

“Words and Deeds”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
September 20, 2009
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Chalice Lighting

Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back.
(Dag Hammarskjold)

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

The words of our shared reading today are from the Rev. Mark Morrison Reed, who is one of only a handful of African American Ministers in our Association, an adjunct faculty member at my seminary, Meadville Lombard Theological School, thus, my professor, and, I like to think, my friend. Mark said:

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.

CONGREGATION: There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.

MINISTER: Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

CONGREGATION: It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community.

MINISTER: The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

CONGREGATION: Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

(Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed)

Reading

Our reading today is from James Luther Adams, noted UU theologian who served for a time on the faculty of both Harvard Divinity School and Meadville Lombard Theological School. He was, alas, at Meadville before my time.

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ground of freedom, that sustaining, judging transforming power not made with human hands. It protests against idolatry of any human claims to absolute truth or authority.

I call that church free which promotes freedom in fellowship, seeking unity in diversity. This unity is a potential gift, sought through devotion to the creative exchange in generous dialogue. But it will remain unity in diversity.

I call that church free which responds in responsibility to “the winds that bloweth where it listed.” The tide of the spirit finds utterance ever and again through a minority. It invites and engenders liberation from repression and exploitation whether of nation or economic system, of race, of sex or of class. It bursts through rigid, cramping inheritance giving rise to new language, to new forms of cooperation, to new and broader fellowship. The church of the spirit is a pilgrim church on an adventure.

“WORDS AND DEEDS”

When I was seven I was Zorro.

I spent countless hours dashing around the small farm where we lived chasing imaginary evildoers. My black cape fluttering in the wind, I peered out from my black mask seeking those who oppressed and mistreated the peasant people of early California. When I came upon such villains, I would vanquish all with my superior skill with sword and lash. When they had been undone, I would deftly use my sword to carve the letter “Z” into their breast coats to remind them that it was I, Zorro, who had ended their wrong deeds. I would then leap onto my coal black horse, Diablo, and ride into the desert.

This fantasy world I spent time in was inspired and fueled by Sunday night episodes of Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color.

Fast forward 50 plus years. Travel with me in time past the idealistic attitudes and actions of a young would be 1960’s revolutionary, through decades of engagement with programs that served young children and helped their parents, especially their moms, access higher education, to Spring 2009 when, just days after retirement from my long career with the University of Oregon’s child care programs, I set out on a great real life adventure. I went to Africa.

I traveled to rural areas of the Kwazulu Natal region of South Africa to spend time with my daughter, Lindsey, a graduate student in public health and anthropology, who is collecting ethnographic and other data there. My journey there was to see my girl and to see for myself what she had experienced there.

It was 6 years earlier when Lindsey, then an undergraduate, made her first trip to Africa. It was a life-altering experience for both of us. The tales and especially the photos she returned with had a profound impact.

When I saw the photo of that little baby with full-blown AIDS nestled in my daughter's arms, there was clearly no doubt about my connection to that child. That photo opened up a window in my heart and expanded my vision to help me clearly see that I am deeply connected to that child and to every child who lives in the global village.

My theology became my undeniable reality.

I spent my first night in South Africa and most of my first morning with Lindsey in North Durban, a suburban enclave of Kwazulu Natal's provincial capital. The look and feel of the neighborhood, coffee shops, and cafes seemed much like Southern California.

Around midday, as we started our journey North, I got my first glimpse of the reality of much of South Africa. At the northbound on-ramp for the N2 freeway, there were scores of black would-be salesmen and women offering everything from candy, soda, and newspapers to sunglasses, watches, and even small appliances to those passing by. As we pulled onto the highway, I was surprised to see scores more black people standing and walking along the shoulders near the off-ramp and on down the highway.

These legions of walkers, men, women, and children, exclusively black, appeared on every road I traveled. It seems there are two distinct classes of people in South Africa, those who walk and those who drive. The former are exclusively black, the latter are mostly white.

Seeing all these long distance trekkers gave deepened meaning to the title of Nelson Mandela's autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom.

While political liberation occurred in 1994 with the end of legal apartheid, economic apartheid is still very much alive. South Africa has the dubious distinction of having the largest disparity between wealth and poverty of any country on the planet. The gap has unfortunately grown in the 15 years since political liberation.

The harsh reality is that the continuation of land, natural resources, industry, banking, and capital remaining almost entirely in white hands was part of the deal cut in the 1990's between the now dominant African National Congress and the Nationalist Party, which had previously controlled the government.

