Simultaneity

May 2, 2010
Rev. Mark Belletini

Opening Words:

We are here
in the month of May, in Beechwold neighborhood
to worship, to celebrate life and love and faithfulness
with the art-forms of our heritage:
careful words, tender silence, beautiful singing,
and the simple agreement to be together each week.

And so, **mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.**

Sequence:

Oh universal and temporary privilege of breathing!
As you push my frame out and pull it in,
I give thanks for each and every breath.
I love you. I love to breathe, and breathe freely.
I take you for granted too often,
but for the following minute,
I bow to you with the full gratitude of my being.
I offer praise for every molecule of oxygen
dancing with the other gasses which make up the air:
nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide, neon, helium, methane, krypton, hydrogen, xenon.
I bow in gratitude for the rainbows drawn in arcs by the moist fingers of the air.
I remember that some of the molecules that I breathe in today were breathed out earlier this week by people in Sumatra, Paris, Nairobi, Kabul, Vladivostok or by that ten-year-old who immigrated with his parents from Mexico to angry Arizona.
Breathing, not language, unites the world.
And I am moved to know that every molecule in my breathing was once generated in the abyss of space,
in the womb of exploding stars. Such wonders!
I bow. I bow. I bow. I bow. And keep a respectful
silence before wonders that quiet me....

silence

I bow to my life and to your lives too, to the particular people in our lives that make our lives what they are. Naming them within, or saying their names quietly aloud, we remember those we love, or miss, or with whom we struggle…

naming

Imagine that all we have is right now. This moment, these people, united by breathing to all that live, united by dreams of a world at peace, without pointing fingers, without heavy burdens, without a wall of separation between haves and have nots.

Choir Anthem: Imagine, John Lennon

The First Reading *this morning comes from a most excellent recent book by historian Diana Butler Bass called A People's History of Christianity, The Other Side of the Story, which I recommend especially to anyone who thinks they already know all they need to know about that history.*

In April 2008, Mathew Felling of WAMU radio in Washington, DC, interviewed Dr. Gordon Livingston, a psychiatrist who for more than thirty years has been studying human happiness. Felling asked the predictable question: "What is it? What makes people happy?"

Livingston responded by listing three things: meaningful work, meaningful relationships, and a sense of hope for the future. The first two are, in many ways, self-explanatory. But hope for the future? How is that achieved?

"By having a realistic sense of history," Livingston responded. He insisted that seeing the past on its own terms---not through the romantic gaze of nostalgia---is intrinsic to human flourishing. Nostalgia, he declared, is the enemy of hope. It tricks people into believing their best days are gone. A more realistic view of history, he insisted, envisions the past as the theater of experience, some good and some bad, and opens up the possibility of growth and change. Our best days are ahead, not behind. Hope for the future.

The Second Reading *comes from a book I have much enjoyed and also recommend, both to those who think they know as much as they need to know about Buddhism, and to those who think they know all they need to know about atheism. Stephen Batchelor has been writing books on Buddhism for decades now. He and his wife live in France these days.*

When it came to my turn, I offered the Dalai Lama a brief history of Buddhism as a way of showing how, over time, it had responded to the needs of different Asian cultures, but in so doing, had itself been transformed by the encounter. This appeared so self-evident to me that I worried my presentation might be too simplistic. Yet to my surprise, the Dalai Lama listened with a slightly puzzled look on his face, as though the idea was novel and rather dubious. He asked for some concrete examples. I suggested he consider how the image of the Buddha in Japan looks Japanese, while in Tibet it looks Tibetan. He swung around and pointed to a Tibetan image behind him: "But look, this Buddha: he is *Indian.*" It was difficult to know what to say.

The image he was pointing to looked, as Martine put it afterward, "no more Indian than my eighty-four-year-old granny in Bordeaux."

Again I was forced to recognize that no matter how intelligent the person to whom one is talking may be, his or her view of the world might be based on entirely different premises. What seems obvious to me as a modern Westerner may not be at all obvious to a Tibetan lama – even one who, in so many other respects, seems to have embraced and understood the modern world. And whereas I found the study of history to be a vivid illustration of the Buddhist teachings on impermanence, this did not appear to strike the Dalai Lama as particularly significant. I realized with an unsettling jolt that the "historical consciousness" I so take for granted was a peculiar feature of my own upbringing and conditioning. As this exchange indicated, someone from another background might perceive the same data quite differently.

