

Sermon: “*Old Churches – New Meaning*”

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January 24, 2010

First Reading: *from Psalm 44*

O God, our ears have heard,
our forbearers have declared to us,
The deeds you did in their days,
in days of old:
How with your own hand you
made room for them.
It was your arm and your right hand
and the light of your countenance,
in your love for your people.
In God we gloried day by day,
your name we praised always.

Yet now you have cast us off
and put us in disgrace,
and you go not forth with our armies.
You have let us be driven back by our foes;
those who hate, plundered us at will.
You marked us out as sheep to be slaughtered;
among the nations you scattered us.
You sold your people for no great price;
you made no profit from the sale of them.
You made us the reproach of our neighbors,
the mockery and the scorn of those
around us.
You made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.
All the day my disgrace is before me,
and shame covers my face
At the voice of him who mocks and blasphemes,
and in the presence of the enemy
and the avenger.

All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten you,
nor have we been disloyal
to your covenant.
Our hearts have not shrunk back,
nor our steps turned aside
from your path.
Though you thrust us down
into a place of misery
and covered us over
with darkness.

Yet for your sake we are being slain
all the day;
we are looked upon as
sheep to be slaughtered.

Awake! Why are you asleep, O Lord?
Arise! Cast us not off forever!
Why do you hide your face,
forgetting our woe
and our oppression?
For our souls are bowed down to the dust,
our bodies are pressed to the earth.
Arise, help us!
Redeem us for your kindness' sake.

Second Reading: — *from “The Dark Side Rising Diet” by Anne Lamott (an edited and revised reading)*

(This was written by Lamott in 2004, before the Haiti earthquake and the particular political challenges and crises of 2010—and I have cleaned up her language. Where I use the word *manure*, she chose a much more colorful word. Feel free to translate.)

Follow these four simple rules, and I promise the gloom you've been feeling for the past week will start to subside...

I sank in to such stunned hopelessness that I honestly didn't think anyone could write or say anything that could help me get my chops and pride and sense of humor back.

No wonder a lot of us feel paranoid and hypochondriacally – it feels more and more as though the Dark Side is truly rising.

So I lay down to practice my Prone Yoga, and I remembered that people already had said things that helped: Martin Luther King said the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward freedom. Molly Ivins said that freedom fighters don't always win, but they're always right. I started to feel better. And this is when I came up with the Dark Side Rising Beauty, Diet and Exercise Program, which I follow strictly now.

There are four rules of the DSRBD&E. First, moisturize, moisturize, moisturize. Drink a lot of water. We are still – and perhaps even more deeply – in the desert, and I hate the desert. It is way too hot, there are snakes, the light is implacable, and when there is actually some shadow or shade, it contains too many surprises – and I'm not talking Easter eggs. So you need living water.

If you don't die of thirst, there are blessings in the desert. You can be pulled into limitlessness, which we all yearn for, or you can do the beauty of the minutiae, the scrimshaw of tiny and precise. The sky is your ocean, and the crystal silence will uplift you like great gospel music, or Neil Young. In it, you can hear better than you've ever heard before – labored crow wings.

These days cry out, as never before, for us to pay attention, so we can move through them and get our joy and pride back.

Everything in the desert is intentional: underneath your feet is something that definitely struggled to be there. A lot of it is too voodoo-y for a nervous type like me – the skulls and skeletons and snakes, but there are also columbine and fern, hawks and kestrel. The water is so hidden and surprising that when it finally rains, all the creatures come out, and it is like the Rapture.

Which brings us back to our diet program. Rule No. 2: Don't eat manure! Just for today, when someone is dishing it out, you may say nicely, and firmly, "Oh, no thanks, I'll stick to water."

And it seems like everyone is dishing it out. They're mocking people like me, who were pretty worried there for a few days. "When did you become such a worry wart?" When did they start acting like such losers? Well, I'll answer that another time because Rule No. 2 only addresses that you must not eat anyone's manure even when – especially when – it is being served in your own family.

