

2005-8-21 Summer's Lease
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
in late summer
to celebrate life together,
not alone under stars, or by a lake,
but together, an intentional community.

And so we say:

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom
presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and
drawn by the vision of a community known for its
honesty, generosity, depth, love and justice-work,
we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

Story

Sequence

Like the somersault of a child on the lawn,
the flight of a flute, and glide of the piano,
like the wind, turning without plan or
purpose, like a game of hide-and-go-seek,
or a supper-table decked with laughter,
let my thoughts roam freely,
unhindered by my own expectations.
I unhinge them from my worries and
want for a while, and let them splash freely in this moment like
children in a pool or lake, or like sun, which paints every leaf in
every tree with a different but perfect patina.

Let there be a moment here that anticipates

the Day of peace and contentment
that illuminates much of our dreaming,
our planning, and our desire.

bellsound and silence

Remembering that we are all in this world
together, and that not one of us is entitled
to more or less than anyone else, since the
universe is a gift, not an earning,
we turn now to our brothers and sisters around the world who live
in our heart's deep house of love.
We name aloud, or in our mind's echoing chambers, the people
whom, especially today, we imagine, people we struggle with,
people we care about deeply, people we miss.

Naming

Blest is this moment, which rides our
present breath, in and out, in and out,
and yields to the play of music in our
hearts.

Readings

The First Reading is a poem by Nita Penfold, found in a book, Hunger Enough, published by our own local poetic jewel of a press, Pudding House Publications. It's called Discipline, and she wrote it, she says, after, that is, influenced by Wendell Berry

Wake up. Begin to see.
There is despair, yes. It stinks.
Do not move away from it as if
it were a dead and rotted thing
you can ignore. It reeks only of

ego and hubris—humankind
so arrogant to believe itself
indestructible, to believe
Earth an unlimited warehouse
instead of a home.
Take despair into your arms.
Don't be afraid.
Hold it tight, admit it as part of you.
dance with it, and, as you dance,
it will grow less awful, lighter—
so light that you can finally release it
and begin to act.

The Second Reading this morning comes from one of the writers who transformed my early years, Alan Watts, who quotes the great poet Dante Alighieri, author of “L’Inferno” which is the source of the quotation.

If you are a free person, you will find there is as much divinity and mystery in a brick as in all the ramifications of science. There is as much freedom of the spirit in watching sparrows on a city street as in meditating on some mountain solitude under the stars. There is as much expression peeling potatoes as in making a cathedral organ sing out the liquid thunder of the fugue. For when you are free, you have become aware of the mystery that the whole power of the universe is at work in the least of things, the least of thoughts, the least of deeds. When you lift your finger, you are using the same power that hurls the stars through space, which bellows in the wind, which produces a giant tree from the microscopic germ of seed, and wears away mountains to thin clouds of dust. If you are free, you know you cannot really cut yourself off from that power. You know that, despite your mistakes and fears, you can never cease to share in its freedom. You do not, however, think of yourself as a spiritual giant who has reconciled the opposites of living and dying. You are only awakening, that's all.

And you realize that the universe is a mystery greater than you can ever hope to fathom, for the deepest perplexity of all is that such a creature as yourself should be allowed to use the power that moves the stars in the littlest of your deeds.

And so you will say with Dante: “ma gia
volgeva il mio disiro e il velle si come
rota ch’egualmente e mossa, l’amor che
mova il sole e l’altre stele---*but now I can feel my free will and
my desire are all being turned---instinct and intellect balanced
equally, as in a wheel whose motion is steady...by the Love that
moves the sun
and other stars.*

Sermon

This summer has been different than previous summers around here. Our Worship Committee, with the help of Bill Ingles and several others, coordinated a series of services dealing with our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes. Seven thoughtful members of this congregation reflected on some of the meanings of the great words embedded in those principles. Their services were personal, wise and beautiful.

They unpacked words like freedom. Equity. Compassion. Justice. Great words that make you feel all warm inside just hearing them. They unpacked noble phrases like “the search for truth” and “the inter-dependent web,” and offered fresh meaning to these noble lines.

