

# Life and Death Beyond These Walls

April 21, 2013

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

## Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,

*after a rough week for the human heart,*

to worship again, to dive past the surface

*and go deeper, to hold ourselves accountable*

to our dreams of the common good,

*and to fearlessly question even ourselves,*

that our lives might powerful and kind, even now.

**so Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.**

## Singing 123 Spirit of Life

### Ingathering

One morning, Hedgehog found Mouse covering himself with leaves. "What ARE you doing?" asked Hedgehog. "I'm hiding from Snake," said Mouse. "You are hiding from our *friend* Green Tree Snake?" asked Hedgehog? "Yes," said Mouse. "Fox and Skunk both told me that snakes are VERY dangerous to mice like me."

"Oh, that's silly! Green Tree Snake has been our friend for a long time. He lives in his tree and when he comes down, you and I and Green Tree Snake always take walks together. Lets you and I take a walk right now. You will be perfectly safe."

So Mouse joined Hedgehog on a walk. They talked and talked, but Mouse wasn't paying attention. He was still worrying about Green Tree Snake. He looked everywhere except where he was going. Suddenly he fell into a deep hole.

"HELP!" he cried out. Hedgehog looked down. "I think you need to be more afraid of yourself than you are of snake." "That's not funny!" said Mouse. "I twisted my foot and I can't climb out." "Are you sure?" said Hedgehog. "Yes I'M SURE!" said Mouse, a little mad by now. "Just stay calm!" said Hedgehog. "I'll find help."

He found Squirrel, but squirrel said he couldn't help. "It's too dark down there, and I am afraid of the dark. And there might be spiders. I'm afraid of spiders."

Rabbit, when asked, came to the hole, looked down and said "It's too deep. I could never jump that high and get out. I'd be stuck too."

Hedgehog said, "Don't look at me. I have prickles on my back and that would hurt him." But soon, all the animals heard some wooshing in the grass. It was Green Tree Snake.

"What's up?" said Green Tree Snake. "Oh," whispered Hedgehog, "Mouse fell into a DEEP hole and can't get out cause he hurt his foot. None of us know how to get him out."

"I'll go down and get him. No problem," said Green Tree Snake.

"NO, NO, NO!" said Hedgehog. "That's not a good idea. Skunk and Fox have been telling Mouse that all snakes are dangerous to mice. Mouse is afraid of you."

"But I have always been Mouse's friend," said Green Tree Snake, "so I am going to rescue Mouse anyway."

"How can you do that without scaring Mouse?" asked Hedgehog, "Watch," said Green Tree Snake. "Someone get me a long stick. Good. Now, tie my tail---tight---around the stick. Good." Then Green Tree Snake lowered the stick down the hole, as he himself coiled around a nearby tree, going higher and higher. Mouse saw the stick but not Green Tree Snake. He grabbed on, and as Green Tree Snake spiraled up the tree trunk, the stick lifted Mouse out of the hole. When he got out of the hole, he saw who it was who helped him. "See. Green Tree Snake helped you!" said Hedgehog. "He did!" said Squirrel and Rabbit.

"Because," said Green Tree Snake, "I would never hurt you." "I'm sorry for listening to Fox and Skunk," said Mouse. "I'm sorry for not being your friend." And the next day, Mouse picked a bouquet of spring flowers and brought them to Snake, as a way of saying thanks. And Snake was very happy.

## **Greeting** (*Announcements and Caring Cards*)

### **Affirming A.** *Ojibway Prayer, 19th Century*

*The Ojibwe were a native nation across the north eastern part of North America, especially the Great Lakes Area. with many names, including Chippewa. They were made famous in the long poem Hiawatha, by the Unitarian poet, Longfellow. Gitchee Manidou is translated as Great Mystery, although missionaries often used it as a substitute for the word God.*

*music starts*

Gitchee Manidou---Great Mystery,  
Grandparent of our days  
behold our brokenness.

-----

*We know very well that in all the earth  
only the human family  
has strayed so far from the sacred way.*

-----  
We know that we are the ones who are divided,  
and that we are the ones  
who must come back together  
to travel once again along the sacred way.  
-----

*Great Mystery, Gitchee Manidou  
Grandparent of our days remind us of love  
remind us of compassion and remind us of honor*  
-----

that we may heal the earth  
and heal each other. *music ends*

**Affirming B:** BREAD Alice Rathburn

Good morning. Each month a member of our Justice Action Ministry speaks to the congregation about one of the many projects funded by your contributions to First UU's operating budget. BREAD – Building Responsibility, Equality, and Dignity – is the social justice interfaith community organization that our church helped found, and pledged to support 17 years ago.

