

**“AIDS in Africa and America: The Reality and Response”**  
**World AIDS Day Service**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**December 6, 2009**  
**Dennis Reynolds, Ministerial Intern**  
**Rev. Bruce Bode, Assisting**

**Chalice Lighting**

We light this chalice  
For the renewal of faith,  
The wonder of hope,  
The beauty of love,  
And the gift of joy.

**Opening Words**

This is a new day that has been given unto us.  
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.  
And let us count our many, many blessings:  
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,  
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.  
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.  
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together,  
giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: On this second Sunday of the Christmas season we celebrate the quality of hope, forever springing up in our hearts and minds, forever being rekindled.

CONGREGATION: There is no state more desperate than hopelessness. When people lose hope, they die.

MINISTER: However deep our faith, it is sometimes shaken; however strong our hopes, they are many times crushed.

CONGREGATION: Our faith must be deepened and enlarged; our hope must be confirmed and renewed.

MINISTER: When the candle of hope is quenched, it must be re-lighted. We must find a way to protect the flickering candle of hope.

CONGREGATION: We find hope for ourselves when we move with those who have visions and dreams. We find new meaning for our life when we share in the courage, devotion, and dignity of others.

MINISTER: We come together in this season to celebrate the qualities of Christmas. Our faith is strengthened by the love of our friends.

CONGREGATION: Our lives wing with new expectancy. The hope of Christmas brings joy to the world. (Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, adapted)

### **Lighting the Candle of Hope (Bode)**

Last night I went outside around 11 o'clock and was so surprised to see a layer of snow on the ground. Were you children also surprised this morning? In my mind, snow and Christmas are always connected. It always feels a little more like Christmas we've had snow.

Earlier in my life, I lived for three years on the island of Guam in the South Pacific, and there it never snowed. And there it never felt quite like Christmas because there was no snow.

These banners on our sanctuary wall also give me the feeling of Christmas because these banners speak of some of the deepest spiritual values and qualities in our lives. And, to me, that's what Christmas is primarily about – bringing to our minds the deepest interior values and qualities by which we live our lives.

And as you children see, there are now two banners on our sanctuary wall, the purple banner of Faith that was hung last week, and now this week, it is the green banner of Hope. Next week it will be the blue banner of Love, and finally the red banner of Joy. And when all four banners are hung, we will know that Christmas is very near, whether or not there is snow on the ground.

The candle we light this week is the Candle of Hope. And to me, hope is much more than simply the things we hope for ... because many times the things we hope for don't happen. And so, to me, real hope has to do with that power that keeps pushing forward, even when particular things we have hoped for have not happened.

To me, hope is like a white flame of fire that never goes out but is always burning at the heart of the universe – and in our own hearts, too. It's a fire that burns throughout our lives and keeps on burning after our lives are over. To know about that fire, and to be connected with that fire, is to know the deep reality of Hope.

Hanna Trailer (9:15), Calvin Leckenby (11:15), will you please light the second candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Hope.

### **Reading**

The reading I would like to share was written by Ina Hughes, a reporter for a newspaper in Knoxville Tennessee. It is titled "A Prayer for Children."

“Prayer” is one of those words like “soul” or “God” that can elicit a reactive response from Unitarian Universalists. I consider such words as the ones for which I can create my own definition. Prayer has often meant an appeal to an outside higher power. It can also, I suggest, be a call to something deep within our own being. I am sure such reflection would be consistent with the intent of the poet.

### **“A Prayer for Children”**

We pray for the children who sneak Popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire, who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never "counted potatoes," who never go to the circus, who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions, who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.

And we pray for those who never get dessert, who have no safe blanket to drag behind them, who watch their parents watch them die, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser, whose monsters are real.

We pray for children who spend all their allowance before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed, who never rinse out the tub, who get visits from the tooth fairy, who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool, who squirm in church and scream in the phone, whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything, who have never seen a dentist, who aren't spoiled by anybody, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and for those who must,

Who we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance.

For those we smother and for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

### **“AIDS IN AFRICA AND AMERICA”**

I see in my mind's eye South African children. They look out at me with sad eyes and sometimes with smiles. Some are the children whom my daughter, Lindsey, met and

photographed on her first trip to South Africa in 2001. I know them from their photos and her telling of their story.

There's 12 year-old Fasimway who, along with his grandmother, had come to Holy Cross Hospice in order to receive services, as she was dying from AIDS. She had contracted the disease while caring for her daughter, who had died shortly after giving birth to twin sons. Famisway told his grandmother good-bye and began the long walk home with his two 5-month-old twin baby brothers, one on each hip.

There's Nolo, the young preschooler who stole Lindsey's heart. She spent many evening hours with Lindsey during an extended stay at Holy Cross. She was there with her mother, a patient at the hospice, and she stayed for weeks after her mother's death as they sought friends or family who could care for her. In time, an aunt who lived to the north agreed to take her in.

And then there's "the photo". It's a picture of a child nestled in Lindsey's arms. This baby is not smiling but is sickly with bloodshot eyes and a runny nose. She has been diagnosed with AIDS. No one knows her name. You see, she was found in a township hovel lying between two corpses.

