

## Pulpit Announcements 3/4/2012

You are invited to make a difference at the fellowship by making space in the parking lot. Most of us have experienced mobility issues at one time or other in our lives. Please, if you are able-bodied, consider parking on the grassy areas on Sundays so that we may leave our upper, paved lot open for people challenged by mobility. These spaces mean a lot to folks who are recovering from surgery or may otherwise have difficulty getting into the fellowship from their vehicles. Thank you in advance for your hospitality.

Please save the date. On Saturday, April 28, we will be celebrating our annual Stewardship Dinner. This is a high fun event, and we want everyone to be there, so please put it on your calendar. And if you would like to help out, please contact Rev. Carmen.

“Eat, Serve, Love” A Sermon by Carmen McDowell  
delivered to Cascade Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
East Wenatchee, Washington Sunday, March 4, 2012

### Call to Worship:

(Adapted from James Vila Blake)

Love is the doctrine of this fellowship;  
The quest for truth is its sacrament;  
And service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace;  
To seek knowledge in freedom;  
To serve humanity in fellowship:  
This is our covenant.

### Readings:

Onions by William Matthews

How easily happiness begins by  
dicing onions. A lump of sweet butter  
slithers and swirls across the floor

of the sauté pan, especially if its  
errant path crosses a tiny stick  
of olive oil. Then a tumble of onions.

This could mean soup or risotto  
or chutney (from the Sanskrit  
*chatni*, to lick). Slowly the onions  
go limp and then nacreous  
and then what cookbooks call clear,  
though if they were eyes you could see

clearly the cataracts in them.  
It's true it can make you weep  
to peel them, to unfurl and to tease  
from the taut ball first the brittle,  
caramel-colored and decrepit  
papery outside layer, the least

recent the reticent onion  
wrapped around its growing body,  
for there's nothing to an onion  
but skin, and it's true you can go on  
weeping as you go on in, through  
the moist middle skins, the sweetest

and thickest, and you can go on  
in to the core, to the bud-like,  
acid, fibrous skins densely  
clustered there, stalky and in-  
complete, and these are the most  
pungent, like the nuggets of nightmare

and rage and murmury animal  
comfort that infant humans secrete.  
This is the best domestic perfume.  
You sit down to eat with a rumor  
of onions still on your twice-washed  
hands and lift to your mouth a hint

of a story about loam and usual

endurance. It's there when you clean up  
and rinse the wine glasses and make  
a joke, and you leave the minutest  
whiff of it on your light switch,  
later, when you climb the stairs.

From *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, (New York: Vintage, 2003)

### To Be of Use by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the black sleek heads of seals  
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

From *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish theme* (New York: Knopf, 1999)

## Sermon

When I was a child, I visited my grandparents and great-parents quite a bit. My mom's grandparents were known in the family as Mama Clara and Daddy John, and they lived outside of Amarillo, Texas. I remember a lot about visiting them, but one thing really stands out. Breakfast. Every day Mama Clara would scramble up some eggs from her hens with thick slices of buttered toast or cook up a steaming pots of grits, served with a cold plate of some fresh-from-the-garden sliced tomatoes, and often a half of a grapefruit in its tart, red, perfection. We sat there, Daddy John, Mama Clara and I, around the table and read the paper together. On Saturdays though, they would add a leaf to the table, and Mama Clara would cook way more food. When she opened the oven door you could see the thick stacks of buttermilk pancakes. The sizzle of bacon filled the kitchen. The sound of her spoon circling the bottom of the skillet as she made red-eye gravy. The smell of fresh coffee percolating wafted down the block and alerted the neighbors to the fact that breakfast at the McClure's was just about ready. They filed in one by one, coming into the kitchen through the backdoor without knocking. They poured themselves coffee, pulled up a chair at the table, and simultaneously helped themselves to a section of the local paper while joshing Daddy John about something. He just sipped his coffee and grinned. When I, a kid from the San Diego county suburbs, asked my mother about all this inexplicable behavior she explained that they had lived through the Depression and had been fortunate enough to have food to spare, so they got into the habit of serving any comers breakfast on Saturdays. It was a tradition. Since Daddy John had started life as a chuck wagon cook on cattle drives, and Mama Clara was the well-to-do daughter of the local doctor, they just fell into this practice. It was a touchstone of their marriage. To this day, when I see a table loaded with Texas-size portions of breakfast food, I think of my Mama Clara and Daddy John, and how they ate, served, and loved.

As we prepare this month to cast our vision for social justice, I think we can ask why do social justice at all? Why do we eat? Why do we serve? Why do we love? Have I whetted your curiosity, or perhaps even your appetite?

