

“Who Are We? As Elders”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
October 11, 2009
Rev. Bruce Bode & QUUF Members

Lighting of Chalice (spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Sunday morning. Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, 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.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.

CONGREGATION: When I look behind, as I am compelled to look before I can gather strength to proceed on my journey,

MINISTER: I see the milestones dwindling toward the horizon and the slow fires trailing from the abandoned camp-sites, over which scavenger angels wheel on heavy wings.

CONGREGATION: Oh, I have made myself a tribe out of my true affections, and my tribe is scattered!

MINISTER: How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?

CONGREGATION: In a rising wind the manic dust of my friends, those who fell along the way, bitterly stings my face.

MINISTER: Yet I turn, I turn, exulting somewhat, with my will intact to go wherever I need to go, and every stone on the road precious to me.

CONGREGATION: In my darkest night, when the moon was covered and I roamed through wreckage, a nimbus-clouded voice directed me: “Live in the layers, not on the litter.”

MINISTER: Though I lack the art to decipher it, no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written.

CONGREGATION: I am not done with my changes. (Stanley Kunitz, “The Layers”)

Building Project update by Jim Golden, chair of the Building Steering Committee

Good morning,

I hold before you the Proverbial Glass-half-empty or glass-half-full

I think most of you, including our most dogmatic pessimists, can see that it's more than half full. In fact, it's 70% full. That's because, we're 70% finished. We've spent about 70% of our money, and we've been working for about 70% of our anticipated timeframe.

And it's been a great 70% - the makings of a beautiful building, increased sense of community, stucco fun, enthusiasm, anticipation, etc. etc.

However, the very astute among you have probably noticed that the glass isn't completely full. And that's what I want to talk about today – how to fill the glass, so that we may begin to enjoy the product of our labor, not just the process.

As I will discuss in a minute, we are now at a stage where we have some significant financial challenges. To help meet these challenges, and finish the building, we have come up with the following plan.

With the exception of our working supervisors, and specialized subcontractors, we will need to complete the building with 100% volunteer labor. A lot of volunteer labor. 6-8 of you per day, every day (5 days a week), through the end of the year, to enable us to finish in January.

8 energetic, highly motivated QUUF workers on a Monday morning is a beautiful thing ... unless you're the site supervisor responsible for channeling that energy into useful endeavors. So, to make sure we don't drown poor John Edwards, we'll have two – count 'em two – full-time supervisors on site. Beginning tomorrow, John will be joined by Irv Mortensen, who is joining the Wallyworks team. Together Irv and John will make sure that you have the tools you need, the training you need, the encouragement you need, to finish the job.

We need all kinds of skills – including the ones you currently have, or the ones you'll easily learn. If you can only work on weekends, and thus have missed all of the fun except stuccoing, we'll have some Saturday work days coming up. As a group, there's no reason we can't do what we need to do to finish the job by early-mid January.

Back to the financial challenges:

When we voted to go forward with the project in May 2008, we had a budget of about \$1.4 million, based on the money we expected to have – from donations, grants and loans. Our current estimate is that, if you rise to the volunteer challenge, we will spend about \$30K less than that amount. Normally, this would be cause for celebration, and we

would be talking about what UFOs to fund with the leftover money – kitchen appliances, new sound equipment, office furnishings, additional plantings, etc)

However, as you may remember, the financial crisis that engulfed the country last fall caused our pledge payments to drop by an estimated \$60,000. As a result, instead of having an extra \$30K, we are short \$30K.

You may also remember that we anticipated this possibility when we discussed our building options in the spring of 2008. At that time, we said that, if we did not have enough money, we could defer the finish flooring and/or the acoustic wall treatment. We've come to realize that it is essential to have good acoustics when we open, so we don't feel that we can defer the acoustic treatment.

Which means: having the finish flooring in some, or all of the building on 'opening day' is in jeopardy, unless

- we find ways to reduce other costs – which we're continually trying to do –
- or find more money. Various committees and the board are considering options including
 - accepting the deferral of the flooring
 - fundraising either within the QUUF community or beyond
 - asking the congregation to increase our indebtedness.
- You will hear more about these possibilities in the next few weeks.

