

“Coming of Age: So When Does *That* Happen?”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Joseph Bednarik, Guest Speaker
May 22, 2005

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

At times our own light goes out,
And is rekindled by a spark from another person.
Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude
Of those who have lighted the flame within us.
(Albert Schweitzer)

Responsive Reading

Today’s “Responsive Reading” comes from the author of *The Little Prince*, perhaps the best book ever about a plane wreck:

LEADER: In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.

CONGREGATION: Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between generations.

LEADER: Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child.

CONGREGATION: When we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest.

LEADER: Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to them their heritage.

CONGREGATION: If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is full of wonder.

LEADER: Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.

CONGREGATION: We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

(Antoine de St.-Exupéry)

Reading

Today's reading comes from *this* congregation—a collage of beliefs, taken from each of the Credo Statements that our Coming of Age youth presented to us last Sunday:

I believe that human beings are the caretakers of the world and that it is our task to make it a better place.

I believe I want to make a difference in the world. I want to speak what's on my mind and solve the problems of the world as well as problems of my own.

There is no changing your fate, because changing your fate is already in your fate. Everything happens for a reason.

Be true to yourself and do not confuse your judgement in order to please others.

I believe we need to trust each other and learn from one another.

When the bird takes its first flight
he may be confused where he is going
or how to land on a tree branch. He might
ask family and friends for advice
and maybe God will make sure he has
a safe journey.

I haven't the slightest idea what happens when you die but I know one day I'll find out, and so will you.

I don't believe that there is such a thing as resurrection or the afterlife. But who knows? There might be a spirit world.

Whether you are 10 or 100, try to have a positive outlook on things and when you are feeling down, remember: life is short, so live it well.

Experiences can change you.

I believe in God by believing in myself. I *am* God. My spirit is my God as is everyone else's. By having a soul you have a God.

I thought that right and wrong greatly depended on the person but now I believe that there are just some things that are wrong

I also believe religion and prayer are a waste of time. I do, however, believe in some of the values of these religions, such as respect, community and love, the third one of which I believe we cannot live without.

“COMING OF AGE: SO WHEN DOES *THAT* HAPPEN?”

In our congregation we have circulating among us about a dozen youth who just completed the program “Coming of Age.” It’s a program initiated in many congregations around the country, which pairs a youth with an older member of the church, a “mentor,” with the expressed intention that the two establish a relationship through conversations and common experiences and in the composition of a credo statement, a statement of belief.

Last week’s services were dedicated to a public presentation of Credo’s, and this morning’s reading was a collage of those statements. As you heard, they were teeming with intelligence, passion, subtlety, and a broad spectrum of belief.

I had the privilege of serving as a mentor in the program, and I wanted to share some experiences, observations, questions, and insights, and some of the thoughts the program provoked, regarding three themes:

- mentorship
- challenge courses
- and the phrase "coming of age"

Mentor.

It’s always instructive and often fun to consider the origins of words. “Mentor” is a word that’s bandied around quite a bit these days. It is rooted in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where an elder named *Mentor* was trusted to watch Odysseus’ son, though scholars point out that he wasn’t really very effective.

There is also the issue that *he* was actually a she, Athene, the goddess of “wisdom and war,” who, on at least two occasions, took on the form of the old man. The word itself did not come into English usage until about the 1750s, introduced through a French novel. Not bad origins for a word.

As for a definition, we all have a sense of what a “mentor” is, a trusted person who trains, counsels, guides, nurtures, advises, and supports, and through these activities enables someone to develop skills, to reach a goal, to integrate into an organization...

To mature, as it were, into a fuller expression of themselves.

It is a process devoted to *becoming*.

Mentoring.

The concept of mentoring is very much in vogue, and the literature produced about it is as vast as it is varied. Please know on the front end that I am not expert in the field, do not use mentoring as a management strategy, but served as a volunteer in a mentoring program in a small Unitarian church on the edge of the continent. I didn't read the literature, but signed on and got assigned, took bike rides and got interviewed by a young man about my beliefs and I, in turn, interviewed him. In the course of “mentoring” I began to wonder about these many people who help us along in our lives.

Consider the differences between a mentor, and someone called teacher, or instructor, role model, coach, master, drill instructor, tutor, sponsor, sherpa, manager, boss. Each can certainly serve as a mentor, but none are necessarily mentors.

I mention “drill instructor” not for severe contrast, but because a friend of mine, who became a military officer, talked about his very demanding training and coming to love his drill instructor, not in the usual at-arm's-length affection of “Oh, I *love* that guy,” but a deep bond with a fellow human being who challenged my friend, often beyond the point where my friend thought he could go. Was this instructor a mentor? Not according to the roles prescribed by the military.