**Once** each year, BREAD congregations have the single **most important** social justice event in Central Ohio, the Nehemiah Action. BREAD gets results from public officials because you and thousands of other BREAD supporters show up, in person, and demand action for real and significant change.

**This** year, BREAD will press for additional progress toward keeping kids in school, healthcare, juvenile justice, and jobs. And we'll push public officials to deal with problems of discrimination against immigrants. Now, I appreciate that immigration policy can be a controversial topic, but discrimination surely is not! Just hear this story of the daughter and son-in-law of a member of our *own* congregation. I'll call the couple Joan and Dan.

Dan was 20 when he came to the United States from Mexico in April, 2001, to earn enough money to complete his education. **YES**, he was undocumented... not much of an issue before 9/11...and **YES**, he stayed. By working hard, Dan put his sister through law school, built his mother a house, and continued his education. Almost two years ago, he married Joan, now pregnant; and they began saving for a home of their own.

They also hired an immigration attorney to address Dan's immigration status. But Immigration is **so** backed up that, after two years, Dan still doesn't have a court date.

So Dan could not, of course, produce acceptable identification when he was stopped by the police for supposedly running a red light and driving left of center – minor misdemeanor charges later dropped because neither was on the cruiser's videotape. When he followed his immigration attorney's previous instructions and didn't explain why he didn't have the ID, Dan was charged with a **felony** and taken to jail. There his wallet, cell phone, and clothing were

confiscated and ICE (Immigration Control and Enforcement), contacted. Without his cell phone, Dan couldn't call his attorney or Joan until the following day.

Although Dan was already on Immigration Control's books as an applicant for legal status, it was **five** days before ICE called Joan at work. Dan would be deported immediately unless she brought in a cashier's check for \$7,500 by 3:00 p.m. that day. Joan rushed to comply, the criminal charges were dropped, and Dan was finally released. But even though the cruiser's video did not show the alleged traffic violations, Dan was charged with a fourth degree misdemeanor for so-called reckless driving. His sentence was one day already served, **not** five days, and \$2,000.

Immigration is holding Dan's passport **and** the \$7500 until after the immigration hearings, which could be three, five, even seven years from now. So Joan and Dan have spent all of their savings – almost \$20,000 – to fight specious criminal charges and to follow legal procedures to resolve his immigration status.

Is this story unusual? Not at all. We have heard countless stories from members of our sister BREAD congregations of discrimination, racial profiling, and even documented immigrants not reporting crimes, because they fear bringing attention to an undocumented family member.

What can we do? We can live up to our First UU mission statement to practice “**true hospitality**” and to “relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege to engage in **transforming justice.**” **Your** presence at the Nehemiah Action on May 6 gives BREAD the **power** to hold public officials accountable for making Columbus a more welcoming community for immigrants, as well as for the other problems being addressed.

First UU is committed to having 250 to 300 adults and children at the Nehemiah Action on May 6. But we can't do it without **you**, your family and friends. Mark, Eric, and I will be there. Will you?

## **Communing**

So after this week of explosions killing and hurting people, I find I want to say this: I actually want to *be for* explosions, explosions that are for life, not death. I am for the original bang, the original explosion that gave us all of space and time as we know it, cradling the very earth on which we now in humility rest. The great old stars which exploded billions of years ago shed the very elements that eventually rolled up into us as we sit here right now. Ideas that did not so much dawn, as explode in human minds in the history of this planet, are in the business of slowly changing the whole world; no longer are we merely instinctive like a one-celled creature, but decisive, and visionary and social in a way far more elegantly than bees. As our forbears put it: Love one another. Support each other shoulder to shoulder. Adore your children. Lift the hurt out of ditches. Welcome strangers, for you are just as strange to them. Learn to form societies around freedom, not force. Learn to heal your broken hearts, to deepen your understanding, to ask more challenging questions, even of your own motivations, never afraid of the answers, but rejoicing in unfolding truth.

I am for explosions...but explosions that enhance life, not make death. I am for ideas and visions and images that are for life, not death. And then I am for the silence that falls deeper than deep after these explosions have distributed their new life. Indeed, I am for this silence, right now.

*silence*

I am for joining in this celebration, not as an escape from life, but as an embrace of it, with all of its ups and downs which, after all, cannot be disentangled from each other. So we come to this moment, when we are free to remember aspects of our lives far from this room perhaps, or near, but which we bring to this moment...the inner presence in our lives of those we love, those who love us, those whom we struggle mightily to love, those whom we mourn and remember, and who call forth our deepest gratitude; we name them silently inside our hearts, or make the sound that is their name softly with our lips:

*naming*

I am for the explosion of music that rises from the silence to heal, to offer us testimony of harmony, to thrill, to soothe, to delight, to arouse us to new life.

