

**“The Tender Gravity of Kindness”**  
**November 12, 2006**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Call to Worship**

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

Here are 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**

We come together this Sunday  
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;  
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;  
To reclaim the vision of an earth more fair, with all her people one.

**Musical Response** (Sung by the congregation)

Break not the circle of enabling love where people grow, forgiven and forgiving;  
Break not that circle, make it wider still, till it includes, embraces all the living.

**Responsive Reading**

Our Responsive Reading this morning is from our current Dalai Lama, a reading I have given you before, and one that will be at the heart of my sermon this morning.

MINISTER: Kindness is my true religion. No matter whether you are learned or not, whether you believe in the next life or not, whether you believe in God or Buddha or some other religion or not, in day-to-day life you must be a kind person.

CONGREGATION: When you are motivated by kindness, it doesn't matter whether you are a lawyer, a politician, an administrator, a worker, or an engineer: whatever your profession or field, deep down you are a kind person.

MINISTER: Love, compassion, and tolerance are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.

CONGREGATION: If you have a particular faith or religion, that is good. But you can

survive without it if you have love, compassion, and tolerance.

MINISTER: Deep down we must have real affection for each other, a clear realization or recognition of our shared human status.

CONGREGATION: At the same time, we must openly accept all ideologies and systems as a means of solving humanity's problems. One country, one nation, one ideology, one system, is not sufficient.

MINISTER: It is helpful to have a variety of different approaches on the basis of the deep feeling of the basic sameness of humanity; we can then make a joint effort to solve the problems of the whole of humankind.

CONGREGATION: Every major religion has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting humanity through spiritual practice, and the same effect of making its followers into better human beings.

MINISTER: All religions teach moral precepts for perfecting the functions of mind, body, and speech. All teach us not to lie or steal or take others' lives.

CONGREGATION: All religions can learn from one another; their ultimate goal is to produce better human beings who will be more tolerant, more compassionate, and less selfish."

(Tenzin Gyatso, The XIVth Dalai Lama)

## **Meditation**

As the theme for our service today is kindness, I would like to invite you in our Time of Meditation to join together in an adaptation of a Buddhist meditation called, "Loving Kindness Meditation."

### **Loving Kindness Meditation (adapted)**

If you're comfortable closing your eyes, you may close them now; or, if you prefer to keep your eyes open, as in the Tibetan tradition, you may do that.

Now allow your attention to turn within yourself and at your own pace take a deep, full breath. Then slowly release it. (Pause)

Now take another full breath, noticing how your body opens to receive the gift of breath. Again, exhale at your own pace, allowing any tension to leave your body. (Pause)

Now notice any thoughts or concerns that you bring with you into this sanctuary. (Pause)  
And let them go. (Pause)

If there is a persistent or pressing concern, take a moment to acknowledge it, then gently let it go. (Pause)

Allow yourself to come fully into this time and this place. (Pause)

And now say these words to yourself, "May I be filled with loving kindness." (Pause)  
Watch your breathing as you allow the in-breath to fill every cell of your body with this intent. (Pause)

With your next inhalation, say to yourself, "May I be well." (Pause) Let your body fill with a sense of well-being. (Pause)

And with your next inhalation, say, "May I be at peace and at ease." (Pause) Breathe in the feeling of peacefulness, exhaling any tension. (Pause)

And then quietly affirm, "May I be happy." (Pause)

Next open your mind and heart to someone who might be helped from these affirmations, perhaps someone you know, or it might be a stranger. (Pause)

Imagine yourself turning toward this person and, speaking from your heart, say these words: "May you be filled with loving kindness. " (Pause)

Imagine this person receiving this blessing, and say further, "May you be well." (Pause)

And again, "May you be at peace and at ease." (Pause)

And, finally, "May you be happy." (Pause)

Now bring to mind someone with whom you have had difficulty. (Pause) It may be a family member with whom you have been angry, or a friendship with which you are struggling.

Imagine yourself turning to this person and saying, "May you be filled with loving kindness." (Pause)

And speaking from your heart, say: "May you be well." (Pause)

Allow them to receive your words and say, "May you be at peace and at ease." (Pause)

And, finally, "May you be happy." (Pause)

And now notice your body, your thoughts, and your feelings. (Pause)

Take a moment to rest in gratitude for all to whom you are connected, both those you know, and those you have never met. (Pause)

And, finally, take one more deep breath, thanking yourself for the courage of sending thoughts of well-being to all, including yourself. (Pause)

And now let us be together in a time of silence that will be followed by a musical response.