BTW, if you've been thinking about increasing your pledge, or making one, don't feel that you need to wait.

A couple of more things. Once the glass is full (i.e. once we have our C.O., and have finish flooring, and have money set aside for the renovation of the rear of the existing sanctuary – all things we committed to in May 2008), we'll be able to begin considering the list of UFOs – unfunded objects of our desires) that will do the equivalent of turn our house into our home. Many of us have already begun to turn our attention to our favorite UFOs. I/we are asking you to, as hard as it is, to gently shelve those thoughts and instead focus on what you can do to help fill the glass.

We're confident that we'll rise to the challenge and that early next year we'll be occupying our new space. We're so confident, in fact, that we've scheduled an open meeting, for Saturday, Nov 14, to discuss HOW we're going to use and configure the space, especially the foyer and new fellowship hall aka existing sanctuary. You'll hear more about this meeting next week.

Thanks

“Who Are We? As Elders”
Introduction to Part III of Sermon Series
Rev. Bruce Bode

About this series

This Sunday is the third and final part of a three-part sermon series, which, as I have said these past two weeks, is really a continuation of a sermon series begun last fall at this time, the idea being to deepen our sense of who we are as a religious community by having the opportunity to hear different members of our congregation share something of their lives with us.

And, as I also have been saying in my introductions these past two weeks, our religiously liberal faith tradition is one in which we as *individuals* are called upon to discover, discern, and develop our own personal credos for living. This is in contrast to most religious organizations where one is asked to give assent to and to live out an *institutional* creed. Ours is what is sometimes called “the *left-handed* path in religion.”

And this being the case, it is helpful in formulating our own personal credos to hear from others who are also engaged in this task – to learn from them what life-experience and thoughtful reflection has taught them on their life’s journey.

When persons new to our Fellowship attend our Newcomer Orientation classes, I always like to spend a lot of time in the first session of those classes with the introductions. And I emphasize at that time that these personal introductions are not just a way of us welcoming them or being polite; rather, the sharing of a part of their life-story is *essential* to the religious process in this place ...

... for here we don’t have a standard story or suit of a belief that you are required to fit into; rather, here you bring your own life-story, and here you bring your own developing beliefs, ideas, and spiritual disciplines, and *together* we change and grow into the future.

Thus, each person who becomes a member or friend of this Fellowship changes this place to some degree – adds to the ideas, beliefs, and possibilities for living of this religious community.

Today’s topic and speakers

And let me say, again, that in extending the invitations to our speakers today, I have encouraged them to dig beneath the surface a bit to share something from their hearts, to share something from their personal life experiences.

Our topic today is, “Who Are We? As Elders.” Some of the questions I suggested our speakers might consider in preparing for this topic are:

Who am I at this point in my life?

What is the meaning to me of being "an elder"?
What am I attempting to contribute to the world at this time?
What are some of the rewards and challenges of life for me at this time?

The speakers I've invited to speak today are all retired from their professional positions and are also at different places in their retirements.

Our first speaker will be Diane Bommer, a recently retired nurse.
Secondly, Gunther Dohse, retired from both a military and teaching career.
Thirdly, Lars Watson, a retired teacher.
And, finally, Carl Nomura, a retired physicist.

Again, I wish to thank all four speakers for their willingness to share with us something of their life in relation to what it means to be an elder.

They will speak after a musical piece by our choir, the words of which are the concluding lines of Alfred Lord Tennyson's famous poem, "Ulysses," concluding words that read as follows:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,--
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

**"Who Am I, As An Elder?"
by Diane Bommer**

Bruce was very diplomatic when he first approached me about doing this; he said he wanted people in various stages of retirement. It was only later that I heard the term "elder." It took me by surprise; after all, I'm not old!

There are two characteristics that I have often heard describing elders; one, they have lots of wisdom to offer; two, they have reached the point at which they are able to accept themselves the way they are. Neither of these apply to me.