When I saw that photo of that poor innocent child my heart leapt, and in that moment I realized that that child in my daughter's arms and I are undeniably connected. In an instant a theoretical theological notion about human connection became an undeniable reality.

We are connected. We are all connected.

There is a second photo of Lindsey and that child, whom orphanage staff called Elizabeth. It was taken six weeks later. In that photo the child Lindsey held was happy and smiling and healthy. A generous European donor had committed to provide the anti-retro-viral medications that made her survival a possibility.

On her return from that first trip to Africa, Lindsey and Angela, the classmate she traveled with, resolved that could not merely write a paper to describe what they had seen in that life-altering African journey; they needed to do something more. They started a small non-profit project they called "Thembantahi." The word means in Zulu, "Hope With Us".

Thembanathi raises funds to support Holy Cross Hospice, a multi-faceted service program created and directed by an amazing Zulu woman named, Sister Priscilla Dlamini. Sister was working as nurse in a clinic in a rural area in the Kwazulu Natal region of South Africa when the wave of the AIDS pandemic began to crash around her. She began by creating a Hospice facility to care for the dying. She soon added services to help the children they left behind.

I had the opportunity to visit Holy Cross this past spring. I got to meet and play with the children at the preschool. The crèche, as they call it, was established to assure that the preschoolers' older brothers and sister, who often are the heads of their households, would be able to attend school rather than needing to stay home and care for their younger siblings.

I have a special connection to that part of Holy Cross' work. I worked for 30 years as a teacher and administrator at the University of Oregon child-care programs that exist so student parents can attend the University.

On my first visit Holy Cross I had the opportunity to just play with the children. Marching around the play yard we sang, "Oh I ain't got a barrel of money..."

Actually, I was the only one who spoke English, so we sang "la la la la la" loudly, and "ti ti ti ti ti" softly.

We laughed as we sang. The children screamed with joy as I chased them around pretending to be in turn: a lion, an elephant, and an ape. Lindsey followed along giving Zulu translations for the animals I portrayed and urging them to run, run, run. They and the teachers did not quite know what to make of this wild, exuberant white man. They did discover that he was a lot of fun and that his enthusiasm for children was boundless.

Later in the afternoon we settled down. I read stories in English while they looked at the pictures and tried to garner meaning from my tone and vocal tempo. A group of young girls treated us to an impromptu concert of what Lindsey informed me were Zulu gospel songs.

It seemed each of them wanted a turn to touch my hairy arms and caress the loose skin on my neck and stroke my thin soft hair.

I urged them to slap me five and to greet me with a fist pound. "Yea! All right!"

By the end of the afternoon I was happily exhausted.

When I returned the following week to provide training for the teachers and to work in the classroom with the children, I was greeted first by a three and a half year-old boy named, Spiniseko.

He walked up to me, smiled, and reached out his hand so I could slap him five, and then he offered his fist so we could pound, and he said "all right". I had more time with Spiniseko that visit, as he and his sister Ntando were living at the hospice because their mother died in December and there was no place else for them to go.

The day after I left, Sister got the results of his blood test. It confirmed what his chronically swollen lymph glands had already indicated; he was HIV positive and had early stage AIDS. He is on a waiting list for pediatric ARVs.

## AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

In the 1980's, when the wave of the disease broke in America, the largest numbers infected were within the gay community, plus a few who had contracted the disease through blood transfusions.

The plight of Ryan White, a young hemophiliac, garnered national press coverage. Ryan had contracted the disease from a contaminated transfusion and was, in a fear-fueled time, barred from attending school in his hometown of Kokomo, Indiana. The family moved to Cicero, Illinois, where a community-wide education effort led to his acceptance in the local school and only limited rejection by peers and parents. Ryan was lifted up as sort of a poster boy for those suffering with the disease.

Meanwhile, members of the gay community, whose disease was believed linked to being sexual, were viewed by many, not as victims but rather as having "gotten what they deserved". A few fundamentalists described AIDS as God's punishment.

Jerry Falwell said: "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals."

Jerry was not alone. In a 1987 Pew poll, 43% of Americans agreed with the statement that AIDS must be God's punishment. Only 47% disagreed, and 10% just weren't sure.

Today, just 23% of the public agrees with that proclamation, and 72% fully disagree, and only 5% are undecided. Time and education about the disease has changed public views.

Marginalization of those with AIDS continues. In America, the disease has spread amongst intravenous drug users and, currently, the fastest infection rate is for inner city African American women.

In Africa, I met individuals who still blame AIDS on a lack of morals within the Zulu population. This view totally ignores the impact wrought by apartheid and the centuries of disruption and exploitation that preceded it.

But let's return to the 80's. That's when David Brody, whose apartment I had stayed in while visiting in San Francisco, and Douglas, my doctor's nurse, contracted the disease and in a relatively short time died. The impact of the disease became glaringly real.

It is estimated that 10% of the gay male population contracted the disease. In those days, before the development of Anti-retroviral medications, a diagnosis of AIDS was a death sentence. The early ARVs did little but painfully buy some time.

