



# HOMILIES

2000-2015

Allegra  
Sloman

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## Preface

These are the homilies I wrote for Beacon Unitarian Church (variously in Coquitlam and New Westminster, British Columbia) between 2000 and 2015. I have included a story about my former spouse, two short talks from two different family reunions, a stand-up routine for Canvass, children's stories which I wrote to accompany homilies, an atheist rant entitled the Useful God of Fiction and a very personal overview of the hymnbook in use during this period, Singing the Living Tradition. The homilies are not in date order, or by theme. I open with sanctuary words.

The date delivered is included, where known. A few homilies exist as audio files on the Beacon Unitarian Church, New Westminster, BC, website as of 2016. If you are interested in hearing one check out the site.

Any Unitarian or member of a liberal religious faith is free to use any and all of the writings in this book except where I have indicated in the text that the copyright is held by someone else. If you quote, in print or lecture, please attribute.

Previous versions of the homilies exist on my website, [allegrasloman.com](http://allegrasloman.com); these I've

edited for this edition for clarity, to remove personal references, to soften bigoted speech which I didn't notice the first time around, to provide updates and alas, to correct spelling. There will likely still be typos and grammar errors, but nothing too horrific I hope.

Cerlox-bound 8.5x11 inch versions of this (including large print) will be made available for cost plus shipping and handling on request. Whichever edition of the work is most recent will also be posted in PDF form to my site.

August, 2016

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## Sanctuary Words

### Call to worship

When we come together for worship, you and I give three gifts.

One gift is to myself, for acknowledging that despite my failings, I deserve the comforts and challenges of church. It is a routine, but it is my routine, and I hold it sacred. I make it sacred by a free choice, and so I come.

The second gift is to those we have come to worship with, who look to our faces for connection, community and love; who look to our hands for comfort and good works; who look forward with longing to our discerning and listening ear; who look to our minds for our thoughts and our dreams; who look with love upon our strengths and failings alike, as we walk together toward a better life for all humanity.

The third gift is to the world; we are here, we are here, we are indeed here; we have within our walls, in our sanctuary, a place of welcome, not just for the dwellers but for the

seekers. For some of us make this a home, and some make it an oasis in life's journey. Our church is both these things and much, much more, and will be better, richer, wiser still. It is more of the abundance of life and spirit and mind that we want, not just for ourselves; as we light the chalice today, let us think of these gifts, and open our hearts to the song.

### Chalice Lighting

From our solitude, we come to worship in community. From our own pettiness, we seek refuge; from the hatred that batters our lives, we seek respite; from the entrancing distractions and vices of the world, we seek a defense. Come worship, and let work and trouble and anxiety depart for an hour in the light of our beloved community.

### Chalice extinguishment

We lit our chalice for the holy, and now we extinguish it for the holy. For the rhythms of the world that call us to respond to human need, the path of life that calls us to quest and the holy fire of conscience, we extinguish this brief spark. May you find a way to light

## The Arc of a Life

Good morning. Thank you for joining me on this, the first Sunday of our journey into 2015. Today I'd like to speak on the subject of the arc of a life.

If we are fortunate enough to get our three score years and ten - the seventy years of a human life span according to Psalm 90 - we will have passed through many stages on our life's journey, moving between the helplessness of an infant and the assurance and wisdom of an elder. I'd like you to consider, like the arc of an arrow shot into the air, the arc of a human life, subject to the laws of nature, and following - however tortuous a journey it may seem at the time - a logical and coherent progress and outcome.

Although as adults we are expected to be responsible for our own lives, the instructions for the bodies which house our spirits and minds are unknown to us. It seems very strange that we are admonished to take responsibility for what we don't understand. Even now, if someone handed you a copy of your own genome - the DNA instructions that told your body how to grow and unfold in the womb, and carry out the instructions for repair and healing even now - and you had the ability to meaningfully study it, it would be your life's

work to understand it. Much of that instruction set is conditional, and some of it is damaged or miscopied, and much of it seems nonsensical as yet, waiting for the brilliant minds of our researchers and scientists to be understood. Despite this lack of understanding, which in my view hobbles our ability to truly discern ourselves, the world and its people with compassion, over thousands of years, we've come up with an auxiliary instruction set called culture. In the last 500 years Unitarian Universalists have been refining this instruction set, and it is for reminders and continual improvements that we keep coming to church. In my talk I'm going to link the growth of a child into an adult and our UU culture - two sets of instructions, or possibly guidelines, in a practical way.

DNA turns new ways of being on and off, all through your life. It is a good thing, and a wonderful thing, but transformation is not without its hazards and pains. Our culture turns new ways of being on and off as well; think of the joy of the young driver with that new licence in her hand, and the bleak depression of the elder who now feels housebound after getting her drivers' license taken away. The first terrors and taboos of menstruation transform into the self-assurance of the young woman, which gives way to the hormone bath of motherhood, and then the sadness or cheerful relief of menopause. On and off. On and off. We don't talk much about it. You can say those things are private, and not fit for a church service, but custom and ceremony have always attended the liminal moments, the transitions of birth and adulthood and commitment to service, of events through which we transition from phase to phase in our journey.

Men are by no means spared the consequences of their hormonal switches; from the cracking voice and the terrors of the locker room, to the calm, constructive air of a householder, to the thinning hair and getting up in the night - we all know about it, and we

don't talk much about it.

Where does that leave people who don't follow the current societal norms of birth, growth, sexual expression, school, family?

Some of us choose not to bother with having our own families. Some are never given a choice. The DNA switches pulse in others; mothers who say how much more fun a trip to the zoo would be if there were grandchildren. Fathers who rewrite their wills so that the children without children of their own get less of an inheritance. For some, that switch pulses many times, as they create families, sometimes leaving the previous one behind, making their own warmth and light by defining and living in a family which doesn't look anything like Mummy and Daddy in picture books for kids. The story I wrote for the children today was a comment on how every family looks different, and that there can be conflicts between the generations about what family stories need to be told, but that in the end it is what we say when we think the kids aren't listening that makes the biggest impression.

Whatever our families looked like when we were growing up, let's remember that a normative family experience can feel like a jail made of gender roles, or a continual rebuke to a childless person. When we make a welcome to newcomers, young and old, let's make no assumptions about what family looks like to them, but accept them where they are in their journey.

In the beginning, we were little fish - or looked like little fish - growing inside our mothers. Every one of us.

The wonderful condition of pregnancy is a physically, emotionally and culturally challenging condition for the mother. Biologically it is an unpredictable and unobvious

wrestling match between the contribution of the father, the resources of the mother, the sometimes life-threatening appetite of the growing child and its companion and gatekeeper, the placenta. When you think of what can go wrong, it is no wonder that the most cynical among us will refer to birth as a miracle.

As we acknowledge the miracle, we must admit there are seven billion of us, and there's room for some skepticism, if not cynicism.

Throughout this talk when I reference our children, I'm talking about our congregational children, not as a badge of culturally blessed fertility. I think this is an important distinction to make. One of the best things about church is that it is where you can be in a multigenerational covenant as a choice and not a religiously mandated rule. BE FRUITFUL and MULTIPLY is a suggestion to those UUs who are interested, not a law.

In each stage of life, we have needs, and we bring gifts. A child is a gift in and of himself. He brings the future, the promise of a better world for us to work for, because he is in it, and the necessity for struggle and sacrifice comes with him. He needs to be loved, fed, tended and brought into an understanding of himself and his place in the world, educated, challenged, exercised and, once in a while, spoiled rotten.

Before he is even born, we may welcome him best by making sure the mother gets the best nourishment. A world of better people starts with better nourished fetuses. Somewhere in an imaginary Unitarian Universalist handbook, there is an invisible rule: it states, Feed People. Certainly you can fill them up with hymns and ideas and words, but any church that is more roses than soup needs an adjustment, and possibly a complete overhaul. Feed People is certainly the most practical thing you can do for a pregnant woman and the life she carries.

From birth to two years old, a child needs safety and the opportunity to develop physically and mentally. At this age our brains learn by doing, so our church, to truly be compassionate with all of our members, needs to follow another invisible rule: Make Safe Spaces for Exploration. This rule applies to everyone, but it is the smallest among us who bring this need to our attention, and so the gift that the littlest bring to us is that they need it now, not at some convenient time, to be discussed, when we can all get together.

From two until eight, a child needs to transform play into learning, and to develop a charitable and encouraging voice inside herself, for those times when no one is helping. She needs to be coached through getting up again when knocked down and that perseverance is the ground all success grows from; she learns about making friends and understanding what friendship is and isn't; starts on what is hopefully a lifetime of compassionate self-care; develops both judgement and taste; and learns the traditions and foibles of her family. And if by the age of eight a child can see that she belongs to a larger family of all human beings, then we perhaps have done part of our job, to instill another invisible Rule: You are a Moral Being. When we think of their gifts, kids this age bring questions. Lots and lots of questions.

From eight until puberty, a child needs to develop a moral sense, and that includes learning about responsibility for one's own body. The best way is by example, and there's no substitute for it. UUs embrace the challenge of providing a moral and spiritual education for our young people as one of our most cherished responsibilities. We want them to be whole in spirit and sound in body, and we have spent time, talent and treasure to bring our children curriculum about moral questions and sexuality. I'm specifically referencing the Our Whole Lives curriculum, which is not running at Beacon currently, but may again in the future.

It's crucial to their lives, as our children will live them, that they don't have to leave

any part of themselves at the church door. We care enough to teach our kids about their bodies in a safe space, using trained volunteers who have undergone RCMP background checks.

The age-appropriate curriculum is not trivial. It's based on sound science. In a pornography saturated world it is part of our job to keep the sacred in sexuality and to have the courage to proclaim it the birthright of children everywhere to come to knowledge of their own sexuality with facts, love, humour and acceptance. We have as a denomination chosen to covenant together that this is an important value for us, a defining value, an invisible rule: We Shall Embody Love. For when we teach our transgender and gay and asexual kids, alongside our straight and lesbian and bisexual kids, some of whom may also be intersex, we are most definitely Embodying Love. The gift this part of the human journey brings to us is clear - Nature Doesn't Wait.

We must have the hard conversations about the challenging subjects, whether it's sexuality, evil, death, loss or disaster, when the moment comes, knowing that the moment is unfolding. The time to talk to a young lesbian about consent is not when she's eighteen. It's when she's eleven, or even younger. We may be angry with life for forcing the conversation, but not with the child who needs the wisdom and resources to face the real life she's going to live.

Through adolescence and young adulthood, the brain goes through a complete rewiring. This is a good thing, resulting in a brain with better executive functions and more efficient operation. It's also the time in life when our members choose careers, go to school, perhaps travel independently for the first time, choose partners and in general live a crowded and interesting life. Up until this point in your life everything has been set out for you and you

have had few real choices; now you choose your friends and your destination. The need they bring to us is a hard one, and it is a grief to many of us - they remind us to Take Our Light Out Into The World. We think when young UUs leave us that they've impoverished our church. They are truly taking our values, our dreams, our words, our visions, our plans, our highest aspirations for ourselves and the world where it can make light for others. The gift young adults bring is hope.

And then, darn, one day you wake up and you're a grownup. You have responsibilities and tasks and people who depend on you. It crept up on you. And you'll spend almost half your life like this, if you're lucky. Or perhaps you managed to avoid all of the householder role and you are a free spirit, a creator, an artist, a traveller, a wanderer. Either way, this is time in your life when you feel like a draft horse, because you are at the height of your powers, personally, financially, creatively - and you're still good looking - and there's always somebody looking for more out of you yet.

Somebody wants your time, your money, your love, your car, your insurance plan, your pledge, your estimate, your budget, your participation, your comments by Friday latest, your lovingly cooked breakfast, your grudgingly cooked dinner, your grass cutting and tree planting and mending and help with the computer. You will spend a long time not being who you are, but what you can do for other people, men and women alike, and sometimes it's more than any of us can bear.

The gift we bring is the work we can do, and whether it goes well or badly depends on one very very important invisible rule. If you're going to be a draft horse, CHOOSE YOUR YOKEMATES CAREFULLY. There cannot be joy in all work, but I can tell you from the

fullness of my heart and the depth of my experience that if you are pulling in the right direction with the right people, you will have not only some joy in the work but much joy in the recollection. People this age need to be reminded that they are not alone; the better they've chosen their team mates, the less they need to be reminded.

And when we get to the end of a UU life, full of needs and gifts, we are lucky, and we are old. What do our old people need? To be seen! To be heard! To participate in the all-ages pageant that is church life; to serve as an example of what a well-lived life looks like so it comes as no surprise to the rest of us. What gift do they bring? The reminder that hard times don't last, and can't last if we stick together. Think of Denis here. I never saw a man more like a lily in a field, and he's 92!

We all of us are Living Proof that a church community works. It works best when it thinks about all of its members, wherever they are in the journey of their lives, thinking of their needs in a spirit of loving service, and receiving their gifts with the gratitude and the grace we can muster.

So mote it be on the Journey, and Blessed be!

## Living in Truth Forever and Ever

2003

The truth, you will agree, is a rather large topic. It seems obvious to say that the truth is subjective, for even when you can agree on a fact, such as "I am five feet four and one half inches high," the fact may be altered by time (I am taller in the morning than I am at night) or even where the fact is measured (for example on earth or in orbit). Sometimes it appears that nothing can be known with certainty.

A recent cosmological theory, known as superstring theory, is starting to gather evidence that the universe is actually three different sets of internally consistent locations packed into the same space, and held together with strings which are 17 orders of magnitude smaller than what human beings can currently measure. When you read things like this in Scientific American, you wonder just how weird science news can be before ordinary citizens start saying, Hey, wait a minute. This all sounds like hooey.

Maybe it is hooey, but since there are only about 10 people in the world who can understand the math, how would I ever know? The truth, in this instance, can be as true as true, but I simply don't have the equipment, mental or physical, to test it. Until somebody with bigger brains and a better press agent comes along, I will have to accept the theory on faith, and believe me, that scares me as much as it should scare you.

The truth is an interesting playground, if you just treat it as an idea rather than some absolute. It is revealing to imagine a place where people tell no lies. As a thought experiment, such a notion is in itself painful, for in order to imagine a world without lies, we have first to imagine a world where we are not lying to ourselves. One lies to oneself with about as much facility as one breathes, but Unitarians are not in the habit of pretending they don't lie to themselves. It's merely another facet of human existence that must be tamed, so that we may become more fully human. Hiding it under the rug doesn't help.

What would a world in which we do not lie look like? It's hard even to conceive of it. I envision a world where I am not lying, and nobody around me is lying either. My first and admittedly low-minded reaction is that I am not sure I would like the manners of people in this brave new truthful world. A morning exchange over the back fence might go something like this:

Well howdy neighbour, and you sure are looking rough today.

Morning to you, and you look pasty-faced and exhausted.

I don't know about you, but by lunchtime I'd have had as much truth as a grown woman could stand, and I'd be clicking my heels together in a futile effort to go home. After I

dismiss this idle fantasy to actually think about the mechanics of a truthful life, I next think that in a world with no lies, no one would argue with me about what the truth was. We'd all be so smart and self-disciplined we could just look at the world and go, yeah, unh hunh, that's obvious, and we'd waste no time in debate. Or maybe, and this is another scary thought, we'd spend ALL our time debating, like a congregational meeting that never ends, splitting progressively finer hairs until the matters being debated had no impact on human life at all. Once again, the notion of living in truth doesn't look so wonderful when you actually have to do it. We make assumptions about what is true because jamming 2 million of us into a small space makes it necessary. We can't stop and ask for clarification for everything, and so we don't.

I know I'm supposed to be leading you down a track of ideas with clarity and precision. But the truth is, I'm still on the platform, and my train of thought left without me. How could we ever agree on what the truth is?

We're all dramatically different individuals. We all have wildly different sensory apparatus, and that's what we gather the data with, our senses. We all have measurably, demonstrably different brains, as well as different verbal and reasoning skills. I know little and understand less, but what I know about human intelligence leads me to believe that my ability to think and therefore to perceive the truth about the world around me could never be made to match anybody else's. That's about the point my brain explodes. It seems like an intractable problem. It's impossible to make everybody equal in ability to perceive the truth, because our equipment, our natural endowment, is not equal. To expect people to be equal in their ability to perceive the truth is folly; but I suspect that encouraging people to work on their ability to perceive the truth, especially in the context of a faith community, or as a

parent, teacher or mentor, is probably a Good Idea.

As a side note, let's not forget that dreary old bureaucrats like Pontius Pilate can say "What is truth?" without having a clue what they are saying. It's not easy to come face to face with the Truth in human form when you're not in any shape to deal with it. In a faith community, you get the same message bonked across your bean a few times, so you actually have a fighting chance of hearing the message when you aren't so tired and miserable and aching that you just can't take it in. Pity Pontius Pilate. Jesus was dragged right up to him, but Pontius was having such a bad day he didn't hear him out. Fortunately, as long as we are alive, the truth may get at us, although it sometimes needs a crowbar, a flashlight, and a lot of muscle-bound help.

I am going to back slowly away from the idea of living in a truthful world and try to attack the truth from a different angle. The truth is certainly big enough to be able to withstand any attack I make upon it. I think that truth telling under most circumstances is a good idea, especially if you don't ask me to define 'truth' and we don't get into a hair splitting contest about the circumstances. This makes the theme of this talk, living in truth forever and ever, somewhat ironic. It is a quote from a hymn to Aten, the sun god of the heretic Akhenaten from the 18th Dynasty of ancient Egypt. He thought he had a handle on the truth and his reward was that he got his name erased from many ancient monuments.

It's easy to think about truth as if it was a band-aid you could apply to the places it's required. But for truth to blanket all of human existence – and the afterlife too – seems like a punishment, rather than the reward a fussy god doles out to well-behaved humans. As my son remarked, well, how far into this Truth thing are you willing to go? Are you kissing fiction goodbye?

I was horrified, as I imagine most of you are too. No fiction? I shudder at the thought. Without stories, the people are lost. Jesus told us stories. It's part of God's job description, to take on human form to tell the people stories that mean things, and can help them be better people. And if you are getting irritated with all the references to Jesus, you can substitute Albert Einstein; really it makes no difference in the end. The truth seems to pick its own messengers, and the audience for each portion of the truth seems to select itself as well. Human beings definitely don't have the capacity to watch a TV station that's all truth all the time. All news, all the time, sure, but that's a long way from being the same thing, and there's always the commercials in between.

I think I don't need to convince anybody here that social lying is fairly easy to defend. The Bible says keep your trap shut except to say yes or no – I'm paraphrasing somewhat – and that would definitely keep you out of most kinds of verbal trouble. Social lying is not just saying soothing things to people you aren't that attached to, it's also not exclaiming in horror when you see something dreadful, and not screeching in ecstasy when somebody puts your favourite kind of pie on the table. If everybody was as cheerfully free to truthfully express their inner child as well as the children do it, we'd never get a darned thing done. So to my way of thinking, social lying permits conformance to a minimal standard in behaviour so you can expect the minimal amount of flak from your fellow creatures.

Manners are what human beings invented to prevent every human interaction from degenerating into a fight, and social lying is a good chunk of manners. Social lying is harmless, practical, and efficient. So I am not going to jump up and down and say that lying is a scourge under all circumstances. Not only do I not think it true, I doubt there's a single person in this room who thinks it's true.

The lies that really hurt are the ones we can't see. A fish doesn't notice water – until the water's gone, of course – and we aren't always aware of the sea of lies we're swimming in. At this point in my talk, it would be easy to turn political, to inveigh against advertising, cheap political propaganda, the blandishments of contemporary culture and how it separates rather than unites earth's peoples. But wherever you stand politically these days, it's obvious that there are lies in every direction, as far as the eye can see, and that perceiving the truth amid the welter of lies is much more than a full time job.

It should therefore be no surprise how many people fix their gaze on something they fervently believe to be true, so that they have something ideal within their environment, which they may venerate, and observe with love and admiration. From the Virgin Mary to the contemporary yogis, there are thousands to choose from. To this day, Jesus stands in pretty stark contrast to the rest of the world. The same is true of the Islam of Mohammad, peace be upon him, the rich, humane tranquility of Buddhism, and the gods and goddesses of all the dead pantheons, all of whom were as real, or as imaginary, as the Velveteen Rabbit in the children's story.

Folks like us, though, squirm pretty hard at the notion of being handed a tablet of dogma and a big glass of water to get it down. I for one can't stomach the notion of telling somebody else what to think, unless I'm married to him, and that's a special case. And I'll be damned, and I use the word deliberately, if I'm going to settle for being told what is right and what is just and above all what is true, if I can't test it, and weigh it and measure it, not just against the laws of physics, but against what I have learned about the human heart.

So when I judge the Bible to be untrue, it's not just because Deuteronomy calls bats birds, although that's my favourite piece of Biblical error at the moment. It's also because I

know that homosexuals and prostitutes have both God's love and civil rights. It's because I know that four thousand years of science and progress have made human beings quite different from our tent dwelling forebears, and I feel sorry for anybody who hasn't figured that out. And I know that it was cool to eat cows four thousand years ago, but it may not be cool anymore, even if I don't like the change in my behaviour this new truth may force me to face. The Bible's truth to me is not the truth of its history and laws, but of its poetry and narrative. The Bible, ironically, teaches me above all that the truth cannot be found in books. If all the books on earth evaporated, would the truth disappear with them? Obviously not.

These days, I look for truth not so much in books as in people. People with a good working relationship with the truth are very interesting to talk with, to be with. When you hang around people who tell the truth, your comfort level goes up and your anxiety level goes down. A faith community such as ours survives and grows partly due to the grace that comes when we are truthful with each other. Telling the truth and being told the truth saves time, enhances our feelings of safety, of being cared for, gives us real spiritual nourishment, instead of the chocolate bars and empty starch of the conversations and catchphrases we borrow from marketers when we watch TV.

The telling of the truth may save time, but paradoxically it takes time. The abiding grace of close friendships is how they are marked by truthfulness; how our friends encourage our best self while they call our feelings and actions by their true names, to the extent they can be named. Friends tell us the truth because they have demonstrated that they want to hear it and speak it, and they know that any irritation we may feel about how the truth wasn't spoken with perfect tact, will be soothed by the ongoing meaning and value of our conversation. Friendship is a long, intricate, fascinating conversation. Its usefulness and its truthfulness are

inextricably woven together.

I do not mean to offer "the Truth" (ta da) – an abstract notion at best – as some kind of panacea for the ailments of humanity. However I think that it can be argued that the search for truth, established in our hearts with fervent humility, is a cornerstone of every faith. Sometimes this search ossifies into a weekly trek into a building for the rhetorical equivalent of a pat on the head and confirmation that what was true last week is still true this week. I find most Unitarians are just not into that; that's why they're Unitarians. The forms may look the same, but what we are thinking is fiercely independent and wholly our own.