## **Reading**

My reading today is from the New Testament scriptures and includes one of the most well-known chapters in the entire Bible, St. Paul's hymn to agapic love found in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Corinthians. I am starting a few verses earlier than this familiar reading to give you the setting, one in which the Apostle Paul is speaking of the various gifts that exist within the Corinthian congregation and trying with all his might to point to the most important gift of all. I read from I Corinthians 12:27-13:13 in the New English Bible:

Now you are Christ's body, and each of you a limb or organ of it. Within our community God has appointed, in the first place apostles, in the second place prophets, thirdly teachers; then miracle-workers, then those who have gifts of healing, or ability to help others or power to guide them, or the gift of ecstatic utterance of various kinds. Are all apostles? all prophets? all teachers? Do all work miracles? Have all gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues of ecstasy? Can all interpret them? The higher gifts are those you should aim at.

And now I speak to you of the best way of all. I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. I may have the gift of prophecy, and know every hidden truth; I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may dole out all I possess, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I am none the better.

Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over [the failings of others], but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance.

Love will never come to an end. Are there prophets? their work will be over. Are there tongues of ecstasy? they will cease. Is there knowledge? it will vanish away; for our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when wholeness comes. When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things. Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge. In a word, there are three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love.

## THE TENDER GRAVITY OF KINDNESS

### Introduction

On this Sunday following the mid-term elections, I thought it might be good time to reflect on the quality of kindness in our lives and in our country, hoping that perhaps we can move toward becoming that “kinder, gentler nation.”

So far as I can remember, I’ve never before given a sermon on the subject of kindness. I’m not quite certain why. Perhaps the topic didn’t seem to have enough pizzazz to it to generate a movement of energy or enough edges to grab hold of it. What really can you say about kindness except, yes, it would be good to practice it, and would that there could be more of it in the world?

On the other hand, for years I have carried with me the quotation of the Dalai Lama from the responsive reading this morning, a quotation I always find moving when read. The part of that quotation that has always struck me the most is its opening line, “Kindness is my true religion.”

“Kindness is my true religion.” This past August I gave a series of four sermons on religion titled, “Four Faiths in a Modern World,” a repeat of the series I gave when I first came here two years ago. Those four faiths are: Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism.

Then I opened this new church year with six sermons on religion, a series titled, “Dimensions of Religion,” those dimensions being the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, and experiential dimensions.

All this talk about religious faiths, all this talk about dimensions of religion. Does it all come down to kindness? Can religion be summarized so simply? Is “kindness” solid, substantial, or weighty enough to stand at the center of religion?

The Dalai Lama seems to think so. It’s the main point of the responsive reading this morning. Being well-educated, belonging to an organized religion, holding beliefs associated with given religions – all of these are fine things, they may be helpful; but if they don’t end in kindness, what good are they?

When all is said and done, according to the Dalai Lama, it is kindness that is at the heart of religion: being a kind person, learning how to be a kind person. This, he says, is my *true* religion ...

... which may imply that a religion that doesn’t help people to become kind persons is a false religion...

... which may imply that a religion that isn’t helping to produce kindness in you is not working for you.

“Kindness is my true religion.” I am reminded of the statement of Jesus found in the New Testament scriptures where, when asked to summarize religion, he says simply, “Love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself.”

It all comes down to this – the rest is commentary. If love isn’t at the center of your religion, if your religion doesn’t lead to love, then either your religion needs to be re-examined, or you need to re-examine how you are taking your religion.

I am reminded also of St. Paul’s great hymn to agapic love found in his letter to the church in Corinth, the reading from just a couple of minutes ago. All these wonderful gifts of the spirit that the people of this new religion have been experiencing: the gift of preaching or teaching, the gift of healing, the gift of having the power to perform miracles, the gift of ecstatic utterance, the gift of prophecy and special knowledge, the gift of great faith – it all means nothing, if love is not at the center.

### **Defining “kindness”**

What is kindness?

In the quotation from the Dalai Lama he relates kindness to “love, compassion, and tolerance.” He says the ultimate goal of religions is “to produce better human beings who will be more tolerant, more compassionate, and less selfish.” He says, “Deep down we must have real affection for each other, a clear realization or recognition of our shared human status.”

This latter statement reminds me of something a friend once said to me perhaps twenty years ago. She said true kindness has to do with treating the *unconscious* of another person kindly.

