

**“How Shall We Live? Part I:  
Has There Been a Change in the Rhythm of Events?”  
February 6, 2005  
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Bruce A. Bode**

**Poetry for Order of Service**

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

(Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”)

**Call to Worship**

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather 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.

**Congregational Covenant Statement for Lighting of Chalice** (Spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: Ours is a church which aspires to be catholic, to take into account all religious insights.

CONGREGATION: Ours is a church which desires to be inclusive, to feel the challenge of varied opinions.

MINISTER: Ours is a church which holds the dead in sacred memory, and the living in a caring fellowship.

CONGREGATION: Ours is a church which brings freedom to the young, and security to those who are old.

MINISTER: Ours is a non-creedal church, not because we have no beliefs, but because we will not be restrained in our beliefs.

CONGREGATION: Ours is a church of conscience, not because we hold that conscience is infallible, but because it is the crucible of experience.

MINISTER: Ours is a church of reason, not because the mind is free of error, but because the dialogue of idea with idea refines religion.

CONGREGATION: Ours is a church of moral application, not because morality is all sufficient, but because it is the tangible expression of love.

MINISTER: We dare not fence the spirit, or close off the quest for truth, or force upon people the jacket of conformity.

CONGREGATION: As others have their ways of religion, so do we have our faith; and with joyful hearts, we enter into this community.

(Wallace W. Robbins)

### **Introduction to Reading**

Earlier in the church year I read a number of poems of the California poet, Robinson Jeffers, who lived from 1887-1962.

Just a couple of weeks ago Flossie and I had the opportunity to take a tour of his stone house on the Pacific Coast in Carmel, California, and also to climb his four-story stone tower – Hawk Tower – that he built from stones pulled from the ocean's edge. We looked out upon the Pacific from the top of that tower and in the distance we could see whales spouting as they were making their way down the coast to the Baja.

Robinson Jeffers, who wrote in the early and middle parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, held the idea that America was on a downward slide, primarily because instead of attending to its own life it was meddling in the affairs of other nations and tending toward empire.

In some of his poems he tried to warn against this. It was not a very popular idea, particularly his opposition to entering World War II. And he didn't really believe his warnings would do any good anyway for he also held the idea that humans had a kind of congenital flaw and often acted against their own best interest.

Thus his advice to his children – he had twin sons, now both deceased – was this: Escape. Flee the cities and try to live independently and apart from that incestuous entanglement. Watch things from a distant perspective appreciating what remains of the beauty of natural things before the wild places are completely destroyed by humans. That will you sustain you as things fall apart.

It's not advice I can live by or recommend but Jeffers writes quite compellingly. I read his poem, "Shine, Perishing Republic," published in 1924. The poem begins with an image of rapidly cooling metal in a mould, a picture of what he thinks is happening to the melting pot of America.

## Reading

While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to  
    empire,  
And protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out, and the mass  
    hardens,

I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots to make  
    earth.  
Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness and decadence; and  
    home to the mother.

You making haste haste on decay: not blameworthy; life is good, be it stubbornly  
    long or suddenly  
A mortal splendor: meteors are not needed less than mountains: shine, perishing  
    republic.

But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from the thickening  
    center; corruption  
Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's feet there are left the  
    mountains.

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a clever servant, insufferable  
    master.  
There is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught – they say – God, when he  
    walked on earth.

### **“HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PART I: HAS THERE BEEN A CHANGE IN THE RHYTHM OF EVENTS?”**

## Introduction

This morning I feel like I've climbed a tree and am about to step out on a branch whose  
strength I have not tested before.

At the beginning of the church year in early September I laid out a plan for myself for the  
2004-2005 year that included a winter sermon series I had mostly given before. I had  
planned to work off that series revising and adjusting as needed.

However, as I took a vacation break in early January, I couldn't get away from a feeling  
that something else was called for at this time, something more directly related to our  
current national political and social situation. Thus, I decided to save that sermon series  
for another time and head in a different direction.

Then, in the third week of January, returning from my break and with little time to prepare, I quickly wrote up a new sermon series theme with several individual sermon titles and brief descriptions and sent them off to Alice King, the editor of our monthly newsletter. The overall theme that I sent her, published in the February newsletter, was, “How Shall We Live?”, with the individual sermon titles related to the question of, “How shall live in the face of our current political and social situation?”