To me, religion is about the marriage between what has always been true, those things whose grandeur, beauty and worth do not alter, with the more immediate questions of how the hell we are to get through another day when loved ones die, when we are sick, or imprisoned, or lonely, or overworked, or angry, or victimized by our own passions, or grieving over losses so trivial that we cannot name them, even to our friends, for fear of the laughter they may provoke. It is not easy to keep an eye out for the Numinous when pots boil over, and our children are expelled from yet another school, and cars die on deserted highways at night.

The enduring strength of our faith community is in how truthfully it views and treats and talks about the marriage of the bigness of God, or Gaia, or the laws of physics, and the smallness of our own lives. And I submit to you that we come back to church in the hopes that the reality of all the unnamable truths we experience will be made clearer to us in the sermon, the singing and in the faces of our dear friends, old and new. It sometimes seems mundane, but it is part of the spiritual discipline of holding our minds open to the truth.



## Social Justice

Thomas Carlyle was once asked by a young man what he could do to make the world a better place. His answer was, "Make of yourself an honest man; then you'll know the world has one less rascal."

So there is a neat encapsulation of the concept of social justice. In order to become an agent of justice in the world, it all starts with you being honest. But is that enough? Our ancestors cautioned us, and in one of my favourite hymns, it says - But have not love. So there is another layer on the concept. If we do not move in the world with honesty and love, the profit soon turns strangely thin.

As the world mutates into an increasingly violent and difficult place, the solace that our church provides becomes increasingly important. A church is a house of prophecy, as well as a house of comfort. If you read the Bible, or any of the great holy works of the world's religions, you know that prophets are - and were - a complete pain in the butt.

Who is this loudmouth who comes among us and tells us to clean up our act? Without

prophets to point the way, keep us honest and encourage the people actually doing the work, a house of worship can be reduced to being merely a social club with interesting architecture.

Social justice is living prophecy. We'll build a land where we bind up the broken. We'll build a land where the captives go free. The fulfillment of a world's dream for peace, redemption, justice, freedom and true cooperation involves work.

Social justice is hard work. Many times it has been compared to working in a field, ploughing, planting, tilling, weeding, watering, and then harvesting. You get a little respite, and then it all starts again. Although nature is neutral - and I would say good, but I'm prejudiced - hunger is not. Ignorance is not neutral. Loneliness, boredom, fear, despair and social breakdown - none of these things are neutral. To heal these human ailments requires a clear purpose, a steady mind, and some method, personal to each of us, to replenish ourselves in the face of both overwhelming human need and apparently limitless human greed.

Let us start with a clear purpose. Our job on earth is to find out why we are here and do it.

I really wish I'd got going on that sooner.

The beauty of making this discovery, though, is that once you figure that part out, it is like a perpetual source of light and energy. The light guides your feet, and the energy keeps you moving. When you have a clear calling, you look back on your life and go, Ah.

Everything has led to this. Nothing was really wasted. Some people feel comfortable with the notion that this inner light is the interconnectedness of the universe revealing itself in daily life. Others have a more mechanistic view and figure that it is the way our brains work. Some like thinking that it is God. I have always maintained the view that it's the works that count.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am much more interested in how your principles reveal

themselves in your daily life than I am in nitpicking about whether you believe the Right Things. The wisdom literature is full of what happens when saints of different religions meet. Do they immediately start whipping out the holy books and lecturing each other? Nope. Uh unh. They laugh, they smile, they give each other the kiss of peace, grin like the holy fools they are, because each saint meets someone inseparable from his or her calling. The saint and the calling are one.

By a show of hands, how many people in this room have a clear sense of what their purpose on earth is? Your honesty is a gift to this room.

Well, I'll share something with you. I was put on earth to make other people laugh.

Humour allows us to reframe questions, poke holes in pomposity, view our own failings with compassion instead of disgust, share embarrassment, disillusionment and anger in a safe way, and completely and beneficially alter our brainwaves, breathing and blood chemistry. Not bad for something so trivial. I wonder why the halls of power have little room for humour, except the perverse enjoyment that flows from the discomfort of somebody who is Other or an enemy.

I only figured out my purpose this past year. Now I must figure out how to harness my life purpose to social justice. I am using myself as an individual and extreme example. What I would like to do right now is stop talking, and give all those of you who don't know why you're on earth three minutes to think about it. If you already know, or you find the assignment difficult, just be still for three minutes and lend spiritual aid to the room. I ask the question again, what is your purpose in life?

---

(Allow two to three minutes for reflection)

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Slowly return to this room, and to the concept of Social Justice as Spiritual Transformation. Those of you who participated in the meditation can be divided roughly into three groups, people who know why they are here, people who know but are fighting their calling, and people who don't even know if they'd recognize their calling if they saw it.

As somebody who has been fighting her calling for twenty long and interesting years, I have this to say. The moment of surrender was one of the sweetest of my life. I have watched with amazement as what I need has jumped into my hand, as the support I dreaded to ask for has been freely and lovingly offered, and how the decision was accompanied by an outburst of creativity and personal growth. So if you're fighting your calling, it's not as bad as you might think. Amazing things are waiting on the other side.

Social Justice belongs to the people who claim it, who work for it, who challenge themselves with it. This church in the last two years has undertaken four congregational projects to live our principles. We called Reverend Katie Stein Sather; we did the deep work of examining our prejudices and feelings about the QUILTBAG community; we started our association with the Share Food bank; and we examined our resources and commitment to having a church building, from which we can truly offer a place of refuge through all the days and seasons of the year.

I would like to name the people involved in the food bank, not to shame those of us who have not volunteered; after all, I'm one of them - but to honour those who have. If we don't take the time to celebrate the foot soldiers in the cause of Social Justice, we may lose sight of ourselves as a group of people committed to making the world a better place.

(Names deleted for privacy reasons.)

And what of the other things that people in this congregation have worked for? Amnesty International, a Women's Centre, a Hospice, endless committee work to fight for better schools for all of our children. Child care for International Women's Day. Marching on Pride Day. Writing letters to the press about the social evil of gambling. Visiting the sick, speaking at funerals. Supporting individuals in the throes of addiction and mental illness; serving in the legislature; shovelling snow for neighbours; walking the pilgrim road; raising money for a church bell in a far off land. From the very large issues down to the most personal, the members of this congregation have demonstrated over and over a willingness to be engaged, to witness, to work, and to hold themselves accountable to their own personal dream of a better world.

Unitarian Universalists have always been at the forefront of the uncomfortable social changes. Slavery, Women's Rights, birth control choice, rights for sexual minorities and the extension of marriage rights, reassessment of our draconian drug laws, peace and the rights of indigenous peoples have all been causes that individual UU's have given their lives to.

And you know what all those UU's would tell me about the work they did? They'll tell me it wasn't enough.

As a realist, I have to agree. But the dreaming, visioning, imagining me will answer as well that if you know what your purpose is as an individual, and keep your principles firmly in front of you, whatever you undertake in a group or as an individual will have lasting meaning and value.

If we are to tackle the evils of the world, we'll need courage, faith, patience, and a lot of hard work. But rather than leave you with a feeling that you now have Save the World on your to do list, I prefer to leave you with a quote from Alan Borovoy, many years the senior

counsel of the Canadian Civil Liberties Union. "If you really want to make the world a better place, you should find the best people to go make trouble with and have a lot of fun doing it."

So find your calling; put it at the service of your principles; and amazing things will happen. Ours is the everlasting heritage of those uncomfortable prophets. Let us be the best troublemakers that we can, as long as our strength lasts, about the issues that mean the most to us, and leave a legacy of courage and commitment to uplift a troubled world.

## A Single Kindness Gets Lonely

December 16, 1998

I remember the day Paul lost his memory. His memory was no longer in his head, you see. It was a Casio 128 and his whole life was in it. He left it on the plane from Toronto to Vancouver.

I've never seen Paul so mad at himself. He was madder than the time he crushed his memory into the skating rink boards while playing crack-the-whip with the kids, and madder yet than the time he leaned over the toilet at work and it swan dived into the bowl.

He blankly said, "Well, I guess I'll never see that again," and become very morose. A couple of hours after we got to my parents' place in Victoria, the phone rang. My mother was outside and my father, who associated ringing telephones with drunken clients importuning him for assistance, refused to answer. Paul picked it up.

"Is Paul there?" asked a pleasant female voice.

"Speaking!" said Paul, really surprised. Normally when you pick up your mother-in-law's phone, you don't expect to be asked for by name.

"I've got your electronic organizer!" she said.

One of the cabin crew had found it and looked in it until she came up with a BC phone number. It was by the sweetest chance that Paul happened to answer the phone.

It came on the next flight to Victoria from Vancouver. Paul was thrilled, and touched.

So it was no surprise what Paul did a few months later, when he found a daybook on an airplane, packed with so many names and addresses that the owner had started writing in the margins. As soon as he saw it was a Vancouver address, Paul jumped in the car and drove it to the guy. I accompanied him to see how the drama played out.

After loudly and repeatedly expressing his thanks, the gentleman told us that he was a committee chair, and a prof and an activist, and his whole life was in that book. He had been contemplating recovering the information with something approaching despair. He promised two things, and I know he did one because Paul got a sensational letter praising his customer service skills at work; the other was to promise that he'd photocopy his address book and put it somewhere safe first thing after he got into his office.

So this is a reminder - back up your data. It doesn't matter if it's on paper, a hard disk or chiselled into a rock. Make another copy and put it someplace safe. As soon as I got home that night I sent my mother all my friends' email addresses as well as my address book.

It's important to remember that a single kindness rapidly gets lonely. That single act of being present and taking care will ripple out and have effects you can't even contemplate. When the world is kind to you it's because the laws of cause and effect still rule.

I remember one other act of kindness of Paul's. We were driving up University just

south of Bloor in Toronto and a very beautiful woman was stuck in traffic, standing next to an old diesel Mercedes-Benz. She looked quite distraught.

"My old car!" Paul said, because it was the exact same year and model as one of his first cars. "I know what's wrong," and in about as much time as it takes to describe it, pulled in front of her, leaped out of our car, adjusted something inside her car, and got it running again. I have taken a lot of pleasure over the years thinking of the story this woman must have told her family over supper that night.

We try to look after each other as a family, and try to emphasize kindness. When we find things we return them, if there's an address and a name. Once I lost a sheaf of writing in Toronto, on the Royal York bus, and some woman, who is an angel in human form, spent two bucks on postage getting it back to me. I thank her, and I thank everybody who ever let me in, comforted my kids when I couldn't be there, put a happy nothing day gift on my desk.

Sometimes I think that email inspired belly laugh, in the middle of a brutal working day, is a random act of kindness - travelling from someone I will never meet, outbound at the speed of light. Be randomly kind today!

## Ape and Angel

January 18, 2004

Most of us here assembled wish to live more ethical lives. We wish to make better choices, to open up possibilities in ourselves of compassion, love and renewal. As we struggle each in our own way to achieve this, we also struggle with our very natures - those aspects of ourselves that react to real or perceived threats without thinking first.

Inside each of us is a creature that does not wish to be tamed or transformed into usefulness, that does not wish to be governed by the needs of those weaker than ourselves. The struggle between compassion and appetite - between angel and ape, so to speak - is a driving force behind religion, and the theme of my talk today.

I wish to say at the outset that comparing ourselves to other animals and especially other primates is dangerous mental territory. For we are not our cousins, and the stark fact that we share an immense amount of genetic material with them may be true, but does not

account for where human speech, tool use and adaptability came from.

Nor does it explain how the divine crept into the story some thousands of years back. It's been there all along, of course, but until an eye-blink ago, in geologic terms, nobody was telling the story.

So here's a story from Jane Goodall, from many years ago. Once in Africa there was a male chimpanzee on the cusp of adulthood. His mother died of a respiratory ailment. This chimp became depressed. Perhaps depressed is the wrong word; but if he was whimpering and staring off into space, and not grooming himself, and losing weight, it doesn't seem unscientific to say he was depressed.

In the same troupe of chimpanzees was another male, and he was in the same situation as his troupe-mate, in that his mother had also died at about the same time. But the difference was that the elder was not physically dependent on his mother. The younger one was only two, and his mother's death under normal circumstances would have been his death sentence, as he would have been driven off or bullied to death, or he would have become malnourished and died. The older chimp, who had witnessed the illness and death of both mothers, adopted the younger one.

It started out when the older chimp stood between the younger chimp and another chimp who was teasing and bullying and maltreating him. Within a matter of weeks every chimp in the troupe knew that if you wanted to pick on the young one, you'd have the equivalent of a hulking great teenager on your case. Over the course of time, they were accepted as being a family unit - foster brothers - and life in the troupe settled down again.

Chimps have a long childhood. The younger one grew up learning how to build a nest and what was good to eat and how to avoid predators and what leaves to chew on to expel

parasites. He learned those things from his foster brother.

In turn, his foster brother was, according to Jane Goodall, very patient and good-humoured about his new role. It should come as little surprise that his depressed state vanished at much the same time as he became a foster brother.

Every chimp troupe has an alpha male. The alpha male cannot stay at the top of the heap without two things - his health and the assistance of a small coterie of mostly male supporters. When his health goes, the support of his friends wavers and there's a power struggle.

The older brother challenged the alpha male. Supporting him all the way was his now fully grown little brother. The elder did what challengers do, which is spend a couple of weeks perfecting his charging displays, terrifying charges up and down screaming and throwing things - reminiscent of a former boss of mine, in many ways. He outfaced the alpha male and his potential rivals, took on the leadership role, and life once again settled into the new normal.

What is the moral of this story? Well, it isn't clear-cut. Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you? I don't know if chimps are that sophisticated. When chimps learn a modified version of human language, an adapted for great apes version of American Sign Language, one of the first things they learn is Gimme Tickle. They may be willing to reciprocate, but they ask for it before they offer it. As an aside, I have spent many years thinking about my own conversations with people, and in retrospect many of them seem to be a variant of Gimme Tickle.

Something that takes on the 'feeling' of moral behaviour was happening here. What was it? What caused this unusual action; a male chimp taking on a parenting role? If the older

chimp had done nothing, the younger would almost certainly have died. Chimps are very good at remembering things that happened to them - there are lots of documented cases of chimps remembering behaviors and people going back twenty and thirty years - but they have lousy attention spans, even for great apes, and the future essentially has no meaning for them.

It appears to me that when he volunteered to be a foster brother, the older chimp was remembering something, remembering loneliness and sadness, and recognizing it in someone else. We can't know what he was thinking, but it's hard to interpret it another way. He wasn't plotting to raise a henchman so he could be the boss; nothing we understand about chimps could lead us to believe that they could formulate or plan something that sophisticated. Chimpanzees don't understand time the way we do. Had there been a bigger gap between the death of the first mother and the death of the second, this story would likely not have happened.

The lesson for ME is that when we help other people, the desire to help is there because we are connected with our own past neediness. We remember what it was like, and wish to relieve suffering. Compassion is as much about being connected with your own feelings as it is about helping other people. I've met a lot of older people whom I consider to be role models of compassion. They are there for other people when they are needed, and are usually practical and quiet about the help they offer.

But if you take the time to ask, they will tell you story after story about how they were needy or ill or broke or unemployed or desperately lonely, and somebody helped them. They remember what it was like, and compassion arises in them like an unstoppable force when they see a human need they can themselves take away with their presence or their help.

The connection of two people through need and compassion is not a planned activity.

It may take place in a social context full of nuance and reciprocity and a long shared history of mutual assistance, but it's not something I plan, and I think most of us are like that. I don't get out of bed thinking, "I'm going to help somebody today." If I do help somebody over the course of the day, and I'm thinking of work in this case, it's because they call me and ask me to do something or teach them something.

Or sometimes they send out an email that's so wrong headed that you realize that this poor guy, who's only been with the company three weeks, needs a little coaching so he can fit in with this particular troupe a little better. I remember MY first three weeks at the company. I cried every single day when I got home. It was ghastly. But that's part of what drives me to help, remembering just how horrible it was, and despite that grisly beginning, I'm still there.

The behaviour of the little brother is easy to understand. He transferred his affection and support to the one who offered it, thus doing the only thing he could to ensure his own survival. It didn't hurt that he was little and cute. You can see people do this, act helpless, hoping to invoke the "Oh isn't she little and cute" response to get better results. I have to say that as a strategy, that works very well with some people, and very poorly with others.

The roots of voluntarism - the helpful things we do when we feel ourselves to have excess energy or time or accumulated wealth - are in our natures. There are so many stories of human valour and sacrifice that they cannot be numbered. We are social; we have instincts that cause us to rush into flooding rivers and burning buildings to save other people's children. In the balance are all the barbaric and destructive acts of human beings. These too are part of our nature.

I have many times heard people say, "I could never do that," or "I can't imagine how anyone could do that!" I am not one of those people. The darkness and violence of my own

feelings and thoughts, linked to the study I have made of human destructiveness, lead me to believe that I am a lucky human, because I believe I have a choice about how I behave. I can imagine myself being violent and destructive with no difficulty.

But I am not my thoughts. I am not my imagination. I am the choices I make about what I think, and the strategies I devise, with the help of others, to lift my darkness and show my light.

I do not know what struggles and grief you carry. You have made your choice to be here; you volunteered. We don't have the same gifts and resources, but to publicly acknowledge your need for community, continuity and growth is a gift to everyone else in this room. And you can give that gift whether you're tone deaf or feeling cranky or whether you would really rather be at home in bed or lying on a beach somewhere. If you're feeling good today, then your presence is a twinkling eye in a cold grey world, a smile, a friendly hug and the uplifting feeling you get when you hear good news from a loved one's mouth. That was not merely a smile you gave me this morning. When I stopped to listen to the compassion behind your smile, I could hear the rustle of an angel's wing.

The angel in us is not an ethereal creature with snowy white pinions and a celestial countenance. The angel is in the choices that we make. We can choose to ignore our own gifts and hurt ourselves in the process, as well as impoverishing the world. Or we can choose to see ourselves as participants in creation, as imagining and building and repairing and inventing the language, the tools, the structures and the body of learning that it takes to make a better world. The angel is the strength to meet evil with compassion, horror with beauty, hatred with softness. The angel is the humility to ask for help when we need it, for the ability to see our own needs as worthy of assistance, so that we may become strong enough to take up our

challenges again and win. The angel is the sternness of duty, so that we do not abandon our best selves when the going gets rough.

Many times in the wisdom literature of the world, seekers meet angels and have to look away. Sometimes when you meet your angel, you don't want to see all the things that remain to be done. Above all the angel is a whisper of hope that refuses to abandon us, that makes us, as a species, get up again and again, no matter who says that it's time to abandon our yearnings and forget about making things better.

The ape in us is our connection to the real. Our senses and our appetites are not our enemies, at least not in my opinion. There is a long religious tradition of fighting our own natures, which I think in the end is criminally destructive and stupid when it seeks to conquer those feelings without discernment and compassion. Hatred of the body is half a breath away from hatred of all creation. Hatred of the body makes social justice impossible to achieve.

It seems more practical and humane to me to treat our senses and our appetites as our teachers. When we acknowledge our bond to all other creatures, a contract signed in the very cells of our bodies, then we can most fully experience the wholeness of who we are as human beings, and acknowledge with informed gratitude just how it is we differ from all other creatures as well.

For as wonderful as chimpanzees are, they are helpless to save themselves from the relentless march of human need. So are many humans, who cry out every day for liberation from tyranny, ignorance, slavery and hunger. In the midst of the human race learning just how destructive it can be, how powerful it is, how like unto the vengeful gods of old, we are sometimes in danger of losing the threads of our own narrative.

Our story is a long and thrilling epic about the ape that smartened up. You can be a

hero in that story, adopting a little brother or teaching an adult to read, digging a latrine or liberating yourself from an addiction or putting up a church - all the things you can do to stretch the wings of your compassion. Or you can be a villain, by being destructive to yourself or the world we share, or by killing your own soul with the besetting sins of the modern world, apathy and despair.

You can be an interesting combination of the hero and the villain - aren't we all - but you can't just hit the off button on the remote whenever you feel like it. It's not TV. It's a living story, and every single one of us is responsible for how it all turns out - at least for the parts we can see, and especially the parts we can imagine. I think we are all apes and angels. I think we all have the potential to live more fully in the beautiful bodies we are born into, and to live more fully in the choices that we make about what to do with both our bodies and our thoughts. I think the choices that we make about what to do with our time and our gifts, is what makes us human, the imperfect but ever questing blend of ape and angel.

## UU Stand up for Canvass

Good evening, brothers and sisters of our beloved community. I have been asked to present a humorous homily in a Unitarian vein, and I beg your indulgence as I outline how I approached gathering the material for this evening's celebration of our community.

First I reviewed my previously delivered comedy routines. As one of them commences with my walking on stage half naked – I will leave to your imagination which half – you will not be surprised that I thought this inappropriate. Unitarians believe in freedom, not license.

Having dispensed with nudity as a means of encouraging people to laugh, or at least to pay attention, I then worked my way through the rest of my gags, one-liners, pithy observations, and so forth.

I made the considered decision to delete the references to sex as also being inappropriate to an intergenerational dinner. The prospect of having the children loudly explaining the jokes to their parents was too much for me.

Then I deleted all the drug references, as everyone knows that drugs are something

Unitarians did years ago; we have all long since grown out of it, except for Ibuprofen, of course.

As we are eating, I thought it best to banish all scatological humour. I firmly believe that this is the best part of a family meal, but I have learned that not everyone feels the same way.

As you can imagine, this left me in something of a quandary. I had three jokes left, and while they are all reasonably funny, they didn't take my audience into consideration.

I then resolved to visit a number of Christian humour sites, reckoning that I would find some jokes that would offend nobody. I now have proof that I am nobody, because I was offended by them. Anybody else who is offended by the inane and the sickly sweet will know exactly what I mean.

In desperation, I visited a Unitarian joke site. Of course I should have done that FIRST, but it's traditional to check out various forms of Christianity prior to coming to Unitarianism. I came across this gem, which, is seasonal, now that Halloween is over:  
(Sings)

Gods rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay; Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day; When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say, O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, Glad tidings of reason and fact.

Our current Christmas Customs come from Persia and from Greece, from solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East. This whole darn Christmas spiel is just another pagan feast, O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, Glad tidings of reason and fact.

There was no star of Bethlehem, there was no angels' song; there could not have been wise men for the trip would take too long. The stories in the Bible are historically wrong, O,

Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, Glad tidings of reason and fact!

This little song charmed me because I believe it accurately reflects our Unitarian principles and it scans. I hate things that don't scan.

