

## 2007-9-16 Technology and the Spirit

### Opening Words

We are here  
*to worship*  
which is a way of setting aside  
*our fears and hesitations*  
so as to greet the world of our lives  
*with honesty, and a welcoming spirit.*

This we do with others in beloved community.  
*saying, as we begin in peace:*

**Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we kindle this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.**

**Doug Zelinski's Sending Forth**

*Minister:*

It is a rare and wonderful gift when one of our own goes forth from the nurture and strength of this place to serve the wider movement.

*Board Chair:*

Having served this congregation for many years, in many roles, both behind the scenes and in public leadership, Doug Zelinski has demonstrated a love for the spirit of Unitarian Universalist congregations, and expressed a desire to share in shaping the future of our Association of free churches. I am glad to affirm his vision, while thanking him for all that he has done among and for us, who make up his home congregation.

Doug Zelinski, you have been shaped by this community, and over the years have been empowered by it. You have also been a shaper of this congregation and one who has gladly empowered others. Now you have been called to serve as a leader at the District Level, as Acting Program Consultant for Growth and Leadership in Metropolitan New York. We send you forth to this work with joy and with thanks.

Words by Doug

*Minister:* As much as we will miss your presence among us this coming year, we are also overjoyed that you will bring your gifts to the larger Association. As a congregation we bless you on your way with these sung verses:

*The Tune Woodland was written by the Unitarian Universalist composer Tom Benjamin.  
The words by the late Carl Seaburg bless every form of ministry among us, and were commission by our committee.*

### **Sequence**

The Equinox comes at the end of this week,

early next Sunday morning.  
On our side of the world, autumn.  
In Sydney Australia, spring.  
But equal day and equal night.  
A balance that exists for but a moment,  
and then is no more until the first moment  
of spring for us, autumn for Australians.  
I wonder.  
Where do I find my balance?  
How long does it last?  
Do I wait for it to come,  
or do I make it? Or both?  
Ramadam comes this week,  
a month of fasting for Muslims.  
Letting go of the tyranny of false hunger  
for hours each day.  
I wonder.  
Can I fast too?  
Can I give up nostalgia for the past,  
so I can grow nostalgic for the future?  
Can I fast from worrying needlessly,  
or refuse to consume rumors and hearsay?  
The Jewish New Year began this week.  
Shana tova umetukah!  
A New Year good and sweet! Like honey.  
I wonder. Can I too celebrate the new year?  
Or even the new hour?  
Let the silence come now, sweet as honey,  
that you and I may celebrate this good and fresh new minute in peace.

silence

I wonder. How is it possible to be me without community around me? Friends and family, loved ones, living and dead, specific faces, specific stories, specific memories, specific names. Let them rise to my mind's eye right now that I might see them, or rise to my lips that I might speak them in thanksgiving.

naming

I wonder. Is autumn a joyful game the world plays with us? Or is it a kind of music?

## Readings

*The First Reading comes from the year 1846, when a Quaker artist named Edward Hicks wrote the following note in his memoirs. The William Penn he mentions, of course, is the man for whom our neighbor state of Pennsylvania is named, a radical Quaker of great brilliance.*

Today I think I have been edified and encouraged by reading two of dear William Penn's sermons, preached more than one hundred and fifty years ago....One of the sermons was preached at a wedding, when a Quaker wedding was a serious thing, a solemn religious institution. But now our excellent discipline is too much changed...and I fear is too much like the labor-saving and money-saving machinery of the day.

*The Second Reading* is a poem by the great Ruth Stone, who in 2004, published this beautiful poem on what she names "the quiet authority of culture." The poem is called *Borders*.

Driving through Indiana,  
creeks wriggle alongside the highway,  
incidental,  
like, "Oh Yes,  
someone used to wade there."  
A knot of deformed trees,  
almost too old-fashioned,  
remnants of a farm, discontinued merchandise.  
But it's mostly lost streams,  
weed-trees, and a loneliness that hints  
of automatic two-car-garage doors  
and zoysia grass;  
small well kept lawns and sudden streets,  
and identical houses around a factory  
that sprawls the way small colleges  
use to spread themselves out:  
lawns, flower beds,  
groundsmen with mowing machines.  
The quiet authority of culture.