Our principles are indeed crafted from rich language, around which whole libraries could be created.

Furthermore, they are not a closed creed, but a springboard; not a set of unbending metaphysical doctrines, but wings. Their

grandeur calls us to live lives of equal grandeur, and freedom of spirit. I like them.

Nevertheless, over the years I've wondered about certain grand words that seem to be missing from the principles.

I am speaking of the basic words "local community," and more importantly, "love." And maybe they are not found in the principles because the principles rest entirely on their foundation.

There are many people who tell me that they have been Unitarian Universalists all their lives without knowing it. Until, that is, they discovered this congregation.

I often say to them that I am not sure that's true. I think you can be a free-thinker, or a religious liberal, or a religious humanist by yourself, but I am not convinced you can be a Unitarian Universalist by yourself. After all, to be a Unitarian Universalist means to involve yourself in a community of memory and hope; a community with a shared, not personal, history; a community with joys, bumps and moving moments only possible within a mix of people, not all by one's lonesome. The principles themselves, in fact, deal primarily with how we relate to each other, not individual theology. Compassion, after all, usually takes at least two, doesn't it? If there is to be "equity in human relationships," again, more than one person is implied, no? Justice? If it's not applied to each member of the whole community equally, then there is no justice at all. Buddha and Jesus taught us that thousands of years ago, and they were right, as far as I am concerned. And the very phrase "interdependent web" draws a picture of inescapable togetherness as *the basic fabric* of the universe. Not only does every decision you and I make affect others, as our Tewa story illustrated so well, but every spider-web and mud-puddle is as much a part of this universe as you and I are. By wiping out species after species, as we have been doing this last hundred years, we could eventually wipe ourselves out.

For pulling out one thread in the weave has the potential of unraveling the whole thing.

Our poet, Nita Penhold, says as much in bold language: “humankind (is) so arrogant to believe itself indestructible, to believe Earth an unlimited warehouse instead of a home.” And Alan Watts ties spiritual freedom to exactly such humility; “peeling potatoes,” he calls it.

Our principles do speak of our connection to the “world community,” true enough. But I would like to suggest that without solid and covenanted *local* communities, “world community” can’t possibly exist. So this morning I want to lift up our smaller locale, our local congregation, which is the locus of our principled lives. I want to assert that we don’t have to travel to Himalayan monasteries to find enlightenment, or stand at some distant ancient stone ruin to claim our spiritual freedom. Freedom is found first in local community.

This is something I think the Tewa people knew well. When I traveled out to New Mexico to my friend Doug’s 40th Birthday Party, I visited the sites of the Tewa and their ancestors, the Anasazi peoples. In every case the sites are communal, with the Kiva, or circular ritual temple-well, at the center of things. The ancient pueblo, or village, at Bandalier was a circle, with the windows and doors facing into the community’s center plaza. We do not find Anasazi sites for hermits or loners...we only find community circles, or connected caves.

And why do such local communities exist? Oh, to help each other, I suppose. It’s notably easier to bring the crops in, hunt the game and raise the children together, isn’t it?

But I would like to suggest that underlying all this is the most basic foundational principle of all, Love itself. Capitalized. Nothing romantic, mind you, necessarily, but I am not talking

about some sort of ethereal love, above bodily feelings, either. I am talking about something so basic, in fact, that Dante could call it the power behind the stars and the sun; the same power, as Watts asserts, which unfolds our fingered hands when we reach out to grab and peel a potato. Watts, like Dante, uses the metaphoric word Love to describe this power. It's my own usage as well, patterned after the poets Wendell Berry, May Sarton, Sarojini Naidu, Walt Whitman, Delmore Schwartz, Swinburne and a hundred more round the world and from every culture, who address Love in their prayers and poems.