Then I cruised around some more, and landed with this one,

Q: How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

A: ...well, first you'd have to know whether it's a fluorescent, incandescent, or halogen bulb, but even then you may have made a false assumption because not all UU's necessarily even find electric illumination useful, or even believe in Electricity or BC Hydro, although I'd guess most BC Unitarians don't want to see it sold, whether they believe in it or not... Did that answer your question?

(Helper in the audience. No! How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb?)

Well, it dePENDS. Look, I take the question seriously, but I think we should seek consensus on this one. Do you want to strike a committee?

A Christian friend of a Unitarian once remarked that UU's tend to take a couple of months off during the summer with some churches completely closing. Other denominations might question this practice, by saying "God doesn't take vacations."

The response to this is that UU's are the only ones that God trusts enough to let out of his sight for a while.

Does anybody here know what the four UU sacraments are? (Helpers should be planted among the attendees.)

- Dedication,
- Marriage,
- Memorial Service,

Me: And, of course, Moderated Discussion

What 2 things do UU's and Dracula have in common?

They both have origins in Transylvania and they both shy away from the cross.

I had a bit of a run-in with a Fundamentalist Christian recently. After getting increasingly irritated by my flippant responses to her dogma, she demanded, "Do you know what's going to happen when you stand in judgment before God?"

I grinned and said, "She's gonna have some 'splaining to do."

I note that the following hymn is NOT in Singing the Living Tradition; I am willing to believe that it might have been an honest error. (To the tune of Holy, Holy, Holy, by retired UU minister Chris Raible.)

Coffee, coffee, coffee,  
Praise the strength of coffee.  
Early in the morn we rise with thoughts of only thee.  
Served fresh or reheated,  
Dark by thee defeated,  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

Though all else we scoff we  
Come to church for coffee;  
If we're late to congregate, we come in time for thee.  
Coffee our one ritual,  
Drinking it habitual,  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

Coffee the communion

Of our Uni-Union,  
Symbol of our sacred ground, our one necessity.  
Feel the holy power  
At our coffee hour,  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

As I say, this should probably be in the hymnal but I am sure that it was an understandable oversight.

I would like to close my homily with a few words on the subject of the canvass.

When I first came under the benign influence of the CUC, it was at the Lakeshore Church in Montreal, with the Rev. Joan Montagnes presiding. (She's with a congregation in Buffalo as of 2016.)

When the canvass was announced, the canvass chair got up, brusquely told us that there wasn't going to be a canvass that year, and sat down. After a brief, rustling pause, suddenly, from all over the church you could hear purses and pocketbooks snap open, making a joyful sound of thanksgiving and support. This is a sound which I hope we will all be able to hear in this community as we continue our journey of discovery and service. It is a strange quality of money that, like people, a little of it with the right intentions, in the right place, really can accomplish great things.

## A Drunkard's Walk through the UU Hymnal

There are 415 hymns in the UU hymnal ("The Grey Book") Singing the Living Tradition, and although I've been going to Beacon Unitarian Church nigh on 15 years, I've not heard more than a tenth of them. And there are lots of lovely readings, too!

There are additional hymns I will reference from the ("Teal Book") Singing the Journey Hymnal.

But, erm, why sing at all?

Hymn singing in church is a purposeful way of:

- 

Involving the congregation in worship.

- 

Forcing people to stand at regular intervals so they cannot snooze through the service. Not that our folks generally do, but you know what I mean.

-

Making people breathe together – that's what a conspiracy is, it's a breathing together.

Breathing together causes entrainment. For a few minutes our breathing and brain waves sync up, causing a big spike in happy brain chemicals, which seriously, folks, is one of the reasons people come to church.

•

Assuring newcomers that we haven't dispensed with what was their favourite part of services at their church of origin, which they fled, 'cause of the every reason people flee their religious upbringings. It's as individual as you are!

•

Filking... cause we mess with the lyrics, hard, yo. (Brief explanatory note: filking is science fiction folk singing, which involves large amounts of 'repurposing' of commonly sung tunes. For more details, go thou to the Internet.)

•

Maintaining continuity with our forebears, and extending that continuity into any foreseeable future.

•

Honouring the great composers of religious music from many traditions, not just Christianity.

•

Bringing Hungarian Unitarian songs into our worship, providing a welcome break from the standard Protestant hymns and bringing minor tunes up front.

•

Sneaking gospel into the repertoires of militant atheists.

•

Providing awesome 'cleaners' for 'earworms' – for when you get pop divas, commercials and the Song That Never Ends stuck in your head. Note: the best cleaner is the Happy Birthday song because you sing it once - and stop. You're welcome.

•

Providing something you can drop from the service when worship is running too long. And that's me in the back (I always sit in the back) giving the rolling-side-eye to the homilist who ran long and cut my favourite hymn from the service. Running long is a crime against humanity. Lord how I wish I'd recorded one of the many conversations I had with Bareld Nieuwenhuis, rest his soul in splendour and joy, on the subject. We're renters, and we only get the hall for x number of hours every Sunday.

•

Differentiating one church from another. Every Unitarian congregation handles music and congregational singing differently. I nearly swallowed my gum when I found out there are U\*U congregations who don't use congregational singing AT ALL as part of worship, only bringing in guest singers and musicians on the occasions they feel appropriate. I would hike up my skirts and trot out of any church so inclined. That aside, each church comes to have a particular set of fall back hymns, with complicated backstories of how they came to be part of the lifestream of the church. These 'in frequent rotation' hymns are part of our psychic and spiritual furnishings.

•

Forcing you to stand close to your neighbour, who is holding the hymnbook for you.

•

Providing emotional consistency to worship services.

•

Providing an emotional and physical break from preaching or sharing that can be quite exhausting or uplifting or otherwise challenging.

•

And there are likely other reasons. Add yours here!

•

Herewith my meander through the main hymnal, with a nod to various connecting points. At this point, however, I must pause and say that David Hamilton's piano playing enhanced every aspect of worship, and that his dedication and ability were an adornment to our church. (David Hamilton, sadly, has entered into rest.)

Hymn 1. **May nothing evil cross this door.** Louis Untermeyer wrote the words, Robert N. Quaille wrote the music. We have sung this once to my recollection; I particularly love the last lines, which speak to our wandering state, tent dwellers in a world of settled churches. "Though these sheltering walls are thin, may they be strong enough to keep hate out and hold love in." It's in waltz time.

Hymn 145. **As Tranquil Streams.** Another of many gems from the Musicalisches Hand-buch, which has been feeding congregational singing for over three hundred years, it has a tune recognizable to any Protestant but the lyrics are... well, Unitarian, as in written by a relatively prolific Unitarian hymn lyric writer by the name of Ham. My favourite line: "A freedom that reveres that past but trusts the dawning future more, and bids the soul, in search

of truth, adventure boldly and explore." Sounds like a Star Trek hymn, and certainly a suitable hymn for a lifelong science fiction fan. This is one of the congregation's mainstays.

Hymn 348. **Guide My Feet.** (I sang this to the Rev. Katie Stein Sather, the former minister, as HO-OLD my PU-URSE, while I RUN this RACE. It was appropriate in context.) A real corker, if sung with sufficient enthusiasm and all our basses are in the house to sing that line. It's a traditional tune, pleasingly simple and with loads of gospel flair.

Hymn 211. **Jacob's Ladder.** Like a number of other hymns in the hymnal, this resonates with my childhood. One of the many folk groups we listened to constantly back then had a really fine version of this on an album. It was one of the Limelighters, Kingston Trio, Chad Mitchell Trio (or other) albums. It was wonderful hearing it in church for the first time, and as I recollect I asked for it as a hymn for one of the services I delivered. Obviously the lyrics have changed from the original.

Hymn 108. **My Life Flows On.** AKA How can I keep from singing? This is one of the hymns I sing in my head, a LOT. The lyrics strike me as facing the trials of life with a tranquil and patient spirit. All of the lyrics are moving and essential... the last verse in particular I love. "When tyrants tremble as they hear the bells of freedom ringing, when friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing? To prison cell and dungeon vile, our thoughts to them are winging; when friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?" All as a reminder of those who do not enjoy the benefits of living in Canada in the circumstances we enjoy. Often I sing the first lines to myself... "My life flows on, in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I hear the clear, though far off song, that hails a new creation." So mote it be.

Hymn 324. **Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads.** The truest and saddest song in

the hymnbook, I definitely have used this one a couple of times in services, and I'm the only one who did, to my recollection. The minor tune, an English folk melody, is lilting and questioning at the same time. The lyrics, by my personal favourite Alicia S. Carpenter, contain the following gem. "Eternity is hard to ken, and harder still is this: a human life when truly viewed is briefer than a kiss."

Hymn 361. **Enter, Rejoice and Come In.** Well now. I love this hymn so much I mentioned it in my "Cognitive Bias and Congregational Life" homily. When I first started attending UU services it was at the Lakeshore UU Congregation and a very excellent pianist would be playing this as I climbed the stairs (where a beautifully coloured and hand-lettered sign welcomed me, like a hug, honestly). I thought with the naïvety of the n00b that all UU Congregations started their services that way and I was saddened to find that nope, every UU congregation is like a different fingerprint gathered from the same body. And then I cheered up, because individuality within unity is good.

Hymn 291. **Die Gedanken Sind Frei.** Ah, another gem from my past, as sung with musicality, precision and enthusiasm, by the Limelitters. When I first started attending Beacon at Place Maillardville, we had two elderly German speakers in the congregation, and I was blissful when they sang, standing shoulder to shoulder at the back of the congregation, in the original German. One of those men escaped from Hitler. Both were mighty hearts for justice and learning. It's a song with a LOT of meaning for me; I'm always thrilled when it's in the order of service.

Hymn 8. **Mother Spirit, Father Spirit.** A plea to the Spirit for assistance in understanding our lives; as deeply Unitarian a hymn as can be, having been written, lyrics and tune, by one of our martyrs, Norbert Čapek, who died in a concentration camp in 1942. The

tune is simple and yet heart-rending. Sung measuredly and reverently, it's an amazing work for congregational singing.

Hymn 16. **'Tis a Gift to Be Simple.** Here we borrow from the American Shaker tradition, and a fine borrowing it is, too. It's a good one to put in the order of service if you know things will run long.... cause it's so short you feel like you're standing up and sitting down in the same breath.

Hymn 21. **For the Beauty of the Earth.** Gentle lyrics and a singable tune make this a favourite of mine.

Hymn 30. **Over My Head.** Another spiritual brought lovingly into our tradition. It does have God language, but as I have described repeatedly elsewhere, I have no objections to God language.

Hymn 34. **Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire.** From 1st Corinthians 13, to a lightly modified English folk tune. "Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gift to all inspire, and have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass, and hopeless gain." As stern a warning to Unitarians not to be chatty intellectuals as we get in the hymnbook.

Hymn 38. **Morning Has Broken.** A very slightly different version than the wonderful Cat Stevens rendition, which messes me up almost every time I sing it with the congregation despite the accompanist's efforts, but I don't care, I'm always happy to see it in the service.

Hymn 55. **Dark of Winter.** "And then my soul will sing a song, a blessed song of love eternal". Sung by the choir, this song has reduced me to silent weeping. Winter services are so necessary. Anything to get out of the house and see people. "Let your peace flow through me."

Hymn 73. **Chant for the Seasons.** A great hymn to include for solstice and pagan friendly services, it has a charming Czech folk tune and the lyrics like a sensory tour of the

changing seasons.

Hymn 95. **There is More Love Somewhere.** Apart from the fact that every time I see this in the order of service I think "Well, that's a heck of an endorsement for our congregation if we sing about there being more love somewhere... else," I enjoy this African American spiritual borrowing, which is full of plaintive longing for joy. "I'm gonna keep on... til I find it..."

Hymn 99. **Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen.** Can't exclude that song from the hymnal. "Although you see me, going 'long so, oh, yes, Lord! I have my troubles here below, oh, yes, Lord."

Hymn 100. **I've Got Peace Like a River.** Sounds traditional, but it was actually composed in 1974. It is a very simple and singable tune, and I always like what the congregation does with it.

Hymn 109. **As We Come Marching, Marching.** Suitable for many occasions at church, but especially for woman warriors for social justice and International Women's Day. "Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes; hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread but give us roses." "As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead, go crying, through our singing, their ancient song of bread." Since then it was part of the soundtrack of the amazing LGBT / Working Class coalition movie **Pride**, and my brother must have wondered why I burst into tears as soon as the mine-worker's wife began to sing it.

Hymn 118. **This Little Light of Mine.** A truly awesome song, begging for four part harmony and a kick-ass up-tempo effort by everyone! It is guaranteed to cheer you up on the gloomiest of mornings.

Hymn 121. **We'll Build a Land.** Carolyn McDade for the tuneage and a little bit of

Isaiah and Psalms, repurposed, for the lyrics. "Come build a land where sisters and brothers, anointed by God, may then create peace, where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever flowing stream." It's long and a bit complicated compared to many hymns but definitely worth it in worship.

Hymn 123. **Spirit of Life.** Carolyn McDade has provided Beacon with one of our signature songs (she being responsible for both words and music). Short, sweet, with deceptively simple lyrics, for all its brevity a truly great hymn.

Hymn 128. **For all that is our life.** Beacon used a portion of this as the responsive song after the collection. I was irked when Rev. Katie Stein Sather introduced it and now it's a comforting lodestone in the centre of the service. "For all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise, for all life is a gift which we are called to use to build the common good, and make our own days glad." Can't argue with those sentiments!

Hymn 131. **Love Will Guide Us.** Some hymns, rather than associating directly with the church, you associate with church members. During the amazing/awful period of the getting of the Welcoming Congregation imprimature, Peggy asked us to sing this at the end of some of our meetings, and also we sang it many times at her insistence at the end of our Chalice Circles. Happy sigh. So no, can't think of this song without thinking of Peggy, and the articulation of her voice singing it.

Hymn 159. **This Is My Song.** Oh my, how very yes. We get to sing Sibelius in church on a regular basis. The tune is very familiar, although I keep messing about with the dotted quarter, wanting to flatten it all out, although if I keep my ears open I can hear the accompanist, gamely attempting to force us to sing it as written. And who can fault Lloyd Stone's brilliant lyrics. "This is my home, the country where my heart is/here are my hopes,

my dreams, my holy shrine/but other hearts in other lands are beating/with hopes and dreams, as true and high as mine." Absolutely beautiful, and I love singing it. Also see Hymn 318 to the same tune **We Would Be One**. The lyrics for that one are almost as beautiful.

Hymn 163. **For the Earth Forever Turning**. A beautiful slow waltz time hymn which is a love song to our home, our planet earth.

Hymn 177. **Sakura**. "Cherry blooms, cherry blooms, pink profusion everywhere." A wonderful hymn for spring in Vancouver, full as it is of cherry blossoms! We get to sing in rote Japanese, too. We also sing it for Hiroshima Day.

Hymn 188. **Come, Come Whoever You Are**. A well used ingathering song, it is wonderful to start the day with a paraphrase from the poetical and spiritual genius known as Rumi. "Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair, come, yet again come." A sly reference to our mobile ways, and a candid revelation of the difficulties of a spiritual path. Sometimes we sing it straight, sometimes somebody up front keeps time and we sing it as a four part round. Either way, count me in!

Hymn 231. **Angels We Have Heard on High**. It just isn't Christmas if we don't sing this. This was my favourite Christmas carol as a child, and singing it congregationally feels like a cup of hot chocolate on a miserable night!

Hymn 298. **Wake, Now, My Senses**. A call to get off one's duff and work for justice. "Wake now my vision of ministry clear/brighten my pathway with radiance here/mingle my calling with all who will share/work toward a planet transformed by our care." The tune is a traditional Irish melody and Thomas J.S. Mikelson wrote the lyrics.

Hymn 304. **A Fierce Unrest**. I can't think of this song without thinking of a relative, now dead. It's definitely a science fiction Unitarian hymn. Don Marquis wrote the lyrics.

"Sing we no governed firmament, cold, ordered, regular; we sing the stinging discontent that leaps from star to star." It's got a slightly awkward tune, but I don't care, the lyrics make it all worthwhile. The lyrics of Hymn 343 are memorable too... **A Firemist and a Planet** contains the words: "A firemist and a planet, a crystal and a cell, a starfish and a saurian, and caves where ancients dwelt, the sense of law and beauty, a face turned from the sod, some call it evolution, and others call it God." About as Unitarian a sentiment as is possible, I'd reckon.

Hymn 346. **Come Sing a Song with Me.** Carolyn McDade's sweet and simple hymn, which I always love singing. Usually harmony, much to the consternation of the tone agnostic members of the congregation who are standing next to me and leaning on my voice to find their way to the tune. And tone agnostic is okay. Congregational singing shouldn't be a popularity contest or only held up for people who can follow a tune. Even if I hadn't thought that way at the beginning, filking would have cured me of that little caustic wound of elitism.

Hymn 305. **De Colores.** A gaily cheerful hymn, based on a Spanish folk tune, a little hard to sing for my taste, but part of our repertoire for sure. "All the colors abound for the whole world around and for everyone under the sun." Amen.

Hymn 347. **Gather the Spirit.** The great Unitarian songwriter Jim Scott is responsible for this one. "Gather in peace, gather in thanks, gather in sympathy now and then/gather in hope, compassion and strength, gather to celebrate once again."

Hymn 360. **Here we Have Gathered.** "May all who seek here find a kindly word, may all who speak here feel they have been heard." That about wraps up how we should be toward newcomers... and old-timers.

And through the readings...

There are 317 readings in the UU hymnal, designed to provide words of wisdom, comfort, exhortation, prophecy and joy apposite to the occasions which present themselves at church. Which, candidly, is a panoply of human life.

**Sticklers' notice:** I will be using UU and U\*U and Unitarian interchangeably. It's inaccurate and kicks church history in tender parts, but ainsi soit-il.

As a lengthy aside, I purchased a copy of the hymnal and gave it to my cheerfully atheist mother, as she is the designated driver and provider of editorial content for the crafty circle of elder women she remains connected to at the retirement home which was the last home of her mother-in-law. As such she must occasionally find words for occasions, and I thought I'd minister to her by providing her with some very nice quotations. I also wanted her to be able to find lyrics and words to follow along from Orders of Service I provided her with from time to time when I delivered homilies.

Although she has declared herself permanently disinclined to religiosity, however friendly a face it may present to atheism, I keep hoping that she'll wake up one morning and declare for Unitarianism, like 16th century Hungary. (I must hasten to add that my mother is not as big as Hungary, although she contains multitudes). Given that my father blew out of the Anglican church the day he was confirmed – to make his mother happy, may she rest in the comfort of her husband's presence for all eternity in a specially-constructed atheist heaven – I can only imagine my father attending church after a stroke which destroyed both frontal lobes, his hearing and his taste buds, and now imagination reels at the prospect of my mother ever darkening a church door in their town of residence unless I was presenting. And yes, I stole imagination reels from Dorothy Dunnett, since one of you keen-eyed types will notice.

I'm sure she'll quirk an eyebrow when she reads that, but I've tried not to be a pest in my conversion attempts and she's been very patient with me.

Aside aside, the hymnal is full of great quotes. Roughly half of them were written by Unitarians, and the rest come from an array of holy books, atheists, agnostics, pagans, Christians and poets. It is a collection of words useful when depth of emotion overwhelms our capacity to frame a spoken response, or when we're feeling lazy.

Unitarianism is a religion which has dodged liturgy, ducked canon, rejected creed and flattened hierarchy for so long that it has come to be defined (by outsiders) as offering a kind of nebbish-y nebulous feel-good question-of-sin-dodging heathenism, mocking Christianity with its vintage Orders of Service but spitting on Jesus and trampling the Bible underfoot in the ultimate glorification of apostasy. None of which we actually do of a Sunday. We revere Jesus and continue to draw both comfort and sermon ideas from the Bible. We do not worship Jesus or take the Bible literally. Right there we sacrifice the right to call ourselves Christians, but I guess it's legit if we call ourselves Protestants, cause we're still protesting everything we can. As we are able.

I prefer to think of Unitarianism as being evidence-based religion. Yeah, I know, it sounds like a contradiction in terms, but I think I can at least provoke some discussion on the matter.

In the course of human events, and rather earlier than everybody else, Unitarians became convinced that black people (and other POCs) and women were persons, which meant that they had to change the organization to accommodate them as full members, and anoint them as worthy of the ministry. So it was that the fourth woman ordained in the US,

the highly remarkable Olympia Brown, was ordained in 1863 (probably not coincidentally during the budding of the women's rights movement coexistent with abolitionism during the Civil War) and so it was that one of the charter members of the Gloucester MA church was a free black man. (No date available at press time, but it was at least 50 years before the Civil War.)

How long did it take science to catch up? Well, consider the UNESCO declaration. Scientists gathered themselves up after the carnage and frenzy and sacrifice and heroism of WWII to declare race to have no scientific basis. (Whether women are human beings remains an open question on sizeable chunks of this old world. Count me as a believer.)

Unitarians had thrown their hearts over THAT fence more than a century earlier, even if we've done a just-this-side-of-criminally poor job of being integrated since. So when I say that Unitarians are an evidence-based religion, it's to say that we came to a decision, as an organization, that we can't fear science any more than we fear the light of the sun or the silence of our sanctuary. (We can always bring sunscreen and wear headphones). We WILL KEEP THROWING OUR HEARTS OVER THAT FENCE. And science, sapientia, Sophia, will keep catching up with us, and showing that when we love, when we work for justice, when we instil inquiry and loving-kindness in our children, when we speak truth to power, science will come along and provide evidence, and tools, and confirmation, even it comes later. We trust the dawning future because it's always been there for us. Always. That's what being in the vanguard of religion means. The past is awesome and we love poking around in it but children are starving now, and we look to a future in which that can be made impossible.

When Montréal congregations put themselves at hideous risk by providing

contraception and abortion information to women in the 1960s, it was before the laws changed. When Unitarians put themselves at hideous risk hiding fleeing slaves, it was before the laws changed. And the laws changed in part because of us, because at every stage of the liberalization of laws regarding human rights, in both the U.S. and Canada, Unitarians have been in there preaching, marching, organizing, lobbying and in general kicking ass, taking names, and staying up late putting stamps on newsletters.

Thank you for your patience thus far. Back to the hymnal.

The readings are divided into groups, roughly, words which are plug and play with the Order of Service, words apt to or from our Living Tradition, and words for special occasions. There's everybody from Maya Angelou to Israel Zangwill in there.

Here begins the drunkard's walk. In most cases the quote will be a partial one from the reading, just for flavour, and also to maintain some kind of distance in terms of legal right to reprint. I can quote for commentary but just dumping the whole reading is disrespectful.

Reading 420, Annie Dillard: We are here to abet creation and to witness to it.