Yet my friend tells the story of feeling very conflicted when he realized that he outranked the instructor, his elder, a person who knew much more about the world than he, fresh from college with an English degree.

Here's one of the questions mentors and youth asked of each other in an interview:

“Who were/are the most important people in your life?”

“How did/do they influence you?”

Importance. Influence.

What is lovely about this exercise was not only coming up with the obvious and oft-remembered influences—family members, the beloved teacher, an insightful and inspirational coach—but recalling the people who were involved in your life for a very

brief period of time but who, in retrospect, were just the people for the task at hand, at just the right moment.

As mentors in the Coming of Age program, we were neither charged nor encouraged to become that “important person,” but to guide the youth to consider *their* influences. To ask why? And how. To create a space where a young person could perceive their network of connections, to realize and acknowledge their community, to begin to understand how they are influenced.

When I answered that question for myself, I came up with people who never knew me—such as dead writers—and also people who know me, but don’t know that I consider them as influences, and even mentors. I wondered for a while if this could possibly be, but decided—at least in my case—that a mentor can model a life and the model can be admired and possibly duplicated.

Henry David Thoreau, for instance, was certainly a profound influence on me, but was he a mentor?

I’ve yet to physically build a pond-side cabin, but I carried *Walden* with me for years, reading it while commuting on a train. The irony of reading this classic while commuting on a train is not lost on me.

I remember wanting desperately to write a letter to Thoreau, to take a walk with him, to make some kind of physical contact. And then, when visiting Concord, a friend drove me out to Walden Pond—about as close as one can get to Thoreau—and when I got out of the car and began walking across the parking lot, I turned around and got right back in the car again. The Walden I was looking for wasn’t there; it had moved north, and west, nestled in the non-descript woods of western New York, down in West Virginia, possibly in an empty lot in Brooklyn. It was, in fact, *everywhere*, and no pond in Massachusetts had claim.

I’d like to suggest that our influences and mentors are 10,000 Walden ponds sprinkled throughout the landscape of our lives. There is that great phrase: “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Corny as it sounds, Thoreau appeared in the parking lot—took me by the shoulders, and said “Young man, get a grip. What you’re looking for isn’t here. Get back in that car and go to Boston for Italian food.” It was sound advice. Sometimes we need a pile of spaghetti and some marinara sauce, to gather our wits, to find our own sacred waters.

Challenge Course.

The group from Coming of Age, a mix of youth and adults, spent one sunny afternoon at a local “challenge course,” a place in the woods designed to provide a safe venue where

groups can perform physical exercises in problem solving. It is a classic method for groups to work together.

The first challenge put to the “Coming of Age” group is notable: There were cables about 18 inches from the ground strung taut between four trees. The story was that we were an elite firefighting crew atop a burning building. We had to get the entire crew standing somewhere on a cable and then transfer a small bucket of potent flame retardant to the far end of the last cable. We had one tool, a large circle of webbing.

Before we began, our instructors allowed us to ask questions, but once we began we rationed two question cards, for use during the entire day. And, finally, we weren’t to move along into other areas of the course until we completed this.

And if it took all day, it took all day.

Once we began, group dynamics sprouted and bloomed. Adults did much—arguably too much—talking and directing, and our first ideas proved—like a lot of first ideas—ineffective.

I don’t know if you’ve ever tried to stand on a cable with 19 other people, but it’s not the easiest thing to do. But we learned and innovated and modified and adjusted. By the end of the first hour, we had a few people sprinkled along the cables.

By the end of the second hour, after figuring out a critical innovation with one of our tools, we were all standing on the cable, passing the retardant. No matter that our burning building would’ve collapsed long ago—we were standing off the ground, youth and mentors.

Thinking about this process, I like the fact that we were allowed to ask as many questions before we started, and only two afterward. This is called “theory and practice.” The life we live in our head, the conceptions of the world, and the life we live on the ground, our day-to-day, the proverbial “rubber on road.”

Standing on that cable with the “Coming of Age” group was an accomplishment, something to be proud of. We were told afterward we were relatively peaceful and cooperative—that this particular exercise forced many a group beyond the brink of patience into breakdown. It’s obvious to say we learn about ourselves when pressed, and during the course of the day we observed some profoundly challenging moments.

There is one moment in particular that I would like to share, because being witness to it was one of the highlights of the “Coming of Age” program for me. I’d also like to say that I asked for and am grateful to have received permission to tell this story.

