intimacy means that we can be who we are in a relationship, and allow the other person to do the same. “Being who we are” requires that we can talk openly about things that are important to us, that we can take a clear position on where we stand on important emotional issues, and that we clarify the limits of what is acceptable and tolerable to us in a relationship. “Allowing the other person to do the same” means that we can stay emotionally connected to that other party who thinks, feels and believes differently, without needing to change, convince or fix the other. An intimate relationship is one in which neither party silence, sacrifices, or betrays the self and each party expresses strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence in a balanced way.

The Second Reading comes from the autobiography of Cecil Williams, one of the most remarkable ministers I have ever met, or whom most people have ever met. For decades now he has served the Glide Memorial Church. Glide is an ostensibly Methodist Church in San Francisco, but a church where atheists and agnostics are welcome, a church where Maya Angelou and other well-known literati frequently preach. But it's a church with a huge social impact on its own neighborhood, the Tenderloin area, a neighborhood known, sadly, for its poverty, horrendous drug problems, and visible despair.

Some visitors once tried to pay Glide a compliment by calling us a great melting pot where everyone melded together. But Glide isn't a soup pot where everyone is mixed and pureed until he or she blends in. No, its not that way here.

Glide is more akin to a salad bowl filled with leafy greens, tart radishes, juicy tomatoes, and every other ripe, colorful, distinct and hearty vegetable. When we come to Glide, we retain our color, our cultures, and our tastes. Together we create something when we are not alone. The whole can't be what it is unless we are truly ourselves. Red tomatoes cannot be like green peppers. No one has to look, or believe like anyone else to be a part of the Glide family.

Diversity is a simple truth. We are all human, but we are not the same. Our values, and our ways of thinking, praying and living differ. Those differences help us to define who we are; they are not to be ignored or forgotten.

What this society needs is a gathering place where we can come together, bringing all of our differences into the same room.

When people come to Glide, we don't ask them if they are atheists, Methodists or Buddhists. We ask them what their names are and how they are doing.

Sermon

Every congregation I know has one.

A money magician, I call them. They can look at budgets written in *budgetese* and translate them into plain English any child could understand. They can take losses and re-contextualize them as gains. They can make small increments of cash flow increase sound like windfalls. They can defuse panic when the 20 year old roof starts to leak (and what else is a 20 year old roof to do?) And, they can do this without blaming anyone for neglecting to plan for such realities, by nipping and tucking the budget so that institutional panic and despair do not set in.

Money magicians. Congregations with buildings need them as much as they need well-sealed roofs.

There was a man in the church I used to serve in Hayward who was a good example of a money-magician. He managed his own affairs so well that he retired at age 48 with a comfortable income. Then he helped many others, less insightful than he was, to manage their money, so that after a while I referred to his work as a ministry of money. He genuinely helped many, many people, I'll tell you that. In his spare time, he also often helped to work on the annual church canvass, an event we're doing right now in our own institution. For those who are guests this morning, this is the budget-planning time of the year when expenses for salaries, upkeep, mortgage reduction, and incomes for the more visionary aspects of church life are raised so our responsibilities can be met in the coming year. It is a time of trust, hope, vision and yes, practical, down-to-earth and fiercely honest calculation.

The money magician at my former congregation loved every aspect of this canvass work except one. He hated it that I pledged money to the church every year. He hated it that I pledged as much as I did, but he hated that I pledged at all even more. "You shouldn't be doing that," he would say..."It's like we're taking a kick back. You are the minister of this congregation...we should pay you, you shouldn't be paying us." He would say this with a smile on his face, but he was dead serious. Of course, I gladly made and paid my pledge anyway. It's not a kick-back, after all. It's something that makes sense to me, even though I am one of the ministers of this congregation. Oh, I will agree with you if you think that ministers are not part of the congregation in the ordinary sense of that term. After all, there's a big difference between yammering up here and paying attention or drifting down in the chairs. After all, neither Wendy or I found the church on line or in the phonebook, took membership classes, and attended worship etc.

until we decided to sign the book with conviction and certain comfort. No, both Wendy and I were called to serve this church by large Search Committees. These committees interviewed us, negotiated with us, introduced us to the congregation and helped to move us into our offices. We are paid salaries and given housing allowances and expenses. I don't know of any lay member which is given a remotely similar treatment.

No, when people who are not called to serve a Unitarian Universalist congregation as religious professionals come to a church, they are more likely to do it the way I first did it some 35 years ago. I attended worship (when I could, since I often worked on Sundays.) I talked with people in the church, attended groups, asked questions, wrestled with the idea of what I wanted from a religious organization, spoke with the minister, wondered if it made sense, took a few classes and finally, after 8 long months of decision making, joined.