Reading 429, William F. Schultz: Come into this place of peace and let its silence heal your spirit.

Reading 435, Kathleen McTigue: We come together this morning to remind one another to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives.

The line "the forming edge of our lives" hits that sweet spot of brevity, accuracy and power which characterizes many of my favourite readings from the hymnal.

Reading 440, Phillip Hewett (minister emeritus of UCV and one of the finest theologians and preachers of our faith in Canada and whose participation in Rev. Debra

Thorne's Rite of Ordination was one of the high points...): Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Amen, venerable Phillip. (This is a joke which someone who attended the Ordination might find amusing).

Reading 441, Jacob Trapp Worship is kindred fire within our hearts; it moves through deeds of kindness and through acts of love.

Reading 447, Albert Schweitzer (who likely doesn't need an introduction): At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.

I think this reading, which is for the chalice lighting at the commencement of the service, for the annunciation of sacred space, is part of Beacon's congregational DNA.

Reading 457, Edward Everett Hale. This I think may be one of my friend Peggy's favourite readings from the hymnal, I could be wrong. It sure is one of mine. I quote it in its entirety: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

Reading 462, Paul Robeson: The song of freedom must prevail.

Reading 463, Adrienne Rich: My heart is moved by all I cannot save.

Reading 470, Leonard Mason: We affirm a continuing hope that out of every tragedy the spirits of individuals shall rise to build a better world.

Reading 471, L. Griswold Williams: Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest of truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer.

What admirable concision.

Reading 477, Vivian Pomeroy: Forbid that we should feel superior to others when we

are only more shielded, and may we encourage the secret struggle of every person.

Reading 483, Wendell Berry, who should need no introduction unless you've been hiding in a hedge these last 30 years: I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.

Reading 543, Greta Crosby (a Unitarian minister): Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Reading 492, W.E.B. Du Bois, quoted in its entirety: The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.

Reading 496, Harry Meserve: From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us.

Hey, I do what I can.

Reading 504, e.e. cummings: i thank You God for this most amazing/day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky, and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes

Long term Beacon members will remember Rev Ev using this often in services, and how wonderful that was, his delivery always being a support to the meaning....

Reading 526, Inuit Shaman Uvavnuuk: The sky and the strong wind have moved the spirit inside me till I am carried away trembling with joy.

Reading 530, Robert T. Weston: Out of the stars we have come, up from time.

Reading 557, David H. Eaton: Our destiny: from unknown to unknown. May we have the faith to accept this mystery and build upon its everlasting truth.

Reading 560, Dorothy Day: No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's

too much work to do.

Reading 561, Margaret Mead: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has. (I recollect Peggy has this up on the wall in her house.)

Reading 566, Francis David adapted by Richard Fewkes: Sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.

Reading 579, Frederick Douglass: The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Reading 592, William Ellery Channing (my all time fave historical Unitarian even if he was a well intentioned racist – hey, we all have our cognitive cross to bear): I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering.

Also his, Reading 652: The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own.

Reading 603, Lao-Tse: And whether we dispassionately see to the core of life, or passionately see the surface, the core and the surface are essentially the same.

Reading 637, Robert Eller-Isaacs: For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others, we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Reading 649, Antoine de St-Exupéry: Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.

Reading 657, Sophia Lyon Fahs: Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction; other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.

Reading 663, Margaret Starkey: We make a holiday, the rituals varied as the hopes of humanity, the reasons as obscure as an ancient solar festival, as clear as joy on one small face.

Reading 671, John Milton: If the waters of truth flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.

Word.

Reading 681, adapted from Gaelic Runes (and another favourite of Peggy's): Deep peace of the running wave to you.

It's a benediction I sometimes write or say to people suffering loss.

Reading 698, with which I close. Wayne B. Arnason: Take courage friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high. Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth: You are not alone.

## Home

This morning I'd like to talk a bit about home; what it means to us and how it relates to our spiritual lives.

This morning I welcome all of you, whether new or long-standing friends of Beacon, to our church home. We who are friends and members of Beacon have certainly had our share of anxiety about where our church home, which means so much to us, was going to be. It puts me in mind of Luke 9:58; from the New International Version: Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

A church home doesn't just mean that we have a big roof and a small parking lot... it means that we have the comfort and security of being able to offer the people who need us a safe and accessible place for their children to experience the special gift that is a U\*U religious education; it means we have a proper kitchen for our soup lunches; it means we can give our tireless volunteers a bit of a break so they don't have to haul signs and hymnbooks and glassware hither, thither and yon.

At the same time that most of us are relieved to be able to move into a bigger and more adaptable space, Beacon has become aware of a gift which has made our years of tenancy very worthwhile. That is that wherever there are three or more Beaconites, we can 'do church'.

We know what we need, how to arrange the space, and how to make it sacred. We could do church anywhere; given the challenges since we left Place Maillardville, it's useful to reflect that our wandering years have been an ongoing test of our ability to make Beacon happen, to do church, under any circumstances. With our outreach in New Westminster, we've proven that.

A church building of our very own, mortgaged, no doubt, to the gills, is a goal that is ever before us, but we don't need that building to be Beacon Unitarian Church. And let's not forget that the serious congregational business of building acquisition and maintenance, has been very hard on the financial and energy resources of other U\*U congregations in Canada. As we face another move, let's keep our ingathering song in mind.... "ours is no caravan of despair"; but all caravans have a terminus.

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For most us here today, home is a real place, with a door that locks; our belongings are there, our precious mementoes and photos, our comfy beds. What a change home has gone through in these last millennia! Once upon a time home was wherever the fire was. Now, short of a disaster, a home is a lifetime's accretion of variously useful and familiar objects, each of which can be notable not just for its ability to collect dust, but also for the ability to arouse emotions of nostalgia or pleasure or anxiety.

I acknowledge that for some people, home means addiction, madness, secrets, beatings, abuse, perhaps crushing amounts of drudgery, financial overextension, insect infestations, and

perhaps a lack of either peace or comfort. I acknowledge that some of our neighbours choose homelessness over a home that's not safe. But I'm not going to be talking about that this morning.

A home looks very different to the child who lives in it and to the adult who must feed the unending meter of demands on skill, time and effort. I remember one of my childhood homes as being a sanctuary, and my parents remember how, given that the yard was a third of an acre, it seemed less like a sanctuary and more like a series of yard and garden chores. We had pets in those days too; pets, too, can change how we think of home.

We've reached into the natural world and bred dogs, and to a lesser extent cats, to fit in with our concept of home. Many people here assembled have allergies or no desire to have a pet; many of the rest of us are very indulgent parents to our fur-babies; I could certainly rhapsodize about my cat at great length, but that's not the point I was aiming for.

For those of us who do have pets, especially the more sociable ones, home means having that bright brown eye and that inquisitive nose waiting for us as we push open the door coming home with the groceries; home is the feeling you have when your dog, sighing gently, puts her head on your knee. The dog has been our companion since the days when humans first had settled homes, and here in Vancouver, a sizeable number of homeless people have dogs, to the point where homeless shelters have in some cases changed their policies to allow them entry.

Humans have been around, more or less as we are now in shape, size and intelligence, for something like 100,000 years, but we've only had permanent settlements for 10 to 15,000 years. We have built big cities over the last five thousand years – cities like Mohenjo-Daro, situated in the Indus Valley and having at one time 35,000 inhabitants, which to help you

visualize it, is about the population of Campbell River. In four hundred centuries human beings walked away from following the migrations of game – and coastlines – and instead walked into a domestic, habitual existence, one in which everybody knows the implication of the words "no fixed address".

Home can be a group of habits rather than a defined location. You could be one of those rare individuals who live purely for the mind, people like the noted Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdős. Erdős spent his whole life living out of a suitcase to pursue mathematics wherever he liked across the world, and to befriend people who could understand and converse with him about his ideas and interests. There's no way I could live like that, no matter how fascinating the ideas. He enjoyed the ferment of having many collaborators. He had hundreds of them over the course of his life. He didn't care about anything except math, and the world's a better place for it, but I simply can't imagine what it would be like to get my PhD in Mathematics at the age of 21 and then start globetrotting until I dropped dead at a math conference at the age of 83.

Big thumbs up for style, but I couldn't live like that. When I'm thinking about things, I gather information, and then sit on it for a while, and then talk to people, and then brood on those musings for a while, and then I try to put together something coherent at the end – by myself.

Part of what makes my home a true place of refuge for me, is that room, that magical room with a door I can close. Behind that door I may commune with my own thoughts without anybody else's noise or interaction. There are cultures in which any desire for privacy is considered a sign of mental illness, disobedience or laziness. I am very thankful that Canada and my parents have collaborated in giving me what I now feel is a right. That is

the right to be left, by myself, to think, just to have an hour or two of reflection, as required.

It is when I consider how grateful I am to have that room and that door, that the true value of Beacon's work on homelessness and the shared work of the food bank comes into stark focus. Beacon members have worked tirelessly and without much fanfare to advocate for and assist homeless people. As we in Vancouver wilt in the blinding glare of the publicity for the run-up to the 2010 Winter Olympics, we can't ignore a nagging voice that says that homeless people are being treated as pawns in a large, ongoing struggle over what kind of communities we want to live in.

I want a Vancouver where no-one who wants a home will be denied access to one by reason of poverty, but I might as well be asking unicorns to slide down rainbows to think that marshalling the political will to end homelessness will ever be the primary objective of politicians elected in the GVRD. Besides, Jesus himself said that the poor will always be with us; I could never tell whether he was being sarcastic or just telling it like it is.

Beacon doesn't feel that homelessness can ever be just, or justifiable. How we feel about, and what we do about homelessness in our community is part of what makes this church home for me.

When I was looking at the word home, I remember thinking, isn't it odd how the word fractures along gender lines? If I say "Homemaker" you won't be thinking of a man. But if you think the word "Homeless" you should be thinking of a man. There has been a rise in working poor families and single moms seeking shelter due to lack of access to affordable housing, but homelessness is in many ways a men's issue; proportionately more men than women are made homeless each year, and men are more likely to stay homeless for longer.

Home is a social construction. Shelter may be a human right ... I certainly think it is

... but home itself is a series of agreements we make with ourselves about 'how things should be'. Home is where we eat, sleep and keep clean.

I asked my friend Tammy what she thought home was, and what she said made me thoughtful. She said, "Home is the best of ourselves that we take with us wherever we go."

What is home? Where is it situated? Is your home the apartment you pay for or the people who share that space with you? When you think of the word home, are you thinking about the place that you have the keys for, or are you thinking of your city, province, country?

Or are you looking at a picture taken of our planet by a Voyager mission, which shows the Earth, our magnificent home, as being a single blue pixel in the vastness of the solar system and all of the Milky Way. Looking at that tiny blue dot, so beautiful, so fragile and so serene in its orbit, I am reminded what Carl Sagan said. To paraphrase, he said he was looking at everything human beings had ever said or accomplished, dreamed, believed or taught; every atrocity and every act of kindness; every statue and gadget and weapon and belief system; every mother holding an infant.

To value home, at times we must travel, get some perspective. Well, we've gone places where we couldn't see Earth, hidden behind the moon; right now the Cassini mission is dancing around Saturn. With each journey away, we are given new insights; now we scan the stars for solar systems with Earth-like planets. My home is the whole Earth, but my hope is that we will venture out into our galaxy and make the dreams of science fiction a reality, and we will homestead among the stars.

Not everyone who has a home stays in one place. Travellers have caravans; retirees have motor homes; adventurers have sailboats; Mongols have yurts; astronauts have space stations. Sometimes, home moves while the rest of the world stays still.

In July 2009, I got up one morning and flippantly told myself that I should do one thing every day that scares me. My equally flippant response to myself was that I couldn't think of anything more frightening than attending a high school reunion, so I immediately repaired to the internet and found to my shock that there was a 50th anniversary event in London Ontario planned for that Thanksgiving.

I used the opportunity to revisit some places I used to live and see friends. I went to Toronto, and Madawaska, and Kanata, and London. The reunion itself was a complete wash; although there were 20 people registered for the reunion whom I would have been pleased to speak to, in two days of events I recognized precisely one person. The first night I didn't recognize anybody at all. I worked the room three times and didn't see a soul I knew. I ended up sitting next to an alumni's spouse and commiserating with her about how strange it was to watch 400 people having a great time and feeling like a wallflower.

I went back to the motel and noticed that there was a little bar attached to it, and so I had a nightcap. The barmaid as she served me mentioned that the lease had not been renewed, and that they would be gone in two weeks, and that the next night was the last time they would ever have karaoke. The last ever night of Karaoke at a pirate themed bar called The Black Pearl? I thought to myself if tomorrow night's a bust I'll come back here. It was, and I did, and I had a great time.

Why? Because that bar, which was less than half the size of this room, made me welcome. Strangers spoke to me; I sang a couple of times, once well and once wretchedly; I watched the interplay of friends and laughter and conviviality, heard a dozen accents, and sat with a group of people who were all more or less my age. How strange is that, I thought; all

the kids I grew up with are completely removed from me now; but here I feel at home.

The next morning I got up and drove by my old house in London. I sat across the street in the rental car and thought, it looks the same; the trees are a little taller. I called my mother and told her that the two big maple trees were still standing in front of the house, and she said, "That was the first thing I was going to ask you."

Home is not just the building; it's how it looks covered in snow, the sound the gravel in the driveway makes as you walk across it, the smell of coffee, the feel of the door handle as you fumble for your keys. It is the welcome that waits for you; it is the relief and comfort you take in it. As I made my journey, the physical aspects of home, which I can reproduce if I need to, if I lose the home I have, became much less important, and I was left with the sure and quiet feeling that home is the emotional comfort zone we make with other people.

Home is like the sanctuary we make every Sunday at Beacon. The faces change; but we ritually transform a space, with the help of other people, from a room into a shrine to all the things we jointly value, where we may rest our busy minds, wipe the dust from our spirits and our dreams, and partake of the spiritual nourishment that we bring and share. At its best, home is always a sacred space, wherever and whatever it is.

Blessed be.

## Garbage Day

Today I am confronting a concept which is not high on the list of spiritual subjects. How can I possibly connect garbage with your soul - ever supposing you have one - your hunger for meaning - your love of beauty - your responsible search for truth?

Let us start at the beginning.

In the beginning, the world spun itself together out of leftover junk from the genesis of the closest star. It coalesced, captured another piece of junk which we now call our moon (which, strangely enough, we've left garbage on) and revolved around that sun more times than we can ever count for sure. The hot vents in the bottom of the sea pushed interesting compounds together and some of them started replicating. The replications got more and more interesting and responsive to the environment, and as far as we can figure, that's how life got going on our blue green marvel of a world.

Evolution - a natural process whereby energy and materials are recycled, conserved and recycled again as organisms push their way toward new food sources and reproductive success - gave rise to animals called hominids, some of whom evolved into being generalists. One of them picked up a glowing ember from a volcanic eruption in East Africa (or maybe it was from a grass fire) and lit the first chalice. Of course she didn't, really, but you have to admit it's a compelling image. She DID spend a lot of time burning her fingers before she figured out how to carry fire from one place to another, because there was a distinct advantage to not being scared of fire when every four footed predator out there is scared witless of it.

As soon as we figured out fire, not only did the predators quit eating quite so many of our babies, the available calorie density from our environment went up by four times. That's right, four times. Once you can cook food you can extract four times as many calories from your environment as you could when everything was raw. Cooking neutralizes poisons in, and releases nutrients from, a wide variety of foods. Also, you can start drying food more safely so you can start carrying food around and smoothing over hungry periods.

Now, you don't have to be a genius to see that population of our ancestors would explode with a drop in the infant death rate and a huge rise in our food availability. The taming of fire was, in my opinion, the greatest technological advance of all time. I know that our chalice symbolizes the flame of love, commitment, beauty and self-knowledge, but I see it as the essence of technology; the forge upon which all the things which distinguish us from animals have been created.

Consider this: with the invention of fire, we started to make garbage. You were doubtless wondering when I'd get back to that. Essentially, before fire, we didn't make garbage, because we were animals, and animals make things which can be easily recycled and

reclaimed.

Garbage, along with laughing, crying and the command of fire, is one of the things which characterize us as human. If all the human beings on the planet disappeared overnight, there'd be a couple of places that would be unliveable for other organisms for a while because of toxic waste release or nuclear meltdowns, but eventually there'd be no sign of us, and other species would crowded into where we used to live. Within a few tens of thousands of years, there'd be no sign of us on the surface of the planet, although there'd be lots for alien archaeologists to dig up if they happened to cruise by.

If you take the long view, you know that all the garbage we've visited upon our planet will one day all be gone, but likely not before we're all gone too. The healing and regenerative power of this planet is not well understood, but I do know that if we quit making the mess, Gaia would methodically clean it up. We're too busy flapping our arms and wailing about the bad stuff to understand things in geological terms. In the blink of an eon, it'll all be gone.

In the short term though, and that's what really counts to most of us, we're still here, and responsible for what I see as being three major kinds of garbage.

The first is the garbage that we create when we open boxes and eat the contents and then toss the boxes. Landfill.

The second is the garbage that we have in our own minds. I call it Mindfill. Mindfill is the opposite of Mindful. It's when you don't allow the light of reason and the heat of conscience to guide you, because you are too busy playing or whining or watching TV or shopping or drinking to excess, or maybe worrying, gossiping, denying and blaming.

The third is the garbage we make in our social relationships. I call this Timefill,

because if you live your life NOT making garbage in your relationships, you can have more time and better relationships, since you don't waste time cleaning up the garbage you make by being a jerk. Now are you always running away to new relationships because you can't stand living in and with the debris of the old ones. It can get to be a full time job, dodging all that garbage, and the worst part is that you can get so used to dodging it that there's no longer any impetus to clean it up.

The first kind of garbage is objective. Landfill is something you can easily visualize. There is a lot of it, and you can weight it and measure it. My household produces one regulation sized garbage bin full every week, except at Christmas, and we're essentially five adults. We compost, we recycle, we buy in bulk, but despite all this, according to a website I visited to prepare for this homily, my ecological footprint is only 2/3rds of the Canadian average. We'd need 6 1/2 Earths to sustain every human at my rate of consumption. I was very unhappy when I saw that.

Here I am, looking like an ordinary white lady heading off into middle age, when I am really a menace to creation, gluttonously slogging through resources like the Tasmanian Devil. I am not a nice lady, I'm a monster.

After taking the test I realized that as long as I'm eating meat and driving a car all the rest of things I do to spare the planet may be important but they are not a fix. It's just slowing down the deterioration. It was a real poke in the eye. I knew it was bad, but I didn't get it, and I guess I still don't. The implications for me are that I must continue to alter my behaviour, and keep nudging it toward sustainability, and most of all I must acknowledge my complicity as a generator of garbage, including CO2 and e-waste - without becoming so overwhelmed by the disparity that I don't actually DO anything about it. As most of us know,

once you start to grasp how bad things are, there's an urge to take a nap or go out for dinner, just to get your mind off this bad thing that has suddenly moved into your mind with you.

But this means that you have to make a conscious effort to understand how what you think turns into actions which injure the planet, and that is very hard. It is big, and we are small, and conceptualizing the harm we do is very difficult even for professional doomsayers.

We fire-tamng, laughing, crying primates are our own worst enemies! Curiosity and love of novelty spur ever more useful inventions, but they also mean that we often have the attention span of houseflies about the important stuff, which loops me back to Mindfill.

Mindfill is junk thinking. It's the garbage nobody can see.

Many nobler minds than mine have tried to tackle Mindfill. Benjamin Franklin invented a little chart that he carried around in his pocket to chart his own weekly progress toward dejunking his own mind; it reminded him to practice virtues. Any bookstore will have a wide selection of books trying to get you to change your life by changing the way you think - one assumes for the better but I'm not always convinced. I am cynical, and I see many authors who aren't much smarter than me struggling to tame their own minds while providing me with advice. I think we all struggle with mental health issues - our own or other people's - and it would be great if there was some way of learning about Mindfill at the same time we work on the job of domesticating our bewildering brains. But aren't we all struggling with that? One of the reasons I'm here is because I think about the way I think, and I hope that I can improve and correct the ways I think, and give myself better things to think about.

Landfill can only be tamed by constant daily effort. The way you make less garbage is to buy fewer things. This is what you have to look forward to on that path; you eat somewhat less food, cooked in a less interesting way (less fat, sugar, salt, meat and imported goodies).

You cook your own food and to the extent you can, grow it too. You travel and shop judiciously. You double up errands and you form a buying coop. You stop smoking, you quit wearing makeup and dyeing your hair, you get rid of clothes you have to dry clean, you sell your car, you sell off all your excess stuff. In short, every aspect of your daily life shifts, and if you talk about it you're a social deviant and if you don't talk about it you're not providing an example to others.

Garbage isn't just garbage. It's broken human dreams. A landfill in North America contains food, lots of it. If we are to feel, really feel the call of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we, as individuals and as a culture, have to quit throwing out so much food. Without food, how can we have justice, equity and compassion in our tired old world? Would you hate the person who had food when you didn't?

Let me tell you a little story centred around garbage. There is, close to Mexico City, a garbage dump a mile wide and eight miles long, and some 2000 people live in that garbage dump. They are dominated most cruelly by a number of garbage gang clan bosses, and are spiritually served by one 70 year old Jesuit named Roberta Guevara, who holds mass with a recycled cross once a week, in the middle of that stinking mass of garbage.

When he first started out in his mission Father Guevara was full of fire and eagerness. His mission was to get the parents to stop beating their children, the clan bosses to arrange better payment for their workers, and education and access to health care to his flock, some of the most marginalized people on earth.

The gang bosses, sensing this priest was a self-righteous upright troublemaker who was going to rock the boat, warmly encouraged Father Guevara to get off their property. The priest had to accommodate them to serve his parish. And he did. He had 25 years of practice

doing it, and rather than getting agitated about the evil bosses, he concentrated his efforts on helping the children get educated and the adults get treatment for their frequent injuries.

Does he think the gang bosses are nice guys? No. Does he deal with it and do what good he can? Yes.

When you think about garbage, think about Father Guevara. For him, garbage is not a construct, something nasty many miles away. It's where he sets up his altar on Sunday. Think about him and do what you can about garbage - in your mind, in your life, in your interactions with others - and don't be sidetracked by not being perfect at any of it.

Blessed be.

## Art as Spirituality

March 9, 2014

Thank you for choosing to be in community with us. I offer thanks to the Coast Salish, Musqueam and Squamish people who share, willingly or not, their unceded ancestral homelands with us, and to all the people whose good hearts and hard work brought us here.

This morning before we begin I'd like to define both art and spirituality.

Art is the expression of a normal human desire to create to what seems missing from mere existence. Art is expressed in a form which is not required for the continuance of life, and which is appreciable to other human beings. In order to be art, it can't stay inside you. It must be expressed, or made perceptible.

