

Re-Remembering:
What Kind of Community Do We Want to Be?
February 1, 2015
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering , Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening

We are here,
after a week of bright sun and cold snow,
to worship, to look behind the curtain,
and see what is beyond it,
to honor the imperfect
while keeping faith with ever unfolding truth.

And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.

Singing #86 Blessed Spirit of My Life

Ingathering Wabi Sabi the Cat

Wabi Sabi is a beautiful brown and tan colored cat who lives in Kyoto Japan. The woman in whose apartment she lives is named Akari, which means *light* in English. Wabi Sabi always cuddles up with Akari when she comes home from work in the evening. She likes to be petted too. She is happy.

One day, Akari goes to the door and welcomes visitors who have come to share tea and conversation. She bows as they enter the door. Some of the visitors speak English and one translates things for Akari who only speaks Japanese. Wabi Sabi listens in.

One of the guests says to Akari, "Your cat is very, very beautiful. You told us your name means *light*; what does your cat's name, Wabi Sabi, mean?"

Akari looks down. "Oh, it's something very difficult to translate into English. You don't have a word for it in your language. I am not sure how to describe it." But Wabi Sabi, who understands Japanese pretty well, is confused. Her name MEANS something?
And Akari cannot not figure out how to say what it means?

So later that day, Wabi Sabi goes outside and visits her friends, the dog named Akuto, which means "troublemaker" and the monkey named Toshi, which means "smart." Wabi Sabi asks them, "Do you know what my name means?" Toshi and Akuto answer, "We do, but we can't explain it to you. It's too difficult for you to understand."

Feeling very sad, Wabi Sabi leaves her friends and wanders up a hill. At the top, she comes to a temple where she sees a priest who is making a cup out of clay. The soft clay is on the wheel, and goes round and round. The priest uses his hand to shape the cup. "It's beautiful!" thinks Wabi Sabi. "So beautiful! The cup is perfect." When the priest is done making the cup, before he puts it into the oven to bake and become hard, he takes his finger and bends the perfect edge of the cup just a bit. "Ah," says the priest aloud, "wabi sabi."

At first the cat says, "This priest can't know my name. I live far away." Then Wabi Sabi realizes that the priest has just accidentally told her the meaning of her name. The words Wabi Sabi means that nothing is perfect. Nothing is finished. And yet, it's beautiful. It's wonderful, even if it's never perfect. "Ah," thinks Wabi Sabi, "I have a wonderful name! It is difficult to understand, but the cup with the bent edge helps me to understand what it means." And with that, Wabi Sabi started back home, content to have such a wonderful name.

Greeting *(Mark: announcement about Talent Show, and trip to Asilomar)*

Affirming

Until we receive with an open heart, we are never really giving with an open heart."

(Brene Brown's The Gift of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You Are Supposed to Be) The title of book all by itself says a lot...

Singing # 360 Here We Have Gathered

Communing

Here I am again, like three out of four Sundays for 17 years, standing in a small wooden pulpit with a marvelous quilt hanging from it.

Behind me, the beautiful chancel adornments and the louvered doors and windows. Out beyond them, the patio, with the names of loved ones embossed into brick paving stones. A place to remember, and to grieve and wonder.

Beyond that, the Old Beechwold neighborhood, with its charming stone bridge, and curving lanes leftover from the zoo that used to be there. Beyond that, houses and apartments rolling like a carpet all the way up to Worthington. Keep going with your imagination, and you will fly past Delaware and Marion, over fields of soy, then up through the bright wide streets of Windsor, Ontario.

Up, up now, over the icy waters of Hudson Bay, and the astonishing twisted frozen cliffs of Baffin Island, then over the famous pole, and then finally downward, hurling over the ice tundra, then through the frozen streets of Novosibirsk in Siberia, the bare mountains of Western China's Sichuan, the snowy Bhutan Himalayas, sprawling Kolkata cut in half by the Ganga river in East India. Then over the shining Bay of Bengal, down the spine of the Adaman Islands, then over the dark silver-blue of the Indian Ocean, until the white ice of the Antarctic startles you.