The exercise is called a “Trust Fall.” A trust fall is where someone with their back to a group and, with very rigid body, falls backwards into the outstretched arms—or, in this case, a net held by the group.

Several members of Coming of Age declined to do it for any number of reasons and that was OK; several members did a trust fall, and everyone who did spoke to how exhilarating it felt; and one member of our group tried but could not do it.

Try as he might—and he tried mightily—he stood with back to us, with arms crossed, with body rigid... and could not fall. I was helping hold the net. And waiting.

The person would gather himself, take a breath, convince himself, steel his nerves, begin to fall back, and then catch. Regain balance. Curse under his breath. Resituate. Breathe. This person *really* wanted to fall, and you could see him getting more and more frustrated by not being able to force himself to do it. Finally he gave up, came off the platform and held the net for others.

Repeat: He held the net for others.

Then after a while the facilitators offered this person another chance to try from a lower tier. Even then, the fall did not happen.

I stood witness to this drama with tears in my eyes. Not because the person was “unsuccessful,” but because we were watching someone face himself, allowing us entrance into his life at a very deep place, to become very vulnerable, and to grow before our eyes. He was *truly* challenged, and met the challenge face-to-face, courageously and beautifully.

Coming of Age.

When we first hear the phrase “Coming of Age,” we naturally imagine the dramatic transition called puberty: hair in new places, voices cracking, bodies budding and bulging their way toward adulthood. The visible facts of physical maturity are one piece of “Coming of Age.” A body comes of age; how does the *person* come of age? In cultures the world over, there are rituals and rites of passage to celebrate and guide an adolescent’s journey into adult society—vision quests, bar and bat mitzvahs, ritual abductions, and initiations.

In Japan, “Coming of Age” is a national holiday, and all young people who turn 20 that year are celebrated as entering adulthood. In Japan, 20 also happens to be the legal age for those *very* adult activities of voting, drinking, and smoking.

The “Coming of Age” program in our church—which didn’t involve smoking, as far as the adults know—is one aspect of the overall process: to provide the room and the

resources to enter into relationship and dialogue with the adult world—through a non-parent—and to serve as a sounding board for independent explorations into many of the looming questions that needle the human mind; again some interview questions the mentors and their youth asked one another:

Do you believe in something called God?
What qualities do you look for in a friend?
Do you believe in life after death?

One of my insights into “Coming of Age” is the admission that my “answers” to these questions are fluid, and one of my jobs (whether perceived or not by my mentee) was to model how an adult navigates the existential universe, you know, the one where Nietzsche said “God is dead” and Albert Camus called “Absurd.” That universe where there aren’t neat and tidy answers to questions, and our beliefs are often run roughshod over.

“Do you believe in something called God?”
“Well, yes.”
“What is it? What is God?”

I had twenty-five years on my mentee and couldn’t answer a straightforward question. A question, by the way, that’s been asked since the dawn of human consciousness. What we *can* do is play with the question. Maybe that’s all we can do, play in that absurd universe.

I want to touch very briefly on a certain heaviness to the phrase “Coming of Age.” Responsibility, for one. The feeling of *should*, as in
“you should know better” or
“you should be able to do this.”

The inelegant way to say it is “Adultification.” A bunch of adults trudging around in their little boxes, paying bills. We all delight in the innocence and wisdom of a child and there is that wonderful quote from Pablo Picasso: “It takes one a long time to become young.”

So finally, let’s let wise Pablo Picasso hint at an answer to the question that framed this entire sermon: “Coming of Age: So When Does *That* Happen?” It depends, clearly, on what age you want to become—in body, mind, and spirit. In Japan you can smoke when you’re 20; in Texas you can marry when you’re 14; at the Rhody carnival, you can ride “The Zipper” when you pass that red line labeled “You Must Be This Tall to Ride the Ride.” At 40, with as much teeter as totter, you’re “of age” and aging, but as one of the credo statements read: “You only get old when you act old.”

Coming of Age is a dynamic process opening to each of us, whether maturing into an adult body or *growing* inside one.

It helps to have important people, influences, mentors, it is useful to be challenged. In short, Coming of Age is being alive, *truly* alive, to the *becoming* within every moment.

Amen.

Please stand for the closing hymn #182, "O, the Beauty in a Life." This isn't a hymn we've done before, but I loved the title and the lyric "models wise and gracious ways." Let's give it a whirl.

Benediction

From T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets:

I.

What we call a beginning if often
the end
and to make an end is to make a
beginning.

The end is where we start from.

II.

We shall not cease from
exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first
time.

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by guest speaker, Joseph Bednarik, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on May 22, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)