First UU Church – July 3, 2005 – Steve Abbott

GREETING

Tomorrow millions of Americans will pledge allegiance to the flag: "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Although this ideal remains unfulfilled, and thus worthy of our most committed effort, it is appropriate that we acknowledge the vision of all those who have made the freedoms we enjoy possible—not just the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of our Constitution, not just those who have taken up arms to defend the nation's interests, but every unnamed and unremembered citizen who has spoken out for an unpopular cause, who has known the difference between patriotism and nationalism, who has understood that we protect our freedoms not through force of arms alone, but through a continuing commitment to our rights to speak and write freely, to govern ourselves through elected representatives, and to be free from religious orthodoxy enforced through the power of law.

Good morning. My name is Steve Abbott, and on behalf of the ministers, the staff, and the entire congregation of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, I welcome you to this second in a series of summer services exploring the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. Our summer services are led by lay members of the congregation. If you are a visitor with us this morning, I thank you for coming and hope that you will join us after the service for coffee and conversation in our Fellowship Hall, which is to the left as you exit the Worship Center. Parents of infants and toddlers should feel free to use our Family Room, which is accessible to the left just outside the Worship Center.

The music for today's service was selected by Karen Thimmes in recognition of tomorrow's celebration of Independence Day. Alison Easter will light the chalice this morning, and Chas Williams and Carl Yaffey will provide accompaniment for the children's story.

OPENING WORDS

We gather this morning under a canopy of clouds and in the reverent space of this room

To bear witness to our freedom to worship,
To recommit ourselves to progressive thought and action,
To strengthen the bonds of community,
To open ourselves to more abundant living,
To celebrate all Creation in song and in silence,
To be thankful for both blessings and burdens, and
To affirm the fundamental principles that hold us together.

MEDITATION, SILENCE AND THE NAMING

Our spring has become summer, and for many July 4 suggests that summer is already fleeing. It seems, frequently, that we are in constant motion, that the days sprint by and drag us along in their wake of predictable demands and unexpected interruptions. It can seem that the flow of life is too swift, that we are always in transition.

And we are. So it is all the more important that, in the same way that we look to this day for its essence, its vital space within our larger lives, that we look to the periods within each day, the countless small opportunities for peace and reflection.

In these brief periods we can take time to breathe and to listen to our breath, to listen within the temple that each breath creates. What we listen to may be rain on the roof or the distant sound of fireworks. It may be a quiet voice within us or the profound silence of our own spirits. But together we take the time now to be with ourselves, within ourselves, in a community of silence, where we can enter a place of wordlessness. Where we can simply exist among relaxing images or clear our minds totally, allowing a peaceful place to shape itself within us, Where our time together can be, however briefly, formless and wholly our own. We enter now a period of silent meditation.

[temple bell / silence]

As part of the powerful energy created by silence, we now call to mind those for whom we care deeply. We call to mind in particular those who are far from home in service to the nation, and we remember those whom we have mourned and imagine those whom we still hold to us. Those whom we love and those whom we have difficulty loving. Those with whom we are blessed to share time, and those whom we can only long to see. We now speak their names aloud or whisper them in the quiet rooms of our hearts, in the knowledge that our attention and our mention are gifts to those named and to ourselves.

[names]

We keep these names, spoken or cushioned in silence, close to us, as we look to this day, these clustered moments, and offer to each other the compassion and understanding that keep us whole.

FIRST READING

Following his attempts to get relief from Congress and the Department of Indian Affairs, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe went to Washington, D.C. in January, 1879. He appeared there before a large gathering of cabinet members, senators, diplomats, and others to present a plea for his people. He detailed his people's flight across parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, as well as the victories his small group had won over four different army generals and his difficult decision to surrender in order to spare his people further death and suffering. The following words, which come from W.C. Vanderwerth's compilation **Indian Oratory,** *are the conclusion of his eloquent speech in the name of justice.*

"I only ask of the Government to be treated as all other men are treated. If I can not go to my own home, let me have a home in a country where my people will not die so fast. I would like to go to Bitter Root Valley. There my people would be healthy; where they are now, they are dying. Three have died since I left my camp to come to Washington.

"When I think of our condition, my heart is heavy. I see men of my race treated as outlaws and driven from country to country, or shot down like animals.

"I know that my race must change. We can not hold our own with the white men as we are. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work alike on all men. If the Indian breaks the law, punish him by the law. If the white man breaks the law, punish him also.