## Sermon

On Thursday this week, Joe Pierce, son of Kelly Hopkins, Joe Pierce, who's taught in our Sunday School, came to tell me that he was leaving on Saturday for his Peace Corps assignment. Ghana. Working on water issues. In a nation with some of the most polluted water on the planet. He had long told me of his desire to serve others in this way. He had mentioned the Peace Corps to me as long as two years ago.

He left yesterday. To get his health shots in Philadelphia, and then fly, by way of Frankfurt and Lagos, to Accra, the Ghanaian capital, where he would spend ten weeks learning Twi (pronounced "chwee"), the version of the Ashanti language spoken there by many.

Joe and I talked about his hopes, visions and expectations. Then I said, "You know, I have no idea what Ghana looks like. I have no mental picture of Accra in my head like I have a picture of Paris or Rio de Janeiro or New York."

Immediately, we got up and went to my computer screen. Within ten seconds, we saw vistas of Accra, portraits of local citizens, a description of the tough tonal language he was going to have to learn, and a presentation about the peanut soup and palm-oil greens he'll be eating there. We

saw long, bustling streets, and sleek glass sky-scrapers downtown. We learned that Accra is about twice as big as Columbus... but just as flat.

Only a few short decades ago, such rich information would have required a trip to the library, and a hunt-and-search session with the catalogue cards in an old wooden file with a hundred narrow drawers. It would've taken hours.

It took *us* just ten seconds. Internet technology, you see, is darn close to magic. The two of us were delighted by what we learned.

Of course, last Saturday, while I was working on that very same magic screen of technological perfection, a thunderstorm above this building managed to suck the electrical power right out of walls, and the computer went blank. Went blank with the complex text of my whole Water Ceremony, which I had been crafting for six hours. Lost, behind the coy grey face of my screen.

Oh, the power came back on in a short time. But the fool text didn't come back quite right, and I lost sections of it I could not tell that I had lost. And had you been here, you would have seen one of your ministers, entirely deranged, pacing up and down the hall, waving his hands wildly in the air and cursing modern technology with a choice vocabulary. There he is, yearning for the days of his old Underwood mechanical type-writer which didn't flinch at thunderstorms and never failed him once.

And there you have it. All of modern technology in simple summary. Something wonderful *and* something exasperating. Something useful *and* something destructive. A wonder *and* a curse.

Sort of like religion, I'd say. A wonder *and* a curse. That's right. Religion seems wondrous to me if it convenes folks for an interfaith social justice gathering, demanding a fairer world; or when it offers the redemption of poetry and metaphor to lives crushed under the Paris Hilton banalities of modern so-called civilization. Religion seems wondrous to me when it articulates reasonable and compassionate approaches to difficult problems, or urges the violent to reconsider their methods; or when it is critical of the horrific wastes of the human spirit called warfare, terrorism and oppression. Religion seems wondrous to me when it reminds me that neither you or I are ultimate, that defending our little ego fiefdoms is a waste of time, and that the evolution of life, both our biological lives and our spiritual lives, is the very pulse of the universe. I love that kind of religion.

But there are other kinds of religion too. Religion that exasperates. Religion that destroys. Religion that causes my wonder to recoil.

Look, although I am called by our tradition to open my heart in a tolerant way toward all the varieties of religious life and teaching in this world, I am also invited by that same tradition to be critical of destructive and devious tendencies in any religious proclamation. To be tolerant is not to be uncritical. Sorry if you thought otherwise.

One of the voices I have publicly called to account for years, because of his way of twisting the truth, was the urgent religious message of Dr. D. James Kennedy of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. To the grief of his loving family and congregation, he died last week at age 75 after a long, influential career as a pulpit orator, and as an effective fundraiser for his favorite causes. Although I rejoice in the death of no man or woman, I also do not let the mere fact of death lead me to some placating evasion of direct criticism.

Now to his credit, Dr. Kennedy was always clear about his religious beliefs. For example, he taught that the earth is young, not ancient; that anyone who teaches evolution is really no different than the cruelest of Nazis who believed in eugenics, and that Darwin bears personal responsibility for Auschwitz; that any seated judge in this country who does not come from a God-fearing biblical perspective is unworthy of office, and that conservative evangelical forms of Christianity are the primary inspirations driving our founding forebears to establish our great and, he said, *undeniably* Christian nation.