Then around and up again, over the deep Pacific for ten thousand kilometers until you suddenly are surprised to cross over the green lands of Honduras and Nicaragua, fly over the cloudy Gulf

of Mexico, pass through Columbus, Georgia, then Atlanta, then Lexington, and finally here, coming from the bright south sky over downtown towers into this room, filled with these particular people at this particular moment. This moment will never happen again. May we remember it one day. May we never forget that moments are brief. May we remember that this moment is different for every single life form on this round earth, and that this is both the way it is, and both a blessing and a wonder. O Love, may this silence seal this wondrous truth, embossing it onto our hearts.

The Great Silence

Our individual lives make a circle as well, the decades of our lives all circling back through our hearts with memories, and hopes and gratefulness. And so as we move through this, our celebratory time together, may we take some time to remember all those we love, who have been there for us, who struggle with us, and those whom we now remember with great tenderness. We name them in our heart silently, or softly into the shared air of this beautiful room.

the Naming

With music we come full circle – not just around the globe – but now, to this: from the music of the spheres at the beginning of time itself, to the echoes of that original music which we make in this small room ourselves, with humility and gladness.

Musical Pieces

The First Reading comes from Kathleen McTigue, a friend, and the person who leads the College of Justice. This comes from her book *Shine and Shadow*, 2011.

On the wall above my desk, I keep a favorite quote by Sarah Brethnach (pronounce Brannok) : "Both abundance and lack exist simultaneously in our lives, as parallel realities (parallel gardens). It is always our conscious choice which secret garden we will tend.

So often we take meticulous care of the Garden of Dissatisfaction, cultivated from the lack in our lives. We leave the gate wide open and we wander in each morning almost before we are fully awake. We're already feeling sorry for ourselves because we didn't sleep well again, or the weather is foul, or work feels like too much of a grind. We linger in the Garden of Dissatisfaction, usually without even noticing that we made that choice. We turn again and again to the unkempt and extravagant growth of our favorite gripes, some of them many years old, and still filled with whining vigor.

But there is another garden right along side this one, and just a small shift of perspective tumbles us into its grace. In the Garden of Abundance, the landscape overflows with the ordinary miracles that shimmer through each day we are privileged to walk in this world. The garden grows easily, it blossoms freely, and its riches await us each time we open our eyes to see it: life, breath, kindness, love. All the bounty given us by the unfolding day.

In the Garden of Abundance, the bare branches against a winter overcast sky become a blessing, not because some bluebird of happiness lighted there for a moment, but because they exist at all, outlined against the soft, beautiful gray of the sky. Which secret garden will you tend today?

The Second Reading comes from my friend and colleague Manish Mishra Marzetti, whose *Installation Ceremony* I helped with about five years ago in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and whose mentor I have been privileged to be. This was the devotional reading Fujio Hiyashi, one of our Board members, started our meeting off with last Wednesday evening, and I was reminded of how good it is, and so chose to use it today.

Every day, as leaders within a spiritual community, we must realize that our actions and inactions affect dozens if not hundreds of lives. How do we prioritize the list of pressing needs? What do we have time to get to today? What will have to wait yet another day before the needed time emerges?

Will those decisions mean that someone who needs care and support might not receive it today? Will we meet our fundraising and budgetary goals, or fall short? Will someone leave our Sunday service feeling less welcome than they should? Will we have enough volunteers for our religious education classes?

The possibility of failure abounds. We are engaged in a fallible, human enterprise, but it is one that simultaneously transcends our finitude. Amid the uncertainty, amid the risk of failure, can we remember why we stepped forward? To make a difference in someone's life. To help build and create healthy community. To share our gifts and talents with the world around us. To be the best we can be, and bring out the best in others.

Grounded in these intentions, it's never possible to fail. The world needs every bit of good that each of us has to offer. Do what you can. Trust that gifts offered in love will be received in the spirit of love. Trust that what we are contributing to is far greater than any one of us. Trust that even when we fall short, the good that we are able to do matters. Greatly.

