

Listening

February 2, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here

after a week of cold, snow, and welcome sunlight,

to worship, to confront the deeper questions,

that we might answer them with our lives,

to pay attention to something deeper than words,

and to weave deliberate and chosen community.

And so, bearing witness, *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Singing #389 Gathered Here

Ingathering

Do any of you have any sisters or brothers? Are you the oldest, or the youngest, or are you in the middle? (Question and answer for a while)

This is a true story from a woman in Canada named Nathalie Trepanier. It's about her oldest daughter.

One day, Nathalie came into the playroom, and she saw and heard her oldest daughter Dominique, almost six years old, being mean to her little sister Isabella, who was only four.

Nathalie was upset to see Dominique, who was usually very gentle, mistreating her youngest daughter, Isabella. She scolded Dominique: "That is no way to treat your sister, Dominique.

I am very upset with you. I want you to go to your room and think, really think, about what you just did."

Dominique looked upset herself about what happened, and went up to her room.

About ten minutes later she came out of her room, but her mother had gone out...to buy some ingredients she needed for a recipe she was making later that night.

But Dominique's father, Patrick, was there, sitting in his chair, reading. Dominique went running up to him. He asked her, "Dominique, what happened earlier between you and your sister?"

Dominique said, "My mouth doesn't always tell the truth, Daddy" she admitted. "But my heart never lies. My heart was telling me not to do it, but my hands just wouldn't listen!"

When Natalie came home, Patrick told her what Dominique had said. And Natalie hugged her daughter, and decided that she would write a story so that everyone would know how wise her daughter Dominique was.

And as for her little sister Isabella? She was part of the story too, because, a year after the story I just told you, Isabella went to kindergarten. When she got home one day, she told her mother about how someone at the school was picking on her because she was shorter than everyone else in the class. "Oh my, that is not good," said her mother Nathalie. "What did you do?" Isabella said, "I told her that just because I was little didn't mean I was small. I think she listened to me, because she stopped picking on me." Nathalie smiled, hugged her daughter, and then said, "You are very wise, Isabella, and you will be in my book too."

And so everyone who reads the book knows how amazing Dominique and Isabella are, even though they live a thousand miles away.

Children's Departure

Greeting *Announcements etc.*

Affirmation *Imbolc pronounced Imorg*

This time of the year was Lupercal, to some; now, Imbolc to others, and also Candlemas, Groundhog Day and Superbowl Sunday. It is mid-winter, the days grow longer, the cold still wearies, but all of us, and the season which holds us, are part of a circle that does not cease to circle, and moves from ice to blossoms. Blest are the seasons which circle.

Singing #56 Bells in the High Tower

Sequence

And so the years go forward, oh Love, day by day, hour by hour.
Including this day, with its beginning and its ending.
I notice time always flows in one direction only,
forward, toward a horizon I cannot really see,
but which I try to approach with my sails filled with a hopeful wind.

And so the years go forward, oh Love.

The wars and rumors of wars, in nations many cannot find on a map, are mostly behind us now; but I know very well their effects are still with us in our flesh, in our hearts in this present hour. Poverty is rampant, now more than ever, in this nation so identified by high glass towers and Wall Street; I know each day in the life of a destitute person must be at least twice as long as the man on TV who assures me the poor have chosen their own estate gladly.

Songs sung long ago, by Pete Seeger, in protest or solidarity, are different in style from songs sung now, but I know they are still with us, bound to particular memories of time and place,

just as present day songs are binding themselves to these moments, these days. Whole lifetimes of friends and family, in unique locales from decades past, rise before us; their memories still tattooed to the skin of our souls in colors bright or deep; the faces of people we have yet to meet, yet to love, are there too, but without recognizable features; for we live now, neither then, nor there. For time moves forward, in one direction only. I know too that winters past remain in us, some warmer, some as frozen as this one, filled with chills that change our schedules and slow us down. Yet I know that even the coldest day cannot prevent the comforting anticipation of forsythias spreading their yellow arms out under a warmer sun.

Still, Love, I know: snow first, and winter winds, for we live neither in the memories of the past, nor in anticipation of what is to come, but in this present hour, this present silent moment of breath, of breath, of breath, and steady, quiet heartbeats.

silence

And so the years go forward from past days, oh Love, and our hearts are filled with our lives. And so in this hour, in this place of safety and vision, we are free to name aloud, or in the quiet of our hearts, all of those who cry out within us...those we miss, those we mourn, those we love, whether that love is expressed or not, and those whose love has brought us to this day with blessings.

naming

And so the years go forward, oh Love, and music, our daily miracle, accompanies us, and blesses us, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute...even now.

