

GATHER

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
October 21, 2007

Out of wherever in this aching world life has put us — this beautiful, this threatened, this wrenched and frightened world: we gather here.



This gathering-*place* is very beautiful. But I have been to Unitarian Universalist meetinghouses that had none of the splendor of this one, and I felt it there, too. In the United Kingdom there are Unitarian congregations whose glorious buildings were destroyed in the war, whose congregations, once numbering in the thousands, have been reduced to a dozen, but still it was there.

Still, I knew I was home; I felt the presence of noble souls, visionary and brave, present and past and future, and, leaving there, I knew there was nothing to do but to return to that aching world — that beautiful, that threatened, that wrenched and frightened world that waited beyond the entryway: return bearing a vision and a hope and a love that radiates from here, where we gather.



What kind of gathering is this? Who is here, and what, and what difference does it make?



It's obvious enough that we gather in the presence of each other. I have always thought a UU congregation is a rather amazing thing. I ask myself: where do they come from? what brought them here?

In 1843, the brilliant American Transcendentalist Samuel Johnson wrote this to his intimate friend and fellow Transcendentalist ministerial student Samuel Longfellow — he wrote:

My dear S., you were one of the very, very few here with whom I could speak the thoughts that almost force themselves out of my lips wherever I am, though I am sure of being misunderstood. . . . I wonder who we can have got so perverted as to see the highest things as the lowest, mistake shadow for reality, the outward for the inward. *You* will understand me.

THE READINGS

*A Letter from Rev.
Samuel Johnson
to Rev. Samuel
Longfellow, 1843*

*Lectures, Essays, and Sermons by Samuel Johnson with a
Memoir by Samuel Longfellow.* Boston:
Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883, p. 15.

My dear S., you were one of the very, very few here with whom I could speak the thoughts that almost force themselves out of my lips wherever I am, though I am sure of being misunderstood. Imagine me met with a blank face or a hopeless incredulity. . . .

Truly, when I say that all, without and within (if we can make such a division), — that all, all this is one love-mystery, of which we can only say, —

“The awful Presence of some unseen Power

Floats, though unseen, around us,” —

not only floats around, but actually *is* all things, *is* ourselves; then indeed is it most amazing to me, that . . . the mystic melody of all does not allure us all into spiritual unity, and make society the great form of love.

You will understand me.

*From Doris Lessing,
Briefing for a Descent
into Hell, 92 ff*

Slowly my senses, my new senses, steadied. I was inside a tinted luminosity, and this luminousness was like a flame in fire, . . . And, holding fast to the start or centre of my vision, . . . I let that vision—or perhaps the word was understanding, move out and around. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, allowed it to enlarge, as light spreads . . .

[I]n this spin of fusion like a web whose every strand is linked and vi-

Continued next page

How much it means when somebody else understands the words you speak and the passion that burns at the heart of you, who believes in and supports the unfolding of your highest self. John Milton once wrote, “Our country is where we can live as we ought.”



We are makers of our culture, of whatever sort it is. I have been riveted by the diaries of Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor who somehow survived the Nazi era in Dresden, and then lived through the grim rebuilding of Soviet East Germany. He saw people living in a society where the terms and conditions of civilized life were turned on their head. The air was thick with fear, intimidation, and hatred. This was the way it was *supposed* to be in that society.

He saw what that did to people, how personalities and relationships were poisoned — both in Nazi Germany, and then, to his great disillusion, in Walter Ulbricht’s Stalinist East Germany. He saw what his neighbors, his former associates, people in positions of responsibility and ordinary people — were capable of becoming. He saw them becoming false, organizing life around terror and never-ceasing lies, doing despicable things that once they could not have dreamed of doing.

History shows that human capacities develop most fully in cultures that prize them. Consider what the context — a human community — can make of us. What it can make of us when it’s founded *not* on some nightmare of lies and violence, not on the rock-rigid dogma of other ages; — but on highly evolved human principles, on faith in each other, faith in the possible; organized on the principles of love and care; guided by a creative vision of hope.

In 1990, Vaclav Havel stood before the United States Congress. This is what he said:

Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, . . . the catastrophe toward which the world is headed — ecological, social, demographic, or general breakdown of civilization — will be unavoidable.

Yes, we know: it *is* urgent. If we don’t want to be the last gasping century of human life on Earth, something essential will have to change, in a very short time.

What kind of faith, and what kind of faith-community, — can mobilize us to do that, move us to do it and support us in doing it?

brates with every other, . . . [a] harmony runs in a strengthened pulse in the inner chord of which it is a part . . . the locking together of the inner pattern in light with the other world of stone, leaf, flesh and ordinary light.

In this great enclosing web of always changing light, moved flames and tones and thrills of light that sang and sounded, on deeper and higher notes, so what I saw, or rather was part of, was neither light nor sound, but the place or area where these two identities become one. The pulsing ball of light or sound was fitted to the earthy world it enclosed, . . . everywhere in the earthy world lay the cracks and seams of higher substance, a finer beat in time or light or sound . . .