This sermon of course pays homage to the bestselling book *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. The author recounts how she was unhappy in her marriage and went to Italy to reconnect with the joy of eating, to India to learn how to be mindful, and to

Indonesia to open her heart. It's a charming tale of self-discovery which some have criticized for being too self-absorbed and privileged. I'm here to do neither, but to use it as a reminder that there are different seasons in our lives, and in the lives of congregations. There are times when the most important thing is to have a delicious, soul-nurturing meal. And then there are times when we must move out beyond our walls and serve others. And at all times, we must be grounded in love. So to me, social justice work has a kind of natural rhythm to it, like breathing in and breathing out, all the while staying deeply grounded in the beauty and love of the here and now.

So before we dive into that, let's take a moment and call to mind where we've been this church year of 2011-2012. At its summer retreat, our Board set the goal to re-imagine and re-invigorate our social justice efforts as a congregation. In planning the auction last December, the Board agreed to set aside the funds raised to support this process. We hired top-notch facilitator Jennifer Bright to come and be with us later this month. To keep this from being an entirely minister-led process, I invited Gary Pape to help. Gary indicated interest in this effort from last year's visioning process. He and I then recruited Kerry Logan, Rocci Hildum, and KC Kwak to be the Social Action Team that is working with me to help prepare for Jennifer's visit. And she will be here on March 25 to preach and then lead an all-congregation congregation about our vision for social justice in our community. The following Saturday, March 31, she will return to facilitate the second part of the process – to set concrete action steps to implement that vision.

Here are the words from the charter of the new Social Action Team: “We want to help turn the words in our Fellowship's Mission Statement into action. Specifically how best to serve our local and world communities with sustained efforts while seeking to deepen our spiritual connection within our congregation and within the larger community. It will be our goal to enable our congregation to fulfill the vision of a Beloved Community, one social action at a time. Our first commitment is to interface with Jennifer Bright who will help us envision which unmet needs in our community will be the best match for our talents and energies as a fellowship.” This team is currently contacting local social service agencies to help us get a sense of our community's unmet needs and how we as a fellowship are perceived in the Valley. And we are preparing to do some congregational remembering together next week after the service, where we will do a history timeline. After all the conversations this month, we will again be looking for people to join the team in a whole variety of ways. In the meantime, please feel free to offer to help and give the team your support and input.

I would like to again mention the cyclical nature of congregational life – sometimes we breathe in, sometimes we breathe out. We know that we are not re-imagining our social justice efforts in a vacuum. For through 2007-2010, we breathed out ... a lot. Diane Groody, the chair of what was most recently called the Social and Environmental Action Team, described to me that this congregation had over 20

participants in over 20 different activities, not to mention leading numerous Sunday forums and keeping the congregation apprised of all its activities through the newsletter and announcements. Whew! So I would just like to say right now a very public thank you to Diane and the amazing folks who did all that hard work. Your service is exemplary. Thank you. And since the team went on hiatus in early 2011, we have been in a time of stocktaking and energy gathering. Gary Pape and the new Social Action Team stand on your shoulders. Your work was important and valued. The cyclical nature of congregational life moves on, and now it time to begin to breathe out yet again.

So, before we turn our attention to the themes of Eat, Serve, and Love, let me remind you of something important you have already heard. “In the case of loss of pressure in the cabin during this flight, oxygen masks will be lowered in front of you. Please place your own mask first, and then assist those around you.” Remember, you have to place your own mask first. Before you can serve others, you must eat.

So, let’s turn our thoughts to Eating. There’s an important analogy for us here. Before we can offer another something to drink, our own well must be full. If it is dry, we have nothing for the parched neighbor who may drop by, not to mention our own lives will be a desert. My grandfather, the Rev. Howard McClure, used to say that “The opposite of riches isn’t poverty; it’s community.”

Once I asked him what he meant by that. And not surprisingly, he told me a story. He was raised by Mama Clara and Daddy John, and after a mid-twenties conversion experience, he headed off to New Orleans Baptist Seminary. There he met and married my grandmother Elizabeth. They lived in a tiny apartment off campus together as newlyweds and fellow students. And times were very hard. Granddad took to walking down by the docks in the evening so as not to be home at suppertime. He hoped grandma would think he had a meeting to attend. Actually, he was going without his evening meal so that grandma, who was by then pregnant with my mother, would have a little more to eat. One particularly bad day, granddad was lingering down by the docks and considering giving up on seminary and getting a job to take care of his family. The dodging of the landlord, the slim pickings for lunch, the skipping dinner, the holes in his shoes – it was getting to be too much. He gazed down into the water and an old African American man came up beside him and made some small talk.

“I was lower than a snake’s belly, and when that man invited me home for dinner, I almost didn’t go, but I did.” That was the beginning of a very important friendship for my granddad. That older gentleman taught my granddad how to shrimp from the docks, how to pick and eat poke salad, and basically all the survival ways of his community. And, most importantly, he took him into his community. My grandparents started going to his church, and bags of groceries started appearing on their doorstep. One woman slipped my grandma a hand-me-down dress when it became obvious that she had no money to buy maternity clothes. My grandparents graduated from seminary in 1947, the same year my mother was born. And my grandfather became a vocal and visible

advocate for racial justice during that time of his life and ever after. He told of the meals he had at the old man's house of big mess of collard greens streaming with fatback, hush puppies, fried shrimp, and etouffee, and gumbo by the gallon. And steaming coffee. He would imitate the old man's wisdom on the subject of coffee. "Black as night, hot as hell, and sweet as love."