The First Reading *is from Boris Novak, a Slovenian poet. This is one mighty fine set of beautiful and wise words: it's called Decisions.*

Between two words, choose the quieter one.
Between word and silence, choose listening.
Between two books, choose the dustier one.
Between the earth and the sky, choose a bird.
Between two animals, choose the one who needs you more.
Between two children, choose both.
Between the lesser and the bigger evil, choose neither.
Between hope and despair
choose hope:
it will be harder to bear.

The Second Reading *comes from a book that just came out this week. I have an essay in it, because of my own interest and submersion in Judaic thought and practice, but this is from Sue Magidson who is a Unitarian Universalist Community minister, affiliated with the First Church in Berkeley CA, and serving as a hospital chaplain. She is both Jewish and UU, raised in the Westport Connecticut UU congregation by Jewish parents. She graduated from Starr King School, as did Lane, Eric and I, and so when she talks about Holy Hill, she is talking about the*

very real and steep hill on which most of the ten seminaries in the Graduate Theological Union are located, with Starr King right at the center of it all.

The Christian students and faculty on Holy Hill were warm, welcoming, and well-meaning, but often clueless about the impact of their words and actions. Having lived their lives in the dominant culture, they just didn't know that religious words like prayer or Bible take on different meanings in different religions. They would neglect to specify that they were really quoting Jesus who was quoting the Torah, passing off the tenets of Judaism as unique to Christianity. They vilified the Pharisees, not knowing that the Pharisees helped shape modern Judaism. They dismissed the "Old Testament" as a crude precursor to the truth of the superior "New Testament," thus disdaining Judaism's holy texts. These micro-aggressions rankled, hurting body and soul.

Ironically, Unitarian Universalism and Judaism share many theological foundations. Both focus on oneness and interconnection, on actions above words, on life here on earth. Both have a deep commitment to social justice. While Unitarian Universalist language is not offensive, it can be uncomfortable for Jews, as it was for my mother. Much of our language is from Christian history, words like "church, theology, reverend, good news," to name just a few. We use the word "unchurched" to refer to those who grew up without religion, oblivious to how that might sound to someone who grew up Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu before finding Unitarian Universalism. We have some learning to do in order to live out our intention of radical welcome.

But I am grateful beyond measure that Judaism and Unitarian Universalism can co-exist in my life, with occasional bumps and bruises, but generally with appreciation and curiosity. My internship congregation embraced my Judaism, my Jewish congregation blessed me at Shabbat services the night before my ordination, and my Jewish Unitarian Universalist colleagues offered a Jewish blessing at my ordination.

Sermon/Drash

A few years ago, I learned something about the meaning of the English verb, "listening," which is February's theme this year.

You see, I was experiencing some distress in my ears I learned was called *tinitus*, which affected me, at least as a high pitched tone that was there, no matter if I was in a room full of people, or quite alone and silent. I know many of you have experienced forms of *tinitus* as well.

I went to see my *Ears, Nose and Throat* doctor up there on Bethel, and he set me up with a battery of many different kinds of hearing tests, offered by a boisterous woman who specialized in such things.

The results came in. My doctor reported to me that my ears are damaged. My boisterous tester told me my hearing is not very good at all, even for my age. I will need, she said to me, to get hearing aids sooner than later.

Then, as if trying to figure out what damaged my ears, she asked me if, when I was young, I had

gone to a lot rock concerts, with gajillion-decibel speakers all over the place. I said, "No, I never went to any, actually. That wasn't my thing." After interviewing me for a while, she surmised that it was probably my work in a painfully noisy auto factory in Detroit which had seriously damaged the nerves in my ears, back in my late teens. "But," she said to me, "I have to tell you something. Even though literally you cannot *hear* very well, I have noticed that you are able to *listen*, strange to tell, most excellently. It made no sense at first. But now I think it's because of your years of serving as minister. You listen with your eyes, you see little gestures and blinks, and though you can't hear sounds with your ears, you listen to people by paying attention to the whole of who they are, not just what they say audibly. You may actually be able to forgo the hearing aids longer than I imagined because of how your ministry has trained you to listen, not with your ears, but with your heart."

I was totally taken aback by everything she said...that I had permanently damaged ears; that I was continuing to lose my hearing swiftly...and that my congregational work had unconsciously trained me to listen to people without the medium of sound conveying the information. This last analysis had me reeling for days.

Nevertheless, after what I learned from that exam, I have to begin by affirming that, for me, listening does not have as much to do with hearing with the ears, as it has to do with paying attention, with all that I am, to all that other people are. I think this affirmation works pretty well, even for those who do not have hearing tests and tinnitus in their past.

I can't do that all the time, I'm sure of it. It sounds exhausting. It IS exhausting. Sometimes I just need to be alone with a restorative silence.