Rule No. 3: Get out of Theater A. In fact, run for it. What, you may ask, is Theater A? Well, a big lusty hilarious Christian Science healer told me years ago, when I was toxic with anxiety, narcissism and self-loathing, you always have a choice of being in one of two theaters. In Theater A, the management is showing a violent and sarcastic, overwhelming movie that makes you cringe with its brutality, and fills you with fear and paranoia, and deep shame. And it's mesmerizing. Plus, you still have some popcorn left, a bag of M&Ms, and you've paid the admission. So you end up staying way too long, even though right down the hall is Theater B. There, management is showing a movie that is funny and sweet and intelligent, and therefore inspiring, of people banding together, on a search for the truth deep within themselves, or outdoors, in the beauty of nature.

This kind of movie fills you with the water and air of hope, not Hallmark-running-in-slow-motion hope, where assault weapons disappear from the face of the earth, and there is dancing and tie-dye and, and Dick Cheney is on trial at The Hague. No, real hope, the kind Vaclav Havel described: "Not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." The hope of fellowship, and kindness, and service.

The fourth and final rule of our diet program: Walk. Walk to the TV and turn it off. Then walk outside. Night, day or even in the desert – you can make do with an extremely inhospitable landscape and it forces you to ask yourself, "Where is my place in all this?" And answering that question is why you are here.

Anyway, after I had done all these things, I rested. And it was good. Or, at any rate, it was better...

"What would Jesus do right now?" I asked my Jesuit friend Tom, referring to the state of our union. "Do you think he would take one look around, and just run for his life? Muttering that we'd missed every single point he had tried to make?"

"No," said Tom, "he would want to, but he'd stick around to take care of everyone who was hungry. I think he'd start by making soup."

"Then what?"

"Then he'd sit down and eat with everyone. Because they were family."

We watched people pass by. So many people looked sad and really worried. I thought of a button I used to have that said, “I’m not tense – I’m just very, very, alert.” That pretty much says it.

“Then, when they had eaten,” Tom continued, “he’d encourage everyone to get up and moving again. He’d ask them to help him pick the litter up off of the street.”

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Atheists do it – Buddhists, Christians, spiritual seekers of all varieties – evangelists and secular humanists. I am speaking of the search for meaning. These are the most fundamental of human concerns. All human beings, at one time or another, must answer the question at the top of your order of service, “Why wake up in the morning?” I think the atheist, Richard Rawkins has arrived at a rather good answer – “to work at understanding the universe, and how it is that I have woken up here in this particular time and place.”

The theologian and developmental psychiatrist, James Fowler uses slightly different language. He claims the questions on the ultimately final exam will include:

1. *What commands and receives your best time and energy?*
2. *What causes and dreams, goals and institutions are you pouring out your life for?*
3. *What powers do you fear or dread?*
4. *To whom are you committed in life and in death?*
5. *What are the hopes and purpose of your life?*

Not easy questions. No easy answers. Where is the solid ground that can hold up our lives? What is the source of our joy?

Especially when the ground is shifting – literally, as in Haiti, or politically as in Massachusetts (and in our nation and in our world.) Especially, when as the Psalmist wrote, when he also felt the “dark side rising”? Times of great upheaval. Times when, at least according to King David, he felt that God had either abdicated, abandoned his people, or fallen asleep.

In looking for answers, people have turned in many directions including to religion, to astrology and to science. They have turned into their own homes trying to create a small, but predictable life. They have turned outwards, hoping that a charged political climate would save them, or hoping for simply grand and distracting forms of entertainment and diversion.

Where they have seldom turned for answers is to liberal religion or to Unitarian Universalism. We are such a tiny movement, barely 180,000 adults in the whole world (approximately the current population of the city of Worcester.)