Before retiring 4 years ago, I made a list of the reasons I wanted to stop working (for money, anyway). It wasn't that I didn't like my work – I did, very much. I'm a nurse and a diabetes educator and coordinated the diabetes education program here at Jefferson General. It was a job that allowed me to grow, to give help and support to others, and I felt very valued. But it was an all-consuming job. Although I only worked 32 hours/week, in theory, I often put in more hours, and my husband will attest to the fact that I was often "at work" mentally even when I was not there physically. It was a job that was never done; work situations would awaken me at night causing me to toss and turn for hours. For much of the 14 years I had that job I had no one to take over for me,

so it was difficult to take time off, especially extended vacations. And there were other things I wanted to do in my life. I wanted to experience other places, other cultures, and I wanted to do those things with David before *he got too old*. I wanted to take classes and learn new things, to volunteer with children, to have more time for activism, to spend time with friends and family, to do those activities I enjoy, such as hiking, biking, gardening, sewing, cooking... The list goes on. When my daughter told me they were planning to start their family, that clenched it. I set a date.

But, there was a problem. I was looking for my passion. I needed to feel useful and valued, but it was also important to me to take on only those volunteer jobs doing things I enjoy – which does not include going to a lot of meetings! When Hurricane Katrina happened, I thought, “I can respond to this, I can help, I have time now.” Because I wanted to use my nursing skills, I joined the Red Cross. They sent me to Florida after Hurricane Wilma hit; I was there for 3 weeks and was miserable. This wasn’t turning out to be my passion.

But then my granddaughter Caitlin was born, and I was able to be at and assist with her birth. This was one of the highlights of my life. Determined to know her and have her know me even though she lives in Colorado, I have tried to visit her (and our other grandchildren) frequently. This has been more difficult than I thought it would be, because visiting them requires me to leave here, and here is the place I love to be. However, now that she is 3, we are able to have long talks on the phone and we also visit by webcam occasionally, and I am looking forward to the time when she is able to come here for extended visits.

But, remember, I’m still looking for my passion. Political activism is important – I never paid much attention to what was going on in the world when I was younger; I believed my most important job was raising my children. But now, as an “elder,” I feel a responsibility to work for a better world for my grandchildren and others. So I joined the Raging Grannies and Women in Black in order to act for peace; I march in demonstrations and write letters to congresspeople though I have to admit those aren’t things I enjoy doing.

Working for social justice is also high on my list of values. I believe that, as a church as well as individually, what we do is much more important than what we say – so I am involved in the social justice council. Because I enjoy being around children I make sure some of my volunteer time is with them; I would like to be a surrogate grandmother for some local child who needs one, but haven’t made that happen yet. The problem is not finding things that I want to do, but picking only a few of them. So many things to do, so little time.

All these things are valuable to me, but finding that right balance has been a continuous struggle. Too little time to do those personal things I enjoy and I start feeling resentful. I have always needed to be busy and “productive;” so often when I am doing something that does not have a concrete, obvious outcome, my mind is telling me I need to hurry and accomplish something. For example, I like to ride my bicycle. I rarely ride just for

the pleasure of it, but incorporate it into my daily life, commuting to work or here or to the store. Which is fine, keeps me out of the car. But so often, I am thinking that I need to hurry and get home so that I can work in the garden or clean the house or - whatever. I think that one of the reasons I have this drive to accomplish something is my awareness of the fragility of life, recognizing how quickly one's life can change dramatically or even end.

But, one beautiful day I was riding along the Larry Scott trail, and it occurred to me that this was what life is all about – it's not the endpoint, but the process, not the destination, but the journey - that is important. Whether I am pulling weeds, riding my bike, or even attending a meeting (!), the idea is to be attentive and open to insights, connections with others, or whatever else life has to offer me. That, I think, is what is meant by "living in the moment."

Is this a glimmer of that wisdom we "elders" are supposed to have?

"Age Is Not A Diagnosis"
by Gunther Dohse

In the 1993 introduction of the seventeenth edition of Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary, Doctor Clayton Thomas wrote, "...over 2,200 new terms have been added to the dictionary in this edition. Included are:

Alice In Wonderland Syndrome,
Burn Out and
Age Is Not A Diagnosis."

The juxtaposition of "*burn out*" and "*age is not a diagnosis*" seem to support our culture's values on youth, as in *You Are Too Old For That*.