In other words, in relating to others we aren’t simply responding to or reacting to what is on the surface – the coolness, the politeness, the warmth, the anger, the bravado, or whatever is the presenting face – no, we are trying to pierce through the surface to engage a deeper human need and desire, to engage a level of another’s being that he or she may not even be aware of. That would be “real affection” for another. That would be true kindness.

Kindness, like love, I believe, is wishing another well, wanting the best for another person, being concerned about the well-being of others. Kindness has to do with getting out of yourself long enough to see another and to care about another.

### **Developing kindness**

How do you develop and cultivate the quality of kindness?

In the quotation from the Dalai Lama, there is no program developed, no discussion of what kindness looks like in the face of violence, oppression, or injustice. Here the Dalai Lama is only setting forth the priority of kindness in our lives and in our religion.

So how does one develop the quality of kindness?

A few weeks ago I came across a poem by Naomi Shihab-Nye, an American-Palestinian poet and author of children's books, presently living in San Antonio. She was born of a Palestinian father and an American mother and has lived her life between those two cultures.

Her poem, printed in your Order of Service today, is titled, "Kindness," and gives us clues to what kindness is and how one may develop it. Let us turn to that poem now.

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
Catches the thread of all sorrows  
And you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
Only kindness that ties your shoes  
And sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,  
Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say

It is I you have been looking for,  
And then goes with you everywhere  
Like a shadow or a friend.

(Naomi Shihab-Nye, "Kindness," Words From Under the Words: Selected Poems)

### **Kindness and loss**

I had wondered earlier in this sermon whether the topic of kindness had enough edges to it to grab hold of it or enough weight to it to place it at the center of religion. Reading this poem, no more am I concerned about these matters. Here there is plenty of weight, plenty of gravitas, plenty to grab hold of ... for, according to this poem, kindness – real kindness – is related to and born out of the experience of loss. And not just a little loss, but a lot of loss.

The development of kindness, says the poet, has to do with the experience of seeing everything dissolve before your eyes – the loss of everything you have ever cared about, been attached to, or counted as your own.

What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go...

To develop kindness you must experience enough loss to enter imaginatively into all loss, perhaps even to see whole universes of loss ... or as Buddhist poet Gary Snyder says:

After the mind-breaking Void,  
the emptiness of a million universes  
appearing and disappearing  
all created things rushing into Krishna's  
devouring mouth  
beyond the enlightenment that can say  
"these things are dead already; go ahead and  
kill them, Arjuna"  
is a loving, simple awareness  
of the absolute beauty and preciousness of  
mice and weeds.

On the far side of loss, the preciousness of present things can be seen, and the development of kindness toward all things.

Loss is the great teacher. Not that you have to invite loss into your life – don't worry, nature and time will take care of that – but to use your loss as a source of meditation.

It could be anything: the loss of something material valued by you like a house or a property; or a friendship, a marriage, a relationship with parent or child; the loss of

health, of a capacity, of a skill, a position, a status; the loss of a belief, a world-view, an innocence.

The loss could be anything. But the idea is to extrapolate from your loss and to project from the losses of your life into the lives of others ... until you can see their humanity ... the humanity of all, whatever their status, whatever their condition, whether high or low, whether in plenty or poverty, whether they are afraid and fighting loss, or whether they are in the midst of loss ... but to see yourself there ... by projection.

Of course, there is nothing that can take the place of an actual experience of loss. To have actually experienced a particular loss, not just loss by projection, but actually to experience a particular loss is to be awakened to a deeper connection in sympathy and understanding.

I have noticed, for example, in this Fellowship that when someone loses a child, others in the Fellowship who have previously lost a child, will reach out in tenderness and kindness to the grieving parents.

Kindness is born out of the experience of loss ...

Does this connecting of the development of kindness with the experience loss also mean that if you've never had anything to begin with, it might be difficult to learn kindness? If you've never had anything to lose, no true identity, or nothing to identify with, would you then be constantly striving to be someone or to have something? And under these circumstances, might it be difficult to learn kindness?

This poem may imply that to embody the quality or spirit of kindness, or to experience the tender gravity of kindness, you must first be someone or have something.

### **Kindness and sorrow**

In this poem we see that kindness and sorrow are connected – no surprise since kindness and loss are connected:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

If kindness is to be at the heart of your religion and your being, then sorrow must also be at the heart of your religion and your being. The two are related, connected, and dependent upon each other ... in the same way perhaps as the Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran, connects joy and sorrow, saying that:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked and the same well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

How else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy

you can contain.