But this new information has made me more conscious of what it is that I listen to.

The story I told this morning confirms my learning from the test. Dominique figured out, even as a six-year-old child, that you have to *listen to your heart*. Even that young, she understood something quite that subtle. The heart does not actually speak, mind you. It doesn't even make a single sound. Because obviously, the heart Dominique was listening to doesn't go lub-dub like the muscle that keeps us alive. The heart she listened to is no object at all that can make a sound. It's a metaphor. Yet even a child of six realizes she *can* "listen" to that "heart," and respond to this "heart that does not lie," by no longer hurting her sister.

The poet Boris Novak understands this too when he says so elegantly, "Between word and silence, choose listening." You can listen to silence as well as the word, he says, whether written, spoken or interpreted in American Sign by Blythe this morning.

When I was at Starr King School on Holy Hill in Berkeley CA, almost 40 years before the writer of our second reading, Sue Magidson, we used to talk a lot about *listening deeply* to others. It was the era when folks spoke of "active listening." This meant that often, when you were conversing with someone, they would say back to you, "I hear you. I hear you." But in my experience, this had simply become a relatively empty ritual that was well-intentioned, but didn't really serve any function in facilitating deeper communication or more authentic listening. Perhaps some of you who remember that era might have had a different experience with that

phrase, but I found myself too often annoyed after a round of such "I hear you" rituals. I'm not sure either of us were actually listening to anything, in my sense of the term.

But even in that era when conversations were always being punctuated by "I hear you," people were often offering new, fresh and revolutionary ideas, which they expected folks to listen to, and respond to, in some way.

And often, I'm afraid to say, I resisted.

Many women at my school proclaimed the idea of how language distorts reality. They pointed out that the word "man" was supposed to include women in its three little letters, and that "he" was used to mean "she" when the gender wasn't specific. They pointed out this made no sense at all. They pointed out that male language totally dominated female language in literature, in worship, in the arts and in society at large. Ours was a patriarchal culture, run by men who claimed automatic authority over women.

To prove patriarchal language dominated even Unitarian Universalist worship, for example, they simply quoted the language of the Blue Hymnbook, which preceded this gray book...with lyrics in it like: *Man is the earth upright and proud*, and *The superior man is universally minded* and *Not until a man has helped himself, can he help another; not until he has made himself strong, can he lift his brother*. Not a woman or a *she* in sight.

I offered resistance to this. I said, "Well, that is what they wrote in the old days. You can't change what they wrote, can you?" I said, "Well, just interpret it. Of course it must include women." Years later, I felt embarrassed that I had ever said these things. Now I don't.

I realized that it sometimes takes *time* to really listen to what others are communicating to me. I have to listen deeper than merely hearing. I have to listen to the pain behind the words, written, spoken or interpreted. That took me years, not moments.

And guess what? Twenty years later, Mr. Resist Everything was chosen to head up the commission that produced this grey book. We took the ideas and the pain seriously, and worked to alleviate the pain by changing words and phrasing to present a more balanced and just understanding of reality.

On the night before he was killed, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, a preacher as well as a civil rights leader, offered a sermon where he said this: "Somebody told a lie one day. They couched it in language. They made everything *black* ugly and evil. Look in your dictionary and see the synonyms for the word *black*. It's always something degrading, low, and sinister. Look at the word white. It's always something pure, high, and clean. Well I wanna get the language right, tonight."

I resisted listening to Dr. King. I said, "Well, you know what people mean when they use these words. You are being too sensitive. No one means anything by these words. And besides, the phrase 'in the black' is good, right? I mean, it means the company is doing well economically, right?"

Well, yeah, it refers to the color of the ink in the ledger. It's actually the one lone example, and it's really quite literal. King was right about how our language demonizes the *dark* and *black*. Black comedy is comedy that makes you uncomfortable, not laugh. A black mood is a depression. Black Tuesday is when the stock-market crashes. A blackened reputation is hardly a good one. This is even more poignant because people of European background are not white, but beige, or peach, or cream; and people with African or Caribbean or Indian origin are not the color of ink in a ledger, but chocolate, cinnamon, mahogany and coffee.

Come to find out the venerable James Baldwin had raised this issue earlier. He too had been shot down by people just like me.

Slowly, however, I began to listen to what was being said deeper than the words, deeper than the silence. I began to feel the pain behind King's words in my heart. I began to realize with Dominique, the six- year-old, that my heart does not lie.

And so twenty years later, as I said, Mr. Resist Everything was chosen to lead a team to produce a book for singing and worship that took this issue seriously. We chose words that did *not* lend their metaphorical heft to support the distortion of reality called racialization. Listening, I repeat, takes a long time sometimes. And it has far more to do with the heart than any ear. And believe me, listening is not easy. I can only pray and hope that I am listening still, because it's so much easier not to.