So that’s the tree that I have climbed and today I step out on one the branches of that tree.

This is not a tree I have climbed much before, and it’s not a tree I particularly look forward to climbing. I get anxious as I think about ascending this tree and particularly about going out on some of its limbs.

Religion for me – my sermons on religion and my work in religious institutions – has been more related to the personal and pastoral than the political and public. It has been more of the soul than of society, more of psychology than sociology, more involved with poetry than with politics, more of personal ethics than social and public ethics.

My approach to religion has primarily sought to explore and respond to the great perennial questions of life: What is real and eternal and who are we in the midst of that? How are we a part of the whole and how is the whole part of us? What is good and how should we live? Or, the question as posed by Mary Oliver in the poetry at the top of the Order of Service today:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Religion for me has largely meant asking these kinds of questions. And it has also been involved in trying to wake up to the beauty of things – not to miss the glory of life, even in the face of death, in the midst of sorrow, and with the awareness of terror.

But, of course, these “ultimate questions” are not asked in a vacuum and the opportunity to seek the beauty of things is not something apart from the social, political, and physical environment in which one finds oneself.

In a very real way it’s a luxury even to be able to ponder these questions and to pursue a life with beauty and art in it. If you’re struggling just to survive, if you’re right in the middle of some heaving storm, you don’t have time to ponder these perennial questions or engage in the art of life. You’re too consumed in hanging to mere life to be able to reflect, too exhausted from labor to see the beauty.

And so while I would personally prefer to leave aside political and social concerns and issues and attend only to those things that engage my soul and enliven my spirit, and try to make my contribution to society through these avenues, I know that ultimately that is neither possible nor moral. Indeed, I believe that one is humanly required to be an active

citizen of the society that nurtures one's life and provides the forms for the structuring of one's energies.

### **Storms, weather-related and more**

Let me give you the following analogy related to my inclination and approach toward politics:

Some people enjoy following the weather and the weather reports. They not only like to keep up with the weather, but they like to know what causes the weather. Thus, they enjoy following the TV weatherpersons with their charts, graphs, arrows, and special weather-related language.

I don't happen to be one of those people. As indicated, I have other interests to which I prefer to give my time.

However, I do acknowledge the value of weather reports and of weather reporters and I'm grateful that there are those who do enjoy this enterprise enough to be involved in it.

Further, should some weather-related emergency occur, I want to know about it.

And if, heaven-forbid, some devastating storm should come our way and damage our community, I want to do my part in helping my community to respond to that problem.

So, too, with governmental and political affairs: There are persons who enjoy being involved in governmental and political work and there are many others who take an active interest in following these things.

Again, I don't particularly enjoy either of these and, if left to my preferences, I wouldn't pay all that much attention to the political news. It's not that I don't have political opinions or a sense of principles regarding public policy but it's not where I prefer to put my energy.

Again, however, I'm grateful that there are those who are drawn to these areas of our life, and grateful for the many others who closely follow these things; because I grant that, like the weather, political and governmental affairs are very important in our lives, exerting a vast influence over them and, like a weather-related storm, a political storm can make all the difference in the world. It can totally change, disrupt, and even devastate a life, a community, a country, and an aggregate of countries, even a world of countries. And so, obviously, there are times to pay close attention.

### **Paying attention**

The present, I believe, is one of those times, and it has been one of those times for a period of time.

Following the destructiveness of 9/11, I was actually quite hopeful – hopeful that much good could come out of this horrific event.

I preached a sermon soon after 9/11 on some of the possibilities I saw coming out of it – possibilities related to a recognition of a new consciousness that was present in the world, namely, the consciousness of a single, unified humanity that cut across and was more valued than the particular religious, national, ethnic, and racial groups to which we belong. The basis of this hope was the response of the vast majority of the peoples of the world to 9/11, who, in essence said:

“This destructive action is *humanly* intolerable. In the name of *humanity* – not religion, nation, culture, or race, but in the name of humanity – this is unacceptable. Whatever past injustice or grievance was thought to be addressed here, this is not an appropriate response or solution. And whatever religion, nation, race, or ethnicity you are part of, you are human first of all. This is not how humans are to treat fellow humans.”

That was my hope: that through this event we had a clear example in which the human world saw that it was really already united beyond the boundaries that have typically distinguished and separated us.