But I was intrigued that Dr. Diane Eck a Professor of Religion at Harvard University, not herself a Unitarian, had this to say at a recent installation of a UU minister.

“...I believe the Unitarian Universalists have a very important role in this new religious America and the new millennium of the world in which we live, You are, in my estimation, the church of the new millennium. In this era, Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denomination, but the highest common calling... In a world divided by race and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a church like this, committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor and service to humanity is a beacon. The Unitarian (Universalist) theology, and, yes, you have one, does not reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but amplifies it, broadens it to include the investigation of the many, many ways in which the divine is known and yet unknown... The world is in need of your theology.”

Nice to hear! The church of the new millennium! Time will tell.

Time has been telling a very compelling story at the First Unitarian Church, Second Parish, of the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. In 2010 we will celebrate our 225th Anniversary. Tom and I are convinced (and intend to prove) that we are actually the very first Unitarian Church to form in this country for the express purpose of heresy: to renounce Calvinism (and its ordained damnation) and to embrace the life affirming, free thinking, religious freedom of Unitarianism. Stay tuned.

In preparing for our upcoming official celebration on March 21st, I've had the privilege of reading, in depth, some of the original writing of our forbearers. And what becomes glaringly obvious, as you dip into several centuries of history, is that in this amount of time our spiritual forefathers and foremothers encountered endless crises, loads of setbacks, astonishing challenges, and genuine triumphs.

How did the Second Parish of Worcester grow to be the largest Unitarian Church in the United States in the 1920's?

How have we been able to have such long ministries?

How have we consistently attracted such strong lay leaders? People who spoke out with loud public voices against slavery—for peace—and in pursuit of a more just and compassionate society?

In their search of meaning, what allowed this church to endure and flourish?

There are three qualities that I have observed that I want to share with you this morning: *persistence, vision* and *trust*.

Beginning with Persistence. Being the first church in Massachusetts to be founded on the liberal and heretical and very unpopular idea of religious freedom – the 1785 pew holders in the town of Worcester, population 1,925 people, faced tremendous opposition and great financial difficulties. They had to pay both the required legal taxes to the only legitimately recognized church (the Calvinist one) for the first five years, as well as support a new minister. But even after that, the small band had to build a church in the struggling economy of a brand new country. And I quote verbatim from our first minister's account of those times: The Rev. Aaron Bancroft, from the sermon he delivered on the occasion of his 50th year in the ministry.

“In 1787, the society was incorporated, and subsequently taxes were regularly assessed and collected.

At this period the amount of the minister’s salary for three years was assessed; but discerning individuals informed him that these taxes could not (with safety) be collected in the usual manner; and however disagreeable, they must request him, the minister himself, to settle with members severally. The tax bills were accordingly placed in his hands, and he was left to collect his salary from each parishioner.

Under the burden of the times which all felt, members became discouraged. Few, very few, manifested dissatisfaction with the cause, but not an inconsiderable portion of the society thought that they had entered into engagements which they were unable to fulfill.

Under such circumstances, any one may conceive the embarrassments that must attend the collection of a minister’s salary in this manner. Members generally were disposed to make payment in the most easy manner; a minister under such circumstances must possess iron nerves, who could contend with a farmer or mechanic respecting the quality or price of his article. The sums received fell far short in value of the amount due.

From the period of the society’s incorporation, the minister was relieved from the task of applying to individuals for his support, but his troubles did not here end. The erection of a house for public worship was deemed of absolute necessity. The leaders of the society explicitly stated that they did not dare to encounter the expense of this building while their members were obliged to pay the annual salary to their minister; they therefore must with reluctance request him to relinquish one third part of his salary. While this necessary work was in hand.”

Dr. Bancroft concluded:

“During these trying occurrences, I occasionally felt depression of spirits, and with difficulty could summon sufficient resolution to prosecute new profession of labours. But I was firmly established in the belief that the cause in which we were engaged was the cause of Christian truth, the cause of God, and I was unwilling to abandon it. I also knew that opponents were impatiently waiting for the prostration of a society, which they deemed heretical. And shall I hesitate to confess that I was unwilling to give the triumph.”