This made me curious as to what this dictionary had to say about age not being a diagnosis. In part the dictionary states,

"... being of a certain age, especially of an age wherein deterioration of the mind and body is assumed to have taken place. Statistically and in general, the condition of persons in their 70's and 80's will be different in many respects from their condition in their 30s and 60s. Nevertheless", the dictionary continues, "just because one has attained a chronological age is not, of itself, reason to believe an individual is mentally or physically infirm, incompetent, handicapped, or disabled."

It's nice to get a second opinion about one's competence, particularly one that is found in a book as authoritative as Taber's.

I was born in the summer of 1930. I'm going to ride the current decade as long as I can. I haven't looked up the word *octogenarian* yet. It sounds awful, like an octopus, ungainly with flailing appendages, creeping along the floor in dark places. — I'm not going there.

Unfortunately, there is a smidgeon of truth that statistically a person in his 70's is not the same as a person in his 30's.

Allow me to explain: Dr. Thomas also chose to highlight *prostate specific antigen*, called PSA and *surrogate parenting* as new terms for the 1993 edition.

Do you see another instance of juxtaposition of terms? I am here to tell you, that unlike my great-grandfather who started a family of three at the age of 76, I, with a high *PSA* am unlikely to have any part in *surrogate parenting*.

I am not grieving the fact that I can't best my great-grandpa, but I am trying to learn to live with such age-related health conditions as:

Prostate cancer,
diminishing sight due to macular degeneration and
a severe hearing loss.

At a meeting of the visually handicapped, the handicaps of sight and hearing were discussed. The members agreed that the *loss of hearing* is the greater handicap. I am beginning to understand their concern, as social interaction is made difficult by deafness.

In the September 26 Science News, developmental psychologist Andrew Meltzoff was asked, "What question about the nature of learning would YOU most like to answer?" He replied, "What makes social interaction such a powerful catalyst for learning?"

As I get older, my hunger for learning increases. There are so many things to learn. I find that social interaction helps me to tackle new challenges.

I turn up my hearing aids and participate in two local support groups, the visually handicapped and the CPAP users for sleep apnea. In addition, I have been facilitating a prostate cancer support group of more than 20 men in Kitsap County for more than ten years.

The later time span is significant, because when I was diagnosed and treated in 1998, I learned that the statistics for my grade of cancer predicted recurrence in five years and death in ten. Those were good odds because my life expectancy at birth had me die in February 1990, eight years before I got my cancer.

Beating the statistics has been fun, like being a kid getting an extra turn on the carousel while the operator is asleep.

This year is my fiftieth anniversary of being a Unitarian. I can't think of a better community to grow old in, than this fellowship. The Adult Learning Programs, offered in this loving and caring community, are more than I could have hoped for.

I thank you for giving me the social interaction that is my catalyst for learning to navigate the shoals of becoming an elder.

“Being Eighty-Seven”
by Carl Nomura

When Lars said that because we worked together for a long time, some people call him Carl and me Lars. The real reason is because we look so much alike, people cannot tell us apart.

John Wynn, a member of this Fellowship for many years, minced his way to the front to talk about his “joys or concerns.” He began with, “I didn’t always walk like this.” I thought, “I hope I never get as old as John and walk with such insecurity.” The years slipped by and suddenly, I found myself walking just like John did. My vision dimmed and I started losing my hearing. A friend noticing that I was grumpy about getting old, asked what age would you like to be if such a wish could be granted? I beamed and said, “Oh, to be 75 again!”

I asked a senior citizen colleague, a neuro-surgeon and a member of the Board of Directors of Mayo Clinic “What positive thing can you attribute to being old?” He couldn’t think of anything so he said, I’ll let you know later. It was disturbing that it took him so long to come up with an answer. He said, “Old people are respected for their knowledge acquired over a long life.” I asked, “Do they impart wisdom?”