**The First Reading** is a poem by Neal Bowers, written 25 years ago. I used it for the homily I gave at the communion celebration just before Easter, but I wanted to unpack it again...and more deeply for this service. The story of the Good Samaritan has become a byword in English. The original story, found in the gospel of Luke, is known to many. Most scholars accept this as a genuine utterance of Jesus. It's about a man who travels down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is ambushed by bandits, who beat him up, take his money and his clothing and leave him half dead. A priest from the temple and an assistant from the temple both walk past, and cross to the side of the road to avoid him. But a Samaritan comes by on his donkey, gets off, disinfects his wounds with some oil and wine, hoists him on the donkey, and rents him a room at an inn, offering to pay the innkeeper more if necessary on his return trip. Neal Bowers wrote this in response: *Living the Parable*

Wanting to be helpful, we all  
see ourselves as the Samaritan  
rather than the priest or his assistant,  
and never as the bruised man in the ditch,  
stripped and penniless, taken to a room  
smelling of figs and tallow,  
where he turns painfully in bed  
tonguing his chipped tooth,  
touching his swollen eye.

After all, who would imagine himself  
mugged somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho  
when he could ride in like some minor deity  
on a donkey packed with oil and wine,

his fat purse tucked away, credit unlimited.

Better to be the one without cracked ribs  
safe on the hard packed road,  
pausing long enough to help  
some creature with no luck..  
a dog, a sheep, a beaten man...  
not one of us.

**The Second Reading** *is a powerful poem by Teresa de Jesus, the pseudonym of a Chilean woman who wrote these words in 1973 during the violent overthrow of the Allende government.*

All of a Sudden

What is it with these people-swallowing streets  
all of a sudden?  
They've become cannibal streets, all of a sudden,  
these ordinary familiar streets groomed every hour with creamy blue smog.  
All of a sudden the streets are filled with hidden swordsmen of death,  
or else are long highways straight to jail cells.  
We no longer know our destinations,  
nor our destinies.  
All of a sudden, only the streets know how many guards are stationed at the corner,  
or how many plainclothes cops  
are waiting for someone to leave his house.  
All of a sudden, there are accomplices to crime everywhere. Spies and assassins all around us.  
They feast on people with shoes, or I.D. cards, or with a photo of a sweetheart,  
and it all slips down the large mouth  
of this new-fangled hangman.  
All of a sudden, the same streets,  
strolled by mothers and babies  
and sweet tender pregnant women,  
are posting agents at each intersection.  
All of a sudden, these urbane streets,  
ordinary as every day, start crying out,  
and from behind the cloudy smoke  
you can catch sight of the open mouth of a wolf,  
a sly and effective blow, that swallows our children  
half a month at a time forever.

## **Preaching**

I like to help other people. I dare say most of us want to be of help when can. Help a friend move, including those heavy books. Help by driving a housebound senior to a doctor's appointment. Help by offering our jumper cables to kick-start a dead battery in a neighbor's car. Help by loaning a cup of flour to a neighbor for a recipe. Help by picking up a pal up at the

airport when he returns from his grandmother's funeral. Help by cooking some soup for an ill friend.

But certainly, all this week my eyes have been filled with more *extraordinary* images of help. People helping the hobbling wounded off to safety. First aid applied to wound, hugs applied to shock. People holding the hands of complete strangers in the fading smoke as they sob in Boston, weep in Texas. People risking their lives to carry people to safety amidst the flames.

Extraordinary images of help, yes, but not atypical, by any means. So many of us rise to the occasion when disaster of any kind strikes. Take the Fukushima Nuclear Plant disaster in Japan. Afterward, some 200 retired seniors...engineers, technicians in their seventies and eighties even, organized themselves to work in the radioactive environment to help secure the situation. "Let the young live, and have their families. We have finished our work, watched our families grow and thrive. It's for us to do this work, not the young."

How moving is that? A *sacrificial* help offered by folks who see life from a larger vantage, what our Ojibway neighbors might call the Sacred Way. Thus, as you may have suspected, the children's story this morning was titled *Help* for a reason. Remember? It tells how Green Tree Snake helps out poor Mouse, who had fallen into a deep hole.