Preaching

When I was a kid, and watched Warner Brother cartoons on the television, or even in the theaters before the double feature, I learned a couple of strange things.

1. That even if you drop a dozen 15 ton boulders on top of the coyote, he can bounce back to life instantly in the next moment.
2. Bugs Bunny could outwit anyone, anytime, and lived a long life because Elmer Fudd was the worst shot in hunting history.
3. When cartoon characters are about to bite the dust, they always say the same thing: "My whole life is passing before my eyes."

Now, I have had no indication that I am going to bite the dust soon, but like a Warner Brother cartoon character, I really do see my life passing before my eyes. Hours every day. It's a new thing since I have turned sixty. I sometimes can't remember what I did yesterday, but I can go into ridiculous detail about things that happened 20, 30, 40 and 50 years ago. Even 60 years ago.

For example, I remember the crossing guard on Springgarden Ave who helped me get to my first Kindergarten class. I remember my first kiss, which taught me more about the nervous system than the biology teacher ever did. And I remember my first trip to Cedar Point when I learned just how sick a tilt-a-whirl can make a person. I remember my first trip overseas, when I burst into tears the moment I saw the pale-blue afternoon image of Notre Dame cathedral greet me when I surfaced from the Metro stop in Paris. I remember my Ordination at the San Francisco

Church, and the late and very striking Donald Fehrenbach reading the hilarious text I had chosen for the preacher, Anne Heller, to reflect upon.

And, frequently, especially as I was preparing my sermon this morning, I remember what I experienced going to church when I was a kid. My family attended services in a brand new, modern travertine marble barn of a building with whole walls of stained glass, and blond wood pews seating approximately 2000 people.

There were about 30,000 members of the congregation, since children were *born* members in my former tradition. There were seven or eight services on Sunday. There was no such thing as coffee hour or social time after the service was over; they had folks stationed in the parking lots to make sure folks got out of there quickly, and others parked for the next service expediently. I never once sat next to anyone I ever saw before. And I didn't expect to. Going to church was simply an unquestioned requirement. No balking. No complaining. And, although there was a newsletter, which we called the Bulletin, no one ever knew who was going to preach any of the services – that wasn't important. Seven priests took turns.

You just went. And neither of my folks ever attended a single meeting in the evening. There were no such things back then in the large urban Roman Catholic parishes in Detroit. You didn't go to such churches on Sunday for community. You found your community elsewhere, mostly, I suppose, within the family or in the school.

Later, I also remembered attending Sha'ar Zahav synagogue in San Francisco. One Friday evening, at the service, they were trying out some new readings from their rather spectacular *siddur*, or prayerbook. The service had been designed, and was being led, by members of the synagogue community. They led us in singing the joyous Welcome to the Sabbath song, *L'khah Dodi*. We stood to say the lengthy *Amidah* prayer privately. Suddenly, the rabbi, Jane Litman, came out of her office door, walked over to the *bimah*, or reading desk, and said, "I have lovely *drash* for you tonight." *Drash* means sermon, basically. She hit the message out of the ball park, and then said good-bye and went back into her office. She did not attend the service. I was amazed.

Such a different approach, such a different relationship between clergy and congregation. Afterward the congregation did not go to a coffee hour, but broke braided bread, and shared a cup of wine around the table. The people I talked to told me they came for the richness of the service, and for the community too. But also, they underlined, for reasons of Jewish identity, and real transformative connection to Jewish history. Atheists attended that synagogue and agnostics, but the Jewish identity and history was just as important to them as it was to those who moved through the world with a more traditional religious vocabulary intact.

In this congregation, people very often tell me they come for the sense of community. Others are clear that the music they hear in this place grounds them through the week. Or they speak of the education their children receive about the great questions, while meeting with other parents to share the experiences of parenting. Community.