I was dubious about the respect part because sometimes young people are rude to the oldsters. They might spend a long time counting their change at check out counters, they tell the same stories too many times, or clog the traffic with excessive caution. Nevertheless, I thought there might be a tinge of truth in my friend’s conclusion so I checked some of the positive and negative things that had been happening to me this year. Here they are:

- The Board Members wanted my advice on how to manage their organization. This was positive since I imparted some wisdom.
- The eighth graders at Blue Heron School had been studying the history of the incarceration of the people of Japanese ancestry during WWII. The two teachers wanted a living history account of the injustice. Since I was an internee, they asked me to reach back 67 years and tell the kids, what it was like to be treated like a traitor by my government. I asked the 8th graders, “What you would do if you were imprisoned though you had committed no crime, you lost your citizenship, your father was imprisoned in a maximum security prison without a charge, and your parents lost their home and other possessions?”

After my talk, the teachers asked me, what advice about life could I give to the children. I said, three things:

1. Get as much education as you can because it would lead to a better life.

2. Have a vision of what you like to be when you are about 40 and have a roadmap of how you plan to get there.

3. Learn to think. Two examples come to mind: Learn how to solve problems in an organized way. Learn how to solve boy friend problems, money problems, and math problems. Secondly, learn how to make good decisions. When you come to a serious decision point, you could deflect, do nothing, or take the hard road with risks if it gives you growth or helps your fellow man.

In this case, I think I imparted some wisdom because I had given much thought to these suggestions.

Next, Michelle Sandoval, the Mayor of Port Townsend, asked me to attend the meeting of the City Counsel and state my opinions about the activities of the Border Patrols. I suggested that the illegally entered Mexicans be granted immunity just as George H. W. Bush did many years ago. They came in search of a better life just like our ancestors did during the past three hundred years. It is inconceivable that some came to terrorize the country they wanted to make their home. Secondly, send the border patrols to the borders to prevent the flow of more illegal immigrants.

The negative ones have nothing to do with respect. My friends are dying at a high rate. So far this year, I gave three eulogies at memorials of my fallen friends. I even received a living request. Lars Watson made a proposal to me that if I wrote his eulogy, he would write mine. I said, "That's not an even trade because I have written mine already and even accompanied by music. It is a recording of *Pomp and Circumstance* played by Beatt Meyer. It is bombastic, pompous, and totally inappropriate for a memorial but I want it played in memory of my greatest peak experience, my high school graduation." Then I went to say it that if you wanted me to write a good one for you, you'd better start doing some good things." All joking aside, I'll write a good one because Lars is a good man.

Another negative one occurs when people are talking around a table. I am left out because I can't hear them. This happens even when I am wearing a top-of-line, \$6,000 hearing aids. This, of course, is my fault.

Now let me describe what I do with my time. I became overcommitted so I resigned from all volunteer work to finish the three books I had started. They are *Business Success with Low Stress*, *How to Solve Difficult Sudoku Puzzles*, and a sequel to *Sleeping on Potatoes*. I'm toying with the idea of naming it *Sleeping on a Down Mattress*.

The rest of the time I devote to traveling and playing with my kids, grandchildren, and friends. The high points are playing bridge and poker with friends. I also registered for a course in group theory, an abstruse branch of mathematics. I shrank my gardening to a bountiful eight square feet of earth boxes. Since I live alone, for the good life, I work on gourmet dinners that I try on friends. I still fail with bread making. They come out caved in or dense as bricks.

Then I admire the ladies including two delightful women, Myrt Gordon, 92, and Barbara

Jensen, 94, who take turns destroying me in Bridge. My neighbor said, "Women are the greatest invention of all time." I asked, "Are they greater than the wheel, Kleenex and the Bissell Sweeper?" He said, "far greater." I agreed and what a bargain; we got them for only one of Adam's ribs. I must be a dirty old man because I like girl watching at the Farmers' Market.

The biggest concession I made in life is to quit driving because my kids didn't want me to drive by Braille. The kids hover over me to make sure that I take my pills and exercise. We've had a role reversal. They are now in charge.

In summary, I believe old people are respected some of the time for their knowledge. Most of my parts work somewhat and I don't hurt anywhere, but a perfect solution for these deficiencies is to get a body transplant from the top of my head down to the balls of my feet. Nevertheless, the quality of my life is somewhere between pretty good and a bowl of cherries.

Benediction

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, and in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons)

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 "Who Are We? As Elders," part three of a three-part sermon series given at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on October 11, 2009. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)