No explosions or radiation involved. But trouble nonetheless, since none of his other friends can figure out a way to help him. Green Tree Snake slithers by, and immediately offers his help. But Mouse has heard that all snakes are dangerous to mice, even though he has been friends with his green buddy for a long time. He listened to rumors, to gossip, to innuendo, to sheer bigotry from Skunk and Fox (and yes, I do understand that by using the word Fox, the innuendo is flowing in the other direction as well!).

But Green Tree Snakes do not eat mice. Never have. Never will. The gossip was a lie. A distortion. And Snake, a real gentle snake if there ever was one, heard that Mouse feared him... and helped anyway.

Sort of sounds like the animal version of the Good Samaritan story from the New Testament, doesn't it? Ah, the Good Samaritan...it's now a phrase in common English. We have Good Samaritan Hospitals, and Good Samaritan laws... but hey! who the heck knows what a Samaritan is?

The Samaritans, almost a million strong in the days of Jesus, were sandwiched between Judea and the Galilee in a land they called Shomron, a place where they had their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The Samaritans called themselves Children of Israel, but not Jews, that is, not Judeans. They had their own version of the Torah, their own version of ritual life, and their own complex ethnicity...and they just didn't get along with those Judeans down in Jerusalem. The Judeans didn't like the Samaritans either. They weren't allowed to marry each other, they played nasty tricks on each other too, almost like fraternity rivals out of control...e.g., once a Samaritan gang threw a bunch of dead men's bones into the Jerusalem temple to de-purify it just before Passover. The Roman Prefect who killed Jesus, Pontius Pilate, lost his career by having his soldiers murder a bunch of Samaritans. He listened to gossip about one of their teachers,

believed it, and had his soldiers kill many of them because of that gossip.

So, as I told you, the Good Samaritan story tells of four men, a Judean man about whom we know little, a priest, an assistant priest, also both Judeans, and a Samaritan. Now, none of these guys seems very aware of how the world works. After all, no one with any wisdom travelled that road between Jerusalem and Jericho all by themselves, since the hills lining the road were filled with bandits, and famously so. So the poor guy gets beaten up, is left naked and half dead in a ditch. Two holy guys pass him by...perhaps, they thought he WAS dead, and priests were not supposed to get close to dead people before doing their rituals...this may even be a sarcastic reference to the bones of a dead man being thrown into the temple that I mentioned earlier. But this Samaritan guy comes by, alone, with a donkey, oil and wine in his backpack, money in his wallet, and a kind heart to take the injured guy to a place where he could recover. Moral? Good guy wins, even though he is a hated Samaritan.

Neal Bowers sees something else in the story, however, something that brings me up hard against my own self-understanding: *Wanting to be helpful, we all see ourselves as the Samaritan, he writes rather than the priest or his assistant, and never as the bruised man in the ditch...*

Ain't that the truth? We must be the good guys, because we identify with the helper. But Bowers does not let up on us: *After all, who would imagine himself mugged somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho when he could ride in **like some minor deity** on a donkey packed with oil and wine, his fat purse tucked away, credit unlimited.*

Ah, that stings a bit, doesn't it? Then he tightens his argument even more... *Better to be the one without cracked ribs pausing long enough to help some creature with no luck...a dog, a sheep, a beaten man...not one of us.*

Yes, not one of us. We're not like that. We're like deities. Good people. We never skipped out on school. We always keep our homes well painted, lawns cut neat. We never crossed a border under a barbed wire fence, never had to go to neighborhood healthcare center, or committed routine misdemeanors when we were teenagers. Neal Bowers is saying that, in identifying with the helper Samaritan, with his means and his own good fortune, we have lost any sense of identity with the man in the ditch who suffered deep misfortune. We can help...yes, we have the oil, the wine, and the wallet...but identifying with the man's predicament? Who would want to do that?

The poet Teresa de Jesus points out that such dire predicaments are not confined to New Testament parables, nor to the streets of Boston or a Texas town in 2013. She writes of the year 1973, when the government was overthrown in Chile. Speaking of Santiago, she writes plaintively: *What is it with these people-swallowing streets all of a sudden? They've become cannibal streets, all of a sudden, these ordinary familiar streets. All of a sudden the streets are filled with hidden swordsmen of death, or else are long highways straight to jail cells. All of a sudden, only the streets know how many guards are stationed at the corner, or how many plainclothes cops are waiting for someone to leave his house. All of a sudden, there are*



*accomplices to crime everywhere. Spies and assassins all around us. All of a sudden, these urbane streets, ordinary as every day, start crying out, and from behind the cloudy smoke...* I thought I was reading about Boston when I read that poem. *All of a sudden. All of a sudden.* Smoke in the streets. Cops waiting in Watertown for this young teenaged suspect to leave the house...or boat as it turns out...he was hiding in. Assassins everywhere, writes the poet. Santiago, yes, but also Boston this week, and Detroit during the uprising of 67. The riots in suburban Paris last year. 9/11. The smoke in the air over Cairo. Large events. Horrific events. Events that generate fear, uncertainly and make us question everything. All of a sudden, after such events, we are not the helpful Samaritan anymore. We get it now. We're the guy in the ditch. We're all in that ditch with chipped teeth and blackened eyes, scared, angry, waiting for the next explosion. We're waiting for the next jack-in-the-box terrorist to pop up and steal our lives.