In the cities, white people live in ocean front villas and hilltop homes. Black people and other minorities live, for the most part, in crowded, decaying neighborhoods or in the squalor of the infamous townships. On drives and the long runs I took on rural roadways, I passed by hilltop mansions of sugar cane farmers and clusters of shanties in which the black field workers lived.

In the arid inland, there were scattered clusters of traditional round houses (roundels) and new

developments with rows of new, simple, concrete block homes that are part of government efforts to provide adequate housing for all.

Across the road from the small cluster of homes where Lindsey and her partner, Thomas, rent a guesthouse, was the Mondi Country Club, a sprawling area of homes, golf course, tennis courts and community center with a swimming pool and a restaurant. Entrance to the complex is through a staffed security gate, and a high wire fence surrounds the area. Inside the fence were coils of razor wire that would ensnare anyone who managed to climb the fence.

The urban and rural homes of whites and the few people of color with some degree of wealth all are similarly protected with guards, barbed wire, security cameras, and alarms, and, for many, large guard dogs. Several of Lindsey and Thomas' friends live in gated neighborhood within a gated community.

When I was shopping in a small strip the nearby town of Mtubatuba, I was shocked to see a security guard decked out in uniform and armored flack jacket carrying an AK47 assault rifle. Woe to any would be shoplifter.

Such security precautions are necessary, because, along with the distinction of having world's largest income disparity, South Africa has the world's highest crime rate.

Also, not unrelated, is the fact that South Africa as a country, and the rural areas of northern Kwazulu Natal, have the world's highest HIV infection rate and highest incidence of active AIDS. In some areas, the rate of HIV infection is nearly 40%. Many with this disease are unable to access health care.

Another disturbing statistic is the unemployment rate, which exceeds 40%. For those who find employment, the official minimum wage is set at 150 rand, somewhat less than 20 US dollars per day. However, in reality, many pay less than this officially mandated amount. Lindsey's landlord pays the workers he refers to as "my Zulus" 50 rand, or about 6 dollars and 50 cents for a day's labor.

As in America, elements of poverty: access to adequate housing, employment opportunities, access to health care, educational opportunities, and the capacity to accumulate wealth and thus weave a personal safety net, are all interwoven. For those stuck in such a web of poverty, opportunities to climb out are few and far between.

There are, fortunately, many efforts underway to make a difference in Southern Africa. I am proud to say that a number of Unitarian Universalist congregations, including my home congregation in Eugene, are, independently or in conjunction with the Unitarian Universalist Global Aids Coalition, partners in programs in southern Africa. I will share more about those efforts in a December sermon scheduled shortly after World AIDS Day.

While in Africa, I had the opportunity to spend time at a preschool affiliated with a program called, Holy Cross Hospice. I spent time with children and provided training. I held in my own arms some of the children who, with the help of donated anti-retro viral medications, are battling

AIDS.

Ironically, the greatest contribution I made to address income disparity in South Africa was to leave my baggage-filled rental car unattended. Opportunistic thieves broke a window and quickly made off with five bags that held mine and Lindsey's laptops, two cameras, 2 iPods, back-backing gear, clothing and shoes, gifts and souvenirs, and nearly \$5,000 worth of Zulu jewelry and other crafts, we were transporting for sale here in the states to sell to support a nonprofit that helps fund Holy Cross. Lindsey also lost her backpack, in which were her wallet, passport and four volumes of irreplaceable research notes. This last loss was, to a social scientist, the most devastating.

The hours that followed were frantic as we canceled credit cards, made a quick trip to the American Counsel office for a temporary passport, filed police reports, and rearranged our travel plans.

In the end, the loss was tempered when Lindsey found that half of her notes had been transcribed and backed up on her hard drive at home. We were able to change our itinerary to fly back to the US two days later with little additional expense. We ordered more beadwork and made contact with insurance companies who confirmed that homeowners coverage would likely cover losses at full replacement value.

I lost little but two days time and a sense of safety and security. The latter comfortable attitude is something I usually take for granted in the US, a state of being not readily available in South Africa. Crime and cautions to avoid being victimized are as imbedded in that culture as are the historical exploitations that created the deep economic and racial disparity that exists there. It's a way of life Lindsey affirms she cannot long abide.

What I gained was a deeper understanding of the reality of the multi-faceted nature of poverty, cultural disruption, dissatisfaction, and disempowerment that leads to crime.

I returned to the United States sensitized by my experience, My awareness of income disparity had been made more real when I had the opportunity to see and know a few of the people behind the statistics. I also have a heightened appreciation for my own incredibly privileged status. The final valuations of that which Lindsey and I carried in our luggage exceeded the total wealth of families I met in Kwazulu Natal. In addition, my wealth was insured and secure.