What a guy! He understood that, ironically, sometimes our enemies can give us just the opposition we need to persist against all odds.

When I was being interviewed for or this job in 1983, I was required to go visit the (then) head of the Department of Ministry of the UUA. He sat me down in his office at 25 Beacon Street, and explained in no uncertain terms that I was completely unqualified to be the minister at First Unitarian Church of Worcester. I was too young (32) and I was too “emotionally vulnerable” (I actually talked from the pulpit about having feelings). This was the result of his main objection—I was female, and therefore inappropriate for a historic and important pulpit like Worcester. He couldn’t have said anything to a feminist like myself, that could have been more motivating.

Persistence – sheer orneriness and stubbornness, the refusal to quit or to give up or to lie down . Never underestimate the power of forging ahead.

The second quality that is quite remarkable in this historic parish is Vision. The ministers and the laity here always seemed to have had an uncanny ability to imagine what they could not yet see – to dream of what they hoped would come to pass.

When the present church was built on this site in 1850 (in much the style and form in which you see it now; the Bancroft Room is, in fact, part of the original 1850 building), they knew they had built on “holy ground”. As the minister of the time, Rev. Alonzo Hill, noted, on this land, this particular piece of ground, owned by Isaiah Thomas (a founding member of the parish), was printed and published the first pulpit Bible in the United States. (Normal people often couldn’t afford their own family Bible in the 1700’s. The pulpit Bible was the public, Protestant symbol that sacred truth was available to all, and that priests were not the only ones with access to the holy scripture. As Hill said, “This should invest this spot with more interest than if an apostle had stood and preached here.”

But he said much more that day in 1850, as his new building was dedicated. The population of Worcester at that time was approximately 30,000. He didn’t just look backward to what had gone before in the preceding 65 years of the church. At the dedication of this building, he looked ahead and imagined what Worcester would be like when the brand new walls of the sanctuary had come tumbling down.

“...let us remember, all mortal things decay; and this house which we have builded, when seasons have come and gone, after perhaps a century of years, will also decay and fall in ruins. As I contemplate that distant day when this tower shall be dismantled, these walls crumbled, and the consecrated ground over which we stand shall again be laid bare to the sunlight and the dews of heaven, indulge me a moment. There is a vision passing before my eyes with the distinctness of reality, full of encouragement and hope.

A great city is here extending through our valley, and covering all our hill-sides. I see noble warehouses, halls of science, schools of learning, galleries of art, hospitals for the sick and the insane, all the tokens of a great... people. I see in every direction, in the distant horizon, the gigantic train, bearing hither the treasures of every clime, and travelers from all countries. I hear the inhabitants numbered by tens of thousands, eminent among all people for their intelligence, for truthfulness and high-principled integrity, for active sympathy and untiring charity.

*I look around, and in the midst I see the spires of fifty churches, all venerable in the eyes of the people... If this church shall have done a good work; if it shall have taught the religion of Christ with fidelity and freedom and power; if it shall have watched over the highest interest of this people, and have built them up in a most holy faith and affection; if the multitudes who have entered its portals shall have found it the house of God and the gate of heaven – then, though a ruin, it shall be held in honor by all good men
(and women). The actors in this day’s doings shall be remembered.”*

Rev. Bancroft, Rev. Hill, we do remember. Your vision helps to keep us going today. And something else; your remarkable trust in the unknown. You couldn’t have understood how this brand new religion was going to work out. You didn’t even know if this brand new country called the United States was going to succeed! You, and those who went before us, kept breaking new ground and heading out into an open future, with no guarantees and no old comfortable traditions to rely on. You kept faith; when this church went up in attendance, and down – when it split, and when it had no influence – and when it grew powerful. And from reading the record, you seemed to have consistently relied on fellowship,

kindness and service. You trusted that, even in the worst of times, the free church would prevail.

