

Welcome to this Friendly Church

the Universalist Churches of Norway and West Paris
(Unitarian Universalist)

September 19, 2010

“Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.”

Simone Weil

PRELUDE

Because our service today is focusing on “Affirming Diversity” our hymns and readings are all taken from our current hymn book, as an example of the diverse range of religious traditions from which it draws.

OPENING WORDS “The Journey of Love” Mohammed Iqbal
An Islamic text

Where in our hearts is that burning of desire?
*It is true that we are made of dust and the world is also made of dust,
But the dust has mtes rising.*
Whence comes that drive in us?
We look to the starry sky and love storms in our hearts.
Whence comes that storm?
*The journey of love is a very long journey,
But sometimes with a sigh you can cross the vast desert.
Search and search again without losing hope.*
You may find sometimes a treasure on your way.
My heart and my eyes are all devoted to the vision.

INTROIT Alhamdulillah **from the Sufi tradition**

CHALICE LIGHTING # 634 “To Loose the Fetters of Injustice”
From the Jewish Tradition, in observance of Yom Kippur

Is not this the fast that I choose:
To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the

oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see them naked, to cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Isaiah 58

COVENANT

Love is the spirit of this church. These are our goals.

To worship God in Freedom,
To affirm the dignity of all people,
To dwell together in peace,
To serve one another,
And to seek the truth in love.

HYMN The Wind of Change Forever Blown # 183 _____

A Hindu text

RESPONSIVE READING “On Turning” **Jack Riemer**

A Jewish text

Now is the time for turning.

The leaves are beginning to turn from green to redm and orange.

The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South.

The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter.

For leaves, birds, and animals turning comes instinctively.

But for us turning does not come so easily.

It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits.

It means admitting that we have been wrong; and this is never easy.

It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful.

It means saying: I am sorry.

It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are hard to do.

But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways.

God, help us to turn - from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith.

Turn us around, O God, and bring us back toward You.

Revive our lives, as at the beginning.

And turn us toward each other, God, for in isolation there is no life.

JOYS and CONCERNS

OFFERING, OFFERTORY, and Congregational Response

ANTHEM **Choir**

PRAYER, MEDITATION, REFLECTION

Please join me in a responsive prayer, found at # 515

followed by another, # 516, from Unitarians in the Khasi Hills of Northeast India.

**For the sun and the dawn, Which we did not create,
For the moon and the evening, Which we did not make;
For food which we plant But cannot grow;
For friends and loved ones We have not earned and cannot buy;
For this gathered company Which welcomes us as we are, from**

wherever we have come;
*For all our free churches That keep us human and encourage us in
our quest for beauty, truth, and love;*
For all things which come to us As gifts of being from sources
beyond ourselves;
*Gifts of life and love and friendship we lift up our hearts in thanks
today.*

CHORAL RESPONSE CHOIR

READING(s) “All is Dukkha”
by Elizabeth Tarbox,
a Unitarian Universalist, writing from the Buddhist tradition

There are two readings this morning, both by Elizabeth Tarbox. The first “All is Dukkha” is based on the Buddhist tradition, the second “The Healing moment” is well within our own Unitarian Universalist experience of the world.

“All is dukkha,” say the Buddhists. I am told that *dukkha* is hard to translate. It means, literally, “suffering,” but the feeling of *dukkha* is closer to impermanence; impermanence is central to the Buddhist path to nirvana, to enlightenment.

***Dukkha*, all is impermanence, nothing lasts. I thought of that yesterday while watching leaves come down in a shower and inhaling the smell of rotting leaves returning to the earth. Leaf to humus and back to the earth to nourish the roots of the mother tree. The crows crying as the leaves fall and their nests are exposed -**

dukkha, all is impermanence.

Life goes by, and people who were with us last year at this time have died. All souls pass on, all is *dukkha*, nothing lasts.

The Buddhist path to enlightenment is understanding, accepting impermanence to the point where we no longer struggle against it. But here in the West we search for that which is permanent even as we live with ceaseless change and uncertainty. We search for a sure footing on the path strewn with falling leaves; we notice the buds of next year's growth tightly curled and waiting; we hold on to the things we can count on: our church, our community, our memories of those who died before us, our love and hope, and our search for truth in a world that is *dukkha*.