Art is held in a matrix of context, or to put it another way, a womb of proximities. Sometimes that context cripples the artist, and sometimes it liberates and supports her. But even when art is made for the pleasure of the artist alone, never to be seen or revealed or

shared, the social context of the birth of that art can't be made to disappear, unless you are making your own pigments, and ballet shoes, and grinding your own camera lenses. Art depends on technique, and technique depends on the creativity and boldness of every artist who came before you. Art is social, no matter how we sometimes place artists atop a lonely pillar of genius.

Spirituality, as I define it, is one facet of the normal human reaction to the unknown - the big questions which do not have easy answers. Whether it takes the form of the wordless awe of the scientist learning new questions to ask about our world, or the fervent singing of hymns on the deck of the Titanic, or the meticulous construction of sand mandalas which will be thrown into the sea upon completion, spirituality is an acknowledgement that however complete or enjoyable our lives may be at any moment, all of life is supported and enfolded in mystery and vastness, in which a single human life is like a dandelion seed borne on the wind.

Art and spirituality, as I have chosen to define them, are individual human reactions to being that little seed. Our brains are wired to attend to and be responsive to other people, and so it is no surprise that when art and spirituality are consciously connected, they will produce works which help us to be in community with each other. Hymns and stained glass and temples, for example.

Families know that when you repeat an activity three times, it's a ritual. Humans love repetition as fiercely as we love novelty; it's one of our longstanding contradictions as a species. Great art can be watered down over time by the mundane use it is put to, but the wellspring it draws from never fails; the desire for repetition and the desire for novelty, woven together in a social context.

Spirituality manifesting as art is the reason that gifted actors in television crave stage

acting in the off season. Acting for television is made by serving up little bits of dialogue and explosions, after which someone yells "Cut!". It needs an amazing gamut of skills, and needs an enormous and costly framework to succeed. The spirituality inherent in it is not obvious - until the last music has been cued and the last scene edited. That is when we see what the team has contrived for us, and in the last ten or fifteen years, global television producers have figured out how to make good art, even great art. For the most part though, TV remains a crinkly wrapping on the worst kinds of commerce and social conditioning, political manipulation and abuse of the weak, and not much else. Newton Minow's speech including the much-quoted observation that television was a vast wasteland was given in 1961, and that landscape has only changed in how high the peaks and how abysmal the depths are, not in the average result.

By contrast to television, stage acting has flow and continuity and a live audience, whose members conspire with you, in their awareness and murmurings, to go where television simply can't go, boldly or otherwise. For when you act in television, a director who hates you can leave the worst take forever on your resume, and you can't fix it; on the stage, you can do your best and it's up to the audience sharing your space to interpret your art and support you with their attention.

Most of us pass through a period during adolescence when we see both the art and spirituality of the culture around us as empty, ugly, cruel, old, mercenary, boring, unimaginative and impossible to dance to. Each young artist brings the specific complaints and enthusiasms he has about his culture and religion and family and personal life to the art he makes. That energetic discontent and manic joy can be the leavening that makes for compelling art, whether or not it shrinks in the desiccating gaze of posterity. As we look back

across art history, we see many contributing factors to change and ferment in art, but the most important one is new technology in the hands of young people without preconceptions as to how to employ it. New pigments make new portraits; new lenses make new effects; new fabrics make new costumes, and there's no telling what computers and nanotechnology will bring to art in future. There is nothing new in how humans grasp new technology to deliver something beautiful into the world which they have seen, or heard, or which danced into their minds upon the breath of a half-heard conversation. We have done this forty thousand years and more, and will never stop, not as long as our species is alive. You can count on it.

Art as spirituality connects the technical aspects of art to the questions we ask ourselves. Some of the most perceptive art unifies the simplest of techniques with the simplest of questions; how then shall we live? What does home mean? Who is my family? Where is God, and truth, and beauty? Who has the right to cage minds and imprison bodies, and why? These big questions, brought to our perceptions in art, acknowledge difficulty and darkness; the art born from the big questions, which reaches beyond mere depiction, inspires and revives us.

One of the ongoing discussions I have with my mother is about the difference between art and craft, and how they support one another in bringing colour and individuality into the world. Art to my mind is origination, and craft is continuation. When you pick up a wooden toy train kit to make something for your grandchild for Christmas, the artist has designed and provided specifications, the manufacturer has produced the train to those specifications, and now the art passes through your hands to be altered to suit you. Maybe you take out the train whistle because your daughter can't deal with high pitched noises. Maybe you paint it with tiger stripes because your grandchild's first word was tiger. However you finish the train, you

are helping the artist finish the project, because the artist isn't done until the train is on the floor with the child on Christmas morning.

Craft is at that sweet spot of novelty and repetition.

Suppose you've never pieced a quilt, you at least know it's been done, and there are techniques to help you. When you're done, and it's hanging on the wall of a friend, because it's 'too nice for everyday use' that is the point at which craft migrates into another special case of art, décor. The modern concept of a decorated house commenced in the low countries of Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance. It was perfected by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and virtually every kind of furnishing and decoration and painting we find in our houses today has a prior example from the Dutch.

They were the first to mass produce specific pieces of art so that everyone who could afford it could have a reproduction of a great work; there were artists who knocked off a dozen sketches in a day - of a cow in a field bordered by a forest - such was the demand for pastoral pictures of that kind in the middle class households of that time.

There's probably someone in this room with a picture like that up on the wall. Art connects us through time to people like us, who had all the concerns we do, all the important ones, anyway, and to generations yet unborn, who will ask the same questions and pause with the same recognition and joy when they watch the same Charlie Chaplin movie, or stand in front of a painting at the Louvre, or listen to Ella Fitzgerald. Art can do that. It cuts across age and gender, race and creed, class and occupation, simultaneously uniting us. The best art mocks category, laughs at genre, and ignores critics with the ease of a toddler playing at a beach.

Nowadays décor is big business, but it has a spiritual element. When I sit in a house

I've never been in before and see a simple, solid white carved female figure, the owner is telling me something about her spiritual life. I suppose it's possible that she just stuck it there because she liked it, but that was not the impression I got. When I am in another house, the living room is festooned with musical instruments and the walls are covered with reminders of family life across many decades. My walls are hung with the art and craft of my mother and both my grandmothers and my mother's father, who carved frames for his wife's paintings, and family photos, and reproductions of gods and goddesses and photos of writers and poets. Walk into any Unitarian household and you will likely find family portraits and landscapes and travel memorabilia; all of these are not just décor but the important and ongoing reminders of what we hold sacred, what brings us joy, what reminds us to be compassionate or loving. My memories of Lutina Santing, a former member of Beacon now sadly departed, are woven through with her extraordinary gift for making a space beautiful, which she brought so ably and lovingly to our sanctuary and her own house, which was an oasis of peace and order.

Art is not just about 'making something new which addresses big questions', but about consciously and intentionally bringing the art of others into the space you control, to lift your spirits and keep you company and to remind you of wonder and gratitude. Sometimes people buy or commission art to show that they have money or to pad a collection or as an investment. I find it telling that I have never walked into a Unitarian home and found that to be the case; I said earlier that it is impossible to detach art from its social matrix but it's just as difficult to ignore the spiritual message that the art on the walls is giving you. If I learned that a Unitarian had commissioned a piece of art, I would know without asking that the reason would be, "Well, I really like the artist's work, and I had the money." Or, "It was a friend of

my daughter's, and the painting is of a place they used to hang out together." The connection to the art would be personal. Your art, the art you choose as opposed to the art you make, is like a friend, who happens to live on the wall, or in your stereo, or in your dvd collection.

And in those things, you are in part building your holy shrine. If your shrine is lined with books and filled with family pictures, you are wearing your spirituality where anyone can see it. Perhaps your shrine has a dog or a cat to keep it connected to the natural world. Solid furniture and harmonious colours and mirrors to throw light and specific hues of paint on the walls; all will wordlessly speak of your spirit and what you hold sacred to any visitor. If Mozart or the Indigo Girls or Billie Holiday or techno or Algerian hip-hop is playing when I come in, I will know something of your connectedness to the world, and something of your spirit.

Spirituality demands art from all of us. Sometimes it's hard and consuming and stern and unrelenting, and flings us to the ground when it's done. Not all of us are artists in the original and conventional sense, and most artists are not spending their days inventing new techniques or adapting new technologies, because we're too busy learning how to properly live, work and network in our chosen disciplines. Most of us make art as an afterthought, or as an offshoot of craft or décor, or as pastiche or parody, or by exactly copying something previously created. Spirituality - the consciousness that we are little critters asking big questions - demands that we choose what kind of art we want to surround ourselves with, whether it's the bold colours and entrancing curves of west coast art or the challenges of a Diane Arbus photograph or the endless succession of pieces of construction paper that comes home with our kids from school.

High art is out of my reach, because I may write songs, but I have not created a single

technique or expanded the range of what's possible for others. Nevertheless, songwriting for me is a deeply spiritual activity, because when I'm writing, I'm trying to keep a channel open to something electrifying and elemental, which connects me to every other person who had the sudden perception - "Hey! I'm way bigger on the inside than I'll ever be able to show on the outside! What I'm doing is complex and interesting and only I can do it!" You may rarely experience that feeling, but you can honour yourself as a person who in turn honours beauty and creativity and our common human striving for excellence and hope.

I hope that going forward you bring a more personal and more intentional grace to the choices you make for the art and decorations that you give to others and display in your own home. If you've got an ugly or unsatisfactory piece of art in your life or on your walls, I hope you have the strength to pack it up and put up something that nourishes you instead. Make a conscious effort to sketch, sing, appreciate and inhabit art, either mindfully, as an adult, or playfully, as a child. And remember, it doesn't matter if no one sees it but you. You are still connected to every other artist who ever lived, to the women who left their handprints on the walls of the caves in Chauvet, to the child who draws an unlikely giraffe in fluorescent marker on the bathroom door, to the towering geniuses of our own day, like Ai Wei Wei and Louise Bourgeois. To make art, to select it, to share it; these are activities which affirm our humanity and our connectedness, and that's as spiritual as things get.

Blessed be.

## A Peek at Peak Oil

Homilist's Note: This is not the delivered version of the talk I gave on February 26, 2011, which had far more parenthetical remarks.

This morning I'd like to talk about Peak Oil. I'm going to talk about how the concept arose, and briefly touch on some of the implications. It's the societal and spiritual implications that I hope to stress, so in effect this is a homily about abundance and scarcity.

In 1956, an oil geologist named Marion King Hubbert presented a paper to the American Petroleum Institute. The American Petroleum Institute is an openly pro-oil non-profit conglomerate that tirelessly lobbies, propagandizes and spins. It is where people who make their living from oil can go with a reasonable expectation that they won't have their world view challenged. And thus it was that Mr. Hubbert's presentation that day must have really been the skunk at the picnic.

For what he was presenting was a paper theorizing that on the basis of ease of

extractability – not total reserves, but how easy it was to get oil out of the ground – the US petroleum industry would measurably start to decline by 1970.

Since this prediction was for no distant future, but less than two decades away, that wasn't good news for anyone there. Essentially he told them that for the balance of their careers, they would be presiding over the decline of the extraction of oil in the US. Later on he predicted that there would be a global Peak Oil, which we are supposed to have passed already although I personally think we're still a few years out. So in a nutshell, that is Peak Oil. The demand curve which grows every time a baby is born meets a supply curve which is held in place by how difficult and expensive the remaining oil – which the oil companies say is limitless – is going to be when it's extracted from the ground.

To be fair, the concept of Peak Oil is a controversial one. Let me be clear that everything I'm about to say is my opinion.

The oil companies all say it isn't true. Peak Oil always was and always will be a fallacy. I'll let you think for a moment about the truthfulness, corporate responsibility and peaceful history of oil companies, just for a moment, give yourself an opportunity to think of three news items in which the oil companies have knowingly lied about something or killed workers through safety violations.

Now ask yourself whether you would have any reason to believe the oil companies when their representatives say peak oil is a fallacy. They are closest to the geological information that makes Peak Oil at least a working theory and they've the most to lose if it's true, and they've lobbied like elite shock troops to be able to drill on every square inch of the planet if they choose.

If Peak Oil is true, then citizens have a reason to prevent the oil companies from

drilling, and if it's false then anybody who stands in the way of drilling is impeding the 'orderly march of science and progress' that has unfolded on our planet since 1859, the first year humans drilled for oil.

So from the perspective of the oil companies, they are right, but they have to kill our mother, they have to kill Gaia, to be proven correct. Drilling for oil cannot be made to be an environmentally friendly action.

In my view, if the oil companies are denying Peak Oil, that fact and the evidence I've encountered is enough to convince me I should be concerned about how expensive gas is. But how concerned? How did we end up here?

When the oil industry started up in the continental US, there was more supply than ability to extract and process oil. Getting oil out of the ground made a lot of money, and so more extraction and production capability was built because everybody who had money to invest wanted some of that. Demand grew and so did supply. Hubbert figured out that all natural systems can be depleted, even oil, and started measuring oil production against demand. Eventually there would come a time where the demand curve would hit the supply curve, not because there was no more oil, but because you couldn't get it out of the ground and to the customer without spending too much money to extract it. The oil companies have been looking around in desperation for means of increasing production.

That is why fracking is such a big deal in domestic oil production right now – only by increasing pressure on the remaining oil by pumping special fluid into the ground can the remaining oil be extracted. We don't know much about what the long term effects are but it isn't looking good for the people of Pennsylvania. And it's legal in British Columbia, so the long term consequences will be part of our children's heritage as well.

We are all living in the shadow of this troublesome dearth of oil. The days of easy oil discovery and extraction are over. The last big discovery was in 2003 and it is only now coming on line in Brazil, where the Brazilians have purchased their first nuclear powered submarine to protect their new off shore wealth. Oil has driven humans to war in the past, and we're actively planning for more of it in the future, as a species.

Whatever future energy source humans use, the last one hundred and fifty years of technological development would have been impossible without oil. To my mind, the little geopolitical stability we've had over the last century has been due to relatively inexpensive fossil fuel. At the same time, the lack of it threatens the way of life that we are used to.

Up until this point, as a species we've always counted on technology to help us find a way to escape whatever corner we've painted ourselves into. When the oil supply is restricted to those who can afford it or have the muscle to steal it, will we find some relief from science? Where should we look for guidance in our own daily living?

Oil causes wars. That is the political implication. Where there is not a full scale war going on, there's a war against the population sitting on the oil, whether they are sea life or Nigerians or the Beaver Lake Cree. Very powerful people want the last of the easy oil, and they are more than prepared to bribe and threaten and kill to get it, or to hire people to do that work for them.

It's very easy to look at oil and the impact it has had on human life on this planet and think that it's evil. I look at it and see a mixed blessing, and as it becomes more expensive, I do believe that human beings and the markets we create together will become more creative about how we respond to our needs.

Oil has been so cheap that it has become the solution to every problem. The chemicals

derived from it make fertilizer, plastic, fabric, pesticides, Ink, medical supplies, parachutes, telephones, antiseptics, deodorant, pantyhose and the list goes on and on. It's not just the ability to put gas in our cars, if we're lucky enough to have one, that's in jeopardy if we can't afford oil. Every aspect of human life will become more expensive – and that is going to cause a huge shift in how we do things as a species.

There is always the possibility that new technologies will save us. Genetically tailored bacteria to turn waste plastic back into oil are not science fiction any more. We can grow plants to turn into feedstock for fuel. As Canadians we will have access to these technologies, but whether we can elect governments who will make the unpopular choices that will be necessary to effect change is an open question. There is only so much an individual can do about demand for oil – we need visionary leaders and I don't think leaders of parties who win elections with robocalls are a good bet to lead us with sound technology policy.

I'd like to just take a detour at the moment and say a word about feminism.

Over the last century women have striven to be able to control their own minds and bodies and achieved, at least in some countries, success. All of that has been on the back of cheap oil. Cheap oil has made domestic labour saving devices and contraception, in my view the two biggest contributors to women's emancipation, possible. If there is no reasonable substitute for oil found, feminism may founder.

Okay, now that I've managed to horrify you with a vision of a labour intensive and socially backward future, let's look at some upside.

Monsanto, and all the nasty agricultural monolith companies, are completely dependent on cheap oil to make and distribute their products. They will end up being priced out of the market, especially when the global seed saving movement stops being a small band

of pioneers and starts being everybody. Instead of collecting Pokémons, kids will be collecting, labelling and sharing seeds, and everyone around them will be happy they are doing it.

Instead of spraying weeds we'll be sending herds of goats to eat them, and then we'll eat the goats or their cheese.

Instead of driving ten miles, paying for parking and joining 40000 other people to see a band promoted by a multinational media company, we'll be walking to the end of the street to play music in each other's kitchens. So mote it be, and sooner rather than later!

Instead of being indoors watching television we'll be outside gardening, beekeeping, looking after chickens, rabbits and goats, and our blackberry jelly man will have all the help he could ever want picking fruit every August.

There will be public and private transportation everywhere – some of it horsedrawn, some steam powered, some electric, some human powered. And rich people will still have cars.

You'll spend a lot less time getting dressed, because you'll only have two or three good pieces of clothing.

Rag rugs are going to make a big comeback.

Kids will be walking to school again. Kids will be obliged to help their families find and preserve food, and they will know where their food comes from. They will know what every insect pest and plant disease looks like.

You will know your neighbours.

One of your neighbours may have a shed full of tools to rent to you so you will get out of the habit of thinking you have to buy anything and into the habit of considering what you

can trade for something.

Manners are going to come back. If the pace of life slows down, there will be time for more ornament, and more ceremony, in daily life.

We'll eat less and enjoy it more. We'll still have sugar, but it will be from beets and not corn and it will be made locally. We'll still have cocoa and coffee and cinnamon. It will be expensive but we'll still have it. We'll still have beer and wine and soft drinks and ice cream and cooking oil and it will all be local. We'll be eating less wheat and a lot more barley, quinoa and oats.

We will return to more natural rhythms of eating, sleeping, working and celebrating. We'll have less interference during childbirth and virtually all children will be nursed for at least six months.

We'll still have good water in the Lower Mainland, and a lot of us will have cisterns.

We won't have freesias flown in from South Africa for our tables, but we'll still have fresh cut flowers if we want them.

In predicting all of these things, I am thinking of what positive outcomes may arise, and I will leave you with one last comment.

Beacon will still be here. We may have to get creative about how we get everybody to church and home again, and we may have a wood stove instead of a furnace, and we may have to get our own power generation to run the sound system, but our community will be here for us. Out of all this talk of scarcity, there is still an abundance to life and the human spirit which is quite independent of oil. Kindness and hard work and self-sacrifice do not go out of fashion. The most important thing to remember, whenever anyone says to you that something scary is on its way, is "This too shall pass". Our mother Gaia has let us nurse at the breast of

inexpensive oil for a long time, but even the most loving mother eventually weans her children, and it's time for all of us to think how we may walk more carefully, more joyfully and more humbly upon the earth that is our only home.

## Cognitive Bias and Congregational Life

Fall, 2010

This homily was accompanied by a numbered list of cognitive biases; an internet search for 'canonical list of cognitive biases' will get you started, but the list that accompanied the homily blew off my hard drive in 2014 - and I didn't keep a hard copy. The numbers cited refer to the numbers I put on the list I provided in the handout. The children's story was a very slightly revised version of the "The Blind Men and the Elephant" by J.G. Saxe, referenced below.

I want to take as my text today the Bible verse Matthew 7:3.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

There is much of poetry and wisdom in the Bible, and this verse is a good example of

it. Of course, it is no literal plank I wish to bring to your attention; today I want to talk about cognitive bias, that continuous human ability to be unaware of blind spots, erroneous thinking and logical inconsistencies in oneself while swiftly perceiving them in others.

A cognitive bias is a human tendency to draw the wrong conclusion from a set of circumstances based on faulty thinking rather than the factual evidence. The list of cognitive biases is very long, and because cognitive bias is a hot topic in contemporary psychology, it is getting longer every year. Those of you who picked up the handout will see how long it is, although there is some overlap and some biases are missing.

There are three things you need to know about cognitive biases. You have them; so does everybody else; and you can change your life for the better if you work toward understanding cognitive biases in yourself and others.

Biases come in all shapes and sizes. They don't have to be ugly, like ageism, racism and homophobia. They can be pretty much harmless, especially when you know they are there.

When I first came to Unitarianism, I went to a church in Montreal where Enter, Rejoice and Come In was the ingathering music every single Sunday. To this day I wish that Beacon did the same. Why? Well, take a look at Bias # 51... The "Mere Exposure Effect". That is the tendency to express undue liking for things merely because of familiarity with them.

Now that I've been coming to Beacon for the best part of a decade, I remember my resentment when we had to stop lighting candles for Joys and Concerns when we moved to the Gathering Place. After a year, I was pretty much okay with putting pebbles into a vase to express Joys and Concerns. Why? Because I was familiar with the ritual; because I

participated, and people I love participated. Even if you, in truth, have no control over anything external to you, the familiar gives you that illusion of control; it is one of the reasons why our hearts buck so hard against change, even good change.

This leads in to some other biases; #85 – System Justification, #80 Status quo bias, #50, Loss Aversion, and #26, Endowment effect. These are all biases that make clubs, businesses, churches, families and many other human groups buck very hard against change. How do these all link together?

System Justification is the tendency to defend and bolster the status quo. To be a true bias, the tendency to defend and bolster the status quo needs to be set in context; it is only when the bias is expressed in the teeth of the evidence that it's a bias. Otherwise it's just self-knowledge, or a preference. May I also point out that your ability to see yourself as biased varies from day to day and situation to situation. You may be open-minded about organizational changes at work and very close-minded about what your Thanksgiving dinner should look like – to the point of picking a fight with your mother-in-law about giblet gravy. That's no preference – it's a bias.

When the System Justification bias is in play, then whatever arrangements you have in the group that currently exist are supported and preferred and funded, and whatever alternatives are suggested are bad-mouthed, under-resourced and shunted aside. This bias is what allows groups to do things that are clearly and plainly NOT in the group interest. We've always done it that way! Blessed be!

This bias gets along well with the Status Quo bias – the tendency to like things to stay the same, as well as the Endowment effect – which points to people wanting to be paid more for something they own than what they'd pay for it if they had to replace it (which I also call

the Garage Sale dilemma). Then there's Loss Aversion, which makes the pain of the loss of something more nasty than the pain of acquiring it. End result, nobody wants to change anything at church. Actually there isn't a person in this room who doesn't want to change SOMETHING about church – we just know that there will be a heckuva challenge in store to make change happen. My end of the elephant doesn't look like yours, don't you know.