I bring that increased sensitivity with me here to Jefferson County. I notice not only the lovely Victorian houses in old town and some of the amazing homes capturing stunning views of Admiralty Inlet and the Straits of Juan de Fuca, but also the run-down homes and trailer courts that I pass by on my morning runs. Though I do not see scores of people walking along the highways, I do see families squeezed into run-down vehicles that seem ready to breakdown at any moment.

The unemployment rate here has climbed as the economic problems persist. It is those who live on the margins with little reserves and lacking the accumulated wealth of pension funds and home equity who are most at risk in difficult economic times.

As I did in Africa, I have taken a look at some of the poverty statistics for Jefferson County. Though it is not as extreme as what I saw in South Africa, there is real and significant income disparity within this congregation and within the larger community. About 11% of the counties residents live below the federal poverty line. That number increases to about 19% for children under the age of 18.

Here, too, race has an impact on access to the tools for personal economic stability. The on-time high school completion rate for Native Americans is currently about 60 percent as compared to over 80% for whites.

Unemployment nearly matches state and national averages, peaking recently at nearly 10%. These official employment figures do not reflect those not currently seeking employment, those who are under employed, or those in minimum wage jobs who often do not earn what can be considered a living wage.

The US Congress recently raised the minimum wage in the US to \$7.25 per hour and Washington's is now up to \$8.55, yet calculations of living wage for Jefferson County suggest that while a single individual needs only \$7.54 per hour to find adequate housing and meet basic needs in this community, for a single parent with a single child that increases to \$14.22 per hour, meaning a shortfall of over \$5.00 per hour for someone earning minimum wage. For a two-parent family with two children, a similar \$5.00 gap emerges between what two minimum wage workers earn and what it costs here to meet basic family needs.

In a January 2009 sermon on the topic of a living wage, then President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, reminds us that the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the occasion where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his famous "I Have a Dream" address. A key demand of the march was "a national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living."

Certainly, Dr. King did not dream that the value of the minimum wage would be lower today than it was in 1963.

On March 18, 1968, days before his murder, King told striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, "It is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis . . . getting part-time income."

He said, "We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with daily basic necessities of life."

When members of this Fellowship gathered last spring to establish priorities for social justice projects, economic justice emerged as the top priority. The Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice's webpage offers the following description of what such work might look like:

"Economic justice means building a fair economy that works full time for everyone. It means fair trade policies that protect workers' rights to organize and to receive a living wage for

their work at home and abroad. It includes budget and tax policies in which corporations and wealthy individuals pay their fair share, and which support good schools and childcare, affordable healthcare and housing, retirement security, and a safety net for those in need. It promotes the common good by funding public services. It means calling for new national priorities that reduce wasteful military spending and redirect tax dollars to helping our children, elders, and communities meet their needs. It includes notions of a social contract in which society and individuals fulfill their mutual responsibilities to each other.”

Last Sunday morning I heard the following words expressed by Bruce and those gathered here as part of the Responsive Reading. I think they are worth repeating:

“We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice; and no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.

We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace, which finds completion in social and community involvement.”

In the last year, your good faith and inner grace were reflected in the over \$13,000 given through designated offerings to local organizations whose actions reflect your values. You clearly, as the old saying goes, “put your money where your mouth is.”

You also commit time as well your treasure, including involvement in the COAST homeless shelter and the new project offering volunteer support to enhance the experiences of children in the YMCA’s after school program. Twenty of you have already offered to help in that effort and more are needed.

The roots of poverty grow deep, and contributing factors of education, race, class and disillusionment are often intertwined. The complex issues of economic disparity cannot be readily overcome by a swashbuckling swordsman riding through the night or by any other individual acting alone.

As Mark Morrison Reed reminds us, “Alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

To find an example of what the shared capacity of a religious community can envision and build, one need look no further than the awesome building that is emerging on the opposite side of this wall behind me. Our new sanctuary stands as a testimony to what shared dreams, a community’s commitment and determination can build.

Sinkford states, “I believe there will be pushback and backlash every time the circle of equality is widened, but I hew my stone of hope with these words: ‘The arc of the universe is long,’ said Dr. King, quoting 19th century Unitarian abolitionist Theodore Parker, ‘but it bends toward justice.’”

Yes, the arc of the universe bends towards justice, but assuring that it does so requires us to keep pushing it and pushing it and pushing it.

Benediction

The words of our benediction are from that 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker.

Be ours a religion, which like sunshine goes everywhere;
Its temple, all space;
Its shrine, the good heart;
Its creed, all truth;
Its ritual, works of love;
Its profession of faith, divine living.

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 September 20, 2009. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)