I have been critical of all these affirmations throughout my career. I am convinced they are both wrong and hurtful to any culture that reveres honesty in presenting evidence, and any culture that embraces the many, not the few.

But I am not a member of his congregation. I do not go to Florida. So how can I know his theology so well? Because of technology. Just as technology reduced the distance from Ghana to Columbus to almost nothing, so technology erases the distance from Coral Ridge to First Unitarian Universalist here in Columbus. I've watched Dr. Kennedy on TV for years, every Sunday, while getting ready to lead worship. I've always wanted, you see, to preach my sermons in the context of the real world of America, the world where a majority in this nation are critical of the idea of evolution because of the influence of such technology-supported preaching. I watched Dr. Kennedy's satellite-powered broadcasts on television, and checked out his website on the computer.

And, because of his use of modern technology, Dr. Kennedy influenced a lot more folks than I have. Or you have. Not just because his congregation is ten times the size of this one. But because he reached tens of millions of people through the distance-destroying power of technology. And most of the more influential religious groups in this nation are *very* savvy about technology. They even use technological terms in their worship. For example, television evangelists of all types routinely send out pieces of cloth to their followers. These they refer to as a "point of contact" so that the healing energies of the spirit can bring their folks relief from illness or even bankruptcy. But "point of contact" is a term from electrical circuit boards, not a Biblical word. Technology not only supports religious teachings which I find problematic, but has fused itself to religious metaphor and ritual over many centuries.

Now some of you might say to me: technology in the way you are describing it is recent, not centuries old. Satellite transmission, the chaos of YouTube, thousand-channel flat screen, high definition television, video games like Super Mario Brothers, the almost infinite Internet: all of this left 19<sup>th</sup> century ministers like Ralph Waldo Emerson untouched. There was no technology back then. He didn't even have a telephone. If someone wanted to talk with him, they had to come up to his door and knock. And hope he wasn't out taking a walk with Thoreau in the woods. He didn't know what spam was. Either the kind of dreck that pollutes email accounts to the tune of 500 messages per day, or even the original canned-meat version of spam, only made possible by machine technology, developed fifty years after Emerson was dead. Emerson hand-wrote his sermons. With a pen he had to dip in an inkwell. He walked to the store. He strolled to visit friends. He never once saw a Honda, nor could he imagine one. He never once saw helicopters overhead, shining their police spotlights on neighborhoods looking for drug dens that offer street meds, also made possible by modern technology...i.e. cocaine flown in from Columbia.

All very true. But technology is not to be confused with something shiny, silvery or powered by electricity. Technology goes back to the first wheel, the first hammer, the first saw. The word technology is a Greek word, which has come through two thousand years almost untouched. It meant then and means now: “systematic treatment of the natural.” When the gospel of Mark, also written in Greek, calls Jesus a “tekton,” poorly translated as “carpenter,” it’s using the root portion of that word “techne” which means to build or craft. Jesus was probably a builder, someone who built houses or even a stonemason who worked on city walls. He took raw nature...a tree trunk or a found rock, and crafted it, shaped it, systematically treating it until it was useful. Useful to build something. Like a house to shelter a family.

And from very early in religious history, technology has offered its support to religion. The earliest religious metaphors spoke of the earth as if it were a goddess’s body, her hips the hills, her eyes the lakes. But as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the Book of Job was first recited, technological metaphors have pushed their way into religion: *Then the Eternal answered Job out of the whirlwind. Where were you when I was laying the foundations of the earth? Who do you think was determining the measurements? Or who was using the plumb line, in order to place the cornerstone?* Here God is also portrayed as a builder, a being who used the technology of plumb lines to build the universe.

And, as technology became more complex, it all the more impacted on religion. There would have been no Protestant Reformation, I assure you, without the printing press. The printing press made possible new forms of worship, and new affordable translations of the Bible. Later, when folks like Adams or Jefferson spoke of God, they would use the metaphor of the watchmaker. The universe is like a watch which great Providence once wound up so that it all ticks and tocks with order and precision. This is entirely a technological metaphor. The machine as something spiritual. And when scientists discovered microbes using their new-fangled microscopes, many Protestant Christians feared drinking from the common communion cup. So Mr. Welch, riding on the coattails of the nineteenth century temperance movement, used technology to invent a machine which would fill hundreds of little individual cups with his Welch’s grape juice without spilling a drop.

