

EARTH LAUGHS IN FLOWERS

UUFP - flower communion sermon

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I must admit it is intimidating to stand here to deliver a sermon. I mentioned to my meditation teacher yesterday that I had a sermon to prepare for today and she said, "Oh, you're going to give a Dharma talk."

If you are not familiar with Buddhist practices, a Dharma talk is actually sort of a Buddhist sermon. If you ever attend a day of meditation, there will be one or two Dharma talks spread out in the day. This happens as everyone is sitting on their mats or their cushions, on the same level.

Here I have to be up on this stage above you. But even so, please think of these words as a simple UU dharma talk – some thoughts.

Part I: The Color Purple

One essential theme at a Flower Communion is honoring the beauty of the flowers. The title I chose, "Earth Laughs in Flowers," is a quote from Emerson, who has been jokingly referred to as one of the Unitarian saints.

Since we live in Paris, it is fascinating to know that on Emerson's first European tour, which he took just after leaving the Unitarian ministry, in 1832-33, he visited the Natural History Museum at the *Jardin des Plantes* and had a revelation, a sort of epiphany of the oneness of nature, a spiritual unity of all life embodied in Nature.

This led to the publication in 1836 of his essay, Nature. He wrote,

"The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship."

These words show how far Emerson had come from his training as a 19th century Unitarian minister! That essay was the foundation of the movement of Transcendentalism. Now we know that he had studied the Hindu scriptures in translation, so it is no accident that there is similarity between Transcendentalism and Eastern thought. That is a good subject for another day.

Nature can inspire us many ways. In Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," the beginning of Celie's healing from a life of abuse comes from her conversations with her husband's former mistress, the blues singer Shug Avery. In the key scene in the novel, Shug says, (please excuse my language here, I am quoting Alice Walker):

“I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”

If I believe in a God it is definitely not one that would get angry at such a thing. Probably most of you do not either. But when we do see something as breathtakingly beautiful as a field of flowers (you may recall the scene in the film of two little girls running and giggling through a field of purple flowers), we experience wonder.

Whatever our theological beliefs, whether we believe in any sort of God, let alone a God who is trying to please us and is angry if we don’t notice, Alice Walker’s image is a powerful one.

We do not have to believe in God to experience wonder.

Dr. Carl Sagan, the late astronomer who was an atheist, wrote the following:

“We all have a thirst for wonder. It’s a deeply human quality. Science and religion are both bound up with it. What I’m saying is, you don’t have to make stories up, you don’t have to exaggerate. There’s wonder and awe enough in the real world. Nature’s a lot better at inventing wonders than we are.”

Tapping into wonder can almost miraculously take us away from feelings of anxiety, of anger, of grief.

And along with wonder comes gratefulness. A UU minister, Raymond Baughn, said these wise words:

“Giving thanks has nothing to do with who or what produced the gift. It is rather a way of perceiving our life. Even in the midst of hurt and disappointment, when we see ourselves in a universe that gives us life and touches us with love, we praise.”

And if we keep our eyes open for the color purple, and for the other stunning colors around us, opportunities for experiencing wonder are indeed all around us, every day.

Part II: Covenant

A second theme of the Flower Communion is honoring community. Remember the message of our story today: we are more beautiful as a group than we are individually.

And our opening hymn today, “Come Sing a Song with me” focuses on what a community can bring: sharing, support, love, and hope.

Capek’s community included people from a broad range of religious differences. Here today, I know that we represent a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs.

My personal credo is constantly evolving. One of my all-time favorite ministers who came to UUFP in the ‘90s was the formidable Judith Walker-Riggs. Judith used to commonly

describe herself as an “unrepentant theist, atheist, agnostic, mystic humanist.” I don’t know about you, but I have held all of those beliefs myself at one time or another.

And this could be an interesting topic for discussion. But as Peter Morales has said,

“The problem with asking what someone believes is that it is the wrong question. True religion is about what we love, not about what we think. True religion is about what you and I hold sacred. The practice of true religion is faithfulness to what we love.”

And speaking of faithfulness, at the beginning of the service we read these words in unison:

Love is the spirit of this church,
and service is its law;
this is our great covenant:
to dwell together in peace,
to seek the truth in love,
and to help one another.

How many of you receive this magazine, the *UU World*? If you do receive the *UU World*, and have read this issue, Summer 2013, you have probably already read the article that gave me the idea for this talk. The title of the article is, “Bound in Covenant: Congregational Covenants are Declarations of Interdependence,” and it was written by Victoria Safford

The words we read in unison are a covenant that was written for a church in Evanston, Illinois, in 1894. Today, many congregations repeat these same words every Sunday. Many other congregations have created variations. There are actually several versions of it in our *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbook.

When he was here last year, Chris Buice said that he recited the covenant of his congregation in Knoxville as an elevator speech – in other words, it was a good way to explain to others what Unitarian Universalism is all about.

So, what is a covenant?

A religious covenant is a formal alliance or agreement made by God with a religious community or with humanity in general. The alliance with Abraham and with Moses are the examples in the Old Testament.

For us, you could call it a sacred contract. And more precisely, a sacred unconditional contract.