Sermon

When I studied Western church history in seminary, I became fascinated by the man Martin Luther. He was hard-drinking. He was hard-swearing. And he was a genius; a most intriguing combination, you may agree, in a religious leader. After all, it's hard to imagine the Dalai Lama, or Katherine Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, tossing back glass after glass of beer while cursing a blue streak and pounding the table. Luther was a real character. But his very human qualities intrigued me.

However, Luther's humanity sort of soured and curdled as he got older. I suppose it was all that drinking, but his anger and stubbornness led to many bad decisions. And these led to terrible historical events. There was class-warfare reflected in the peasant uprisings. There were violent anti-Jewish attacks. And, sad to say, he taught that the secular government had the sole right to determine the religion of its citizenry. Thus, in many places in Northern Europe after Luther, it was the Prince of your area who decided your religion. If he was a Catholic, then, by God, you were a Catholic. And if he was a Lutheran, then by God, you were a Lutheran. If you happened to be a Lutheran first and your prince wasn't…too bad…you had to move. And the military would help you if you didn't.

But, interestingly enough, all over Germany, there were princes whose military might just didn't possess the skill or numbers to effect large migrations of people who held to the wrong religion. So, in these places, the central church in the main city became a *simultankirche*, a simultaneous church.

I just loved that word when I first heard it. A simultaneous church. But what did that mean? It meant that there was one building shared by two different religious traditions. The Lutherans had it in the early morning, the Catholics later; they alternated hours in the afternoon, and the Catholics and Lutherans… who were, after all, neighbors in the city, had to actually tip their hats to each other as they entered and exited this "simultaneous" church. They had to relate to each other. They had to share. They had to be, in short, a community, a family.

Strangely, this simultaneous church experience in Western religious history set the stage for us. And it's this history which Diana Butler Bass calls *realistic* history. Remember? She's quoting a psychologist who has studied the concept of happiness for years.

"By having a realistic sense of history," it says in her book, "you can see the past on its own terms---not through the romantic gaze of nostalgia." And that, she submits, is "intrinsic to human flourishing." "Nostalgia," she reminds us, "is the *enemy* of hope. It tricks people into believing their best days are gone. A more realistic view of history envisions the past as the theater of experience, some good and some bad, and opens up the possibility of growth and change. Our best days are ahead, not behind."

What a refreshing statement. Our best days are ahead. And that is true, the simultaneous church experience reminds us, even if we don't see eye to eye religiously, spiritually, or culturally.

Our ancestors were the great-grandchildren of Luther's Protestant Reformation. They were not fond, however, of Luther's legacy…namely, that religion was not free, but something to be coerced.

They agreed that Luther was right to criticize the Bishop of Rome who claimed authority for himself that they could not find in their Bibles. But they also were aware that they were not comfortable with *any* traditionally understood Biblical attitudes toward church organization and government as well. At first, their own discomfort bothered them. After all, the New Testament clearly talks about *episkopoi*, which means supervisors, and is usually translated as *bishops*. So no getting around that word. And it clearly talks about a *presbyter*, translated as *an elder*, but later pronounced as *priest.* And, it talks clearly about *deacons*, which just means table-waiter in Greek. But deacons were clearly part of a top-down hierarchy of church leadership. Still, our ancestors continued to read the Bible carefully. For example, they refused to call their buildings "churches," calling them Meeting Houses instead, since they were aware that the word "ekklesia" or church, only meant the community of people, not the building; the family, if you will, not the house.

Eventually, our ancestors, who were progressive in their thinking, found interpretations of scripture that made sense to them. Passages that looked to the future, not the past. Passages that were not nostalgic. And our ancestors were aware that, in a realistic world, it wasn't just Lutherans and Catholics that might have to share the same space simultaneously. They were deeply aware that we *all* might have to do such a thing if we're really going to be honest. They anticipated in their thinking what Stephen Batchelor makes plain, namely, that there isn't even the slightest chance that we are all going to share assumptions, ideas, religious or irreligious concepts. We're not even going to share the same doubts. Stephen Batchelor had been teaching Buddhism for years, but wasn't even a Buddhist yet, when the Dalai Lama was a young boy, born and raised a Buddhist as he was in Tibet. But yet this brilliant Lama was baffled by Batchelor's simple assertion that Buddhism changes from culture to culture, and *benefits* from those changes. The Lama did not share the Westerner's breath-taking sense of history, or his sociological slant. Now look, he's no dummy, that Dalai Lama. Sharp as a tack. I've heard him speak and my God, he was brilliant, witty and clearly well-informed. Yet Stephen Batchelor, also

a brilliant man, began with totally different *basic* assumptions. And so they found themselves understanding the world…even the Tibetan Buddhist world they shared… in different ways.