Mr. Hicks, in the first reading, recalled a time when there was great preaching at Quaker weddings. Mr. Penn would go on elegantly for a long time. But now, he laments, Quaker worship has changed. “Our excellent discipline, he writes, is too much changed...and I fear is too much like the labor-saving and money-saving machinery of the day.”

Worship, he said, had been affected like everything else had been affected...by the technology of the day. Machinery was labor saving. Technology was saving time. Now folks wanted their worship to save time too. Everything was becoming quick. Instant. Sound-byte brief. Not the helpful collapse of the distance from Ghana to America, but the frenetic, pressured collapse of the distance from one hour to the next. Only 3.5 minutes to the next commercial and a snack break. Stop the movie while I check my blackberry. Let me leave the intimacy of a lovely candlelight dinner for four, so I can go outside to talk on my cell.

Yes, the world has changed drastically in these last twenty years. This is not the world of Emerson any more. As Ruth Stone puts it, when she writes of abandoned farms and their nearby ponds: “Oh Yes, someone *used to* wade there.”

But now, she says, “it’s automatic two-car garages and well-kept lawns and identical houses that sprawl.” The whole landscape has changed. And us with it. And our religion with it. And this unconscious forced change she names most elegantly as “The quiet authority of culture.”



But don't you see? This has always been true. The younger culture has an authority the older cultures simply do not have any longer. Thirteen-year olds can do a thousand things which many 80-year-olds can't do...not on skateboards, but on the computer. Facebook. YouTube. All of it.

But maybe in twenty years, technology will have left those 13-year-olds bewildered too. Computer chips in the brain to help us learn a whole language in an hour. Small robots the size of a grain of sand performing operations. What will happen to religious language then? Will we allow our souls to be downloaded into a computer, so that everlasting life is not a religious affirmation but a cybernetic reality?

The thing I want to say this morning is this: technology itself is neutral. Like religion, it can do good things or terrible things. It can support a life of compassion and justice or hew down both science and history in the name of an idolatrous biblical certainty.

But technology does raise religious questions. The destruction of distance that Joe Pierce and I experienced is just as new and strange to me as the telescope-enhanced technology of Galileo's moving satellites was to the ordinary citizen of Europe five hundred years ago. The power of technology will always require a religious response or a probing ethical question. Just because we can do something technologically does not mean it is a good thing to do. Even immortality. One twentieth-century physicist even suggested removing the technological metaphors that have crept into religion, and return joyously to the old pre-technological vocabulary of myth, suggesting the best metaphor for our quantum universe was simply to call it a big green dragon.

I don't know. Maybe. All I know is that it is ultimately up to us to use both technology and religion for good, not for destruction. It is up to us, as religious people, to encourage a humble search for truth, not promote party lines and partisan zealotry. The distance between Accra and Columbus may be reduced by computer technology, but the distance between a religion that excludes and damns, and a religion that welcomes and encourages, needs to remain, and for our own spiritual safety.

## **Offering**

This is the time in our flow of morning celebration when members and friends offer their pledges and gifts to the circle of our mutual benefit, for the church is the congregation of the people who agree to make it, not some abstraction far away. If you are a guest this morning, a visitor, let the basket pass you by in peace. You are welcome here, and do not have to pay to be here. Those who have made a commitment to this circle of life and love sometimes use this moment to present an expression of their commitment to the life of this, their spiritual home. The morning offering will now be given and received.

## **September Laud**

Praise leaves that glow gold and turn crisp. Praise evening haze, and street lamps glowing early. Praise red. Praise maroon. Praise the sage scent of mums, and the tentacle'd tangle of pumpkin vines. Praise the early star pulsing in a puddle's broken mirror. Praise steady commitments, and quiet reason and seasonal wistfulness sweet as cider, as honey. Praise for walking in the evening to sort out life's priorities, letting dried leaves fall, fall, fall from our branches. Praise sunflowers. Praise life. Amen.