It was my hope that we could see that our consciousness had already changed and that we were already one universal body. The world-wide response to 9/11 was an example of that. So let us raise up that fact of our one humanity; let us strengthen it; let us act upon it.

And it was also my hope that we could pause, even in the midst of pain, anger, and sorrow, and at least for a time consider what might drive some persons to such desperate measures – to consider why some would feel so alienated from our common humanity that they would undertake such actions, and even perhaps that we might try to address the grievances that underlay such actions.

Those were some of my hopes. That seems like a long time ago now.

And that has been my greatest disappointment in the days since September 11, 2001: that we have missed, what I thought, was an opportunity to move our world in a new and promising direction.

Personally, I have disagreed with almost every step our national administration has taken since then. I have thought they fundamentally misunderstood the meaning of 9/11, taking it as a personal attack on the United States rather than as an attack against secular modernity, with the United States being the chief symbol of that secular modernity.

I also thought the declaration of a “*war* against terror” led by our present Administration was fundamentally wrong from the beginning and that the situation should have been

approached more in the manner of a “police action” and dealt with much more by the community of nations rather than primarily our own.

And when, surprisingly, the attention of the Administration turned to Iraq in this so-called “war on terror,” I felt that major issues of principle in terms of our identity as a nation were involved as we were preparing to preemptively attack Iraq.

Thus, I preached two sermons early-on in the build-up to that second Iraqi war – this was in Houston – the one titled, “The Soul of a Nation at Stake,” and a follow-up sermon titled, “*Pax Americana Versus E Pluribus Unum*,” the term *Pax Americana* coming from a think-tank document published in the year 2000 by a group called “The Project for the New American Century,” the document being titled Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategies, Forces and Resources For a New Century. A number of our current top Administration officials were involved in the preparation of that document.

I also took the lead in organizing the Houston-area Unitarian Universalist ministers in signing a letter to the Houston Chronicle stating our opposition to pre-emptive action in Iraq, especially without U.N. inspections being completed. The letter never made it into the newspaper, but it did make it into several church newsletters.

And so against my preferences, and always with a measure of personal anxiety, I have been drawn into the arena where religion and politics intersect.

Each time I have spoken out on these matters I have tried to be clear that I speak for myself, from a free pulpit, and not for the congregation as a whole, who are in a free pew with the encouragement to disagree; and that my object is to promote reflection and thought on how to deal with these matters, for, to my mind, they certainly affect the life of the spirit.

Despite this, when I was in Houston, several persons left the church feeling there was no place for them there, that their opinions were not valued. I tried to speak personally with each of them, encouraging them to stay, to speak their truth as I had mine – we needed to speak and we needed to listen to each other. If we can’t handle such a difference of opinion in a church community, how could we handle it in society at large?

One individual argued that if the overthrow of an evil dictator like Saddam Hussein wasn’t in keeping with the first principle of our Unitarian Universalist covenant that speaks of “The inherent worth and dignity of each person” – if overthrowing him wasn’t a way of acting upon that principle, then what was? It was an argument worth hearing.

But my encouragement to him to stay was to no avail and he and several others left the congregation – a sad thing for me because I want to be part of a religious community where there can be a diversity of opinion, where we need not necessarily agree to be part of the same community.

I want a community where we can feel free to speak from our heart and where we can count on others to listen with openness and respect. I want a community where we might strongly disagree with the ideas of a person but remain respectful of and civil to the person expressing those ideas.

Some of my most moving “spiritual” experiences have been occasions in which each person was given the space to speak from the heart on their political opinions and the reasons for them.

### **The first question**

Which brings me finally to today. For the next several weeks I would like to engage us in thinking about these social and political matters as they affect the life of the spirit. The past election has seen great polarization in our country. What does this mean, and how shall we respond to it?

I would like this to be a conversation, an interactive engagement, and if there is time at the end of given sermons, to ask for a few comments immediately following the sermon during the service itself.

But also I would like to moderate a follow-up discussion here at the church on Thursday evenings following the given sermon topic. It will be a chance for those interested to engage in an open and free and respectful discussion about what is happening in our country, our world, and how we ought to approach these things.

And the first question that I would put before us in this series, which we can only briefly touch on today, is the question: Are we at a major change point in our country?