Yet folks who come here don't share a common rooted identity, like my Jewish friends. Oh, I know, there are some who grew up in Unitarian or Universalist congregations, but our tradition, welcoming everyone, is more fluid. You would be hard pressed to find a synagogue that did not sing Lekha Dodi at the beginning of Friday Evening Service, but among us, there are

congregations who do not light the chalice, or who sing a totally different repertoire of songs and hymns, or where the minister has always, and always will, wear a black gown while in the pulpit. Ours is a very diverse tradition, so coming here for identity is not going to work out quite the same.

In the church I grew up in, going to church was simply a rule. It was a sin not to go, unless you were deadly ill. In our tradition, no one would go for that. There would be an immediate balking at such an expectation.

Others I've met were raised without religion. Or just a cultural understanding of religion. The whole idea of some ideas being holy makes no sense to many people for whom the shopping mall or brunch was their Sunday activity, or Saturday activity, or even, substituting dinner for brunch, their Friday activity.

The only buildings they may have entered with ceilings this high would have been a concert hall or perhaps a train station (*if* they happened to live in a more transportation savvy state with actual passenger trains). The idea of singing with others may not be a central part of their childhood experience, except, sometimes in school where they sang in glee clubs or choruses. They may have sung Christmas carols in school too, but probably without ever knowing who "ron yon virgin" was. They simply lived outside the whole fabric of any religious culture.

The words "liturgy" or "offering" or "sermon" may have little meaning to them, except, perhaps, negative ones. You know, "Don't you mean dramaturgy?" "You churches are always asking for money. Can't you ever talk about something else?" "Don't you preach at me!" Or, when they show up in a place like this, and they were raised Southern Baptist perhaps, they may be totally mystified as to how a sermon could be preached without quoting from the Bible every Sunday, *especially* the Epistles of Paul, or how they can end *without* an altar call or a *clear* invitation to be baptized.

So, membership in a congregation like this is varied because its people are varied. They come from many religious and non-religious traditions, and even Unitarian Universalist congregations are all different too. Many people call themselves members of this congregation even though they have not signed the membership book. Some will not sign the membership book because the whole idea of joining anything rattles them, perhaps because of some unsavory past experience with official joining. Or some spiritual claustrophobia, with a real fear of being hemmed in some way, by any commitment. Others don't know there *is* a membership book. There wasn't one in the church of my youth so yes, for me too it was a surprise that congregations like this had one. I suppose its that way for many others.

So here it is: we all remember different lives – those lives that pass before our eyes, and dog our memories. And thus, we all have different expectations of this place, and make different assumptions about what is or should be important here. Some may find the silence and the meditations the most important gift of this place to their lives. Others may find the images in a sermon something to wrestle with the rest of the week. Others find the other aspects of congregational life more compelling – rejecting the beliefs of their childhood, they come here to share not so much their unbelief as to share an active, organized response to the mayhem and painful injustices of the modern world. Yet with all these different experiences, based on, or reacting to past remembrances, isn't it impossible, many ask, to create real community, real

spiritual depth and yes, some sort of common identity? Isn't the idea of membership impossible, since our individual uniqueness, which we cherish, keeps us separate, quite literally dis-membered from any whole?

My answer? I say it IS possible to create real community, and cultivate spiritual depth, because I think we already have accomplished a lot of that in the last 15 years or so. I notice a richer, deeper sense of community than I remember when I first got here, and there were very few things going on around here other than on Sunday. Now we almost do too much around here. And I've had remarkable conversations with people about their spiritual lives, their deeper lives, if you will, that simply astonish me with their wisdom. So, it's possible to create community and spiritual depth. But it hasn't always been easy. As my friend Manish says:

Every day, as leaders within a spiritual community, we must realize that our actions and inactions affect hundreds of lives. How do we prioritize the list of pressing needs? What do we have time to get to today? What will have to wait yet another day before the needed time emerges? Will those decisions mean that someone who needs care and support might not receive it today? Will we meet our fundraising and budgetary goals, or fall short? Will someone leave our Sunday service feeling less welcome than they should? Will we have enough volunteers for our religious education classes?

