

Text of Sermon for 2012 Labor Day Retreat

September 2, 2012

Jolinda Stephens,

Director of Religious Education

Text 1: Roxaboxen by Alice McLerran

Text 2: Opening words for *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* by Wayne Muller (published in 2000)

In the relentless busyness of modern life we have lost the rhythm between work and rest.

All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea. In our bodies the heart perceptibly rests after each life giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and inhale.

We have lost this essential rhythm. Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishments are better than rest, that doing something - anything - is better than doing nothing. Because of our desire to succeed, to meet these ever growing expectations, we do not rest. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go, we bypass the nourishment that would give us succor. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. We miss the joy and love born of effortless delight. Poisoned by this hypnotic belief that good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort, we can never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger.

Sermon: *Sabbath in the Woods: The Rhythm of Rest and Play*

What brought you to camp this weekend? If this is your second time at our Labor Day Retreat, or your 20th time or somewhere in between, what did you look forward to the most in the last few weeks? Call it out, anyone of any age.

If this is your first time, what did you hear about it that made you want to attend?

So, people have really great memories of our Labor Day Retreat and you tell others great things about it.

What would you say if I told you that I plan to write a book proposing that Unitarian Universalists begin to develop weekend retreats like this every month as one alternative to gathering for 90 minutes every Sunday?

You like that idea? I thought bringing the idea to you first in this special community before proposing it to the large UU world would be a wonderful way to start.

What should such a retreat look like? I'm inviting all the children who want to to gather around this base and use the play dough and even twigs and leaves to create a model of the ideal retreat. What do

you think it should include? Just call out ideas. Okay, now take a moment or two to do any talking you need to do, and then you will need to do your creating without talking so I can use words to give you my picture of a retreat.

In many ways, I'm the last person who should suggest this. I don't particularly like camping. I like my comforts, and my neck problems make sleeping a trial. On the other hand, the sight of woods and water zones me out almost immediately. It's better than any medicine for calming me and even reducing my pain level.

Labor Day Retreats are not unusual in UU churches. I went to Labor Day Retreats when I served in Little Rock, AR and Monterey, CA. The camp for the Monterey congregation was actually located in Big Sur, surely one of the most stunningly beautiful places in the universe. And yet, it wasn't until I experienced Labor Day Retreat First UU-style that I began to see an answer to a question that had been bedeviling me for years. You have developed a strong community here with traditions, plenty of time to get to know others, and a cross-generational ease that exemplifies the rhythm of rest I sense is not fully realized on Sunday mornings.

When I spoke with one of our youth who moved away, I came to appreciate what we have here even more. He had tried attending the local UU church in his new town but found himself the only high schooler and he didn't return. He recently decided that he wanted to try again to connect with his UUism. As a way of reminding himself of what community can be he decided to return to our Labor Day Retreat.

Since I became a DRE in 2001 I've thought that the model we Unitarian Universalists use to come together to worship (hold up and reshape that which we believe is worthy) and explore our history, ourselves and the Big Questions, as in Sunday School, is no longer working well. The model goes back thousands of years and permeates our culture in many ways. Yet, the world has changed utterly. When I was a child in the south almost no stores were open on Sundays. Now we can shop, bank, socialize and work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and somehow we've come to believe we *should*.

As UU's we are probably among the worst at including the rhythm of rest and play Muller called for in our lives. That's probably true even for some of us who have officially retired. When Rev. Eric and I were discussing the reading from Muller, he told me about something that Howard Dana, our minister at the Unitarian Church in Harrisburg, PA, is fond of saying. UUs must, he says, be terrible ice skaters because to ice skate with grace, you push, push, push and then glide; push and glide. As UUs, he says, we're all push, push, push.

And it isn't merely that the adult world has changed. Childhood has changed in my lifetime. Gone is the free range play of Roxaboxen. It's been replaced by play dates, computer games, organized sports and lessons. And, significantly missing is outdoor time, connection with nature. As the ecology of our home, the earth, is spinning out of control, we are not raising kids who have a close relationship with nature. And here is where I think we do better than the average. It seems that UU children spend more time outdoors than their peers.

But if you compare the lives of children you love with your own childhood, they probably spend a lot less time outside than you did. Few kids are climbing trees or trekking through the woods and finding their way home. There are also close ties between time outdoors and the freedom to develop competence, explore and challenge oneself that many child experts of one sort or another are now advocating, and which SYC has advocated for decades.

Studies of "brains on nature" are fairly new but the evidence, using both brain-imaging and large population studies, is mounting that environment has a huge influence on our health, our mood, our actions and our brain power and learning. Population studies in Japan and Denmark, for instance, that controlled for socio-economic factors, indicate that closer you live to green space the healthier you are. Other studies indicate that access to green space can do a lot to ameliorate the lack of access to good health care.

Brain imaging shows that being in nature lights up the areas of the brain associated with emotional stability, empathy and love. In children who have an overload of stressors, access to nature helps to decrease the size of the part of the brain responsible for fear and depression. Still other studies seem to indicate that people learn better after a 20 minute walk in the woods when compared with a walk in an urban setting.

There isn't even time to talk about the toll that busyness takes on health, our ability to focus and to connect with others and ourselves.

Religion has two basic functions in relation to the larger society, and they are in direct opposition. First, religion, true to its Latin roots, serves to bind a people together. Secondly, it needs to be selectively counter-cultural. Religion should function to call the group from the practices that are harmful and toward health and wholeness, when the culture is supporting dis-ease.

In our history as Unitarians and Universalists we have served both functions. Unitarians were the establishment in many places in New England. But as we retell our history we like to emphasize our history as heretics, as those who point out that the emperor has no clothes, as those who are countercultural and leaders of cultural change.

As a DRE, what I have seen increasingly is that worship and Sunday School are sandwiched between home work, recitals, birthday parties, weekend work, and soccer games. It's one more event to be checked off in a very full weekend itinerary. The parents, in each of the congregations I've served, do an excellent job of instilling UU values in their children because they live them. But they do recognize the importance of surrounding their children with a spiritual community.

There is no such thing as instant community. Community takes time. It takes more time for us than for the typical religious community organized around a tight set of beliefs and a concept of God. We just don't seem to have sufficient time to devote to our spiritual community. Many of the things that we cram into our weekends are certainly important. Gardening, trips to COSI and the zoo, time with friends, sports, visits to our parks and musical recitals are all wonderful things.

But we must have time to just "be" together. We must have time for long lazy talks, shared creative endeavors, making our own music together, creating a Roxaboxen. We also need that time at a slower pace, that rest between beats of our heart.

This is not a call to become the New Amish. I love most technology. FaceBook keeps me connected to friends and family scattered all over. Technology gives us access to amazing things we would not have otherwise. We just need to find a new rhythm that meets our needs for rest, play, nature and deep community that also allows us to live full post-modern lives.

One way I plan to propose in the book is a monthly retreat. Three or four Sundays a month UUs could

cram our schedules full. Perhaps some of us would choose to spend some time at other houses of worship, working on shared justice projects, attend board or committee meetings (yes, committee meetings would be banned from my idea of retreat). We could go visit friends and family in nearby cities more often.

But one Saturday and Sunday each month UU communities would go away together to play, hang out, hike, swim, cross country ski, create, play Peek, explore our spirituality, our history, the Great Questions and hold an opening and closing worship service. We could come together as people of faith to explore what that means for us in all its aspects. We could grow in our connections - with our inner life, with each other, with that which is greater than ourselves, with nature.

I'd love to know what you think of this idea. Please talk with me about it today and tomorrow. As we discuss it you will expand and test the idea.