Nonetheless, although professional ministers and lay people come to a church like this in a different way, both groups often engage in deep relationships with the people of the church they are called to serve. These relationships, growing, and intimate, are often the main reason, some say, why many people even come to church in the first place. Not liberal doctrines, but community.

On the other hand, many other people come to a religious congregation not for its offer of community or "freedom of pulpit and pew," but because they strongly believe that the world of the spirit must call out to the world of commerce, conflict and war, and hold it to account. In traditional language, they do not want the pastoral so much as the prophetic. In more contemporary language, they do not want love so much as they want justice. Some of these people come to church feeling that individuals working together can actually do more to make our common and often harsh world a better place than some one working all alone.

These two basic reasons for people coming to church is why the folks preparing our canvass this year have repeated last year's motto. They wisely have chosen to suggest that the people of First Unitarian Universalist Church envision for themselves "small church intimacy, large church impact."

I think this is a lovely and accurate phrase that underscores what I have been saying...that people come to church for different reasons, some for community itself, that is intimacy, and some for the power of the gathered and visionary community on the larger world: and that's called impact.

These two poles cause both delight and tension, elicit both courtesy and conflict. There is no other way it can be, as far as I can tell. The intimacy folks sometimes are suspect of all this desire to change the world; it seems too frantic and demanding to them, perhaps. And the change-the-world folks are often a little suspicious of people who think friendly social relationships are the best outcome for any church. It seems too much like in-groups and out groups to them, and that makes them feel uncomfortable.

But the thing is, both groups, and all their many variations, are perfectly correct in their general impulse in the first place. As the great Cecil Williams says, the church is not a puree, but a salad, not blended soup, but more like a "bowl filled with leafy greens, tart radishes, juicy tomatoes, and every other ripe, colorful, distinct and hearty vegetable. When we come to" this church," Williams writes, "we retain our color, our cultures, and our tastes. *Together we create something when we are not alone. The whole can't be what it is unless we are truly ourselves.* Red tomatoes cannot be like green peppers. No one has to look, or believe like anyone else to be a part of the Glide family."

The image of the salad is playful and delightful. But I am wondering if you heard that wonderful line buried in the midst of all those radishes and peppers...*"The whole can't be what it is unless we are truly ourselves."* Isn't this a perfect echo of what Dr. Lerner writes in her essay on intimacy? She writes: *"Intimacy means that we can be who we are in a relationship, and allow the other person to do the same."*

In other words, the church is not whole without both social outreach *and* community building, without covenant groups *and* the social justice offering, without workdays *and* playdays. And intimacy and social outreach, by this take, are not that far away from each other. Glide church is famous for its impact on its neighborhood, a most difficult and testy neighborhood littered with needles and heaving bodies on the edge of death by overdose. It's a neighborhood of poverty, of lack of access to power and peace. But I am telling you now, no church in San Francisco has as much impact on its local neighborhood as Glide. Many have literally been saved from the damnation of hard drugs by the outreach of that church. And yet, few churches in America can equal Glide in the intimacy it has helped create between people of different classes and styles and colors, between people of different religious ideas and no religious ideas. I give you Glide as a model of a *whole* church.

Because in any church that is whole, people "are going to be who they are," in Lerner's language, or "truly themselves" in William's language.

As a minister for almost 26 years now, I have a good understanding of the impact a church can have on society. I have seen women claiming their power as persons in the liberal church, and I have seen sexual orientation minorities coming to terms with their honor & spiritual grounding. I have seen terrific education on race issues, & sex education programs second to none. I have seen

effective letters to legislatures, marches, and the empty stomachs of the hungry filled. I have seen mayors backing off, governors reconsidering and expenditures restored because of the influence of the liberal church. For a religious group whose largest congregation is a mere tenth the size of any large Southern Baptist or non-denominational Church, our impact, I would have to say, has far exceeded our actual numbers. Working to change the world in a good way is *who many people are*, and in this church, there is room for such a rich spirituality, respectful and honest engagement.

But there is also room for people who want good change in their own lives...whether it's support in their health as they give up substance abuse, or some other new self-understanding that leads to a life of greater peace and self-confidence. In the whole church, people come as they truly are, insists Williams, one of the great social justice ministers in America. But Lerner insists that this is exactly how intimacy can be described. "Being who we (truly) are' she writes, "requires that we can talk openly about things that are important to us, that we can take a clear position on where we stand on important emotional issues, and that we clarify the limits of what is acceptable and tolerable to us in a relationship. "Allowing the other person to do the same" means that we can stay emotionally connected to that other party who thinks, feels and believes differently, without needing to change, convince or fix the other. An intimate relationship is one in which neither party silence, sacrifices, or betrays the self and each party expresses strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence in a balanced way."