In more recent history, the Mayflower Compact was a covenant. The Pilgrims took a solemn, sacred, collective vow to ***“keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,”*** whatever lay ahead when they went ashore in Plymouth.

When you become a member of UUFP or if you join EUU at a retreat, that is a covenant. You become a member of an interdependent community.

Our fellowship is in covenant with the UUA in Boston which means not only that we are part of their association of congregations, but that they cannot ask us to leave their community, even though they no longer allow new congregations outside of the United States to join.

As for the first line, Love is the spirit of this church:

The Jesuit priest and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote that

“Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves.”

Teilhard de Chardin believed that love was the result of evolution, and that it was a kind of energy that existed at the cellular level. (He ran into problems with the Catholic Church.)

Learning compassion is a pathway toward learning how to love. Karen Armstrong [in her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*] has said that compassion is something that we learn through practice, like becoming a dancer or excelling in sports. We need to practice diligently day by day.

The second sentence is: “...and service is its law.” We have heard some prophetic voices here through the years calling us to do the work of justice in the world. And there will be a meeting today after the service to discuss how to advance in our social justice locally.

But how about service to UUFP?

Every year we elect five officers to whom is given a sacred trust to lead this community. Since we have neither permanent minister nor administrative help, their shoulders need to be broad.

Fortunately, other volunteers come forward and are appointed. Even so, we never have enough volunteers; we need more helping hands and open hearts to keep this community strong.

The rewards of teamwork are great. But even more important, doing tasks for UUFP is sacred work, a kind of ministry. A few years back, there seemed to be an overwhelming amount of administrative tasks involved, at the time, including sending out mailings – stamps, trips to the post office. At that time, a ministerial student who was passing through town helped me to look at these jobs differently. As part of an internship in preparing for the ministry, he had the responsibility of keeping up a church in California, which included sweeping the courtyard. He told me that when he did such tasks and particularly when sweeping the courtyard, he thought of it as holy work, as he was doing it for the community he loved and for what the community stands for.

We are not a club. UUFP is not like other 1901 Associations.

For example, I recently got a notice from an association that I belong to, saying that if I do not renew my membership before June 30, my membership will be deactivated and not only that: reinstating my membership at a later date would cost an extra 15 euros beyond the

membership fee. That certainly is an efficient organization, but not very gentle and forgiving.

Because our relation is one of covenant, our interaction needs to come from gentleness and humility.

We have been described as a haven for English-speaking religious liberals in Paris.

In fact, for many of us, it feels like home...

You all know the often-quoted words from Robert Frost [from The Death of the Hired Man]:

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.

and I looked up the following two lines in the poem:

I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve.

In the same way, UUFP is a place where....

... once you have signed our membership book, you belong. Of course we hope you will be active, contribute your time and your ideas and your money. We hope you will find this to be a place conducive to your own spiritual development by taking advantage of the various opportunities for growth that we offer. And of course we NEED many people to do that.

... sometimes people become inactive because they move away from Paris; it also can happen that people gravitate to another religious sensibility and luckily, not very often, some leave slamming the door. In those very rare cases, people can be removed from our membership.

We need to accept that some people can go through an inactive phase, when either they do not feel the need to come to church or that health or distance or family commitments seem to take up too much of their time and energy. Yet they still define themselves as Unitarian Universalists.

We do not always know the reasons why people stop attending but we do attempt to keep in touch once a year and as a minimum we ask for confirmation that people want to be included in the Directory. And when you receive your Directory today, think of it as a sacred document because it contains the names and contact information for this whole community – including people that moved away long ago but still feel part of UUFP!

We need to be here for people who may need us some day, when a time comes that a religious community is needed. Once a member, always a member of this family. You do not have to do anything to earn a place here. Everyone needs to be welcomed with compassion.

As the *UU World* article points out, we cannot live these ideals every day but the important thing is that we have made promises to one another and that means that we continue to strive to take that path. Our task is to try to repair any damage by forgiveness and grace. And to vow to keep on trying to become our best selves.

And that means that our relationships with one another need to be governed by gentleness, generosity, and humility.

And I will add here that such a community cannot be created only electronically. Daniel Costley pointed out to us last month that he had noted how much more likely a person is to show up at an event if they have actually said to someone - on the phone or in person - that they would be there.

To return to today's metaphor of the flowers, we as a community need to remember that we all have a role of gardeners of the spirit: of our own and of one another's.

We will never manage to turn UUFPP into a Le Nôtre-designed French garden, with perfectly controlled geometric patterns.

Our UUFPP garden will always be a messy wildflower field or, at best, an English-type garden with a profusion of colors and shapes spilling out, imitating nature rather than changing or controlling it.

Cultivating the UUFPP garden is work, yes, but it is sacred work which can lead to life-transforming rewards. These rewards can be unexpected friendships. They can also be a special kind of inner growth as we open our hearts to one another and to newcomers.

The poet e.e.cummings (son of a Unitarian minister) said:

“Be of love (a little)

More careful than of

Everything. “

And I'd like to add:

“Be of this fellowship (a little)

More careful than of

Everything. “