So I started off today, why worry about the speck in your brother's eye when you have a plank in your own? Well, it's human to do that. It may not be wise or good, or just, but it is human.

Most of our cognitive biases seem to have one of two psychological purposes.

Biases like the Herd Instinct are all about the human craving to belong. We don't stick our necks out, and we follow the example of others so that we can be part of a group, and feel safer. If you're selling heroin on the streets of Vancouver, as a foot soldier in some kind of drug gang, the sacrifices you make to belong will not avail you once you're arrested or shot in a turf war, but the main reason that young men and women make those sacrifices and take those risks is to belong, to share values and to participate – especially when nobody else but a gang has previously bothered to include them.

At the same time as we have biases that encourage us to belong, we have biases that allow us to differentiate ourselves from others – by allowing us to emphasize in our own minds our uniqueness, intelligence, memory, good fortune, etc. etc. These are much more pernicious in my view, because it is much harder to identify and attack them.

Let's look at one of those planks – I mean biases.

How about #1 – Actor – observer bias. This is a sneaky one. It's definitely a plank in the eye. Suppose you hear that Allegra has been in a car accident (I haven't, fortunately).

Now further suppose you have an opinion about me being a rather frivolous and inattentive person, and seriously, I have no notion where you might have gotten that idea. This perception of my being frivolous and inattentive might bias you to believe that my personality had more to do with my imaginary accident than the situation I found myself in at the time of the accident.

Now put the shoe on the other foot. You are describing the exact same accident, an accident YOU had, to a friend. Your personality would have nothing to do with your description of the accident. You would say, "It was dark, the road was wet, and I had just swerved to avoid a raccoon when somebody made an illegal lane change in front of me." And your friend would say, "How awful!" But she might secretly be thinking that you were too tender-hearted and you should have just hit the raccoon.... See what I mean? The person who is watching gives more credence to personality and motive than to the facts of the case. When the situation is reversed, personality hardly affects the description at all.

How do you fight a bias like that? Well, it's hard. You can tell yourself, "I pledge to myself that I will judge situations on facts that I can verify, and I won't give my feelings and preferences the same weight as facts." Best of luck with that! I want a cookie and a high five when I manage it, which isn't often. It's a struggle. But it's an important struggle. Hardly anything you do with your mind can affect your life more than to make the decision that you are going to get to know all the dark corners and unexamined assumptions of your life.... So you don't fool yourself as much, and so you don't make unwarranted assumptions about the thoughts, feelings and actions of others. Or maybe you do still make unwarranted assumptions, but you can at least catch yourself doing it and adjust your behaviour accordingly, like a cook correcting the seasoning in a dish after tasting it. (Oh my GOD this

stew tastes like COGNITIVE BIAS.)

I call attention to Cognitive Bias like a skeptic at a magic show. When you're eight years old, you might think the magician really makes the elephant disappear and pulls that rabbit out of that hat. If that eight year old is sitting next to a hardened skeptic, the skeptic will say, there's a trick to it. Then the eight year old, understanding the mechanics of the trap door under the hat, will turn to the six year old and say, "You big baby, there's a hidey hole in the table!" when the six year old says, "Wow!" with awestruck wonderment.

The eight year old has left self-deception behind. She can no longer say to herself that what the magician is doing defies the laws of nature. Shedding bias is a sign of growth, maturity, self-esteem and wisdom. But there will always be folks in the audience who prefer wishful thinking to facts.

Fight self-deception in yourself. Fight the urge to belittle others for lack of knowledge and understanding by holding compassion in your heart. If someone is genuinely ignorant of their own incompetence, then it is the incompetence that should be addressed, and not your own hurt feelings that somebody should have 'known better'. How often do we hold others to a higher standard than we hold ourselves?... nitpicking on a speck and ignoring our own big and smelly compost heap, if I may borrow one of Sue Sparlin's favourite sources of inspiration.

I linked cognitive bias to congregational life. Each of us is at a different stage of a journey towards competence in spiritual growth and fellowship; to be aware of cognitive bias in yourself and others makes it easier to adapt; to find practical and humane methods of resolving conflict; to not take things personally; to be able to apologize meaningfully when we have given offence; to nurture ourselves as we battle internalized bias and fear of the 'other'.

At its best, a U\*U congregation is a place where you work on your theology along with the rest of your life, sometimes as more of an activist, sometimes as more of a hermit, or more a traveler, or more family-centred, depending on your age and stage, and depending on how your life has arced and sputtered and sometimes even kept a steady flame. But in order to approach the idea of the holy or the powerful or the eternal, we must keep our wits about us; if we are going to think about it, we're better prepared if we know where the pitfalls are. Different religions emphasize different things. But there is also a lot of attention given to the same things, over and over, in different forms, in different religions. Meaningful and honest speech; cleanliness; discipline in the face of trials, charitable behaviour and kindness to and awareness of those in need; diligent support of the faith and trustworthy behaviour in performing tasks.

All of these traits are worth promoting. I can certainly see supporting any number of behaviours, as long as you show me the science or the positive outcomes that recommend why I should, for example, support needle exchanges for IV drug users. My bias leads me to say, when asked to support something, that I don't want the rule (or Bible, or Koran, or Book of Mormon), I want to be shown the reason, the logic, the power of the argument. I can be convinced, but not coerced. I want to hear from the experts because I've only ever got hold of one leg of the elephant. Nobody knows everything, but together, we know quite a bit.

To be told what to do infuriates me. To be convinced with real life examples, as well as book learning, that something I once believed to be true is no longer true, well, that new conviction will free my mind. It's why I'm U\*U. I come to this faith with biases and shoddy thinking, in the belief that I will be forced to confront my biases – that I will be asked to consider my role in the dance of all life – that I will be moved to be more compassionate and

more forgiving, not just to others but to myself.

To have a mind full of bias is like running on empty with a broken gas gauge. You see the gauge, and you just don't want to believe that illusory fumes may be all you have. It is not wishful thinking that will build the new Jerusalem. It is clear thinking, relentless self-examination, and lots of very hard work, supplemented by the ability to see yourself and other people as and how they are with understanding and love unclouded by sentimentality and expectation.

I am asking you to make it your business to examine your biases – and to help make Beacon a great place, a safe place, to do that in. When we learn about cognitive bias, and learn what we may do to fight cognitive bias, that problem of human cognition that makes our flaws invisible – and the very same flaws in others insufferable – we are in truth working on our theology. We will find in ourselves better solutions, by thinking better quality thoughts. Blessed be.

## Epistemology and the Principles and Sources of UUism

October 23, 2005

In this homily I will attempt to define epistemology and link that branch of philosophy to your own exploration of belief, knowledge and faith. As that is a tall order for 15 minutes, I'll get going.

When I first went to the dictionary for definitions of epistemology, I became apprehensive. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make epistemology funny, and I was hard pressed to come up with a story to link it to our own lives. As Rev. Katie has said, and I'm paraphrasing here, people don't come to church for a lecture, they come for stories.

So I became very discontented with the definitions. The best one I found was "Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, origin and scope of knowledge." Or, what is knowledge, where does it come from, and how do we agree on where to set the boundaries for the discussion?

I became so discontented with the definitions, that I fired them all and hired my own. "Epistemology is the process whereby human beings organize their thinking about knowledge." This centres epistemology on human beings, making epistemology everybody's business; and while epistemology has specialists called philosophers, it also has everyday day practitioners, who would be you and me. We humans have common beliefs about knowledge, a point which I will illustrate in a moment.

This morning I will not be talking that much about the details of contemporary epistemology, rather I will be talking about the folkways of the knowledge gathering process especially as they relate to U\*Uism.

Of course, you can't define epistemology without tackling knowledge. Knowledge, according to Plato, is justified true belief. This definition stood up well for over two millennia, until the nineteen sixties, and has since been adjusted to say, Knowledge is true beliefs which have some other quality which we are still arguing about. The specialists agree that true belief is necessary for knowledge to be knowledge, but they are still wrestling over justification.

If there is anyone in the congregation who is a professionally trained philosopher, I am sure you are scandalized by my compressions and omissions, but this is the fifty cent tour.

I said I was going to illustrate common beliefs about knowledge. I went to a skeptical website some years ago, and was much struck when the author said, "Almost everybody argues about God, and hardly anybody argues about gravity." If I pushed my lecture notes from the pulpit and they flew up to the ceiling, there would not be a single witness who believed that gravity had been suspended. They would suspect a trick, or a rational explanation. The most mystical person in the room would assume this. In fact, most of the people in this room would say "I know that was a trick!" And they'd be right.

What I just said was a rhetorical trick. If you are one of those people who would immediately assume a trick when my papers flew up, you are (drum roll please) a foundationalist! A foundationalist is somebody who believes that there is knowledge which is foundational, and that means it's integral to other knowledge. Everyone is subject to gravity. It is a justified true belief, and it's a foundational one. We can argue very well the finer points of gravity, but its influence on human affairs is not a matter of much debate.

The great thing about being a foundationalist, and I recommend it as a strategy, is that you can say, I gather information through my senses and then use my reason to discern which information is true and which is false. If it's true it goes onto the storehouse of knowledge. If you're not a foundationalist, you have to prove that something is a piece of knowledge from scratch, establishing a chain of logic from the start to the finish. That's definitely work you want to leave for the professionals.

I will provide another example, this one deceptively simple. What is the first game that a baby learns to play? Why, it's peek-a-boo. Peek-a-boo is a very interesting game, and it becomes more interesting the longer you look at it. It may not be very clear what peek-a-boo has to do with the branch of philosophy concerning knowledge, but bear with me.

Peek-a-boo can be played with a very young child, six months or less sometimes, and, prior to speech and prior to much socialization, the child can play cooperatively with any other human being whom the child is interested in looking at. Language and culture are unimportant.

Peek-a-boo is a game which illustrates the expression "common knowledge", and suggests that there is a lot more common knowledge than we are consciously aware of.

Peek-a-boo is a game which shows that even at an extremely early age, human beings

can handle the notion that something can be there and not there at the same time. This ability is foundational. Without it, human beings couldn't know anything about anything, because once the source of their knowledge disappeared from view they wouldn't have the knowledge any more. As an aside, this ability is what distinguishes the smarter, more social animals which human beings hang out with, like dogs, horses, cats, pigs, dolphins and elephants, from other animals. Smart animals have a good idea that even if they can't see something, it's still there, and their idea can be shown not to have a basis in habit.

So the next time you're playing peek-a-boo, you can loftily announce that you are teaching the child about epistemology, and you won't be wrong. It's foundational to the human ability to acquire knowledge that we know that something can exist which is no longer visible.

I believe that every time a person acquires knowledge, it is because that person has learned to keep more than one piece of knowledge in mental view, and the link between those two disparate pieces of knowledge is now obvious and repeatable, at least to the person who knows it.

I said earlier this morning that the current working definition of knowledge is that it's true belief with optional, arguable, extras. My definition of knowledge reflects my prejudices. Although the acquisition of knowledge as an internal mental and physical process taking place in individuals is not clearly understood, I believe that knowledge has a quality that implies sociability. If information wants to be free, then knowledge wants to be where the people are.

I have a mystical streak a mile wide, and this is forcing me to make another aside. I believe that the knowledge that we trade words about it is amazing, and our ability to communicate nothing short of miraculous. But I also believe that every cell in my body is

more knowledgeable than I am because it has knowledge that I do not. I have no clue how to transport oxygen or repair cell walls or grow hair. My body knows, though. The definitions I provided of knowledge at the beginning essentially shut this way of knowing out.

Technically, the cell contains information and automated processes, not knowledge; knowledge is something that belongs to people alone. However, if I'm going to stick to the party line about knowledge, in this instance a human being can know what the chemistry or physics of a cellular process is well enough to describe it. This description can then be shown to be true or false. That makes it knowledge in the philosophical sense. I think most of us have had the experience that our bodies can distinguish true from false and act on the results, but without belief, it isn't knowledge.

The mystic in me objects to this, but I am also, most of the time, quite committed to rationality. It is this constant tension between the ways of knowing that are closed to human beings, and the ways that are open, that led me to Unitarianism in the first place.

Epistemology distinguishes between knowing how to do something, and knowing that something can be proved true or false. Gilbert Ryle said that "Efficient practice precedes the theory of it". Maybe Unitarians are so interested in doing church that they don't want to get into theory. It's like that little poem:

A centipede was happy quite, Until a frog in fun, Said, "Pray, which leg comes after which?"

This raised her mind to such a pitch, She lay distracted in the ditch Considering how to run.

By this I mean to say that if you come to church, you may need to come to church for a while and practice before the theory behind what you're doing becomes clear to you; I think this is a great idea, as it fits in perfectly with the UU attitude towards the individual. Also, you may have noticed from your own life that sometimes thinking about what you're doing doesn't help.

Our common faith is a safe place to let the boundaries made of words dissolve, so that we may approach matters of knowledge, faith, truth and falsity, and our beliefs, with our quest and our humanity intact. Church allows you time to disentangle yourself from the struggle to put one foot in front of the other.

On Sunday mornings, we know how to "do church"; we dress and move and speak in an orderly way. But the reason that we "do church" is so that we can "be church"; we know from hundreds of years of common experience that worship is a folkway – informal knowledge – that is as durable and fragile as humankind itself. We also know that the practice precedes the theory, so we may not always be able to articulate the theory. What happens in church cannot be defined as knowledge, although church exists in part to help us discern the true from the false.

Epistemology uses words to address questions of knowledge. We have no other common mode of understanding these things, which is why epistemologists spend an excruciating amount of time defining terms. Worship is an acknowledgement that words may not suffice; that definitions, rationality and logic may not be enough to get you through your everyday life.

I invite you to re-read the principles and sources of Unitarian Universalism with the word knowledge in your mind, because the word knowledge is nowhere mentioned. This is

because the worship experience, as conceived by most UU's, is not something you can apply the word knowledge to. I am going to paraphrase our principles with the philosophical definition of knowledge in mind.

Our lives happen outside church; the puzzle is to determine how we will behave when we're not at church. We live, or try to live, in testimony to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, applying justice, equity and compassion to human relations, accepting each other's spiritual growth and taking care as we search for our own truth and meaning, and the truth and meaning which we find in community.

We try to be principled and loving in our exercise of power, however it may be bestowed upon us; and we try to stay aware of our obligations even when we're having fun or creating beauty. We imagine a world where no one is subject to violence, and tears come to our eyes. We imagine a better world and a world where have we ceased our feeble attempt to tyrannize nature. None of this is knowledge; but how can the world be better without imagination and awareness?

In the process of imagining that which we cannot know, we are wise to acknowledge the ancestors of both our bodies and our minds. We point toward transcendent wonder, which is not knowledge, but is something precious nevertheless. We learn the words and deeds of the brave and the eloquent, and are we moved to be like them. Love is not knowledge; it is more like a motive source, and it finds its face reflected in many scriptures. Our spiritual forebears are Jewish and Christian but we have turned aside from much of the violence our forebears upheld; toward the bodies of women and children and queerfolk and slaves, and toward the followers of other religions. The humanists, God bless them, prevent us from becoming

clogged with spooky rituals and idolatry, and the elders of the first peoples remind us that nature is not something we can pretend to be outside of, or separate from.

We have principles and sources which are not, technically, knowledge. They are folkways. U\*U's believe that we must heed science and rationality in our quest for spiritual truth. We are participants in a stubborn and ongoing effort to be the living link between faith and knowledge. For we are not so foolish as to think that everything we believe is true; but we are not so cynical as to think that everything we believe is false, even if we are not allowed to call it knowledge. The wisest among us can only stake a small claim upon knowledge, and you can measure their wisdom by how readily they admit it.

I return to the definition I made of epistemology, that it is the process whereby humans organize their thinking about knowledge. Maybe, when you are confronted with a new situation, this definition will be of use, because sometimes it is not knowledge, but awareness of the many ways of knowing, that is most useful as we confront the challenges of our lives.

## Niebuhr Family Reunion Homily

Good morning everyone. My name is Allegra Rivett Sloman, and I come through the Aron line of the Niebuhr family. It is my happy duty this morning to deliver a homily called a Meditation on our Family.

Our foremothers and forefathers came to Canada and the US in the hopes of being delivered from bondage into two kinds of freedom. One was freedom of conscience, and the other was freedom from want. Let us take a moment to think ourselves back into the past, into the choices that they made, and why they made them, and take a lesson from those choices.

My auntie Mary Crane told me yesterday that some of our Mennonite forebears came to Canada because it was giving away land – or as close to that as makes no difference – and because of British justice. The Niebuhrs had had quite enough of the Tsar's justice, even if some of them cried when they heard the Tsar and his family had been murdered by the communists. The Mennonites had many reasons to fear being uprooted from everything they

had built. What is harder than abandoning a life's work? What is harder than facing the truth that there was no good future for their children if they stayed? Hardest of all was not knowing for sure what kind of future they were voyaging too, except that with God's help and hard work, it couldn't be worse than what they were living through.

The Niebuhrs had had enough of upheaval and war in their lives. Who wouldn't long for peace and order after all that? They didn't want to rule the world; they wanted a piece of ground so they could be self-supporting. They wanted freedom to commit their souls to God as their forebears had done. They didn't want to tell other people what to think; they wanted to be witnesses to their own faith. They surely didn't want to stay where they would be forced to watch their daughters starve or be set upon by bandits, or to watch their sons to be conscripted into armies to fight any wars, just or unjust.

They came here for their faith, and for their families.

Think of the courage and fortitude our forebears showed. I think of the tears shed at the railroad stations and docksides, as many heart-rending partings took place, and I wonder how I would hold up under such a trial. Think of the times they were cheated and abused on their way to the terminus where the great ships were docked, the illness and fear they felt during the tedious ocean crossing, for all those farmers and tradesmen and businessmen who'd never gotten into any boat bigger than a horse ferry across a local river. Think of the comfort they took in the cramped quarters in the steamer as they opened their Bibles by lamplight or stood on the deck in good weather, and sang hymns.

It is difficult to picture how hard it was for the first arrivals. Imagine being the first of your family to arrive; negotiating in the unfamiliar English language, bereft of the advice and practical help – and cash – of your family. Then, over time, brothers and sisters, mothers and

daughters, were reunited. Turn to your siblings, or spouse or your children, if present, and think of how you would feel the first time you saw them after ten years, or fifteen years parted, how your heart would sing, even as you saw the lines that work and time had etched into their dear, beloved faces.

I think the most beautiful story about how the Niebuhrs came to Canada and adapted to life here starts with Mary, the youngest daughter of Gerhard Thiessen. He saw the writing on the wall before the First World War, and advised all of his children to emigrate. May we have so much foresight, if we must ever send our own children out of danger, however hard the parting.

Gerhard died before she left, and Mary took a sedum plant from his grave, to bring with her as she started her new life in Canada. She brought it such a great distance, in a cracked teacup with a broken handle, packed in moss. It was almost dead when her sister, my great grandmother, Katharina Thiessen Rempel, nursed it back to health, until it could be propagated. I like to think of that sedum plant as it grows in two peaceful graveyards on the prairies, putting down roots in this country, as did our forebears.

There is no sacrifice our ancestors wouldn't make, for their faith and for their families.

I think there are a lot of lessons we can take from that great crossing.

The first is that we should all be thinking about a place of refuge. You may think that it isn't necessary; that it won't come to you; that the Rapture will come first; that you are too old; that it would show lack of faith in God to prepare for what I think are the trying days we may all soon face. Our ancestors would shake their heads in dismay at any of those excuses. Faith in God does not mean abandonment of either your responsibilities or your ability to reason. For the sake of our families, we have to think about the future, even to the seventh

generation. Wise stewardship demands nothing less.

The second is that we should all be thinking about nurturing practical skills in our children. All of the handcrafts and skills of a hundred years ago will take on new meaning in a future when energy is more expensive and our food supply is no longer secure. Science tells us that the 20th century was the wettest on record for the prairies. The wheat that sprang from the soil with such unbelievable abundance in the teens and twenties of the last century, and which was in such large part the well from which our family drew its prosperity, will not soon return to us, not if the weather keeps shifting and the rivers and the aquifers that allow us to irrigate become overdrawn or contaminated.

The third is that despite it all, despite horror, war, famine, bandits, religious persecution and the trials and perils of emigration, our family made it. We suffered losses; hard work burned down in an hour or was foreclosed in a day; horses threw us; fathers died leaving us nearly destitute; illness, debt and doubt sometimes assailed us. But as a family, with our gifts and our diligence, our brains and our muscles, our love and our hope, I guarantee you that we will win through in the end. We are like the sedum plant brought many miles; if we stick together and nurture each other, despite it all, we will thrive.

## Rempel Family Reunion

Sunday July 31, 2005 Victoria, British Columbia

A family is a place where people who don't otherwise have a lot in common have to be in community with each other. Families cross colour and language lines. They cross religious and cultural lines. They toss all the genders of people together, all the ages, all abilities and disabilities, and all the genius and the violence, the anger and the humour that all peoples at all times have been capable of.

At its best, a family is a place where people who are together by accident can decide, safely and sensibly, that they will be intentional about being good to the people close to them. A family is a place where you want to make a commitment to going the distance. Families are about the promises you make with your eyes wide open, to a future you cannot imagine, which you know you will never see.

A family is a story. It's a living, breathing, working, loving, dying, story. Sometimes the story is dark and sometimes it's a journey in light, but it's a story, with a million plot twists.

The best families – the families we want to live in, tell a very old story. I can't tell you that story in 20 minutes, but I can give you the flavour of the story, and it goes something like this:

Once upon a time, there was a man and a woman, and they loved each other, and from their love came children. The children were tall and wild, and very clever, and it took all the effort the parents could muster to tame their rambunctious children to be useful instead of just wild. With much trial and error, they figured out how, but that was only with their youngest children. For the first three children, they failed miserably, and the oldest children were named Madness, Violence and Laziness. The last four children were very independent minded and hard working, and they were also wise. They liked to work together as a team, and they were named Justice, Love, Generosity and Faith.

Madness, Violence and Laziness – as you can imagine – grew up to be every parents' nightmare. The parents were always running back and forth between the three oldest children, trying to resolve things, but they had no plan, and they never stopped to make a plan. One day the parents became very sick at heart, and for one second they stopped believing they could make a difference. They said, it's not our problem anymore, and Madness, Violence and Laziness broke free of their parents' control and did whatever they wanted. The situation became desperate, and the other children met together because they were concerned, and some of them, not surprisingly, were afraid.

Love was the leader of the other four children. Love said, Justice, Generosity, Faith! I need you to help me bring our siblings back into our family; it grieves me to be separated from my own flesh and blood. Will you help me?

Justice knelt and said, Justice will serve Love. Generosity embraced Love and said we are dear siblings, of course I will help you! Faith stepped forward and said, without me

you cannot succeed, and with me you cannot fail. I, too, will help you, Love.