In the advertisement for this sermon I quoted Margaret Wheatley, who begins a recent article saying, “As the world grows ever darker...” And a friend of mine recently wrote saying, “I fear that we are at the end of popular democracy and on the threshold of empire.”

So the question is this: Do you believe that what we are experiencing now in our national life is essentially normal social and political weather, the typical ups and downs of national life, and that our nation will pretty much go on as it has in the past; or are we at a major change point, a break point, so that moving in the direction in which we are now heading what we will become will be very different from what have been and are now as a nation and as a society?

Earlier in the service I read a poem of Robinson Jeffers. I’d like to read another of his gloomy but powerful poems, this one published in 1939 just before World War II when it was not yet clear whether war was coming, though it was certainly threatening. The poem is titled, “Prescription for Painful Ends,” and it puts before us the question of whether we are heading on an irreversible downward spiral:

Lucretius felt the change of the world in his time, the great republic riding to the  
height  
Whence every road leads downward; Plato in his time watched  
Athens  
Dance the down path. The future is a misted landscape, no man sees clearly, but at  
cyclic turns  
There is a change felt in the rhythm of events, as when an exhausted horse  
Falters and recovers, then the rhythm of the running hoof-beats is changed: he will  
run miles yet,  
But he must fall: we have felt it again in our own lifetime, slip, shift and speed-up  
In the gallop of the world; and now perceive that, come peace or war, the progress of  
Europe and America  
Becomes a long process of deterioration – starred with famous Byzantium and  
Alexandrias,  
Surely – but downward. One desires at such times  
To gather the insights of the age summit against future loss, against the narrowing  
mind and the tyrants,  
The pedants, the mystagogues, the barbarians: one builds poems for treasuries,  
time-conscious poems: Lucretius  
Sings his great theory of natural origins and of wise conduct; Plato smiling carves  
dreams, bright cells  
Of incorruptible wax to hive the Greek honey.

Our own time,  
much greater and far less fortunate,  
Has acids for honey, and for fine dreams  
The immense vulgarities of misapplied science and decaying Christianity: therefore  
one christens each poem, in dutiful  
Hope of burning off at least the top layer of the time's uncleanness, from the  
acid-bottles.

That was Robinson Jeffers writing before World War II. He held to a theory of inevitable  
cycles in history – cultures and nations, like human individuals, arising with vitality and  
ideals and then naturally decaying and returning to the earth.

Do you think we are dancing an inevitable downward path? Is our nation an exhausted  
horse that must fall? And have you felt a change in the rhythm of the hoof-beats?

Jared Diamond, a UCLA Professor of Geography, best known for his Pulitzer Prize-  
winning book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which looked at how and why Western societies  
came into world dominance, does not hold to Jeffers' theory of historical inevitability.

And now he has just come forward with a large new volume, titled *Collapse: How  
Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. In this book he looks at societies, both ancient and  
modern, that have collapsed, while other societies succeeded and maintained themselves.

He highlights five key factors involved in a societal collapse: climatic change, loss of trade, attacks by neighbors, self-imposed environmental degradation, and political intransigence. Any one of these five factors alone, he has found, can bring down a society, though usually two or more of these factors have been involved.

In the book Diamond examines societies such as the Mayan society, the Anasazi of the American Southwest, and the Polynesian society of Easter Island.

Of the Easter Islanders, who one by one chopped down all their trees until there were none left, Jared Diamond says he often asks himself the question, “What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last palm tree think while he was doing it?”

Diamond concludes his difficult but very readable book with a note of hope – “I’m a cautious optimist,” he says (p. 521).

This hope is almost completely dependent on the political will and the spiritual strength to clearly examine what we are doing and to make the necessary changes. For he believes we are clearly on a path to collapse, with the only advantage we have over some previous societies that collapsed being more knowledge and quicker communication.

Are we willing to use it? Do we have the political will and the spiritual fortitude?

So what do you think? Where are we as a society and a world and where are we going? Do you have your own idea of history? Is there a key to how history unfolds?

We don’t have time for discussion right now but, if you’re interested, join me here this coming Thursday evening at 7 p.m. Bring your ideas, your thoughts, your questions, your feelings, and your friends, and we’ll enter into conversation on this topic.

### **Benediction**

Now may peace be in our hearts,  
and understanding in our minds,  
may courage steel our wills,  
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

### **Extinguishing of 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 The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Sunday, February 6, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette and CD at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)