But that was then, and this is now. And the unique challenges of our own time are formidable, and are in some ways unique and untransferable.

The images and stories from the recent earthquake in Haiti are heart breaking and discouraging. How do our neighbors to the south find solid ground when the earth itself is unstable? When their government is nonfunctional and corrupt? And the real problem, when their unbearable poverty has only grown far worse in the last few weeks?

And I don't know very many people who are happy politically. From the conservative right you hear the cries that our country is being financially bankrupted, politically weakened and taken over with socialist ideology. From the far left, you hear the cries that our country is morally bankrupt—we are killing our planet, abandoning the poor, and being taken over by wealthy lobbyists and corporations. Both extremes are encouraged by their leaders to hate and to fear those who disagree with them.

And the people in the middle often feel that indeed the “Dark Side” is rising – that in these uncertain times, solid ground is rare and exceptionally difficult to find. We can no longer rely on the old ways, the old answers, the old formulas. Which brings us full circle to the question of not only “Why do you wake up in the morning?” But more specifically, “What hope are you counting on to carry you through the day?”

I thought that Anne Lamott gave us a very good start to developing your own answer to this question. To repeat the gist of the Dark Side Rising: Beauty, Diet and Exercise Program (DSRBD&E).

First, if you find yourself in a desert, find the living water: either in what is limitless (and larger than you) or in what is tiny and particular, yet still awesome. **Pay attention.** The water will come, but it may be hidden and surprising.

Second. Do not eat manure. Remove yourself from what is toxic and harmful and degrading to your own inherent worth and dignity.

Third. Abandon those stories that get you into trouble. I call them “Strategically Stupid Stories.” Anne Lamott describes them as violent, heretical, sarcastic stories playing in Theater A, that will fill you with fear and shame. I would describe the stories a little differently. “Strategically Stupid Stories” have no correspondence with what is real. They are inherently frustrating, self-defeating and isolating. A few small examples of such stories:

- (one of my personal favorites), “I have suffered enough!” Or its corollary, “You have suffered enough!” As if any of us had a guarantee that after 10 days of suffering we had fulfilled our quota and were promised safe passage for the conceivable future. Nuh-uh. We don't get to be in charge of how much pain we have to bear.
- Another “Strategically Stupid Story” (to my way of thinking) is, “If only”. If only I was more talented, smarter, better looking, richer, more powerful and received more applause and reception. I will read the following names to prove what a “Strategically Stupid Story” that is: Tiger Woods, John Edwards, former President Bill Clinton and Gov. Sanford. I rest my case.

*Perhaps the stupidest story any human being can tell himself or herself is, “There should be no overwhelming challenges ahead in my life.” “ I should encounter no significant opposition to what I want.” “I’d like an easy life a smooth life....or, I’d like to encounter no real enemies and have no great battles to fight.”

If your mind (or your entertainment system) is offering you that particular fantasy, follow Anne Lamott’s fourth final piece of advice – turn off the T.V. Turn off the silly, stupid stories and go outside into a place much larger than you are. Ask yourself, “Where is my place in all of this?” And then, go explore the answers as to the location of your solid ground.

I’m quite fond of Lamott’s solid ground – fellowship, kindness, service. But each of us has to find our own. Jesus gave some concrete arguments about how to find our place. He recommended loving God through :

- Feeding the hungry.
- Visiting the sick.
- Clothing the naked.
- Providing shelter for the homeless. (opportunities are available for this in the coming two weeks at this church.)
- Welcoming the stranger.
- Visiting those in prison.

I repeat: you will have to discover your own *solid ground* on this mysterious journey called human existence. We all need to find the source of our strength that will get us up, and moving again in the direction of joy and service. And if you can, you might consider picking up any litter you may find along the way: it makes the journey more beautiful for us all.