Which is why I bring up the words from Sue Magidson, which comes from a new book published this week by our Skinner House Press, called *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism*.

Sue, a classmate of our Religious Education Director Lane Campbell, has lived in the "in-between" territory of being both Jewish and Unitarian Universalist. Her parents are Jewish, and she was raised in our Westport church by them, because they preferred to engage with religion in our way, which is looser and often asks questions without immediately offering answers based on rabbinic discussions. But as Sue went through Starr King, she realized that even folks who had left their own Christian religious institutions, still maintained unquestioned assumptions and ideas embedded culturally *in* many of those institutions. Things like "The Old Testament God is terrible, the New Testament God is kind and compassionate." Things like the words "church" and "unchurched." She began to listen to the stories of Jews who come to the Unitarian Universalist church but never join because...although they like everything about it...it's still called a *church*, even though the only time Christ per se is mentioned is in a few carols at Christmas. She doesn't mind the story of Jesus (without Messianic interpretations, of course), Jesus as a first century Galilean teacher clearly grounded in the Torah, the sacred text of the Jews to this very day. But she still has questions. She and other folks have communicated their stories clearly, and their stories overlap a lot. Oh, please, people like Sue are hardly expecting, because they tell their stories, that a Unitarian Universalist congregation will abandon any mention of Christmas or Easter, even as they are truly glad that Yom Kippur and Passover and even Hanukkah are often part of our worship schedule, besides a Solstice ritual or Buddhist meditation.

But the word *church* itself feels, Magidson says in her particular essay, feels like "a micro aggression." Some of her co-religionists out of the Jewish tradition point out that many of our earliest congregations were not called "churches" but Societies, which once meant something like the modern word "community." (My first ministry was in the San Francisco Unitarian Universalist Society, founded in 1840.) She understands fully the most predominant historical grounding of Unitarian Universalism, its roots in radical Protestant and Anabaptist culture. She delights in the multi-cultural approach of our congregations, with a Hindu teacher like Tagore featured in one service, and Kung Zi, or Confucius in another. She loves the diversity of the music...chant, hymn, song, everything really. She herself is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. But she has not out and out rejected her whole past history. Neither, I think, does she need to, if our idea of radical welcome, or as we say it, "true hospitality," is to mean anything more than saying a kind and open hello at the door.

Listening to the stories of others has been one of the major dimensions of my whole career, I have discovered. I resist the implications of some of these stories, but eventually, I find I listen deeper. As my heart grows more vulnerable with time, I find that I cling less to what comforted me, or offered me safety in the past, but I turn toward what is not yet fully formed there on the horizon before me, toward which I move, hour-by-hour, day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year.

I am well aware that the idea of possibly changing the name of this *church* to *congregation* to express our hospitality is a controversial idea. I spent a lot of my time resisting this exact idea at my former congregation in Hayward. But, I am aware that I am still listening...to the language of our transgender members, to the language of our more Christian members, and to the language of our differently abled members. To the language of Dr. King, and to the language critiques of my feminist and womanist teachers through the years.

Listening is not easy. It takes a long time. But listening is not at all the same as hearing. A hearing aid is not what enables me to listen. It's the long slow hard work of the heart alone, the heart which cannot, in the end, as our six-year-old Dominique reminded us, and as Dr. King reminded us, ever lie.

Offering

In a congregation with courses that help us to learn, music that invites us to sing, organization that invites us to try and see the world without distortions, and more just; in a congregation which has no higher authority than ourselves; in a congregation that cooks for the homeless at Faith Mission and the YWCA, which celebrates the holidays that challenge us, which offers its dance floor to joyously active feet and martial arts education; in a congregation that claims responsibility for itself, we now give and receive the morning offering, a circle that never stops circling.

Returning: Reprise

Between two words
choose the quieter one.
Between word and silence
choose listening.

Between two books
choose the dustier one.
Between the earth and the sky
choose a bird.
Between two animals
choose the one who needs you more.

Between two children
choose both.
Between the lesser and the bigger evil
choose neither.
Between hope and despair
choose hope:
it will be harder to bear.

Singing 1012 When I Am Frightened

Blessing

Pete Seeger didn't write *We Shall Overcome*. But he did change one word in the song, and by doing so made it more popular than it had ever been before. He changed the original word *will*, *We will overcome*, to *shall*. *We shall overcome*. Why? "Because," he said, "it opened up the face more to sing *shall* than *will*." Inspired by this simple change, open up your faces, and your minds, that you shall listen to the quiet voice of your own hearts.