"Let me be a free man—free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself—and I will obey every law, or submit to the penalty.

"Whenever the white man treats the Indian as they treat each other, then we will have no more wars. We shall all be alike—brothers of one father and one mother, with one sky above us and one country around us, and one government for all. Then the Great Spirit Chief who rules above will smile upon this land, and send rain to wash out the bloody spots made by brothers' hands from the face of the earth. I hope that no more groans

of wounded men and women will ever go to the Great Spirit Chief above, and that all people may be one people."

SECOND READING

In 1985, American-born photographer and author Margaret Randall returned to the United States after living in Central America. Based on her highly charged political writing as a feminist, teacher, and oral historian, the Immigration and Naturalization Service ordered her to be deported under the McCarran Act, the McCarthy-era law that has excluded people from the country based on writing in support of social justice and political freedom. This poem is from her collection **Memory Says Yes***, published in 1988 after her successful challenge to the deportation order.*

Talk To Me / Margaret Randall

Talk to me. Three words
moving with heavy feet
across the open spaces.

A signal,
or the beginning of a poem.

Talk to me. Not meaning
"How are things going?"
Not meaning
"They *can't* do this to you"
(they can, they are)
not even
"What can I do to help?"

Do it, that's all.
Please.
No more questions, no more
knowledgeable statements.

Three words. Begin a poem. Take your life
and use it.

REFLECTION

"OF THEE AND ME:
JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND COMPASSION IN HUMAN RELATIONS"

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus
July 3, 2005
Steve Abbott

In last week's initial worship in this series of services on the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, Bob Gordon offered a brief history of the development of the principles, which were shaped over several decades from 1950 to 1985, when the original five principles were expanded to seven and approved at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. He also provided an exploration of the first principle: "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Today I offer reflections on the second principle: "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." I intend to start with the last of these three qualities—compassion—because I submit to you that compassion is the basis for the justice and equity that make up the other two-thirds of this principle.

Compassion emerges naturally from the first principle: "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." We can not fully appreciate and honor the worth of others if we can not recognize it for ourselves. Recognition of this worth in every person allows us to begin with a belief in our own worth, and then to apply the same love to the universe beyond ourselves.

Compassion is synonymous with pity, and although there are those who say that pity suggests detachment while compassion suggests intimate engagement, the words have much in common. *Pity* derives from the same root as the word *piety*, which refers to religious devotion but also to

devotion to family. *Compassion* has its origins in the earliest meaning of the word *passion*, which was "suffering," and the prefix *com*, meaning "with." Thus, even in their root forms, *pity* and *compassion* link human beings to one another, suggesting a devotion that is communal and spiritual in its linguistic origins.

This principle is challenging because it calls us to do more than simply sympathize. Sympathy allows for detachment, whereas compassion calls for us, in its etymological root, to *share* another's suffering, and thus is closer to empathy. Being grounded in compassion forces us outside of ourselves, beyond our own experience. It compels us to put ourselves in the position of the other, to take on the expectations and conditions that shape another's existence.

But compassion is about more than *feeling* another's suffering. One version of the covenant we make with each other as Unitarian Universalists begins, "Love is the doctrine of this church." In his book *Peace Is Every Step*, Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that compassion is not passive or detached. Rather, it demands that the self-love we find in our own inherent worth and dignity be translated into a sharing of another's life, an extension of ourselves into others. He notes:

"When we observe deeply, the fruit of our meditation will naturally transform into some kind of action. We will not just say, 'I love him very much.' The mind of compassion is truly present when it is effective in removing another person's suffering. We have to find ways to nourish and express our compassion. When we come into contact with the other person, our thoughts and actions should express our mind of compassion, even if that person says or does things that are not easy to accept. We practice in this way until we see that our love is not contingent upon the other person being lovable."

So compassion is not the sympathy that some associate with pity. Sympathy allows us to hold our involvement at arm's length. Compassion, being a "suffering with," is about empathy, which takes us into the world of the other.

In the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan allowed the teacher Jesus to illustrate the virtue of compassion while challenging the social inequity of his place and time. By making a socially despised Samaritan the model for virtuous behavior and a temple priest and a Levite, or temple assistant, the bad examples, the parable suggests the fundamental importance of equitable treatment for every person even as it

indicts the hypocrisy of those who claim to serve a higher good. Even today this parable offers a denunciation of those who use religious orthodoxy as a disguise for hardened hearts that refuse to be compassionate. Fully engaging ourselves in the spiritual work of compassion allows us to find our own fallibility, weakness, and pain in others, and to extend to them what we seek for ourselves.

