

**“The Listening Season”**  
**April 24, 2005**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**©Rev. Patti Pomerantz**

**Call to Worship**

Holy Spirit, I am scurrying around like a chicken with her head cut off, making a mess everywhere I light...Help me to slow down, to be silent, so I can hear Your truth inside me.

(Marian Wright Edelman, “Guide My Feet,” p. 67, adapted)

**Lighting the Chalice** (spoken in unison)

Though our knowledge is incomplete,  
Our truth partial,  
And our love imperfect,  
We believe that new light is ever waiting  
To break into our hearts and minds,  
To enlighten our common path,  
That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,  
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: I want to be with people who submerge in the task,

CONGREGATION: Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along,

MINISTER: Who stand in the line and haul in their places,

CONGREGATION: Who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

MINISTER: The work of the world is common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.

CONGREGATION: But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

MINISTER: Greek amphoras for wine or oil, Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums but you know they were made to be used.

CONGREGATION: The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.

(Marge Piercy)

## Reading

The trees, along their bare limbs,  
Contemplate green.  
A flicker, rising, flashes rust and white  
before vanishing into stillness,  
and raked leaves crumble imperceptibly  
to dirt.

On all sides life opens and closes  
around you like a mouth.  
Will you pretend you are not  
caught between its teeth?

The kestrel in its swift dive  
and the mouse below,  
the first green shoots that  
will not wait for spring  
are a language constantly forming.

Quiet your pride and listen.  
There – beneath the rainfall  
and the ravens calling you can hear it  
the great tongue constantly enunciating  
something that rings through the world as grace.  
(“Winter Into Spring,” Lynn Ungar)

## “THE LISTENING SEASON”

This morning’s reading and story remind me of my connection to the earth, how I am part of something much larger than myself. Here in this beautiful place I imagine it is an easier connection to remember. But put me into a city for a while – like Philadelphia, PA where I was raised – or even Portland, OR, my current home town where car stereos are so loud I’m not sure how those inside the car can hear at all - and I’m more likely to be tuning out of than into my surroundings. I try to make some reminder to be attentive a constant companion – a reminder to listen.

The title of these remarks, “The Listening Season,” is a phrase used in faith-based community organizing in the Portland area. It designates a set time during the year when folks get together and listen to each other’s stories. The listening season is part of a larger strategy based on the organizing work of Saul Alinsky who created *alliances* with the Catholic Archdiocese and organized labor and business in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicago to

improve living conditions for the working poor - as radical an approach *now* as it was then. The shared stories help identify local issues across institutions – religious, civic. Identifying common issues generates coalitions that support both agitation and negotiation with those in power. It's a demanding process – I've seen it work.

In contrast, I'm amazed how much we *don't* talk to each other about things that matter. I was born into an east coast Jewish family in the early 1950's. I grew up watching Ozzie and Harriet, and Father Knows Best. Dobie Gillis was counter cultural - and I wanted Marcus Welby to be my doctor – that is, once I got over Dr Kildaire. We did not talk about family problems outside our home. I thought the Nelson's really were the family next door and if I just lived right, we would be like them. When we weren't, I took it as a personal failure.

I do not mean to intimate that my childhood was a bad one, or even rough. Our new suburban neighborhood was filled with kids my age and we had the run of it. There was always some parent watching out for us and it didn't really matter which one. And, although I cannot quite believe it now, my sister and I somehow did hear our parents' yells for dinner or bedtime even when we were blocks away. The world was a lot less noisy in those days, and a good deal safer – at least in my neighborhood. It was easier, less complicated to listen.

Over the years I've learned that my experience growing up was not particularly unique to my neighborhood or my generation. I still push against a culture that assumes perfection is attainable – even a short time in front of the television shows the pill for what ails me, the beer that will bring me to a perfect relationship – as if the one I have is not, and if I can just get my e-resume on the right e-job list, I will find the perfect job – as if there is something wrong with the work I do now. And it's not just on television. I see the same messages plastered to billboards, in magazines and popping-up on computer screens. Not only is my physical environment noisier than it was fifty years ago; the noise of the market sector is everywhere I look. Is it any wonder *whenever* we choose to tune out so much of our lives?

Unfortunately, this tuning out noise also leads to isolation. By moving so quickly - there are always things that escape my attention – like the beginning of the Jewish celebration of Passover which starts this weekend. I develop a habit of disregarding what I never quite get to. I grow skills in numbing out, disconnecting from things in the world, sometimes important things that I simply don't have time for. Am I the only person here today who has deeply hurt a close friend by forgetting a commitment I'd made; getting so distracted or overwhelmed that the commitment and the friend just fell off my attention?

Our computer-based culture also encourages isolation. Library books, tickets to sporting events, even groceries can be ordered on line. Music, religious icons, prayer groups, even our UU Church of the Larger Fellowship – our community for folks who do not have a local congregation - are all on-line. And how many people here have traded movie theaters for pay-per-view, or Net Flicks? Why go out when you can make popcorn at home and watch movies in your jammies?

I must admit I appreciate some of the convenience - like the library calling me this week to tell me the book I searched for in the comfort of my home office was waiting for me down the street at my local branch. And I thought it was a great convenience for my next-door neighbor, mother of three children under 5 years of age, to order her groceries on-line for delivery. But there is a price we pay for this convenience. Isolation breeds a culture of fear. If I don't get to know my neighborhood, everyone who walks down the street is a stranger. If I lose informal and spontaneous relationships that come from being out and about - at the grocery store, at the library, at the community center - I miss opportunities to be in relationship. And when I do go out, it's hard to hold conversations when I've got my protective blinders on.