Spirit of creation, Goddess of today – let us find each other in a changing world; let us experience love as something which exists, a possibility which is. Let us know that we are alive and being renewed miraculously each second; that the impermanence gives to life its freshness and surprise; that our memories of yesterday and our expectations of tomorrow make now a precious, eternal moment.

“The Healing Moment:”

Each day I am newly reminded of my unworthiness: a dozen thoughts misspoken; another day when the good I do falls so far

short of the good I could do; myriad small interchanges, moments of sharing that strain to the breaking point my desire to be generous, helpful, and kind; months of careful work lost by a moment's impatience, a careless word.

But when I am here at the edge of creation, breaking with the small tide over the sand, the need to do good rolls away; the question of what is right diminishes to insignificance and is easily borne away by the tiny waves. Here, where no words are spoken, none are misspoken.

I am [one] with the broken stubble of the marsh grass that holds on through the wreaking wind and the burning flood. I am [one] with the grains of sand that mold themselves around everything, accepting even so unworthy a foot as mine, holding and shaping it until it feels that it belongs. I stand somewhere between truth and vision, and what I don't know ceases to embarrass me, because what I do know is that the water feels gentle [–] like a lover's touch [–], and the sand welcomes it.

What I have done or failed to do has left no noticeable mark on creation. What I do or don't do is of no moment now. Now I am here and grateful to be touched, calmed, and healed by the immense pattern of the universe. And when I die, it will be an honor for my blood to return to the sea and my bones to become the sand. Reassured, I am called back to my life, to another day.

HYMN Praise to the Living God

215

Jewish, in observance of Yom Kippur

SERMON

“Affirming Diversity”

Mr. Beal,

Speaking from our UU tradition of honoring diversity:

I agree with Elizabeth Tarbox where, in the second reading, speaking of standing on the edge of the sea, on the edge of the universe, she says “What I have done, or failed to do has left no noticeable mark on creation. What I do or don’t do has no moment now.” The important word there is “now.” When standing enveloped in a feeling of the universal, of the infinitely unknowable and unexplainable vastness of the cosmos, what we do or have done, what we have failed or will fail to do, truly has not nor will not make any noticeable mark on creation.

But moments of feeling in touch with the great mysteries of existence are for most of us few and far between. For the larger part of our lives what we do or fail to do does make a difference, does leave a mark – at least on our own souls. We feel fulfilled when we do something worthy, however small, and feel an emptiness or a sense of dis-ease when we know we have not done something of worth we could have done or have been caught by our own conscience doing an unkindness or perpetuating an untruth or in whatever way adding to the sum total of the world’s unhappiness or pain. We’ve recently, in the entirely too frequent and unfortunate disparagement of Moslems and Islam itself, seen a failure of understanding and, worse, a failure to seek

out the truth of what the Koran on balance actually teaches. Like the Bible, which in the psalms encourages the Israelites to dash the heads of the infants of their enemies against the rocks of the desert, every religion, including the Christian tradition out of which we have grown, there are degrees of cultural myopia and vestiges of beliefs and practices that if we were really aware of them we would work to overcome. At our best and/or most conscientious we would seek out diversity and look for differences – in order to learn from them.

For there is as surely an ecology of the human heart and mind as there is an ecological balance in the world of nature. We exist only because of the wealth of speciation that started first in the earth's primordial oceans and grew, difference by difference, until one celled animals became multicellular, and then, over 200 million years or so, evolved into fishes and reptiles, insects and mammals, Australopithecus and, roughly 300,000 years ago, Homo sapiens. Not one evolutionary creature which would have lived and developed without the presence of the increasingly differentiated world around it.

Islam and Christianity, fundamentalist and liberal both, are inextricably linked, as both are linked to paganism and Hinduism, Taoism and Shinto and Buddhism. None exist in either a religious, cultural, or historic vacuum, but are mutually inter-dependent, no matter what they might prefer to think. And neither is inherently better than another, their value is dependent not upon their sacred texts or ritual

practices but upon their grasp of morality, ethics and the human ecology which accounts for their existence and why they are what they are and why they mean for their followers and for each other what they do.