Prayers and poems. Yes, you're right...it's a word that shimmers at the edge of the much abused word "G-d" as in Gandhi's great assertion, "Love is God." But don't imagine something airily spiritual, outside the flesh...for I say that though it's not the same as romance, it's a word that also easily embraces Romeo and Juliette, Abelard and Eloise, David and Jonathan, Damon and Pythias, Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein and the amazing circle of our Socinian ancestors in Poland, who strove mightily to be a local community of love *par excellence*.

I actually learned something fresh to say about the words "local community" and "love" just last week. I took a week of vacation and went out to New Mexico for my friend Doug's 40th birthday. I joined 29 other people, who flew in from San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Sydney, Paris, and Tokyo. It was a temporary community, never before gathered on the earth, and never more to be repeated. Yet I partook of something deep, holy and eternal that will last beyond my days. It was a vision of the Love which scatters the sun and galaxies, in Dante's vision.

A temporary community. But one that teaches me a lot about this local community, this church. And, please, the comparison works. For even churches like this are temporary communities when you look at them. Do you think in fifty years many of us will be here?

Or do you think the founders of this church are all still living? All communities are, well, temporary. Now is all we have.

Oh, it was just a birthday party, you might say. We have all had those ourselves, and attended such functions, some more fun than others to be sure, but they are all rather ordinary affairs in the scheme of things. Even 40th birthdays.

Perhaps. But I did not experience this gathering as anything ordinary. Neither did anyone else there. And as a minister, I began to see this extraordinary gathering as a lens with which to look at the concept of church community...even *this* church community.

First, I noted that we all had spent a great deal of money and time to get there. The flights from Tokyo and Sydney alone were 13 hour flights. It took me all day to get there too. And my flight was not inexpensive. Local communities, you see, are not just accidental. That would be merely romantic, and even irresponsible. Local communities take a deliberate commitment of time and financial resources, a deliberate rearrangement of other aspects of one's life.

That is not much different than a church community, it seems to me. Like this one. If anyone thinks this community exists without such commitment and generous contributions of livelihood and time, they are existing in a misty and hopelessly unrealistic world.

Second, I noted that the people who gathered were all different in their beliefs.

In this case, some were Catholics, both Roman and Orthodox. Others were Jews, or Buddhists or UUs. Others were "spiritual, not religious" and still others preferred to think of themselves as secular or non-practicing. You can find some similar variety of belief around here. And, there were Democrats, Socialists, Republicans and apolitical types there too, and people completely

out of the United States political system. Paul, from Sydney, for example, told me they have compulsory voting there, an idea I would favor here, but which I do not imagine being implemented in my lifetime. Different politics, yet we all embraced.

Again, it reminded me of this church to an extent too, a variety of positions on a variety of issues, all tending toward the progressive end of things, to be sure, but with very real differences.

People traveled different distances to be part of this temporary Santa Fe community too. Tokyo, Sydney and Paris clearly took the blue ribbon in that department. But isn't that true here too? People who were raised in difficult religious environments, where the ancient biblical words were used as cudgels and threats, have to travel far indeed to come here, across many perilous roads of the spirit. Others, raised in liberal homes, walked through the door here, and considered it only a short walk away.

The love at that four-day party, weighted with trust and tenderness, was tangible. Over and over I watched people embrace, sometimes ten or twelve times a day, just in passing. Men and women, older and younger, gay and straight, the embraces were deep, sweet and tender. Whether people were speaking in French or English or Japanese, the embraces crossed lines easily. People who were not romantically involved held hands, or walked arm in arm, just because it's a tender thing to do. But everyone was real too...there was no superficiality there. In our poet's words, the guests in Santa Fe had faced their "despair" and learned not to be afraid. People who just met told their stories of love and death, holding nothing back...the sad loss of child, the loss of a spouse, the death of a lover. The candor was profound, and no one was embarrassed to ask or answer the most personal questions. There was laughter, feasting, and even the most untalented among us trotted out our high school French so as to be hospitable to the men and women who had come all the way from Paris.