Compassion is not simply feeling sorry for someone else. Compassion demands that, in "suffering with" another, we share ourselves, as the poem by Margaret Randall suggests. Sometimes compassion is as simple as talking to someone—greeting the shy co-worker by name, offering a kind word to someone experiencing anxiety or disappointment, simply showing up at the calling hours at a funeral home, or extending the seemingly banal but profoundly meaningful "I'm sorry" as a condolence to someone bereaved in the face of death. Compassion allows us to alleviate another's pain by embracing it as our own, coming back to us second-hand. It is, in truth, a spiritual practice.

Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic of the 14th century, wrote, "You may call God love. You may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion." In a similar vein, and as an echo of this morning's children's story *What Melody Is the Sweetest?*, Mahatma Ghandi once suggested that God had no right to appear to a hungry person in any form other than a loaf of bread.

By definition, equity implies impartiality and fairness. In legal situations, for example, equity means "justice applied in circumstances not covered by law," and this meaning is surprisingly instructive in how we approach living our day-to-day existence. You can see already that this principle does not allow for examining justice, equity, and compassion separately; rather, they are part of the tightly interwoven fabric of our spiritual journeys. I'll do my best nonetheless.

Equity does not mean we are all equal in any number of senses, or that we are not different. It recognizes, as the legal definition suggests, that this emotional connecting is not something that can be measured, quantified, legislated. Equity derives from blending our recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every person with our desire to be treated fairly ourselves. In acknowledging that others are just as deserving of compassion as we are, we acknowledge that the suffering of others is as keen and meaningful as our own. Equity as a spiritual principle suggests a

longing for a sort of universal balance, which we all discover early in life when we protested, “But that’s not fair!”

Shortly before she died, my mother, possibly reacting to another one of my passionate tirades against some perceived political or social inequity, observed, “You always wanted things to be fair.” From her matter-of-fact tone, I couldn’t tell whether she was simply making an observation or describing a character flaw. And I’m willing to admit that, in a human world, any quest for fairness is in some ways a fool’s mission. After all, folk wisdom—or is it the School of Hard Knocks?—tells us, “Life ain’t fair.” But this doesn’t mean that we should abandon our efforts to create conditions and human relations that are more balanced. Without wanting to minimize the profound nature of justice, I suggest to you that seeking it is similar to having to routinely dust the house: whether it’s fair or not, you never get to stop doing it. In his last speech, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told his audience that he didn’t know whether he would walk into the Promised Land of racial equality, but that he had “been to the mountaintop,” from which he could see in the distance the changes that would come. Like many others who have strived for justice, he understood that those of us who seek justice have to be in it for the long haul, and that we may never see the harvest we have worked to produce.

Even if we agree that every person has inherent worth and dignity, this is not to say that every one is like every other. While it’s true that justice is an abstraction that seeks to balance right and wrong, fairness and unfairness, scarcity and abundance, we seek concrete manifestations of it every day. Yet our quest for justice, some form of balancing the scales or making things somehow “equal,” is not entirely a desire for cosmic balance. Rev. David Weisbard of the UU Church of Rockford, IL, has noted that there’s a sense in which the seeking of justice has an element of selfishness to it. Our sense of justice is fundamentally shaped by the question, “How would I want to be treated if I were in the position of this other person?” This requires us to see ourselves as the other. And again we find a link to compassion and equity.

We can see that there are short steps, then, between compassion and equity and justice, if there is any gap at all. Yet, the reality is that, in our all-too-real world, compassion and justice wrestle with each other. Our challenge is to attain some balance between the two. Depictions of justice use a blindfold as a metaphor for objectivity. At the same time, the scales of justice imply that we must find some balance between what is just and

what is compassionate. In the same way that compassion calls us to recognize and equate our humanity and suffering with that of others, equity and justice are about weighing, measuring in some way, trying to find balance between punishment and pity, yours and mine, thee and me. Chief Joseph's eloquence challenges our sense of justice and our spirit of compassion. He implores those with power to provide relief through some measure of justice; he asks for equity, for compassion.