In the middle of this horrific epidemic something amazing happened. The gay and lesbian community and their allies came together to offer support for the so-called PWAs, "People With AIDS". In the midst of great sadness, sorrow, and fear they rallied to

provide support for their brothers who were afflicted by the disease. The poet May Sarton describes it in her poem, "AIDS."

We are stretched to meet new dimensions  
Of love, a more demanding range  
Where despair and hope must intertwine.  
How grow to meet it?

Intention here can neither move nor change  
The raw truth. Death is on the line.  
It comes to separate and estrange  
Lover from lover in some reckless design.  
Where do we go from here?  
Fear, Fear, Fear, Fear

Our World is never more stark  
Or more in peril.  
It is very lonely now in the dark.  
Lonely and sterile.

Yet in the simple turn of a head  
Mercy lives. I heard someone say  
"I must go to a dying friend  
Every night at nine I tuck him into bed

And give him a shot of morphine."  
And adds, "I go where I have never been."  
I saw he meant a new discipline  
He had not imagined before and a new grace.

Every day now we meet face to face  
Every day now devotion is the text.  
Through the long caring hours, the hard caring night  
We are forging a new union, we are blest.

As closed hands open to each other  
Closed lives open to strange tenderness.  
We are learning the hard way how to mother.  
Who says it's easy. But we have the power.

I watch the faces deepen all around me.  
It is the time of change, the saving hour.  
The world suddenly made new.  
As we learn again, as we bring it alive;

Love, Love, Love, Love

Five years ago fear, fear, fear, fear filled my heart. That January, while I was attending seminary, my daughter Lindsey, who was then and is still doing research with AIDS-impacted children in South Africa, got a report on blood work. Her HIV test was “inconclusive.”

The morning after I received the frightening news, a small group of us were performing a mimed drama based on the hymn, “Bring Many Names”. I was portraying a “warm father God.” I mimed lifting up a small child. In that instant, I imagined the child to be Lindsey and tears rolled down my face. When I shared with my professor, John Tolley, what was going on, he gave me a warm hug and assured me it’s “no longer a death sentence.”

It was six weeks before a follow up test came back negative. We were of course relieved, but I now know that it could indeed be my child or any of our children. They are all “our children” be they African or American, and we need to heed the lessons of the 1980s and respond, not with the separation and estrangement that comes from fear, but with the power of love.

Here in Jefferson County a few stalwart, loving souls who make up Jefferson AIDS Services (JAS), assure that our neighbors who have AIDS and struggle with the life disrupting effects of the disease and the debilitating side effects of ARV medications are not alone and not ignored.

While improved Anti-retroviral medications have helped reduce fatalities, JAS Board chair, Al Hernandez, reports, “The ‘cocktail’ has done wonders for some and crippled others. The toxic side-effects of all the drugs can wreck havoc on the health of people taking them. In fact it's getting to the point that if the disease doesn't kill, the drugs will.”

JAS raises money to distribute to clients for urgent needs, from food to vet bills. They are not health professionals so they don't offer advise. They connect clients with a case manager with the health department. Most importantly, they show clients that someone cares.

Continentially, nine Unitarian Universalist congregations are affiliated with the UU Global AIDS Coalition and are involved in educational activities, service work, and partnering with projects in Africa. These congregations have all been designated as Red Ribbon Congregations to acknowledge their caring efforts. They include the churches in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington, and the Fellowship in Juneau.

The Unitarian Universalist Association UUA has launched a campaign called “Standing on the Side of Love.” The campaign came into being in response to the shootings last year at a UU Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. A fear-filled gunman entered the church and shot and killed members gathered there. The gunman had struck out against what he saw as threatening beliefs and actions by “liberals”. Religious violence is not something that occurs only in far away places.

“Standing on the Side of Love” proclaims that we will not become silent in our loving advocacy for all who are victimized by oppression and discrimination. It is an affirmation that we will not retreat in fear.

The campaign includes equal marriage advocacy. Recently, Measure 71 passed here in Washington. It assures that same sex couples, in this state, have rights equal to those offered to different sex couple.

Love and inclusion won. Fear and marginalization lost.

The love-filled actions of Sister Priscilla, and the loving commitment of people like the JAS board and those who first reached out to love the PWAs are shining examples of the power of love.

They did not merely try to make a difference. They made a difference through their loving action.

It was the fictional Jedi Master Yoda who advised that, “There is no try there is do or do not.”

I am sure many recall how the young Jedi in training Luke Skywalker learned to focus fully on his actions, to be in the moment and heed the advice to, “Let the force be with you.”

When we gather together to stand on the side of love the force is truly with us.

When we stand on the side of love and act in love, we are able to focus most fully on the task at hand.

When we act out of love, we are not fooled by the illusion of our separateness.

May it be so.

**Closing Hymn #1014 – “Standing on The Side of Love”**

**Benediction**

As closed hands open to each other  
Closed lives open to strange tenderness.  
We are learning the hard way how to mother.  
Who says it’s easy. But we have the power.

**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 sermon given by Dennis Reynolds on December 6, 2009. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)