I understand that sudden fear, that upsetting disruption to everything ordinary, I think. And yet I am here to say this morning that for many folks, the ditch, and the poem about the streets, ARE everyday occurrences. They are not confined to one sad week in April, 2013, but spread out over the years...slow-motion, something like silent but very real explosives going off in their lives. Like the folks Alice mentioned in her good words, Dan and Joan, folks associated with this very congregation here in Clintonville, not in faraway places like Phoenix or Tucson. Here. The story Alice told, and which I know for myself, is a real story about real people...and it's a story of bigotry, bullying, fear and trembling, and yes, terrorism. It's just not, to use the poet's words, a story framed with the explosion "All of a sudden." But the intensity of that story echoes the horror in Boston, even though it's local, more singular and without a trip to Good Samaritan hospital. I say threats and death hover about this story, just like the smoke on Boston streets.

What BREAD, our gathered interfaith justice organization affirms is this: in our own schools, in our own streets, in our own neighborhoods, injustice and cruelty and sadness are happening *all the time*, not *all of a sudden*. To focus on these issues, we are called to open our eyes...that is...do research on these issues... as many people in this congregation have done. We are called to work together...not to walk down that road between Jerusalem and Jericho by ourselves, as individuals...we know now that's foolish. The power to change things, to name things that have been silenced, is simply greater when we are together. We are called, not so much to help...in the ordinary sense of the word, which I certainly salute...soup to the sick, rides to the doctor, the beaten lifted from a ditch...but rather, to be *allies*, to work shoulder-to-shoulder, side-by-side, with people very different from ourselves in culture and religion... on issues that *affect us all*. Affect us all just because we share this city and this state and these streets together. Those among us who have more good fortune are not going to the Nehemiah meeting to rescue and save, but only to be allies to the immigrants who are treated with bigotry and terror in our own city. Allies to the teenagers in our schools who are kept from their education by foolish practices and a court system that punishes and divides rather than restores relationship and encourages good citizenship, etc. Allies, not saviors.

The explosions affected us all this week, no question. But even before this week began, slow-motion invisible explosions were going on all around our city, explosions that also call for our response...

That's why Eric and I intend to show up at the Celeste Center at the Fairgrounds on Monday, the

6<sup>th</sup> of May, at 6:15. You see, I don't think we'll ever be able to create a society that is completely safe from sad people and their weapons...after all, as the brilliant social scientist Marshall McLuhan once said, "Violence, whether spiritual or physical, is a quest for identity and the meaningful. The less identity, the more violence." Personally, I don't see that quest ending, soon or late. But we can join together in thoughtful power as allies to mitigate and correct the results of slow-motion and quite explosive violence in our local community.

To help is important, certainly, the strong helping the weak, the powerful helping the disempowered. But to join together in mutual support adds a religious dimension of insight that engages me at a far deeper level. I do like to help...but I like to support and be an ally even more.

### **Offering**

As many of you know, our congregation voted last year to fund our many social service and social justice projects from this church's democratically approved operating budget. Our financial contributions not only fund First Unitarian Universalist's facilities, staff, Sunday school operation, and numerous activities but also its social services, such as Faith Mission and YWCA Family Center dinners. Oh, and by the way, our pledges and other contributions pay First UU's BREAD dues and help to support many other social justice organizations that are working to make a difference. So whether you pay your pledge annually, monthly, or weekly, remember that every dollar you contribute helps to make a difference in our world. The ushers will please come forward.

### **Prayer to lift up Earth Day**

I am part of April. April is a part of me.

I am part of the Sahara. The Sahara is a part of me.

I am part of a lily. The lily is a part of me.

I am part of the tear on the cheek of one who weeps.

One who weeps is a part of me.

Each leaf, each child, each bell, each gale of

laughter, each scream, each blade of grass, each brook, each crow, dolphin, giraffe, each song is a part of me and I am part of them, for I am not on the earth,

I am of the earth, and not one part of earth can be cut off from anything else on earth forever and ever. Amen.