Frequently, it seems, cries for "justice" are little more than cries for revenge, a settling of scores that demands a literal or figurative bloodletting. Whether the circumstances involve a heinous crime, a political action, or a personal betrayal, we want someone to *pay*. This translates our anger into demands for perp walks, prison sentences, impeachment, or some psychological or financial pain for those who have wronged us or our sense of what is acceptable. In our country in particular, where rogues are folk heroes as long as they are dead and even the worst political and corporate criminals are allowed to be reborn as respected elders, we often insist on retribution in the guise of "justice."

To be sure, there will be consequences—psychological, financial, legal—for our mistakes. Justice and compassion, it seems, are sometimes competing values. And it is not at all easy to find balance—some might say fairness, or equity—between the letter of the law and compassionate understanding, between our instinctive angry revulsion and a sense of proportion. Thich Nhat Hanh warns us that we should not cling too tightly to any single cherished principle, that to hold one—say, justice—too tightly can result in a loss of compassion, or, conversely, that a strict adherence to compassion may in fact create an injustice. We must be ready, then, to be flexible, to stretch the bounds of Me to include Thee, to understand that the mistakes and fallibilities of others are no different than our own. Justice and compassion flow from and into one another.

Many use the term *justice* only in the context of courts and law, or crime and punishment. Yet there is a more universal aspect of justice that draws from the wells of equity and compassion. The Old Testament prophets whose words have guided Jews and Christians for millennia were hardly sentimentalists or abstract philosophers who withdrew to their distant and solitary mountaintops. Rather, they spoke truth to power. They demonstrated, as we shared in the reading from Isaiah, that compassion demands the making of justice: "Is this not the fast I choose: To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go

free?" In other words, it is not enough to *believe* in justice; we are called to *create* justice. We can not sit calmly in the smugness of our liberal beliefs, thinking our good hearts are somehow going to make a difference by beating a self-satisfied rhythm in our chests. We can not spend evenings sipping coffee or wine, laughing or complaining about those whose politics are driving the nation backward into the injustices of the past and forward into the quicksand of debt that will drown our children and grandchildren. We can not complain and wring our hands in frustration at nationalistic military adventurism or the massive transfer of greater wealth to the moneyed elite while schools and infrastructure collapse.

No, this isn't easy. Sometimes it requires a substantial amount of letting go, and as one who too often wants to maintain control, I have struggled for a long time with compassion. What I have discovered over the past several years—due in part, I believe, to my participation in this congregation and its principles—is that as I let go of having to be right, to be (and be seen as) perfect, to be who I wanted people to imagine I was—that is, as I learned greater compassion for myself—I found compassion both *for* and *from* others. In turn, I have been more thoughtful in dealing with those whose positions I oppose or whom I find difficult. I've found that I don't have to be angry with them, or ascribe evil intent or negative character traits to them, in order to struggle for fairness or justice. I've found that I am less inclined to assume malevolent intent when someone does something that hurts me. This does not mean I am less hurt; what it means in real terms is that, knowing that I myself am often clumsy or thoughtless, I start from the possibility that the other person may not have intended to inflict insult or injury. And two things happen out of this: I am generally less prone to anger and disappointment, and I'm able to approach my reaction or future action from a more centered, determined, and compassionate place. And if the insult or injury *was* intentional, how am I diminished by not reacting to it?

It's still not a perfect world, however. I'm in the process of negotiating a labor contract with my employer on behalf of my union, and in the heat of frustrating setbacks I am not beyond calling the lead negotiator on the other side of the bargaining table names that I won't repeat in this setting, or occasionally denying the humanity of certain politicians.

These principles—justice, equity, compassion—can not be practiced on only a personal level. We are called to go further, to go beyond our

personal interactions into the realm of social and political action, because selfishness and indifference are marketed to us daily. Because power creates the sense of entitlement that breeds inequity. Because our anxiety and fear prevent us too often from being compassionate.

This second principle of our faith is clearly linked to the first. If we really believe in the inherent worth and dignity or every person, we *must* practice—in the spiritual sense of a regular discipline that leads toward enlightenment— justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. As Rev. Kenneth Collier of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Medesto has noted, "There is no justice without equity, and there is no equity without compassion."

May it be so.

[Offering]

CLOSING WORDS

Our closing words today, as we consider the meaning of Independence Day, come from Abraham Lincoln:

"As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others is the great, durable curse of the race.

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.

"Our reliance is in our love for liberty; our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and we have planted the seeds of despotism at our own doors.

"Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and cannot long retain it. Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world? Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith. Let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

So be it. Amen.