[T]here was another, different . . . pattern, of a stronger, rarer light (or sound) that varied and pulsed and changed like the rest but connected direct, made a link and a bridge . . . Not only a link or a bridge merely, since this strand of humanity was open like so many vessels open to the rain, but part of the shimmering web of fluid joyful being, which was why the scurrying, hurrying, scrabbling, fighting, restless, hating, wanting little patches of humanity, . . . the sea’s children, were, in spite of their distance from the outer shimmering web, nevertheless linked with it always, since at every moment the glittering tension of singing light flooded into them, into the earthy globe, beating on its own delicious pulse of joy and creation. The outer web of musical light created the inner earthy one and held it there in its dance of tension. And a scattering of people, a strand of them, a light webby tension of them everywhere over the globe, were the channels where the finer air went into the earth and fed it and kept it alive. . . Together they formed one beat in a great dance, one note in the song. [I]n the great singing dance, everything linked and moved together. . . .

Never before has the human community faced a crisis like the present. Never has the integral vision of our Unitarian Universalist faith been more urgently to the point.

We live or act in isolation. Human communities, including religious congregations, form the context for our being and becoming — for good or for ill.

I have contemplated often the community of people who gathered at Concord in Emerson's parlor, and the culture that was created there. How could so few people be responsible for so much advancement of human culture and consciousness? You will know some of their names: Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Henry Thoreau, Moncure Daniel Conway, Senator Charles Sumner, Theodore Parker. Why would so many visionaries and brave leaders come from one little town? Was it something in the soil, or the water?

But of course, these were just folks with warts and foibles, such as you might find anywhere. But they were caught up in something greater than themselves, something that implicated and compelled them, something that challenged the terms and conditions of life in this world with a highly evolved and still-evolving vision of how the world *might be*. They could have declined participation on the grounds that they were not ready, not good enough. But life doesn't require that we be "ready" or be something other than what we are.

A few weeks I read from Adrienne Rich's poem "Sources" :

No person
trying to take responsibility for her or his
identity,
should have to be so
alone.
There must be those among whom
we can sit down
and weep,
and still be counted as warriors . . .

There are congregations, you know, that resemble clubs (existing for the pleasure of an entitled inner circle) or a store (where I expect to get what I want because, dammit, the customer is always right!). But a transformative spiritual community will uphold higher-quality expectations of each other than the world outside its doors. Its members will share a really compelling sense of mission. It won't be comfortable for everyone and it will constantly challenge members' assumptions and egocentrism. It will remind us always of our central calling and task and keep us from dwelling on trivia and busyness. There always seems to be a contingent in a congregation that mistakes the plumbing for the water. When that happens, the institution is unlikely to dare to do or to be what the times require.

Yet — when it happens — a religious congregation can be a field for enlightenment and for the unfolding of human possibility, providing members with a context within which their individual life-work can become clear and find support and collaboration.

We face a moment of great danger and of great promise today.

What is required is a fundamental intent about the meaning and purpose of our lives. Not "being ready," not perfection.

As the great Indian visionary Aurobindo put it in the last century, "Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of . . . strength in however small a sphere which [Life] offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it."

We are what we are. A greater purpose calls us just as we are, to enlist our best energies in its service. That intent, and not perfection, is what's required. Each of us must be able to say: *This is my work and my gift*, and trust that your best gifts might be discovered here, and not just busywork, but your best, your most inspired work might be done here.

I know that the responsibility of the minis-

try with which I am charged doesn't always allow me to say popular things or easy things. But I must be faithful to the inner voice. I must speak from my own inner depths and not superficially. In authentic spiritual community, we learn from each other, are challenged by each other, are held to high purposes by each other. And what is valued is the unfolding of the authentic self, beyond the egos that imprison and distort our authentic selves — and the clear intent to pursue this journey, unfold truth, and carry on this work not for ourselves alone but for the sake of the world that might be.

But such a community isn't for everyone. A lot of liberal religious communities run aground right here. You can't hold up an ensign/banner that declares "We don't stand for anything in particular and we don't ask anything of you" and at the same time be a community of vision and profound purpose. We don't want anybody to be unhappy with us. And to the extent we care about *offending* or *disappointing* no one, ever, we will *excite* no one. As for our faith community, there will be no *there* there. I quote the historian Garry Wills, commenting on the election to the United States Senate in Illinois in 1858 between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas:

The genius of politics, as opposed to the mere practitioner — the Lincoln, not the Douglas — knows when compromise can go no further without becoming incoherence. Douglas tried to hold together incompatible things . . . The worst nightmare of the congenital compromiser, who tries to please everyone, is to find that he has, in fact, angered everyone. . . . The believer in the system and nothing but the system is a pragmatist with no practical effect. Even fanatics accomplish more.¹

A community of profound purpose and vision has a right to ask that our participation be of a higher quality than the *obstructionary*, in which the participant engages for no particular

reason other than to enjoy the delicious feeling that *one is able to obstruct*. Nor is any single member of such a community entitled to veto its evolution and forward movement.



But now. I asked, What kind of gathering is this? Who is here, and what, and what difference does it make? Many noble and radiant lives have enlivened this place, and your homes, and still we meet them here. Of course, more about that *next* week.

But — there are ghosts here, too. Or rather spirits, unseen companions.