Together the siblings made plans, and the plans meant that they would all have to work very hard. But their parents had brought them up right, and even though the parents were too weak to help anymore, the children knew what to do.

Love said, first we must convince Laziness to be reclaimed from error and brought back to usefulness. Violence said that Justice and Love were trying to be very bossy and run the show, and that they would be struck for their insolence. Justice stood up for Love, and made Violence back down. Madness started jumping up and down and begging for attention, and told them of money spent on lottery tickets and said "Madness will be loved by all of you the most, because I have tickets that will win us so much money I will be the most lovable of them all." The four siblings realized that they had a lot of work to do to help make things right.

The other siblings had a hard time convincing Laziness it was time to reform. Justice laid out the plan to Laziness, and explained why it was best. Love said, I will be here, always. I will love you always, no matter what. Generosity offered to assist during the hard parts, and Faith promised to believe, always, that Laziness could change. Laziness laughed and said, if I am called Laziness, I will always be called Laziness. Since people will always call me Laziness, I will bow to their wishes. Faith nodded and then said, trust me, if you aren't Laziness anymore, you can call yourself something different. Then the four children sang Laziness a song to help the work along, and Laziness remembered it from childhood, and started singing too, and the four children knew then that Laziness would learn to work.

And that's the story of our family, over and over. In each generation,

Laziness becomes Self Discipline, Madness becomes Self-knowledge, and Violence

becomes Peace – but only if Love, Generosity, Justice and Faith take the time, and make the effort to help.

—

In our family, we have had to deal with plague, famine, war and religious persecution. These days it seems like our problems are a lot smaller than that, but while we can't predict the course of the future, we can predict that whatever happens, we'll still be a family. Despite everything that has happened to us, good and bad, our family is about trying to raise our children in the way they should go; it is about love, and justice, and generosity and above all faith.

When we gather for a family reunion, it's to say that we love each other; that we wish to be generous with both memory and food, that we wish to do justice to the remarkable men and women who caused us to be here; to honour our cherished elders, and to show our faith in the next generation; so that when we show where we came from, it will be that much easier for you to know how to walk your own path.

Love each other while you can, and keep singing.

Go in peace.

## A Garden Comes to Mind

I want you to imagine that you are sitting in a garden on a sunny afternoon, somewhere by the bounds of the Salish Sea, in the land of the salmon, with the summer light filtering through trees, amidst the sound of tranquil water plashing against rocks, of birdsong and a gentle, pleasant breeze. More butterflies than you can remember seeing for quite some time are gathered there; most are shades of brown and orange, but there is one brilliant blue butterfly that briefly darts into the garden and vanishes over the fence.

A hops vine twines up tall poles; the raspberry canes are already promising a succulent and marvellous harvest. The ponds have goldfish in them, and screens over the tops to prevent the depredations of the herons. Hummingbird feeders hang up over the walkways, and the insistent buzz of Anna's Hummingbirds as they perform their dive bombing display occasionally pre-empts your thoughts.

On the far side of the garden is a lush growth of bamboo. The gardener who organically tends this patch of ground says that they are a lure. She planted butterfly bushes

to attract butterflies, and they came; she put out feeders for the birds and the hummingbirds came, and mason bee homes for the mason bees; why not plant bamboo in the hopes of luring pandas? Next to the bamboo, the raspberries, next to the raspberries, the compost bin. For who can hope to have a garden without compost; the chance to add some caring balance to the soil, which keeps the fragile network of cooperative bacteria and plants working to make beautiful foods and flowers. That and timely water, good seed, pest control. A garden is about the gracious benefits that come with the right amount of effort at the right times, over many years. The wisteria and clematis, the passion flowers, all these gorgeous colours, don't come without effort.

As you sit in a cedar gazebo, which is filled with memorial plaques of friends, family and pets, some long dead, and some more recently passed, there is a sweet smelling peace all around that sits well in your soul. If there is ever to be a locale a place where atheists and believers can set aside their differences, it will be in a place like this. A garden has no care for what you think, but only for what you do, and that is all of its hazard and charm and usefulness in one sentence.

Unitarians are not all gardeners, but I think that if you took a poll, you would find that a large percentage of them garden. The garden may be vegetables and it may be flowers; it may be cacti or begonias or orchids; it may be a hobby farm on an island with a cantankerous goat and an elderly horse. Or it could be yaks. Some people do have yaks. To garden is to both impose order on a piece of land, an order which is achieved and maintained only with effort, and to submit to the actions of the natural world with humility.

The juxtaposition of control and submission is in many ways a metaphor for religious, or shall we say spiritual growth. For as much as we can plan a garden, and draft a place for

each stalk and rhizome, we must see that no seed will sprout and no flower bloom without its own inbuilt instructions. Nature and nurture are required. In the genetic code of Unitarianism, or in its most powerful folkways, is a deep need to see the divine in the ordinary, and a history of challenging assumptions as well as structures of power and force. Intellect is only one weapon against evil, illness and woe, and it frequently isn't the most useful one. One can plant a single acorn and never see the tree that grows... or you can randomly allow the squirrels to rearrange your bulbs, as I have done on many occasions, and wonder at the various places that the hyacinths now come up. Or you may, as one gardener of my acquaintance has done, treat the hole dug in the lawn by a visiting dog as a sign as to where to place the next stepping stone in the garden. Your actions are not all for your own gratification, and what a shoddy and horrifying culture we would have if every action was planned to that end. One may not control the event, but one can always ameliorate it, learn from it, build on it or turn it to a suitable lesson; it is our job to turn the bad into good with our thoughts and deeds.

A gardener, showing a garden to a new friend, will not see the garden as it is. Rather, it is a palimpsest of time, place and greenery, with each season scraping off an old layer and adding a new, until what is seen with the eye is only the latest flower beds and acquisitions and not the layers of effort and colour which have made the garden what it is. A garden is a place of memory and effort, as well as a place of peace and contemplation of what is, what was and what will be.

A beautiful public garden is one of the great gifts of a citizen to a city. In Europe during the war, there was a garden in Kiev full of mature trees. In the midst of starvation, cold and want, the people who lived through the second war left the trees standing, knowing

that their children would bless their sacrifice and forethought. So must all of us put aside temporary requirements in the service of a greater good, and it is the relentless and comforting cycle of the seasons which reminds us, year in and year out, to have a care for the future, which will happen whether we have a care for it or not.

A garden is sometimes the first place that a city child may be exposed to a cycle longer than the week that goes by and brings him his favourite television program again. To plant a seed and watch it grow from two crumpled dicotyledons into a fat pumpkin for the front porch on Halloween is a joy that more children should know. To garden is to be connected to growth and decay in ways that will allow a child to generalize these simple facts of all organic life into her own life, and to be of some comfort. How many of us have looked at a tree, a flowering shrub, a climbing vine, a stand of irises, and thought of the gardener, now passed, who planted, fed and watered it so that we may be sheltered and enriched by it today.

Unitarian values sometimes seem to lack showmanship in an environment full of competition for attention and honour. I've read the list of Unitarian principles and sources to many people over the last ten years, and virtually everyone hearing them has little objection to them, which is damning with faint praise. In place of the megachurches lately sprung up across Christendom, Unitarianism seems like a boring maiden aunt, always going on about some cause or other. I would like to reframe that image somewhat, and mention for a moment my astonishment and glee, when attending the memorial services of some Unitarians recently passed, when I find out that the boring elderly relatives are like neglected gardens, in that my eyes and consciousness passed over them until I learned that lay beneath the dead heads of their fluffy hair and the keen intelligence and thirst for justice that lay in the compost bins – the aching and aging bodies – I had been walking past. It seems to me that they were

gardeners too, but the human spirit does not necessarily leave the physical signposts we may view when we sit in the gazebo and listen to the bird song. It wasn't until they were gone that I knew of the courageous union activities and anti-Nazi activities of my fellow congregants; how I wished I'd had the sense, the interest and the humanity to ask them about their lives when they could tell me about them with that same ferocious zeal for life and justice that they have now taken to their graves. But that is just me feeling sorry for myself. Like the gardener that inherits a neglected garden, it is always our task to nourish the soil, to clear the weeds, to plant and plough and harvest and to always save the seeds which, small as they are, contain the miracles of another season. The garden is not always physical. It is a model, a way of viewing the world as well.

A garden is a patch of ground, particular to a gardener, a family. The Unitarian garden is a model for a whole world. In our hymnbook there is bread, and there are roses; there is a call to action, an invitation to celebrate our triumphs, and a supplication for strength to bear the burdens of the quotidian world and to heal the rifts and ruptures that scar our planet and our body politic. In the garden of our religious journey together, there are many meals shared and songs sung, many moments of rapt silence and raucous laughter, as we welcome the rituals and enjoy the volunteers who find their way into our carefully laid out plots and beds. Each moment of enjoyment, meditation, sorrow and contentment yields to a new commitment to the work, however we conceive of it and bring ourselves to it....

Have YOU hugged a gardener today?

## The Seven Deadly Sins

In this talk I am going to briefly address the seven deadly sins – their meaning in the Christian sense and their possible meaning to Unitarians. Our tradition is a living one, and we must freely consider our traditions to honour them. My intent is to demonstrate that sin is still a useful concept for Unitarians when seen as an issue of stewardship, and coaxed away from its Christian origins.

The seven deadly – or mortal – sins are not listed in the Bible. Jesus mentioned sin as something to be either forgiven or left behind. The list of the seven deadly sins was fluid until as recently as the seventeenth century, and was first composed in the 11th Century by a Catholic bishop. It hasn't changed in three centuries because it isn't fashionable to talk about sin any more, unless you're in a pulpit fulminating about sins like sodomy and failure to post the Ten Commandments in schools.

In researching this talk I wandered across a list of the Unitarian Seven Deadly sins, which was quite apt but somehow didn't have the emotional resonance of the Catholic list. I

also ran across a lot of theology that was patently against everything UU's stand for and made me cringe. When I'm talking about sin, it's because I want to talk about how these concepts can receive a breath of useful life, not to become part of a Unitarian creed, but to help clarify our thinking about who we are and what we do. Sin is an evolving concept, and so this talk is my spin on it.

The sins are Pride, Anger, Avarice, Envy, Sloth, Gluttony and Lust.

Pride is separation from other people and from God through a non-realistic assessment of your own importance or value in relation to God. In the Christian world-view, pride is a sign that your relationship with God is broken, and can only be fixed by an understanding of the sacrifice Jesus made for all us, and the humility this understanding brings.

In the Unitarian world-view, concepts about pride are shaped, as a general rule, by practical, political and psychological insights. There are those among us who believe that Jesus died to bring new life to the world, and UU's honour that tradition as a wellspring of much richness and depth. However, most of us, myself included, find the meaning of pride and humility in context of other people and the social contract – the rules, written and unwritten, of how we are to relate to and use each other. The word 'use' is quite intentional – and not meant to be derogatory, but quietly accurate.

The general yearning of UU'ism is towards a fully realized egalitarianism, one in which all our talents are brought to flourish and all our flaws are brought under the discipline of love and work. In such a scheme, pride would have to be brought under control.

You can believe that you're better at Greek, embroidery and yodeling than other people. If it is true, that's not pride, that's honest self-assessment, a humanist take on the virtue of humility. If you believe that your excellence at Greek, embroidery and yodeling

makes you intrinsically better, more worthy, than other people – or of any part of nature, for that matter – then you are puffed up with a pride which separates you from the world of your fellow creatures.

The difference between the sin of pride in Christianity and Unitarianism is where the separation is seen to occur. Unitarians don't have a problem with leaving God out of the equation entirely, because it is our observable behavior that demonstrates our values, or lack of them. The sin of pride carries its own punishment, separation from community.

Only six sins to go. Which shall it be? I shall call upon Anger next.

Anger is an interesting sin. Any theology I present to you today is supported by my long held and possibly irrational view about the primate – the ape – lurking in our genetic material. Anger in that context is a physiological reaction to being thwarted in gaining and retaining the stuff of life – food, water, shelter, access to breeding opportunities and higher social status, as defined by your upbringing. That sounds a little harsh, and mechanistic, but it's what I have observed.

It's hard to see how anger can be a sin when it requires overturning a million years of adaptive evolution to control it. Further reflection yields the notion that science and religion provide us with the tools to root out those aspects of our physical nature that separate us from our fellow beings. If we have the tools to control anger, then, anger will always be a sin.

Nothing separates you from another person quite like them getting in your face and screaming at you. The urge to return fire, or run away and get mad at someone smaller than you, must be controlled. Meditation helps, and I know this from personal experience.

Therapy helps some people. Understanding that anger is a manifestation of fear, primal and uncivilized and innate, helps. The cure for anger is the conscious development of our powers

of empathy, forgiving yourself for your anger, and really connecting to the person or groups or situations that make you angry.

Anger and dialogue do not co-exist. Anger and rational thinking, that everlasting fuel for the flame burning in the heart of Unitarianism, do not co-exist either. There are times when we must have the strength to forgive, despite the horrors we have been subjected to. The tremendous energy of anger must be transmuted, through our own personal alchemy, and with the support of those who love us, into action for good, lest it destroy us.

In the Christian scheme, anger is another facet of the soul's separation from God, which if unatoned for, will kill the soul. Christians are to be joyous because of the promises God has made them. For Unitarians, who aren't especially expecting the lollipop of eternal fellowship with the saints at the end of a well-lived life, anger is a natural emotion, which needs to be channeled into making the world a better place. And I submit to you that anger is a messenger, telling us we'd better get moving on being better people.

Next up, Envy and Avarice, the tag team of the Underworld Wrestling Federation. They certainly have a lot of room to maneuver in global culture these days. I was brought up to view both of these sins with disdain, and to refuse to indulge in them. To feel grief and hatred for the fortune of another? Insane! To grubbily pile money up, and put it before people? Ludicrous! But a whisper of caution in my ear does not allow me to run away from these sins entirely. I was born to a fortunate life, in terms of my health, my nationality, my colour, my sex – ah yes, I envy no man either his equipment or his privileges – and it has been a privilege to bear the pains I have borne over the course of my life, as they have been instructive and a source of much of my art. For the fortunate, it is easy to ignore that for many people, envy emerges from a deep sense of deprivation and spiritual darkness caused by

the social injustice that scars our world. As for avarice, it is possible to go too far the other way and be so contemptuous of money that we lose our sense of stewardship.

Envy and avarice together are the face of powerlessness and fear of loss of control.

Envy is the emotional expression of deprivation, and avarice the outward manifestation of desire to control your life by being able to buy

your way out of any situation. The cure for envy is accomplishment – the knowledge that you have your strengths and the ability to heal and strengthen some small corner of the world.

Sometimes I think the only cure for avarice is death, so strong a grip does it have. But both of these sins are social ones. There must be gifted and wealthy and beautiful people to envy, and stupid people to be fleeced and maltreated by the miser. The envious and the miserly can only exist in the context of the society their behaviour is an affront to.

Sloth, Gluttony, Lust..... really, can you think of a better way to spend an evening?

Humour aside, there is a serious message for Unitarians here. Christians consider these things to injure the soul and to be an affront to God because each reduces the person to the level of an animal. Those of you who are vegetarians can consider the bleak irony of this, because animals don't as a general rule behave in these ways, except as their innate natures direct. The virtues that counter these sins are industry, temperance and chastity. Back in the bad old days, if you were subject to depression, you'd get penances from the parish priest for sloth. I'm glad I didn't have to deal with depression when my therapy would have consisted of being told God was cheased with me for being lazy. As for Gluttony, it essentially means too much of something, good or bad. It can be ice cream or figurines or alcohol or opiates or shoes or gambling or the Lee Valley Tool Catalogue. If you don't have your 'Enough!' line set properly you will consume more than you need to work, live, run a household or tithe to your

church. (Thought I'd get a plug in there somehow). If you are slothful, you will generate no surplus with which to meet your obligations, or to be helpful to others in need. If you're lustful, you upset the social contract by interfering with and damaging previously covenanted relationships, sometimes including your own to your immediate family. I note that lust also means greed for all sensual pleasures, and all refinements of luxury – lechery and luxury were interchangeable at one point – so there is not just the strictly sexual meaning for this sin as Christians define it.

The list of the seven deadly sins is missing a few things. Raghavan Iyer's 1985 article on the subject contains this thoughtful comment, which I quote, "The besetting sin of humanity and civilization is not violence but untruth. Violence is the universal expression of untruth, and all the more specific moral failings of (hu)mankind are ultimately traceable to it." He also says, "...seen from a modern perspective, the net result of European involvement in the concept of sin was a tremendous release of violence in the name of religion," which is echoed by events, as 19-year-old boys from Detroit are still getting shot at in Iraq. It's hard to believe it's all about oil.

Missing as a single sin is the concept of Waste. All of the seven sins address a small corner of the problem of stewardship; each of the sins is played out into the larger world, for a sin cannot be a sin, in my opinion, that does not show in your conduct or affect another person. It can be a horrible internal struggle, but I don't see how it's a sin.

Viewed from a stewardship context, each of the seven deadly sins escapes from its medieval bondage into usefulness in the 21st century. Each sin is a stewardship issue. A steward of peace must control her anger. A steward of equality must control his pride. A steward of the earth itself must control gluttony and avarice and sloth, for all of these sins,

unchecked, affect our future together. A steward of love must control envy and lust. All of us, as stewards for the truths lovingly, and with great sacrifice, handed to us through the centuries of civilization, must learn to liberate the truths, both scientific and spiritual, that spring up in us from generation to generation, so that our children may be the stewards we have not been. It is for our children and generations yet unborn that we fight the lies and harmful impulses that separate us from others.

If the world is, in the words of a 17th Century protest song, a common treasury for all of us to share, we all have a responsibility to look after it. The sins catalogued by our forebears are useful as long as they point us to an understanding of our personal and collective responsibility towards looking after ourselves, our children, our communities and our earth.

Any other definition of sin is the lingering remnant of a theology that seeks to control and contain our questing souls, to deny the advancements of science and to imprison minds that will always seek to be free.

Blessed be.

## Good Atheist, Bad Atheist

I'd like to start off this morning's homily, Good Atheist, Bad Atheist, with a quote from a work entitled The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis from the CIA website, followed by stories from my own life, followed by my report from the front of the culture war between faith and atheism, from the standpoint of an atheist.

Here's the quote from The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis.

"Herbert Simon first advanced the concept of "bounded" or limited rationality. Because of limits in human mental capacity, he argued, the mind cannot cope directly with the complexity of the world. Rather, we construct a simplified mental model of reality and then work with this model. We behave rationally within the confines of our mental model, but this model is not always well adapted to the requirements of the real world. The concept of bounded rationality has come to be recognized widely.... both as an accurate portrayal of human judgment and choice and as a sensible adjustment to the limitations inherent in how the human mind functions."

Atheists love saying, "There's a rational explanation!" but there is one small problem.

Human beings ain't rational. We end up with gods to match, too, irrational, fussy, and easily annoyed.

What do I mean by Good Atheist, Bad Atheist? Well, it depends. Some people in this culture believe that if every atheist dropped dead, the world would be a better place. If you don't believe me, do an internet search on the words "The only good atheist is a dead one". Everyone in this room knows a good atheist, but there are a lot of people who can't even conceive of such a notion. We are left with two opposing camps, cranking up violence-enabling rhetoric, about how morality with God – or without God – is impossible.

There have been atheists on the bestseller list. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are two you may have heard of, and frankly, I'm rather annoyed with both of them. They don't come anywhere close to where I am on the spectrum of belief and unbelief. For them, science and rationality are stable ideals, fit for building all of human life on, but I don't find them so level, all of the time. When science divorces religious norms and marries laissez-faire capitalism, I'm not so sure the world instantly becomes a better place.

Worse, from my perspective, is that they believe the superiority of their view, briefly, Atheism Yay, Belief in God Boo, is intrinsically obvious. They make their points and they are rude about them. Dawkins at one point defended his sweeping condemnation of religion by comparing the tone to that of a very negative restaurant review, and saying he was much milder. That's precisely the kind of behaviour that makes me roll my eyes; religious views are much more important to many more people than a restaurant review, and the disrespect he shows in comparing them adds weight to the notion that Dawkins is a little too socially inept to be taking on such a big project.

I know I'm participating in a low form of argument here. Attacking the tone rather

than the substance of an argument is a sign of a weak case. But my case is based on the premise that people don't like to be yelled at or scolded for being stupid, and that tone is extremely important in changing somebody's mind. Otherwise, you're just venting to fellow atheists, and making any of the faithful in your audience think atheists are elitist stuck up bigots.

Of course religion has been used as an excuse for repression, massacre, starvation, occupation and inquisition. But history teaches us that atheists are just as capable of suppressing science and committing genocide as the most heinous theocracy – one has only to think of Lysenkoism and the Ukrainian famine to be able to conclude that. An atheist regime might arguably be less likely to suppress scientific truth to achieve political goals, but as for less capable, it happened before and might very well happen again. It behooves atheists to remember, when making rhetorical hay with the follies of religion, that there may be a bitter cud of reflection to chew later when your words have made enemies instead of friends. Every word you say may be true... but is it loving and useful? Maybe you're right, but so what?

Atheists and theists deal with each other in daily life according to their mental map. Work is the place we don't talk about religion so we can get along with our coworkers. Why don't we talk about religion at work? Because it gets in the way of getting the real work done, it gets people mad, it kills morale stone dead, and you can shortly be crawling with investigators from the Human Rights Commission.

Sometimes things go wrong, and people are harassed for their beliefs. But in the 30 years I've been working, I've never been harassed for being an atheist, and I sure have seen Muslim and Christian co-workers get hassled for their beliefs.

When I was in Grade 6, two of my schoolmates, a Jew and a Mormon, ganged up on

me in the schoolyard to argue the existence of a supreme being. This was in response to my publicly stated belief that not only was there no god, anyone who believed in one was a moron. I agreed with them because the prospect of getting harangued for hours for my beliefs had very little appeal.

Of course I should have had the courage of my convictions, but I was outnumbered, as atheists usually are when we aren't scooping out a niche of sanity and calm for ourselves like Beacon. Beacon is a place where, in keeping with our principles, atheists and theists and pagans and shamanic warriors may be in community, as part of 'the free and responsible search for truth and meaning'. There's no getting around how this is in direct contravention of everything established religion stands for, both for mixing atheists and theists, and for encouraging them to think about what's important without telling them what to think along the way.

But getting back to the schoolyard, I am not convinced that the public discussion of faith and atheism has improved in either tone or content in 40 years. In fact, if anything, I think things have gotten worse. Atheists are still calling the faithful morons; the faithful are still hauling atheists into the street and killing them and putting their heads on spikes. Not so much in North America; it used to be that atheists would shake their heads over the follies, peccadilloes and outright illegalities committed by the representatives of various religions, but not comment aloud; now there's an atheist pride movement which relishes every stupidity of the faithful as if it was somehow automatically meritorious to point it out.