As I said, ministers, even though their roles are different, often experience a sense of intimacy, after many years of service, with the people they serve. Marrying people, helping families bury their loved ones, counseling people...these are events which deepen relationships and make them indelible in the heart.

Let me tell you a story about small church intimacy. Its been haunting me because tomorrow is the 10th anniversary of the even I will now describe. I had served my former congregation almost 14 years when my partner and I separated. If that was not upsetting enough, a few months after that, my best friend, Stefan, grew increasingly ill, visiting the hospital with great frequency. I would tell my church board during my reports that I was going over to the hospital when I could, in between my duties at the church.

One day, at a board meeting, some members of the Board said “We want to say something to you. You have often told us that family, however you define it, is more important than anything....more important than work, more important than goals or career development, more important than anything. We want you to know that we are perfectly aware that Stefan is your brother as well as your friend; he is family to you. Therefore, we want you to spend more time with him and less time with us. You have been here for our marriages, our divorces, our children’s births and namings, our children’s marriages, the funerals of our loved ones. You have listened to our stories. We want you to know that we have heard your story as well. You go and spend time with your family. We will take care of things around here. If you have to give up some Sunday preaching, let us know. And we will cover for you.”

You may be sure that I wept most of the way home that night for the sheer expression of intimacy from people in that small church.

Two months later, Stefan died. My secretary called, and she said “We’ve been talking here. We know Stefan was Jewish, so we want you to feel free to sit *shiva* for him. We’ll cover for you. (Shiva is a week long memorial custom where you sit indoors and receive visitors. You do not, traditionally, go to work.)

I did sit Shiva, after we buried Stefan's remains at the Jewish cemetery in Colma. Then the rabbi, blest fellow, allowed me to conduct the Memorial Service at the synagogue. It was a small building in those days, cramped, and on the day of the Memorial, it was packed. Richard, Stefan's surviving spouse, looked out at the crowd. "Mark, I knew all of Stefan's friends, I think, but there are at least seventy people here I do recognize. I wonder who they are?"

I knew who they were. "Richard, those are the people of the church I serve. They knew Stefan and you are family for me. They have come to support me in my grief and sorrow." Then we both held each other and wept. Intimacy, after all, always recognizes intimacy. Care recognizes care.

It's a perfect example of what the phrase "small church intimacy" means. No one in the church tried to fix my broken heart. No one tried to silence my tears or my loud grief. No one asked me to sacrifice my emotions so I could be the traditional ministerial "non-anxious presence." This, says Dr. Lerner, is a sign of true intimacy. It's the kind of intimacy I hope for in any congregation I have served, large or small. And it too is a rich spiritual practice. As rich as coming out, or decrying injustice or tutoring reading or making potato salad for the hungry.

Thus, in a whole church, you will find meals for the homeless *and* care for the bereaved. You will find music for the joyous *and* an arm thrown around the mourner's shoulder. I won't kid you; you will find irritating people sometimes in the mix; that's only human and to be expected. But you know what to do...you set good boundaries and work respectfully as you can to make connections and solve problems. Intimacy, after all, doesn't just rise out of sweetness and light alone...any real intimacy will require

boundaries, conflict resolution, patience, knowledge and more patience.

So this is why Wendy and I both support this congregation at the level we do...more than five percent of our income each. We don't do it to be, or because, we are leaders. We don't see it as a kickback, as my favorite money magician feared. We do it because we both care about the possibility of large church impact and small church intimacy in this troubled world and time. We may not be able to fix all troubles either social or intimate...but at the very least we can up the ante that something great, courageous and kind, a Unitarian Universalist community in the middle of the Columbus Metropolitan area, will have the strength...and you do need strength to do this you know... to stand up against the powers and principalities of our day. May we do so in peace and with growing patience and love.

Offertory

Prayer Still and Small

I'm not always sure, Love.

I don't have all the answers.

Sometimes your voice inside me is very quiet.

A bare whisper. Yet outside me injustice thunders,
people without shelter, without hope, lightning and thunder
cracking through the silence. And your whisper, O Love, quiet,
serene, as transparent as my tears, and as hopeful as the child in me
that laughs and laughs meets the thunder, grabs the lightning in its
hand, and turns it all into a song of life.

What else can I say but, thanks, O Love?