I turn to our story — the story of this great religious movement of Unitarians and Universalists — the way a Christian or a Jew turns to the Bible. These stories inform us; they make us and energize us. Four years ago, at Essex Hall, the British Unitarian headquarters in London, I was privileged to see, and touch, an ancient volume, leather covers, bronze latches — it was the records of what they were calling the "Unitarian Society," the forerunner of our present denomination that was founded in 1825. The names of the great ones are there: Lindsey, Palmer, Belsham, Priestley. These were really meeting minutes, and you see that they're meeting in some tavern. There is a letter to Joseph Priestley expressing support, appreciation, and moral indignation after a mob burned his library, chapel, home, and his laboratory where he discovered oxygen — all at Birmingham in 1791, a tremendously moving tribute to him — and then there is Priestley's reply, just before he set sail for America, bringing his Unitarian vision to these shores. It made me tremble. They all felt so very near, there in the bowels of Essex Hall.



Here we ask, what dreams do they bequeath to us; what works pass on to us to fulfill?

Others are here, too, unseen — some we would not want to admit could be among us, but they sometimes accompany us here, maybe

hiding in some crevice of your mind, to surprise us at some unexpected moment. Perhaps St. Paul is here somewhere with his heavy judgment and condemnation. Once, in Oak Park, after the fundamentalist preacher across the street had pronounced the judgment of God upon the village for allowing gay people to live there, and after my response, the newspaper devoted fully eight pages to the transcript of a conversation between Ray Pritchard and me. I had to agree with him that if St. Paul were there with us in that room at the newspaper, he'd probably agree with Ray, and not me, about quite a few things.

But suppose — St. Paul didn't come back to meet with us just as he was, as if freeze-dried for two millenia — just the same as he was when he wrote those dreadful words in Romans 1, or his words about how women are to remain silent and obey their men, or how slaves are to obey their masters. Suppose instead — during those intervening twenty centuries, St. Paul had *learned something*?

The heart of the Universe is a roaring engine of creativity, and the genius that created one magnificent moment is now creating another.

This is not a place that leaves us as it found us, and it is not a place that itself remains the same.

You and I might not wish to go back and attend the services that were held here 130 years ago. Old questions no longer need answers because they are found to be the wrong questions. There are new questions to engage our imagination. Today some still struggle with the outworn questions of another time. But you no longer speak of the God the ancients meant, a man or woman up in heaven, like you only bigger, with lightning bolts to throw around. With every new influx of the Divinity into the mind comes new questions, and old ones are discarded. This

faith of ours, and this gathering — they are really a journey, aren't they? You would not come here if you didn't understand that, and if you didn't require the company of others who understand it.

Here the gods and teachers and inner wisdom figures we carry around with us can be brought into the dialogue, too; can learn and stretch, too.

But there is another dimension to our gathering. Who is present here?

All our brightest highest selves

All our dark shadows

All our godhood

All our demons

All our dreams and vision and nightmares
All that we have been and are and will be
and might be or might have been

All our genuine, essential selves are here,
and the future that calls us forward, that we
are making —

All that is gathered here. And sometimes, this place might change us, transform us. And if that *never* happens, we probably wouldn't bother coming back.

What we need now is not just an *individual* transformation. What's required now is a revolutionized *community*, communities of people guided by a different vision, living by different terms and conditions, supporting and rewarding higher values. That is the indispensable reason for a spiritual community.

A community that makes room for this central quest, makes it part of the equation — will be electric.

It will open in us our best passions and energies and free the creativity inherent in us.

It will stay focussed on its mission and do so with great imagination. It won't waste time and energy on trivia. It will think bold thoughts; it will attempt significant things.

It will radiate respect, trust, and mutual regard.

It will be a place where human lives are transformed from within, by the force of the power within them — and it will cherish the transformation.

It will take risks. It will give you space to make mistakes and learn and keep at it until you get it right.

It will work, really work, at finding the gifts and capacities of each of its members, and make a place for them.



And there is another dimension to our gathering:

Here we are invited into communion with the very mystery of our being, the Life of all life, the life-force surging in all that is. And that Life is not something other and separate from ourselves: It contains us, and we are the flow of its creativity.



The great story of Unitarianism and Universalism makes us, forms us; indeed, the greater story of the forward movement of Life and of

human consciousness — *is our story*. And now *we must make its future*. We must face the future with no less courage, no narrower vision, no smaller love.

Because at its best this is a gathering of all our dreams, all our highest aspirations, all our gifts, and all our capacities, gathered here in the presence of so much more — inspired and energized by the unseen body of those who inhabit these walls and the minds of those who gather here — in the service of the Mystery from which all of it flows, in the profound Communion of all Being.

¹ London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and Phoenix/Orion paperback, 1999. Subsequently published in the USA.

² 55f.

³ 59.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*. New York: New Directions, 1980, p. 11.

⁵ *Lectures, Essays, and Sermons by Samuel Johnson with a Memoir by Samuel Longfellow*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883, p. 376.

⁶ *Lectures, Essays, and Sermons by Samuel Johnson with a Memoir by Samuel Longfellow*, p. 15.