These kinds of questions flow through the leaders of this congregation every day. They are healthy questions. They lead to self-examination and to many incremental changes over the years. And none of these questions seem to me to be rooted in the unique, personal, and diverse remembrances of religious or non-religious experiences found in each individual leader. They are based instead on vision, on preparing for our future together, not trying to pretend we have a common past. My prayer is that we are creating an experience here which people will remember many years to come, memorable moments of understanding, depth, comfort, skill-building and challenge. Memories that bring them back to life when one of life's boulders falls on them. Memories which will outwit the despair and gloom life sometimes offers. Memories that will bring us life and life and life.

And this is true too: we will never, ever, get it perfect. We can improve things, ask deeper questions, but we will sometimes be clumsy, sometimes just not get it, and sometimes really have to work harder at it than ever before. We can fail even at times. As Manish reminds us: The possibility of failure abounds. We are engaged in a fallible, human enterprise, but it is one that simultaneously transcends our finitude. Amid the uncertainty, amid the risk of failure, can we remember why we stepped forward? (Oh, yes.) To make a difference in someone's life. To help build and create healthy community. To share our gifts and talents with the world around us. To be the best we can be, and bring out the best in others.

And the whole time we are doing that, we will have to find beauty in our very imperfection – the wabi sabi idea from Japan, which reminds us that, even if we go through a difficult time, what we are doing is not only worth it, it's a beautiful gift to ourselves and our world which "transcends our finitude."

However, just because we are imperfect as both a community and as plain old human beings, it does not mean we do not dream of perfection. Richard Fenn titled one of his books on religion exactly that *The Dream of A Perfect Act*. He suggests that in this broken world, any religion worth its salt has to lift our ideals, help us gaze at a vision of worth and justice and beauty, and

teach us to act in a way that challenges the "entitled" attitude of the larger world *of which we are still a part*. Echoing Kathleen McTigue, we may be imperfect gardeners, but it's best for us to deliberately choose to cultivate the Garden of Abundance rather than scrape our own knees cultivating the Garden of Lack – the garden governed by perfectionism, the false faith, often unconscious, that we should be ashamed not to be perfect. Better to appreciate and be thankful for life than to grumble all the time it's not going the way we expected because of our unique path. Kathleen puts this beautifully: "In the Garden of Abundance, the bare branches against a winter overcast sky become a blessing, not because some bluebird of happiness lighted there for a moment, but because they exist at all, outlined against the soft, beautiful gray of the sky."

My childhood cartoons taught me odd things, but yet I do think I would benefit from being more grateful for all of these memories passing before my eyes of my heart. After all, they are doing that so that I can say "thank you" while I am yet living, and then, filled with gratitude, turn those same eyes of my heart to cultivating, through the community of a congregation such as ours, a future of abundance, gratitude, or in Kathleen's words, "life, breath, kindness and love."

Offering

Returning Prayer for this House

May you, O Love, shimmer in this our community of life and dreams. May we show up, ask questions, pitch in, be undone at times, inspired at others. Come, steadiness, and come, surprise! May we never be so certain that we skip the privilege of play, or dance, or meditation or worship. Let us enjoy the privilege of learning by teaching, and teaching by learning. If we watch the big game tonight, may at least some of us do so with the very people we worship with today, for the congregation is not hemmed in by these walls; if that is not our thing, may we engage richly in other ways with those whom we love. Love, soften our assumptions and melt them into mist so that we deal with the real and not the supposed. May we sing even when we were told we can't, voice our blessings even when we are fearful, and give openly of time and treasure, talent and trust. Amen.

Singing #1 May Nothing Evil Cross This Door

The world needs every bit of good that each of us has to offer. Do what you can. Trust that gifts offered in love will be received in the spirit of love. Trust that what we are contributing to is far greater than any one of us. Trust that even when we fall short, the good that we are able to do matters. Greatly.