Our ancestors imagined that was probably going to be true of all of us. That even if we *used* the same words, they would still have different meanings for each of us. If I say God, you won't necessarily hear what I mean. If you say Jesus, you may mean the Jesus you were taught about as a child, who terrified you with threats of hell in Sunday school, or if you were raised Jewish, the Jesus who threatened his fellow Jews with pogroms and hatred. Myself, I would hear in that name the words of the ancient teacher who was concerned for the outcasts, the hurt, the imprisoned and the poor. Same name. Different people. In short, this relentlessly deep honesty about the meaning of things suggests that those of us who are Unitarian Universalists would not even feel the least bit safe if we fenced our community with a creed. Some people tell me it's "easier" when everyone knows clearly what they are supposed to think, feel and believe. They think a creed provides this sense of "ease." Maybe so. But we seem to be the sort of people who are not so sure that the "easy" way is automatically the "best" way.

No, our ancestors said, in order for us to meet safely, we have to meet freely. Moreover, we have to govern ourselves freely. We have to organize ourselves freely. And so we decided not to impose creeds, belief statements, summaries, or faith statements on each other, nor arch over each other with hierarchical control, supervisory synods, spiritual aristocracies, or king-like archbishops with serious political power. Instead, we agreed to meet as different, distinct, unique …but *equally* dignified partners, *together*…and *entirely without external coercion.* Total freedom. We agreed to meet together for worship in community and in the service of justice for one and all. And we called this agreement to meet by another ancient word, covenant.

As the first reading says, any telling of history that is not *realistic*, that is, that is told only nostalgically, cannot ever hope to proclaim "Our best days are ahead, not behind." So realistically, and despite the central importance of the word in Unitarian history particularly, I have to admit that the word "covenant" has had a problematic history in this particular congregation. Even though the Griswold Williams covenant "Love is the doctrine of this church…" was recited regularly at worship for over 30 years, it proved controversial for some folks, who were clear they disliked certain words within it. So, after what felt to me like a difficult year here emotionally…my first year here in fact…after a new covenant was being created by a committee and the Griswold Williams covenant was lying dormant, the congregation voted at their yearly June meeting that there would be no *official* covenant for this congregation. *Neither* the Griswold Williams, *nor* the elegant one crafted by the committee.

I admit this was a difficult decision for me, since, as an amateur, but passionate, historian, I wasn't sure if an unwritten, unspoken and invisible agreement to meet together qualified us as a Unitarian Universalist congregation at all. But I decided to let the decision sink in, and to work with it instead of against it. Our ancestors, I now think, would have agreed with my decision.

I decided, after some months of meditation on the issue, that, in some ways, the decision was freeing.

After all, I am not sure if any set of words, however lovely or generalized, are deeply useful, or anything more than memorized sounds after 30 years, which is a really long time in some respects. Our religious ancestors were aware that covenants do indeed change over time, and continue to change. Alice Blair Wesley goes so far as to suggest that, if the congregation is healthy, its leadership is healthy, and its spiritual grounding is healthy, unwritten covenants can serve the common life just as well as the written ones. That's a lot of "ifs" of course!

But the written ones *can* be striking. The language of the earliest covenants in our movement, in congregations such as the one in Salem, Massa-chusetts, the congregation first founded by the Pilgrims, and which is now a Unitarian Universalist congregation, used language typical of their times. Here is the 1636 version of their covenant, which read in part: *We covenant with our Lord, and one with another; to walk together…in his blessed word of truth; to be his people, in the truth and simplicity of our spirits. We promise to walk with our brethren, with all watchfulness and tenderness, avoiding jealousies and suspicions, back-bitings, censurings, provokings, secret risings of spirit against them; but in all offences to follow the rule of Jesus, and to bear and forbear, give and forgive, as he hath taught us. In public or private, we will willingly do nothing to the offence of the church; but willing to take advice for our selves and ours, as occasion shall be presented. We bind our selves to study… all truth and peace; both in regard of those that are within or without; no way slighting our sister churches, but using their counsel, as need shall be; not laying a stumbling-block before any, no, not the Indians, whose good we desire to promote; and so to converse, as we may avoid the very appearance of evil. We resolve to shun idleness, nor will we deal hard, or oppress any…*

