

2008-04-06 Accountability.doc MLB
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Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate our interdependence
and to yoke our vision of a just world
to our honesty and our way of life.
Our ability to respond quickens now,
as the richness of our living tradition
illuminates the depths, the heights,
and the very center of our being. So,

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 have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Offertory (extempore MLB)

Sequence:

Drop a stone into a body of still water,
and beautiful circles ripple around it,
circling to the edge of the pond.

Drop a spark of determination into the chest of a man running a decathlon, and
the circles of energy ripple to the edge of his body, pulsing in his muscles.

Drop the image of a homeless grandmother into the heart of a woman who is
serious about her faith, and ripples of cold anger and organizational skills radiate
outward to the edge of political agitation.

Drop a vision of peace into the souls of people have lost someone they loved in a
war, and ripples of protest, of poetry, of persistence, circle out to the edge of
power where movements are born.

Drop the wooden clapper against the edge of the temple bowl, and rings of sound
radiate outward toward the edge of the room until they lose themselves in silence.

silence

Drop the daily calendars and appointments and deadlines and demands into this
deep pond of silence, and suddenly memory and love and concern ripple outward
to the edge of our lives.

Speaking the names of our loves, losses, concerns and care into the air, or continuing silence, let our loads be lightened, our remembrances blest, our worries given over to the mystery of a love deeper than our own.

naming

Dropping the stone of our commitment of into the still pond of this moment, ripples of beautiful music circle to the edge of this Center; to the edge of our hearts.

The First Reading comes from Rev. Wayne Arneson, co-minister of our congregation up in Rocky River, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. For those who might be visitors today, you may need to know what Wayne means when he speaks of an eighth principle. Right now, we Unitarian Universalists only identify seven. Wayne, by the way, was raised Unitarian in Canada, among the Icelandic Unitarians. This is a long reading which I have slightly adapted so that you really hear his point.

The founders of several world faiths believed that they were accountable only to God and not to any other sacred or secular authorities. Most theological traditions point to a source of authority that transcends this world as the ultimate reference for their accountability. Although some individual Unitarian Universalists do that, as a tradition, Unitarian Universalism does not covenant around a transcendent source of authority. Instead, as a covenantal religious community, we locate our accountability in this world, in our community of congregations, and in the values, principles, and traditions they represent.

Calling ourselves to account can be a difficult thing for Unitarian Universalists. . . Over and over again throughout our history, we have seen the struggles that have ensued when we called ourselves to account, based on values we *said* that we held, but denied in practice.

Being accountable to each other is just as much a part of the theological covenant we make as Unitarian Universalists as respecting the worth and dignity of each other might be. In fact, I've begun to wonder whether we should affirm "accountability to each other for practicing these Principles with integrity" as a kind of eighth Principle.

In saying we are accountable to each other, we make a statement about our whole lives as human beings. We acknowledge that the community of Unitarian Universalists in one sense represents the whole human race, past, present, and future, to which we are accountable—ancestors, people who aren't Unitarian Universalists, and people yet to be born.

Aspiring to be anti-racist in practicing our Principles opens up these questions of who is in our community, and to whom we are accountable in a new way. Buddhist theology has an important doctrine known as the inter-dependent chain of causation. Much like our affirmation of the interdependent web of life, this theological affirmation declares that no event, no encounter, no circumstance or occasion is disconnected from a great chain of causes that have led up to the present moment. Ultimately, each of our actions

reflects and encompasses everything that has gone before, and everything that comes after.

If I truly take responsibility to fight racism by being accountable to people of color, I bring to consciousness my place in that great chain of causation, and I own the actions I will have to take to shape the direction toward which that chain goes into the future. I recognize that in the inter-dependent web of life, what happens to communities of color happens to me, or happened to my (Icelandic) ancestors, or will happen to my descendants— and the ways in which I can be accountable for, and make a difference regarding what happens, are both the content and the fruits of my Unitarian Universalist faith.

The Second Reading is from Mary Oliver's most recent book, *Red Bird*, just out last month from our associational jewel, Beacon Press. Our readers this morning, Carole Pruiksma and Gretchen Faulstich, are part of our Stewardship team, and are working to make our annual budget planning time exciting, fair and efficient. The poem is called by its first line: *What is the greatest gift?*

What is the greatest gift?
Could it be the world itself—
the oceans, the meadowlark
the patience of the trees in the wind?
Could it be love, with its sweet clamor of passion?

Something else---something else entirely
holds me in thrall.
That you have a life that I wonder about
more than I wonder about my own life.
That you have a life---courteous,
intelligent---that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.
That you have a soul---your own, no one else's--- that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.
So that I find my soul clapping its hands for yours more than my own.

Sermon

Before the annual meeting of all the Unitarian Universalist congregations in our local Ohio Meadville District, held in Pittsburg this weekend, all of the ministers from our district gathered at the North Hills church to see their lovely new building and to share some supper together.

I took a seat near Wayne Arnason, the man who wrote the reading Wendy and I read to you earlier. He was with his wife and co-minister, Kathleen Rolenz.

