

**“Beyond Denial and Despair”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, May 18, 2008**  
**Guest Speaker: Kurt Hoelting**

(NOTE: Below is a print summary of the sermon given by Kurt Hoelting at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on May 18, 2008. This summary was prepared for Kurt’s blog site (see <http://insidepassages.com/p=239>) and is presented here with his permission. The spoken sermon is available on audio cassette at the Fellowship.)

**“Pulpit Reflections” by Kurt Hoelting**

I gave a guest sermon yesterday at the Port Townsend Unitarian Church, where I also had a chance to practice what I was preaching by riding my bike thirty miles home from the church. It was an interesting and engaging congregation. Seemed like every other person I met was a retired professor from somewhere, so there was a lot of intellectual horsepower in the room.

I titled the sermon “Beyond Denial and Despair”, and began with David Wagoner’s poem Lost, which I’ll share here:

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.

Here is the gist of my sermon remarks:

When I saw An Inconvenient Truth last year, I decided I had gone about as far as I could go in my wrestling match with climate change using the same old tired strategies of denial and despair. Of the two, I never was much good at denial, anyway, so that seemed to leave me only despair as a fallback.

Being depressed much of the time was really getting old. And furthermore, in my better moments I knew that despair and denial aren't the only options available to us. There are other routes through these turbulent waters that offer much more promise that we might actually reach the other shore. When I am successful in connecting with the richness of the moment, I'm always reminded how alive the world still is, how resilient the human spirit is, and how much we still don't know about what might happen next. Rebecca Solnit has written, "Despair is a luxury. If I despair, I can drive a Yukon and watch bad television. Despair makes no demands on us; Hope demands everything."

Denial is a luxury because it allows me to pretend that I don't see what is evident all around me. At the moment that includes a climate that is unmistakably beginning to come unhinged. This is something that warrants my attention. Despair is also a luxury, because it allows me to think I am powerless to do anything about it. It blinds me to the range of choices that are always available to me to take more skillful and courageous action, regardless of what others may choose to do. I took my vow to go car free for this year in part because I was tired of waiting for everyone else to act first - tired of waiting for politicians to take the lead by passing more intelligent energy laws, tired of waiting for car companies to build more fuel-efficient cars, and for consumers to wake up and change their buying habits.

Meanwhile my own inability to embrace changes on a level commensurate to the challenge of climate change left me feeling numb and demoralized. Why is it so hard to change? How is it possible for so many otherwise intelligent, caring people - beginning with myself, to just keep staring at the chasm between what we know and how we're living?

It was in the midst of this personal impasse that I was ambushed by the idea that is now unfolding in my Circling Home year? What if I really took it on? What if I just stopped whining, and made the most radical shift I felt I was capable of making? What if I spent an entire year within walking distance of home, parking my car for the year and turning the whole thing into an adventure of self-discovery? Just thinking about this possibility got me excited, and I could immediately feel the resilience beginning to return to my life. As the time approached for me to begin my car-free year of local exploration, I stopped feeling depressed. I stopped feeling hopeless about the future. I started seeing possibilities for positive action and healing change everywhere I looked.

I know full well what the odds are against us at this perilous moment in our human tenure on the planet. But I'm also much more tuned in to the groundswells of wild and exuberant initiative that is springing all around the edges of the culture. It is an exuberance that is so palpable that even the mainstream media is beginning to notice it.

When I began this adventure on the winter solstice five months ago, I was both excited and nervous. I knew I had to do this, but I didn't know if I could really pull it off. I was afraid I might be disappearing myself by stepping off the train. I was worried that the "confinement" to a slower pace and smaller landscape might actually make my tendency toward depression worse. The opposite has happened. I have not looked back once. My explorations of the Puget Sound Basin on foot and bicycle and kayak have brought my home to life for me in ways I could not have imagined. I no longer feel the heavy burden of being stuck in so wide a gap between belief and action. I feel much less divided within myself, and therefore much freer to respond creatively to the needs of the moment. There is a celebratory sense to my life that I haven't experienced in many years, knowing that small things matter hugely, and that the "miraculous in the common", as Emerson called it, is available to anyone who takes the time to look. I've been reminded every day that many layers of complexity and richness exist in the territory nearest at hand, and how many lifetimes it would take to seriously explore it all. I've been reminded how vibrant a community I live in, and how much support one can find by cultivating the relationships nearest at hand. I've been reminded that I live in a body that knows how to walk and run and work and dance. My body has thanked me a thousand times for allowing it to get back into the game.

Vaclav Havel has written: "Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

And I'm much more convinced now that we actually do have the capacity to turn this ship before it really hits the rocks. Whether we choose to exercise that power, it is there for the taking. I am more determined than ever, regardless of the outcome, to put my shoulder to this great wheel. I am far too deeply in love with the life of this precious world to do anything less.

How about you?