This is not a creed. This is a promise to willingly meet together in community and, well… you heard it…*behave*. Which means that no one gets to elect himself or herself archbishop for the day, and tell anyone else what to do or what to believe. No one gets to speak for God, or for anyone else, interpret the scripture for anyone else, criticize the scriptures for anyone else, or ignore anyone else, or mock or oppress anyone else, even, it boldly says, "the Indians…outside." I'm not sure if they understood that "the Indians"…that is, the Iroquois, also lived by the civilizing practice of the free covenant, but perhaps they wrote this odd little sentence in their covenant to suggest exactly that. Each member in a church, the progressive congregational tradition agrees, like the Iroquois did, to cooperate with each other, to work together for the common good, and to listen to each other, as well as speak with each other. To be part of such a congregation does not mean that you can believe whatever you want, in isolation from those who differ from you…that's not community, that's just a collection, like a box of random sea shells. In other words, to belong to such a congregation is belong to a living community where everyone agrees to be in "converse," that is, conversation with each other about the deeper issues of life. A covenanted church is a place where I want to be willing to grow, and even to be ruthlessly honest about the changes experience has brought about in my life and way of thinking. What's wonderful about having no creed…and by creed I mean even what I call a fairy-tale creed, you know, like when someone says, "Oh most people around here think just like me"…is that I can change my beliefs, and then redefine them again… and *still* be an active, committed member of the community.

Let me get back to this business of an *unwritten* or an understood covenant. There was, I think, an unwritten covenant between the civil rights workers in this nation back in the sixties. The idea that men and women of all colors and ethnicities should have the right to vote was clear to everyone. They didn't write it down, but they did proceed from it and organize around it. And yet, at the famous March on Washington, women sang songs, but didn't give testimonies at the microphone. Women were outside of the dream for many men. And so women like Dorothy Height realized that commitment to a covenant implying freedom for some, implied freedom for all. So she slowly but surely moved the men of the civil rights movement to understanding that, without women having the same rights as men, the whole civil rights movement was being undercut. Did she toot her horn, whine, demand? Did she cut King off mid-sentence, yell at Ralph Abernathy, scream at Jesse Jackson? Did she withdraw her support because she didn't get her dream of gender equality fulfilled immediately, or walk away judgmentally because a man as brilliant as King hadn't preached this already? No. She understood the depth and grounded nature of a covenant agreed to by a community working for justice. Patiently, slowly, with organization and skill and kindness, she got the men to enlarge their focus. They *changed* their beliefs…but still remained great leaders of the civil rights movement…as was she.

When Luther broke from the Roman Church, he took the three historic creeds of that church with him; he really believed uniformity was possible, and that folks could be coerced into religious identity from the outside. He changed the way the sacraments were interpreted, and theology was preached, but he kept the standard creeds. He was a brilliant man, Luther, but I really disagree with him. I rather take heart in our progressive tradition of covenantal community, where people agree, not on what they believe or don't believe, but only to be there to support each other for the long haul. Thus, I want to end with the beautiful verbal covenant of my colleague Alice Blair Wesley, who adapted the 17th century covenants of the original free congregations of this movement for modern use. I think it summarizes beautifully what the purpose of this, or any Unitarian Universalist congregation is…at its best…where we can gather, simultaneously, and be and become exactly who we are…and no one else.

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
our truth partial and our love uneven,
From our own experience and from
the witness of our tradition (to wit)
that new light is ever waiting to break
through individual hearts and minds
to illumine the ways of humankind;
that there is mutual strength
in willing cooperation;
and that the bonds of love keep open
the gates of freedom,
therefore we pledge to walk together in the ways
of truth and affection,
as best we know them now,
or may learn them in days to come,
that we and our children may be fulfilled,
and that we may speak to the world

with words and actions
of peace and goodwill.

Offering

On this spring day, we gather in freedom,
in mutual support of each other, and this our
common home, the earth. We labor together
to make this a home for the spirit, and a shelter
for the hurting. We offer our generosity
either in the modern way, electronically,
or this way, that we might flourish and all might flourish.

Benedicite for Spring

O you peonies, opening your wide eyes
on branches stretched out like dancers' arms,
blest are your fiery petals.
Blest your outrageous colors, oh tulips!
Blest are you, that you exist in the same world
as we do, right here and right now.
O you green leaves of spring, unfurling,
chartreuse and pink and yellow-green,
we bless you,
you the living mosaic illustrating the precise meaning of life and truth.
O you dandelions on the lawns,
rubber-stemmed, jagged toothed….
we bless you for looking like a flock
of rare birds, or scattered gold coins.
Weeds you are, but life too, just like we are.
Blest are you, wonders of spring, harbingers of hope,
blessings, as it were, on us, we who bless you.
Amen.