As we ate the delicious Indian food together, the subject of ceremonies came up: weddings, rites of union, naming ceremonies, that sort of thing. We discussed the whole notion of whether we were willing, as ministers serving rather large congregations, to do these ceremonies for non-members as well as for members.

We agreed that we often did weddings and unions for non-members. Not just the grown children of members, for example, but often complete strangers who come in off the street.

“But what about dedications or naming ceremonies for children?”

“Well,” I opined, “those we do only for members during the service, since we think of these rituals as the initial connection of the children to the whole caring congregation, among other things. That wouldn’t make sense for non-members. But if non-members want such a ceremony in their homes, or at another time, I’m willing to do that, if I have time.

And of course, we have to use discretion about saying yes to all of these other ceremonies. Wendy and I can’t be ministers for the whole world outside the covenanted congregation, after all; there have to be limits.”

“Ah,” said Wayne, “but who is a member? Up in our congregation, we have people who claim to be members ask us to do ceremonies for their children. In the service on Christmas Eve. We look them up and find no record of their ever signing the book, or any record of them ever offering a contribution in support of the church. They come to the service often on Sunday, and they think that makes them members, since in their childhood church, they never had to sign anything or make any clear promises about financial support so the good folks preparing the budget could do so without utter guesswork, hair-pulling and heart-palpitations. They may have been taught that throwing a few dollars in the offering basket was enough.”

“I was taught that when I grew up,” I thought to myself. “Two bucks per Sunday,” old pastor Schuler used to say. Of course, that was 1958, when two dollars was considerably more than it is now...the equivalent of about 20 today-dollars.

“We live in a city where many who attend worship were raised Catholic,” Wayne said. I nodded in understanding. Although many Catholic congregations have events similar to a budget planning canvass these days, a few decades ago that simply wasn’t true.

“Yeah, everyone has pretty different ideas as to what membership in a congregation might mean based on their upbringing, their childhood experiences in church, or their lack of them.”

And so I began to think of all the kinds of folks who come to Unitarian Universalist congregations. Some are born and bred Unitarian Universalists...some raised in congregations where ministers wore black robes in a New England meeting house fitted with a pipe organ, some coming from Fellowships where they only had guest preachers now and then, and listened to recorded music on a record player. Some were raised in religious traditions that

so singed them with guilt and threats of hell that they still wince decades later if any word or structure is used that reminds them of what they remember.

Others were raised outside of religious institutions completely, and are looking for something deeper and richer than CNN, Tuttle Mall or “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire.” They sometimes tell me they long for religious metaphor, and for the ideas and spiritual imagination that moved a Martin Luther King, a Helen Keller, a Bishop Tutu, a Rabbi Heschel or a Sojourner Truth. Or even a Dr. Jeremiah Wright.

Some come from religions where the worship was rich and historically complex. Others come from traditions where the worship was simple and silent, or without musical instruments, or else, mostly just a long sermon message sandwiched between choir selections.

Some came from religious traditions where Hebrew was the language of worship, or German, or Latin, Icelandic, or Elizabethan English, or even the famous glossalalia, “speaking in tongues.”

Others came from traditions where it wasn’t the language used, but the duties, or tithes offered, that marked you as a member. But still others have no idea at all how something like this stays afloat, who has duties, or pays dues. Or ever wonders whether we have accounting books hidden somewhere, or even, if we are organized, who does the organizing.

Some of us come from emotional homes, others from harsh homes, or cool rational homes, and still others from family homes that can only be described as confusing. Some *think and reason* to get to their religion, others travel the path of the heart, still others are worried that the word *religion* itself may be a bit too much, and they fret that folks outside might think that, if we claim to be religious in any way, we might be seen as foolish, the kind of people, who believe (in the words of Alice in her wonderland), “six impossible things before breakfast,” each and every day.

But despite all those differences...and of course I could easily go on three full days charting them as could you...here we are. Roof over our head. Comfy seats. The plants watered, not withered. The choir practiced, not improvising. Folks organizing to go to the BREAD rally tomorrow night, or pick up their kids after Sunday school today. Folks remembering to bring clothes for our Appalachian friends. Folks working out a three year budget plan. Lots of organization around here, structure, details and planning. We may have different spiritual approaches, distinct theologies or a-theologies sometimes, but we’re together. Deliberately, not accidentally. A community, not a crowd. A community with an open door policy, not a club with a secret handshake.

“But if you are so varied, what holds you guys all together?” Folks often ask me that. Maybe they ask you the same thing. And often I, or maybe you too, will talk

about the Seven Principles, those principles beautifully framed out in the hallway on your way to our social hour.

Just so you can hear them fresh, I have put them in simpler, metaphorical form. These are the principles by which we, as one of the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Free Churches, agree to live our lives.

1. We agree to act knowing each person is inherently valuable. There is no history without *every* story included in that history.
2. Thus, in principle, we live as if justice, kindness and generosity call to everyone, since religion is relationship.
3. Thus, for us, religion is not so much an answer as a journey; growth, not certainty and satisfaction.
4. And that means no one gets to restrain or ridicule anyone else's spiritual journey.
5. And so every person gets to come to the table of life, not just to eat, but to contribute to the feast.
6. But our journey is not for personal salvation, but so that the practices of peace and justice might be organized in all communities on the planet.
7. Because we try to behave as if everything, you see, is intimately connected. To love the earth and its creatures is to love ourselves, for we *are* the earth.