Though as Unitarian Universalists we vary in our individual beliefs, we are not the only people who, in general terms, tend to have a broad range of beliefs and, as we do, include a considerable number of different, even contradictory, beliefs. Some of us are like Buddhists, professors of a spirituality that in its most abstract forms does not posit a god – certainly not one which is active in the world. Some of us are not unlike Hindus, who see an overarching divine unity, but understand and relate to life in terms of numerous gods, goddesses, and spirits to whom they, like some of us, appeal under different conditions and in particular situations. Quite a few of us accept some of the precepts of Christianity, following the more liberal moral and ethical teachings of Jesus even though we don't think of him as a special child of God come to earth to ransom us from an inherently evil nature. And often we find the hymns and rituals we grew up with in more mainline churches or Liberal Christian Universalist or Unitarian churches are attractive and comforting even if we don't accept very much of the theology they contain. A lot of Unitarian Universalists grew up in Jewish households, Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed and not particularly religious at all, but retain a fondness for Jewish culture and customs and are proud of Judaism's significant contribution to the world's intellectual and

professional life. Many of us are, and more of us once were, very like religious humanists and members of the American Humanist Association. We have increasing numbers of members whose main identification is with pagan, neo-pagan, and earth-centered spirituality. I could go on, because we are diverse in our religious make-up and believe, very honestly and usually forth-rightly, in the ultimate health and value of learning from and being in dialog with many different beliefs and points of view.

Sometimes we claim too much for ourselves and don't expend the effort or take the time to understand as fully as we could the world's religions we think we know and borrow from – sometimes too facilely and superficially. But while I think we need to acknowledge this, I still think it's better to try to understand and utilize other religious perspectives and opinions than to have too simple and easy an appreciation of just our own.

We've attempted an honest awareness and pursued a real interest in others of the world's religions for a very long time. It's possible to find numerous scholarly studies of both Judaism's and Islam's influence on our own brand of monotheism. Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendentalists were among the first in this country to study and spread the concepts in Hinduism and Buddhism. James Freeman Clarke wrote the first books on world religions in this country, and both the Unitarians and the Universalists were organizers of and participants in

the first Parliament of World Religions, held in Chicago. We've had close relationships, indeed partnerships, with the Brahma Samaj in India and Rissho Kosei- Kai in Japan – liberal Hindu and Buddhist movements – since their beginnings.

But diversity is not easy. Ours is a religion not comfortable for those who find certainties, however specious, easier to live with than the amount of work regularly dealing with ambiguity entails. Yet ambiguity is the reality with which we live. This is an increasingly complex world. If there is no god as God was once popularly understood, and there is no heaven, with neither pearly gates, nor streets of gold, nor choirs of angels majestically sweeping about the throne of the Almighty to the ethereal music of their own voices, as I suspect there isn't, then what becomes of “God's in his heaven, all's right with the world”? It goes the way of all things, and we are left with the ambiguities our history and our contemporary lives have created for us. A world in which it is not easy to see what is right and what is wrong. I listen with a degree of sympathy to those who want taxes cut. Cut for the poor. Cut for the middle class. Cut for those who make over 250,000 dollars a year. But I also ask myself who will pay to pave the roads, and reinforce or replace the bridges that are threatening to collapse. Who will educate our children to make their way in an increasingly complex and competitive world? And if our teachers are forced to try to educate ever larger numbers of students in ever enlarging classrooms, and there are fewer

and fewer social workers and psychologists being subsidized to provide support and create hope in those who are feeling hopeless, who will be left, because of the cuts in taxes, able to maintain the already stressed machinery of democracy? If people believe it is the “will of the people” that is preventing the Food and Drug administration from protecting our food and medical supplies from institutions whose bottom line is profit rather than public service, and those people can not afford eighty-six lobbyists for every senator and congressman, who will protect the public good, the public safety, from the robber corporations that buy elections under the guise of “patriotism,” and the “free market” (a “free market” that is sustained by welfare tax breaks for the rich – who may or may not create jobs, either out of the goodness of their hearts or on the basis of their ingrained sense of “noblesse oblige?” Who, reduced to medical insolvency and dependent on food pantries for nourishment will provide the cultural, educational, and political basis for a civilized society? It seems to me I see far more parvenues than I see people from established families at the rallies held to call for special privileges for those not convinced they can succeed solely on their own initiative.

It’s diversity, it seems to me, not the rush of lemmings or the stampede of sheep at the siren song of “rugged individuality and the devil take the hindmost” that builds a world of fairness and simple social justice. I believe it’s the free exchange of opinion and the honest examination of differences that creates the just society. And I welcome

A "Thank You !" to everyone who brought something today to help with our contribution to the local Food Pantry.