The opposite of riches isn't poverty; it's community. Before you can feed others, you must be fed.

And if you're feeling hungry right about now, I invite you to consider signing up to be a host for an upcoming Saturday Circle Supper, or sign up for one on the back wall of the Sanctuary, near the back doors.

When you yourself have plenty and then some, it's time to serve. And we have been serving, for a very long time. This is one of our longstanding sources of pride as Unitarian Universalists. We had ancestors on both side of the family tree who were involved in abolition, women's suffrage, the peace movement, and countless other social change movements. Our Unitarian ancestor Joseph Tuckerman is considered to be the founder of professional social work. He served the poor and immigrant communities in 19<sup>th</sup> century Boston. He was typical of his period, though, and provided ministry to persons, not structures; social service, rather than social action. Rather than change the conditions causing poverty, he tried to raise and distribute funds to alleviate poverty, (Tuckerman, 28). That was his guiding image, and the one available to him at the time, so I don't judge him. I am grateful to him. He serves to remind us that images are powerful, and drive our motivations for our social justice work. What have been some of our images, historically?

I would say at least three, (Beuhrens and Parker, 11). First, there is the ancient Christian sense that comes out of Paul and the Book of Revelations that there is a great battle underway between good and evil, and in order to be helpful in that battle, Christians are called to serve their fellow human beings. The notions of sinfulness, judgment, and redemption guided us when we felt more rooted as Christians.

This brings us to the second image. Jesus preached that all humans are siblings under God, and that our participation in this kingdom calls us to serve one another. This has been handed down and adapted over time. The 19th century social gospel of Walter Raschenbusch similarly emphasized our common humanity, what he called the Commonwealth of God, a term perhaps more palatable to democratic sensitivities. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached of the Beloved Community, and spoke of how we are all caught up in a web of mutuality. Our Jewish brothers and sisters speak of Tikkun ha-olam, the ongoing work to heal the world. Rebecca Parker and other critique this vision of the Commonwealth of God in that it places its emphasis on a future time when all will be restored, redeemed or in some other way made right. It juxtaposes this future against the present and finds the present wanting, which then drives us to act. Parker cautions that this guiding image for social justice can be too thin, and run dry

when the going is rough. I will speak some more about this next week, and also the alternative she suggests, which is simply, a grateful vision grounded in interrelatedness and love.

So, this is the love section of this sermon. We know as Unitarian Universalists that no external power forces us to serve our fellow human beings. We are not compelled by images of hell that await us unless we amass enough good deeds in this life. Nor are we convinced that having the proper set of doctrines fixed in our minds is what saves us. What saves us is simply this: love. Richard Gilbert puts it like this: “In the love of beauty and the spirit of truth, we unite for the celebration of life and the service of humanity,” (28). Gilbert says that the first principle of our religion, the reason we unite is love. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the principle of inter-being. He says that one cannot look at the tomato without also seeing the soil in which it grew, without feeling the warm sunshine of southern climes where it grew, the clouds whose rain gave it nourishment, the Immokalee workers whose hands plucked it from the vine and packed it in a crate, the oilfields in distant lands who provided fuel for the truck to bring it to market, the soldiers who fight for those oilfields, the long-haul driver of the truck who toiled at all hours miles from home, the supermarket worker who placed it in a pyramid with other tomatoes at the local shop, the Columbia River whose hydro-electric power so brightly lights that red pyramid and the parking lot where I choose to shop late at night, and the bag boy who placed it in my bag and set it in my trunk. When I bite into the tomato, with mindfulness, I remember my connection to all things and beings. I remember with humility my reliance on so many others for my existence. I feel gratitude. I feel love. And I am motivated to help ease others’ suffering. From this place, not from a future vision of a better world, but from a heart full of love, I pray I can act with integrity and hopefully with sustainability for the long haul.

May we be a house of plenty, like the house of African American elder who shared his table and his knowledge with my hungry granddad. May we be a house of gratefulness, of love, of hope, like my Mama Clara’s and Daddy John’s, like the ancient Hebrews tent of meeting, Druidic circles of standing stones, and even the Gothic cathedrals.

May we be a house of remembrance for the skills of loving over long stretches of time, for renewing ourselves, and blessing the world. For breathing out, and breathing in. For being planted in gratefulness and ever rooted in love.

May it be so.

References

Buehrens, John A., and Rebecca Ann Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

Gilbert, Richard S. *The Prophetic Imperative*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000.

Parker, Rebecca. "Resisting Evil, Reverencing Life." In *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2010.