These seven principles made me think of the story Wendy told the kids this morning. As you remember, it's a story of a relationship someone has to another person, and to the larger world, including both people and animals. This relationship is expressed by the baking and sharing of seven loaves of bread each and every day.

When one character in the relationship becomes too sick to make the bread, the other agrees to share in the baking and distribution of the loaves. But she soon starts to shirk her promises by saying things like "It'll be too hard to do." "I'll never have the time. I don't want to work any harder than I have to, you know."

How do things turn around? She takes account of what she promised her friend in justice and generosity. This taking of responsibility helps her to do all the things she had promised, not as some chore, but because she finally, and joyfully, accepted that she was accountable for her words, accountable for her promises. She started to wonder about her sick friend's life more than thinking about her own need not to work so hard, her own need to be taken care of, rather than to care for others.

I thought immediately of Mary Oliver's simple and beautiful poem: What is the greatest gift? Here are the key lines again:

*What is the greatest gift?
Could it be the world itself—
the oceans, the meadowlark?
Could it be love?
Something else---something else entirely*

*holds me in thrall.
That you have a life that I wonder about
more than I wonder about my own life.
So that I find my soul clapping its hands for yours more than my own.*

Now please. This is not some rarified new form of co-dependence. This is simply allowing the total *otherness* of someone who is different from us to get past our defenses and comfort, all so that they can really be more important, more compelling for a few moments of attention at least, than our immediate convenience or ease.

Furthermore, I want to make clear there is nothing wrong with the main character in the story wanting her rest and sleep. In fact, in this ridiculously hectic world of ours, we could do with more rest and sleep, not less. But that's not the point. The point is, she stopped letting her lack of organization and planning keep her from keeping her promises instead of forgetting them for sleep and rest. Instead, she learned that she could do both if she planned instead of living by impulse alone.

Wayne's clear words imply that the story of what keeps us together as a community is completed by an *eighth* loaf of bread, an eight principle, one not written down or pasted in our book, or hung on the wall.

Accountability.

And look, prepositions are important. Accountability to, not accountability for. So spare me the lectures on "guilt." I know very well we can't save the world. After all, the few of us sitting in this room couldn't even save one tough neighborhood in Columbus, and it would be arrogance to imagine we are accountable *for* everything that happens in the world. But we can be accountable *to* others who are troubled, or sick, or disenfranchised. We can be accountable *to* everyone suffering the systemic ills that trouble our world: sexism, racism, homophobia and ableism...even if many of the people suffering these systemic ills might be in this room. By accepting this unwritten eighth principle, accountability, we affirm with Wayne that "no circumstance or occasion is disconnected from a great chain of causes that have led up to the present moment. Ultimately," he continues, "each of our actions reflects and encompasses everything that has gone before and everything that comes after. If I truly take responsibility (to fight racism by being accountable to people of color), I bring to consciousness my place in that great chain of causation, and I own the actions I will have to take to shape the direction toward which that chain goes into the future. I recognize that in the inter-dependent web of life, what happens to communities of color happens to me, or happened to my (Icelandic) ancestors, or will happen to my descendants— and the ways in which I can be accountable for, and make a difference regarding, what happens are both the content and the fruits of my Unitarian Universalist faith."

Exactly. I support this congregation, and our larger movement, with both service beyond my employment, and money. I contribute 5% of my annual income to this congregation's budget because I feel accountable *to you*, the people of the congregation, you who seem to act as if you are accountable to those people in the world whom the powers and principalities have marginalized in order to empower and enrich themselves alone.

We are each here with different pasts, different beliefs, different emotional patterns. But today we unite around the table of life for not seven, but eight loaves of bread. May we be fed well, yes, but mostly, may we wonder enough about the lives of others to offer them the bread before we take it all for ourselves.

Circle Prayer

Please rise in body or spirit, and turn body or face to the center of the room, so that we make concentric circles.

Toward the center we turn, toward strength, solace, education, clarity, challenge, transformation, cooperation, empowerment, relinquishment, and joys not yet imagined. For this, O Love, is our common home, the place of our celebrations, our learning, the focus of our commitment and accountability to each other, to our shared memories and shared hopes.

Please now turn body or face outward toward the walls of this room, still in concentric circles around the center.

Toward the edge we turn, toward our families, our friends, our work and retirement activities, toward our own homes and the homes of strangers, toward other lives, other languages, other cities, other nations, other ways of being human. Toward wounds that call for healing, and communities that build for justice. For this, O Love, is our common world, the place of our true worship and religious practice, the focus of our accountability for peace, justice, wholeness and truthfulness.

And now, if you would, please turn again toward the center, and cross your arms, if possible, across your heart.

Blest is this day, this hour, and this moment, O Love, when, in the words of Sokrates, we can catch a glimpse, at least, of that World where the inner and the outer are one; the center and the edge, a single astonishing whole.

silence

Let us sing together # 155