This reminds me of an ideal local community, like this church perhaps, where welcome is taken seriously, where arms are opened to strangers because, in the context of an interdependent universe, they really *are* your brothers and sisters, whether you think so or not. It means taking out the old courtesies we learned in high school before our self-protection, history of hurt, or suspicion, took over completely. It means being willing to fearlessly tell one's story as part of the larger community story of which we are all a part. That will include tales about how people here once figured out wise solutions to problems, or how they found moments here that will glow within them the rest of their lives, or how they struggled with tensions and loss, and prevailed.

What I felt in New Mexico was what both Watts and Penfold refer to as “waking up...” Waking up to the real possibilities of local community, and the deepening of relationships of love and care. For love and tight circles of community were what united the natives of New Mexico, both ancient and modern. Not a common belief system. There were many. Not common rituals. There were few. Not even shared reverence for the earth spirits or divinities. But the circle of the pueblo, the circle of deep love that reached out past its own center and found a way to include even their persecuting enemies in their prayers...a beautiful example of which you will hear at the close of this service.

I was deeply moved last week, as I encountered the culture of the Tewa Pueblos and found an echo of this congregation there, and in a more modern circle of friends, new and old, who surrounded my perfect friend Doug. And both of these experiences reminded me why I choose to serve as one of the ministers of a community like this.

For in the end, it's not the principles which unite us...no, those are ways we *express* our loving community in the world...you know, allowing our compassion for peoples, like the Tewa, for example,

whom many of our ancestors wronged, to lead to redemptive work. Or, working to establish equity between those whose ancestors always lived here, and those who came from Europe, or were brought from Africa, or who immigrated from China or Mexico. Or, for that matter, proclaiming our gospel of theological freedom to our increasingly unfree modern nation. These are all good ways of putting our principles into practice.

But what *unites* us is our decision to be together no matter what, to face the inevitable conflicts that arise, to overcome obstacles to love and honesty, to question anything that would keep us sleepy and moving to unconscious patterns instead of moving through the world awake and alive. Thus, community comes first, not the intellect, theological criticism, or the work to better our common world. They are deeply important, but they come second, for without the covenanted community, the agreement to work together, we have nothing left but a group of well-intentioned people who each want to wave their own flag, and hope that at least some people will follow. Religious conservatives learned long ago that such a way of being in the world leads nowhere. It's time, I am convinced, for religious liberals, religious progressives, and other so-called "freethinking" folks to learn that too. Now don't get me wrong...you know I have no use for right-wing theology or politics...I make that clear all the time. And I confess I am impatient with all the attempts to make religious services into emotional concerts, and reduce the discipline of worship to a sea of hands waving at the ceiling.

But this summer, just last week, in fact, I think I rediscovered my priorities. I returned to what brought me into ministry in the first place...the possibility of a loving community in this hard world. Summer's lease, says Shakespeare, has all too short a date. No kidding. Any teacher or student can tell you that. Summer was over with in a flash.

I can only hope that what I learned this summer about honest and loving community will come to slow full blossom this fall, as I work among you, the work of the church.

Offering

This time is an opportunity we offer to all members to give expression of their support to this community and its growing vision. Without freely given support, there is no community house we share, nor this rare privilege of growing deeper as individuals, together, through learning, struggle, shared work, conversation, and most importantly, love.

Prayer

*Initiation words of the Kwirana K'osa
(the delight makers, or sacred clowns)
of the Tewa People:*

Tsing we nu ha pang ri mbo'e
t'a t'o wa'e gin sigi muni we nge
naimbi kwiyo...

Be ready then, resolute, to go on,
toward the mountains of the west,
the north, the south, the east,
clouds flowering above them,
clouds not barren of rain.
May all tame animals increase,
and all children.
For though we are small,
divinity loves us, and the rhythm
of our great mother's breathing
reaches around the world,
as far as the Utes, Apaches, Navajos

Kiowas, Comanche, Cheyenne, to all
of them. Her summer breathing reaches
to the Mexicans down south, and to the
people of the United States, even to them her breath reaches. They
are all loved of divinity, all of them. So that is why we are here,
trying to live, we mortals.
Let us place ourselves in the midst of this good summer, hoping
for good days to come, and the harvest.