Now I know I'm preaching to the choir, that your congregation does an exemplary job of finding and welcoming newcomers. You don't get selected as a Unitarian Universalist Association "Breakthrough Congregation" and invited to give a presentation at the national General Assembly meeting for nothing. That doesn't happen if you're not growing community and that doesn't happen unless you're listening. But as globalization makes our individual communities smaller and more diverse, there is a desperate need to listen more deeply and broadly than ever. The world is screaming for meaningful community.

As we become more self-contained we forget how to listen. We can work from our homes, create cyber-community with those of like-mind, and avoid the messiness of interacting face to face. It is pushing against this isolation that makes the listening season - listening with open curiosity - radical, counter-cultural for me.

It's not just the curiosity that's needed. The listening season also requires action - action on behalf of a community - action that is inherently political. At least it should be. I know some of you are already familiar with the work of George Lakoff. His book, Don't Think Of An Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate, and his think tank Rockridge Institute, are popular with progressives these days. Lakoff proposes that one of the reasons the conservative agenda is so politically successful is their expertise at framing - using specific moral language to frame political issues. The book title comes from an exercise Professor Lakoff uses in his beginning college classes on cognitive science. He tells the students in the class, don't think of an elephant, no matter what, and then watches as they all do just that, precisely because of his instruction not to. The elephant, he explains, becomes a frame. It evokes what we know about elephants, and in trying to negate the image, we actually reinforce it. He believes that attacking an opponents' frame actually reinforces their message. [xiii] "People think in frames... To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off". [17] He presents the assumption that people will vote their self-interest as a fallacy of Democrat political strategizing. Progressives, in Lakoff's view, just don't get this framing quite yet. I agree with him.

By opting out of a conversation - for instance as I have done over the years with the political use of religious language, claiming to believe so strongly in the separation of

church and state that I will not enter such a dialog – I give up my power to influence the conversation. Religious words, the language of moral values, is not something that should be owned or controlled by those with one particular point of view. The point of language, after all, is to stimulate relationship, not create polarities.

And that is where radical Unitarian Universalist listening comes in. Since our faith is founded on the principle that no belief can exclude anyone from UU community, we have a unique opportunity to learn how to speak about different beliefs, how to formulate effective frames with each other. Imagine if each of us here today spent the time we currently use objecting to that which we do not believe – God, perhaps, or Wicca; Jesus or Buddha, the primacy of reason or Mother Earth – listening openly to each others' stories. We could begin to take back traditional religious language - or create a new language of reverence – as UUA President William Sinkford speaks about so eloquently in recent UU World magazines and on the UUA website.

Is not listening beyond differences our religious work, as well as the goal of interfaith work? Is the lack of a shared language not what we see contributing to so much violence around the world today? Imagine our potential in UU congregations to create and model common ground beyond linguistic styles. Imagine what we could teach the larger community as we teach each other about respect and love – about letting go of the fear that grows from cultural isolation. All we need to start is a commitment to listen to one another.

Have you noticed recently how much our lives are controlled by fear? In western culture, especially but not only recently, we're instructed to fear anyone with Middle Eastern features – even if they are our third generation American neighbors. We're afraid that social programs and people who use them will somehow steal middle class resources. There was a very effective campaign in Oregon several years ago, where people in depressed rural timber communities were convinced that if a certain ballot measure did not pass gay people from the cities would be taking their jobs away. I tried to imagine my sophisticated chic gay friends as lumberjacks – it just doesn't work. But the frame of scarcity and fear did. School campaigns make us afraid of books and ideas that don't match our own – and note in the struggle between creationism or Intelligent Design and evolution both sides of the debate are closed-minded. Both sides. It's an intentional frame that sets up the either/or thinking.

There is never only one right story. I know from my own stories of personal marginalization – by virtue of my gender - female, the religion of my birth – Judaism, and my chosen family – homosexual, that life is not always fair or safe. But if I give in to the claims of others that I am somehow less of a person because of any of these factors, I am giving into someone else's view of the world, someone else's fear or greed. And my wounded perspective is not my only story. The reality is that I am a white person of relative privilege. And more than the fear of my own 'otherness' is the cost of my privilege to live in the world willing to be changed, willing to explore. It is my responsibility to dive into the 'otherness' Marge Piercy referred to in our responsive reading this morning. The reading is taken from her poem, "To Be Of Use," which

begins with these words. “The people I love the best jump into work head first without dallying in the shallows and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight”... It is time we UU’s dive into listening with our curiosity showing, willing to get messy, to be challenged.

That is why I embrace the listening season. I must approach the unknown, the different, the other with curiosity. If I can’t do it here within this beloved and covenanted community, I fear all is lost. But if I can learn to do it here – ah, then I can imagine the peace I see. The words of our reading by Lynn Ungar resonate in my soul - *the great tongue constantly enunciating something that rings through the world as grace*. All it takes is grace. Grace – that invites us to sit together at the table and teaches us to love through all our differences. It is grace that encourages us to be links in our broken communities; it is grace after all that has brought me here with this message to you today. I can hear it in every conversation if I listen. Grace calls us to our best selves. Let us answer the call with our open hearts and open ears.

May we hear the call of loving community and respond joyfully. May we embrace the opportunities to explore that which we think we are not. May we bring peace to the world through our love. May it be so today and everyday. Amen.

### **Spoken Benediction**

May the spirit of life and love surround you.  
May the love of peace move through you  
to everyone in every place from this time forth.

### **Extinguishing the Chalice**

May the light from this chalice flame move in our hearts  
until we come together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by guest speaker, the Rev. Patti Pomerantz, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 24, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)