(Kahlil Gibran, from The Prophet)

So, too, our poet here is saying that kindness and sorrow are related. Kindness is born out of sorrow. The more you are able to embrace sorrow and the more that you are willing to enter it, the more kindness is likely to be born in you.

One of the gifts of engaging and entering sorrow is an increased capacity for kindness. Writes poet Robert Bly:

What is sorrow for? It is a storehouse  
for wheat, barley, corn and tears.  
We step to the door on a round stone,  
and the storehouse feeds all the birds of sorrow.  
And I say to myself: Will you have  
sorrow at last? Go on, be cheerful in autumn,  
be stoic, yes, be tranquil, calm:  
or in the valley of sorrows spread your wings.

(Robert Bly, "What Is Sorrow For?")

When you are willing to enter the valley of sorrow, when you are willing to wake up with sorrow, when you are willing to speak to it and have sorrow catch in your throat at every turn when you do speak; then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that sends you out into the world on a daily basis, only kindness that accompanies you as your shadow, your companion, your friend.

### **A practice of kindness**

Last evening I returned from our Men's Retreat at the Deception Pass State Park. Earlier in the day Carl Nomura had approached me saying, "I see you are speaking about kindness tomorrow."

"I am," I said.

"All my life," he said, "I was a problem solver. In my business I was a problem solver. But I couldn't solve my conflicts in my first marriage to Louise ... until late in our marriage we hit upon the mutual practice of kindness.

"Each day each of us would practice some kindness toward the other. Usually, it was a little thing. Sometimes noticed, other times not. Sometimes speaking of it or calling attention to it, other times not. But each day each of us practiced a kindness toward the other.

"Do you know what the cumulative effect of 365 acts of kindness over a year's time is? It is immense. And the best thing of all," Carl said, "is that it changes you – changes your attitude, changes who you are."

“I’d like to use your example in my sermon tomorrow,” I said to him. “Of course, I won’t say who it’s from.”

“No, I want to use my name,” he said. “Many will already know anyway. Also, it’s written in my book.” [Sleeping on Potatoes]

This is one practical application of kindness. Of course, there are infinite applications. Kindness cannot be made into a formula or law that will apply in all the varied circumstances of our complex lives and this complex world. Rather, kindness is a goal to strive for in terms of attitude and approach, a life-long journey of both interior exploration and outward action.

In the end, discovering kindness in this world is a bit of miracle, or at least so suggests Mary Oliver in a newly-published poem titled, “In the Storm.”

Some black ducks  
were shrugged up  
on the shore.  
It was snowing  
  
hard, from the east,  
and the sea  
was in disorder.  
Then some sanderlings,  
  
five inches long  
with beaks like wire,  
flew in,  
snowflakes on their backs,  
  
and settled  
in a row  
behind the ducks –  
whose backs were also  
  
covered with snow –  
so close  
they were all but touching,  
they were all but under  
  
the roof of the ducks’ tails,  
so the wind, pretty much,  
blew over them.  
They stayed that way, motionless,

for maybe an hour,  
then the sanderlings,  
each a handful of feathers,  
shifted, and were blown away

out over the water  
which was still raging.  
But, somehow,  
they came back

and again the ducks,  
like a feathered hedge,  
let them  
crouch there, and live.

If someone you didn't know  
told you this,  
as I am telling you this,  
would you believe it?

Belief isn't always easy.  
But this much I have learned –  
if not enough else –  
to live with my eyes open.

I know what everyone wants  
is a miracle.  
This wasn't a miracle.  
Unless, of course, kindness –

as now and again  
some rare person has suggested –  
is a miracle.  
And surely it is.

(Mary Oliver, "In the Storm," Thirst)

## **Benediction**

Our benediction today is titled, "Unison Benediction," by May Sarton:

Return to the most human,  
nothing less will nourish the torn spirit,  
the bewildered heart,  
the angry mind:  
and from the ultimate duress,

pierced with the breath of anguish,  
speak of love.

Return, return to the deep sources,  
nothing less will teach the stiff hands a new way to serve,  
to carve into our lives the forms of tenderness  
and still that ancient necessary pain preserve.

Return to the most human,  
nothing less will teach the angry spirit,  
the bewildered heart;  
the torn mind,  
to accept the whole of its duress,  
and pierced with anguish...  
at last, act for love.

(May Sarton, Collected Poems 1930-1993)

### **Extinguishing of Chalice**

We extinguish our 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 service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on November 12, 2006. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)