I sit at lunch with coworkers who say with apparent seriousness that religious people are so stupid that they ought to be lined up and shot. There are subgroups of atheists that would like nothing better than to publicly humiliate and kill religious people, or talk about

doing it at great length. My response is always the same... yeah, let's do that, but before we do that let's make sure they all have to wear yellow stars, and we all wear swastikas, so we don't lose sight of it being a form of genocide.

By the same token, Christians say very bad things about atheists on the internet. I'm not going to dignify so much as a syllable of it by repeating it, but if you haven't looked, I recommend searching on Fundies Say the Darnedest Things. I don't really care about the wacky nonsense on the internet, but unfortunately sometimes Christians shoot atheists for being atheists. Not often, but occasionally; it was reported in the US as recently as 2004. Once again, the atheists are talking up a storm and being rude, and the Christians are talking up a storm and being rude, but I'd say the Christians are still winning, because God is on every coin in your pocket right now, and it's hard to get elected anywhere in North America if you are an avowed atheist. Yes, we are discriminated against. Frankly, it's a price I'm more than prepared to pay for the freedom to think as I choose. As a rude aside, I was joking with my mother, in response to learning that 25% of Canadians are atheists, that I now understood why contemporary atheists are so crabby. Not only to we have to do the thinking for four people, we had to have the manners for 4 people too.

I believe that fundamentalism has blighted far more lives, proportionally, than atheism – and I defy anybody to prove me wrong, at least on the basis of statistics on such things as illiteracy, genital mutilation, slavery, child marriage and other blessings which accrue with monolithic religious dictatorships. If I sound bitter, it's because for every person whose interior life has been improved and ennobled by religion, it seems there are many others who have been demeaned and degraded by being forced to adhere to its customs and dictates.

Most U\*U congregations in the US and Canada try to be a safe place for atheists and

theists to be in community. We covenant to affirm and promote "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations". There's nothing in there about kicking you out if you're a theist, or mocking you if you have problems with God language.

On balance, I'd say Beacon is a pretty humanist place, and safe for people like me, who enjoy God language for its grandeur and poetry, without subscribing in the slightest to the notion of a god who takes interest in my doings, or in the existence of any personal god.

The difference between Unitarians and best selling atheists is not just that we have a hymnbook with God in it; not just that some of us believe in a god or some gods; nor are the similarities that we think the scientific method is cool or that religion has no place denigrating women, those of different faiths or queerfolk. The biggest difference is that Unitarians try to remember their manners when they object to something, and that we are living our chosen faith in community, whereas best selling atheists have no spiritual home outside the lab, or in front of a video camera. Not that there's anything wrong with having a lab as a spiritual home, but I prefer to be here, and if someone thinks I'm being sentimental I'll just smile. For as much as theists have problems with my philosophy, many atheists can't understand why I'd bother with church at all.

In all this talk, though, I've neglected to define what an atheist is. Picture my surprise, on researching this homily, when it turned out I didn't have it clear in my head what, exactly, an atheist was. It turns out that there are two main kinds of atheist. The majority of atheists say, "I don't believe in a god, or any gods". The minority say, "Not only don't I believe, I know there is no God" which is a harder position to defend because you have to provide proof. Either way, an atheist is somebody who doesn't believe in God. A substantial fraction of atheists feel that a question like, "Is there a God?" is flat out meaningless, and a waste of

time.

But when it comes to God, we all have our cognitive cross to bear.

With God believing people, this cross takes the form of the belief that an all-powerful being chooses to be invisible, silent and immaterial while simultaneously having loving custody of the universe, including every one of us.

With atheists, our cognitive cross is the belief that the people who believe in God are stupid, irrational, self-serving, crazy, evil, wretched, hypocritical, sexist, ageist, homophobic, fascistic, perverted and mean... or some combination of the above.

When I entitled this homily, Good Atheist, Bad Atheist, it was because I've done a lot of thinking about the cultural construct that is atheism. It's true that we're all atheists in a state of nature, but it's been a while since we were in a state of nature, so let's put that aside and think about the world as it is. It appears to me that atheism exists in modern culture as almost a chemical, or possibly alchemical reaction to religion, mostly Christianity, and continues because in every year, thirteen year old boys and girls sit in church and think, while their hearts tremble with shock, "This is total nonsense." They walk out free of God – but not free of the questions that plague human existence. Questions like, "Why are we here?" and "What is evil and why does it exist?" and "How will I know when I'm a good person?"

I am also, when I think the words, Good Atheist, Bad Atheist, thinking about my own spiritual journey. If somebody asks me, are you an atheist, I have to respond "Yes," because I know there is no God. More properly, I know there is no personage, no individual personality playing that role, and there's nobody to petition or thank or blaspheme against. Please don't ask me to prove it. Frankly, I feel I don't have to; I kind of take it on faith. I was raised atheist, you know, and it's hard to renounce the faith of my parents.

So here I am in church, delivering a homily, which makes me a very bad atheist indeed, because I am countenancing God language with my choice of hymns, and I stand before you saying that I don't think theists are necessarily evil or stupid or even delusional.

I am, indeed, a very bad atheist, but I have a checklist for a good one.

A Good Atheist is one who understands the process by which she became an atheist; she can speak up about her religious rights; she can logically defend her beliefs; she understands that she may have cognitive barriers to being sympathetic to religious people and makes allowances for it; she understands that religion is both deeply useful and deeply meaningful to many of us, whether it can be demonstrated to be delusional or not, and she can talk about all of these things without recourse to name-calling or disrespect.

That's a lot to demand of a Good Atheist, but that's my list, and I hope I've given you something to think about, whether you believe in God or not.

Go in peace.

## King Jesus Children's Story

Easter, 2012

Once upon a time there was a little boy named Jesus son of Joseph, who lived in a small town in a place called Judea. The people who lived in Judea were mostly Jews.

At the time Jesus was born, his people were under the control of the Roman Empire. The Romans had conquered all around the Mediterranean Sea and they made all those conquered countries pay tribute, which means they made war on their neighbours until they gave up and handed over all their money and luxury goods. This is not the same as paying taxes so you can have roads and water and doctors when you're sick. This is having your money stolen and used for things that won't help you, like if somebody steals your lunch money at school. There were two kinds of people in Judea, those who hated the Romans, and those who were helping the Romans steal the wealth of Judea.

The Romans usually made all the countries they conquered worship the gods the way the Romans did. The people of Judea, who are our spiritual ancestors, refused to do that. So the Romans made a special deal; in exchange for being able to worship they way they wanted

to, the Jews took care of their own business and prevented angry Jews from trying to kill Romans. This didn't always work and there were always rebellions and rioting, which the Romans and the Jewish authorities fought back against.

When the little boy called Jesus was growing up, he learned to read the Torah, the holy book of the Jews, and he learned to be a carpenter like his father Joseph. He read awesome stories about how the Jews were once great warriors and conquerors. These stories would have been just like your favourite action movies. He would have imagined himself as the hero in these stories. He heard wise and gentle men talk about God's love and how we should all be good to each other because of God's love. He read God's laws, and there are over 500 rules in the Torah which Jews are supposed to obey. That's a lot of rules.

Every day he would see Roman soldiers, and it really, really bothered him that God had once loved Judea so much they were free, and that now, somehow, God was angry with the Jews, enough to make them slaves to the Romans. So Jesus listened very carefully to the wise men, and he read the Torah, and he watched the leaders of the Jews betray their own people - or so it might have seemed to him - and when he was thirty, he couldn't stand it any more. Jesus had to do something to help his country. Most big strong guys who hated the Romans became warriors. Jesus never wanted to hurt another living human being in thought or action, but he really hated what had happened to his country. He left his job as a carpenter to tell stories to the people.

The truth is we'll never know for sure if Jesus was a real person or a story. But millions and millions of people think that he was, and that he still is, and so the story of Jesus is a very important one, even if it's not one we believe ourselves.

The stories he told were about love, and forgiveness, and kindness, and how wonderful

God is. There were lots of people telling stories at that time, but Jesus was different. He and his followers showed their love by healing and comforting the sick. They took care of each other and shared everything they had. They showed love that the Romans didn't have and the authorities didn't have. The ordinary people, looking at Jesus, would see somebody close to God.

In the end, the Romans got angry with Jesus for gathering crowds and for saying and doing things that the Romans really didn't like. Roman punishment for many crimes was crucifixion. They nailed him to a big wooden cross and left him to die. The Jewish leaders didn't help Jesus because they were scared of the Romans, and his followers were farmers and fishermen, not soldiers, and they couldn't fight.

His followers believe that Jesus went up to heaven after he died, and they continued to tell his stories. Over time, what he said was written down by many different people in different ways, and the stories stopped being just for the Jews but for any person who would listen. Then they had so many followers that they took over Rome. It took about three hundred years. The Romans may have put Jesus to death but they couldn't stop his message. A great message doesn't care how old it is.

Jesus is an important teacher for us. Love, and kindness and forgiveness are important and we need them in the world. Patience is important too. And I thank you for the patience you have shown me this morning.

## King Jesus Homily

Easter, 2012

Good morning, everyone. Happy Easter. Jesus of Nazareth has always been a troubling enigma for Unitarians. Michael Servetus, one of UU's spiritual ancestors, was burned alive for saying that there was no biblical support for his divinity. We can go from one end of the church year to the next scarcely mentioning Jesus' name, except, as noted by Don Hauka recently, if somebody trips and falls down the stairs. And we do like him at Christmas. Unitarians love their Christmas carols. Baby Jesus is a lot more appealing in some ways than his older incarnation.

Very few contemporary Unitarians consider Jesus their saviour, and there are probably people in this room who don't believe he ever existed, considering that nothing about him appears in any corroborating documents from the period when he was generally considered to be alive. I personally believe Jesus walked this earth, spoke truth to power, and

got nailed to a cross for his trouble. If he was the Son of God, he was no more or less so than anyone in this room. If he never existed, it's important to understand the circumstances under which his story had to be invented. Hundreds of millions of people believe in him and so whether we like it or not, his story is important and its effects on the speech, beliefs and actions of hundreds of millions of people are even more so.

Unitarians have been moving away from the Bible for a long time, as it is not a document most of us feel much kinship with. Jesus is not going to go away as an important religious and mythic figure, and the more we know about him the better off we'll be when confronted with people who use Jesus to bless their hatred, support their idolatries and prop up crony capitalism as all being self-evidently Christian.

The more we know about Jesus, the better off we'll be when confronted by Christians who loathe and despise us and the more compassionately we'll be able to argue that love is indeed better than hatred, that we are responsible for being compassionate and kind to those around us, whether they necessarily like us or not, and that we are called to be simple and kind in word and deed. For Jesus preached all those things, and that makes him a Unitarian hero.

It is as a Unitarian hero that I would today like to reframe Jesus, taking as my text, not the Bible, but a very interesting and challenging work of fiction by Robert Graves, called *King Jesus*.

In this work, Graves calls out five specific roles for Jesus that were prophesied in the scriptures, that would have been part of the background assumptions of the culture in which a historical Jesus would have existed. I am trying to make it clear that even before his arrival, Jesus was controversial. And hey, UU's dig controversy, right?

The Jews were expecting a Messiah, but different schools of thought believed different things. Two thousand years ago, many people believed the prophecies pointed to a King of the House of David who would appear, have his pedigree accepted, and boot the Romans out of Judea. This was according to Ezekiel. Even though two thirds of the Jews would be killed during a horrible war, in the end he would triumph, gather up the faithful survivors and reign for four hundred years of peace and plenty. They weren't expecting it to be a cakewalk – but at least the Romans would be gone.

The second Messianic notion was a tribal thing. He was predicted in Isaiah. The northerners believed that they, too, would have an ass-kicking Messiah, but he'd be of the house of Joseph. This meant that essentially any Jew might qualify, and was a challenge to those who believed that the Royal House of David would yield up a Messiah, seeing as how it was the Royal House of David who'd been in power when the Romans had shown up and look what a mess they'd made of that.

My point in using such casual language is to draw attention to how all of Judea was on the lookout for a Messiah, but they weren't all looking for the same guy, and that the arrival of the Messiah was an accepted part of popular culture.

There was a wrathful UFO Messiah, who would ride into Jerusalem in a chariot of fire as foretold in the book of Daniel, but as you can imagine, a Messiah who was a forgotten king was a lot more likely than that, so only a few wackos paid attention to that theory.

Only the really intense scholars of scripture believed in the fourth Messiah. There was a book called the Testament of Levi, which foretold that the Messiah would be a priest-king. (Just to be clear for all you Bible scholars, the oldest version of the Testament of Levi dates

back to just around the time Jesus would have been alive and was in Aramaic and not Hebrew, but there is reason to believe the prophesy was part of an older apocalyptic tradition in Judaism from the book of Malachi.)

This version of the Messiah would have all the wisdom of Solomon and the war-fighting ability of David and he'd reform the calendar, institute peace, revise the scriptures and cleanse the people of their sins. Now that's what I'd call an all-purpose Messiah. Also he'd be of the house of Levi, note that it's the Testament of Levi we're referring to here. So once again, squabbling between the tribes of Israel impacted how they interpreted scripture regarding the Messiah, which would have spilled over into discussions among Jews after Sabbath worship, because every Rabbi would have a different idea about who the Messiah was going to be. The Messiah was like the Stanley Cup of Judea; even people with no skin in the game had an opinion.

The fifth Messiah was just plain weird. He was foretold in Isaiah and also Zechariah; he would be scorned, mocked, reviled, made the scapegoat of the people and put to a shameful death. He was the suffering servant, who took on the sins of his people, and only after he was gone would the people weep over him as over a lost child.

What, you might ask, has any of this to do with how modern Unitarians could review their understanding of Jesus?

I think the most important thing to remember is that whoever Jesus was, he couldn't publicly claim kingship or priestliness. As such, no matter his nobility of purpose as he brought comfort to the spiritually needy and ailing people of rural Judea, there was no way most Jews would accept him as a Messiah because he simply didn't show the signs.

As a consequence, much of the writing in the New Testament is there to answer the

Jews – the early Christians wrote of his pedigree, his understanding of the Torah, and his magical powers to raise the dead and make the blind see, all of which were used for the glory of God, to bolster his claims to be the prophetic Messiah whom the Jews were wrong to reject.

This is why he's recorded to have ridden into Jerusalem on an ass, which was crucial to prophecy, wearing special clothing, also crucial to prophecy. Candidly, I don't think that it matters whether he walked or thumbed or skateboarded into Jerusalem, but many people around 100 AD surely did, and that accounts in part for why the stories are written with prophecies in mind.

From before his conception to the present day, Jesus is the 'pick one from column a, one from column b', Messiah. With each new uprising in Judea, or immediately after the destruction of the second Temple, another version of Jesus was written about, to answer whatever political and social firestorms were going on all around the writer. All these stories were coloured by the ethnicity of the man writing them, and centuries later were revised and bound together by the early Christian church. Many of the writings that were most lunatic in their assertions were kept, because they managed to meet the needs of the church leaders who at that time were assembling the New Testament. They kept an eye on which writings most closely matched the prophecies of the old testament, and in so doing, left us with a lot of different visions of Jesus.

Which version of Jesus do you claim for yourself?

Now we are faced in our daily lives with people who assert that they take every word of the Bible as true, when we know from our own experience that to accept the Bible as literal truth is to subject ourselves to the whims and cruelties of a culture thousands of years old,

with no reference to our common heritage as human beings, or to science, or even contemporary laws regarding social justice.

We need to reclaim Jesus not as saviour but as a hero, for he is a hero, and he should be celebrated as such. He died for our sins, as have many others, many, many others over the course of human existence. To learn from and act on his example in the smallest way, in kindness or defence of the helpless, is to live his legacy as a hero.

He prevented a prostitute from being lynched. He healed people who were sick. He gave hope to people who were terrified of the Romans and disgusted by their own leaders, both religious and secular. He didn't suck up to rich people at the expense of the poor and indeed told them to prove they'd had a change of heart by selling all they owned for the poor, a comment that was just as popular then as it is now. He preached love and mercy and forgiveness and the kingdom of heaven to people who wouldn't even be allowed into the local synagogue, let alone the temple at Jerusalem. He whacked the moneychangers in the temple for cheating poor people when they came to make offerings, and he was especially angry with those who sold doves, the cheapest offering and thus the one that bilked the most money from poor and elderly women. He allowed women to be his disciples although their roles were watered down in the final edit. He walked from town to town with a bunch of farmers and fishermen, gathered some pretty big crowds, and got the reputation of being both more approachable and more filled with God's holy love than anybody else. And when his followers were asked who he was, or wanted to know who Jesus was, they had a lot of answers, because everyone had a different opinion. And so will we! He will be what we read into him; he will be what we choose to learn about him, or to emulate in life.

I call Jesus a hero, because in his short and memorable ministry to a small corner of an

empire thousands of years ago, he made it pretty clear whose side he was on.

Jesus is one of our spiritual forebears. Like the rest of his flock, we pick and choose our way through his message; unlike the rest of his flock, we're honest enough to no longer call ourselves Christian, since it is the social justice message of Jesus and not his supposed divinity that is of importance to most of us. We have many heroes, and divine or not, real or not, Jesus is one of them.

May we carry light and justice out into the world from this place. Amen.

Now I'd like to sing a song about all the heroes whom we honour. I wrote it thinking of the mission of Jesus, but it is for every hero we hold in our hearts. I will have welcome assistance from a few people so give us a few moments to get ready. Immediately after this song we'll join in singing Jacob's Ladder together.

Author's note: The song I wrote to accompany this homily is called The Hall of Remembrance, a PDF copy of which may be obtained upon request.

## Mother's Day

Mother's Day, 2000

Everybody has a mother. Until such time as scientists discover how to produce healthy babies without the fuss and bother of a real pregnancy, that's one definite truth we can share. This unity of origin for all humanity gives us a starting point for my meditation on motherhood this morning. I wish to touch upon the mother figure in religion, the idea of mother as the molder of personality and conscience, the troubling shadow of the dark mother, the origin of Mother's Day and the concept of Gaia. In twenty minutes. Wish me luck, as you grant me the honour of your attention.

The mother figure in religion is pictured on the wall behind me. From the Venus of Willendorf to the three fold goddess Hecate, to the Virgin Mary, and all the countless faces she has taken in religions across the world, she has marked our culture and art from the day humans began to realize they could shape matter into a representation of something they had

imagined.

The mother goddess was suppressed in our Judeo-Christian heritage and I have no idea why. It was political, some historians say, part of the rules that were put in place to stamp out the competing religions of the Old World. It was a joyous act of liberation from idolatry, in response to the revealed word of God through his prophets, say others. It would be a bit much to ask any Unitarian congregation to think about that for any longer than it took to dismiss the idea.

But I believe that from this suppression comes the requirement to restore balance. Unitarians have struggled with making the language they use in worship more inclusive, more respectful, and more accurate. If the audience for Unitarian thought is the whole world of people who wish to make peace, then we must in the process reach out to those who see the Divine as Mother, as well as to those who utterly reject the notion that any God is running the show.

To me, on a deeper level, the suppression of the mother goddess is a reminder that there are many valuable religious insights to be gained from many traditions. This means that I am required, as part of my faith walk, to be respectful of Pope John Paul II's insistence that the Virgin Mary directly interceded on his behalf on the day that he was shot. It's not something that he'll ever be able to prove to me directly, but I'm obliged to take the Holy Father's word for his conviction that the Mother of God saved him, and not to poke fun at the apparent incongruity of his belief. If I do otherwise, my prejudices are working harder than my faith.

This to me is the hardest thing about Unitarianism; that I am called to be respectful of

the belief systems of others, so that I may truly demonstrate my faith in the essential oneness of all peoples.

All the earth's peoples tell stories about the bountiful mother and her shadow the evil step-mother. The bountiful mother is characterized by a host of attributes, all of which read like merit badges at some saintly version of the Girl Scouts. Generosity, dignity, tireless effort, wise speech and wiser silence, healing hands, willing sacrifice, encouragement, cheerfulness, protectiveness, artfulness, and the ability to make each member of her family feel individually cherished and understood. Those of us who are fortunate to have experienced a mother who embodied these attributes – and I count myself as one – are forever blessed, but in an odd way we are burdened. It was not until I took the time to learn about the lives of people outside my family that I learned that not everybody is raised by a mother like that; the more I learned about my family history and those of the people closest to me the more it became clear that a mother can be an emotional millstone – a dark shadow across your whole life – as much as an emotional liberator and guide.

When I had children of my own, I was thankfully spared thinking about the responsibility of my new role in life because I was too busy enjoying them when they were little. I had a very hands-on partner, and not a clue in my head about the emotional and ethical swamp that motherhood was going to toss me into.

Having my worst prejudices and most unlovable habits mimicked with appalling accuracy in the adorable accents of a four year old brought me up short. I cruised through the early years with nothing more complicated than diaper rash and finding childcare to deal with. Once they started talking, I was in serious trouble. Why is everything so hard? Why do nice people die? Why do you do one thing and tell me something else? How come daddy

has to go

away to Montreal? Why are you crying?

I have a pretty unorthodox take on childrearing – but I have help. We have done eccentric things like consult our children on which house to buy and taught them when it's okay to swear and told them which illicit drugs we tried when we were adolescents. We have talked to them about our jail time and our scary experiences and our tough decisions and our biggest mistakes. But not all at once – then you just sound like you're braggin'.

I have sometimes been too swift in reducing my apparent divinity as all-providing, all-knowing and all powerful to mere competence, which I gained by practice and by having a longstanding desire to successfully heed the mistakes of others. On the whole, I prefer to be Mom rather than Mother Goddess to my children, and I think the transition was reasonably successful. I will always be Mom, but my next transition is into Peer, and I look forward to the day when my worries will be reduced to a manageable twitch from time to time, as opposed to floor-walking midnight agony, while my far more sensible spouse is logging pleasant hours of unconsciousness.

The successful mother is always aware that she falls short, even if she doesn't always see where the shortfall lies. The shadow mother, the dark mother, the insane mother, the wicked stepmother – none of these see the children they raise as being anything but a disobedient, willful, destructive piece of property.

Many of us in this room are in the cold penumbra of the shadow mother. She has as many faces as the beneficent mother who smiles on all we do. She is the grey chill of absence, caused by death, lingering illness, insanity, addiction, senility, irresponsibility, or perhaps a career too personally meaningful to sacrifice to motherhood. She is the harpy, the critic, the

demon who devalues and eviscerates every good thing we do, using words that ring in our heads like a gong for weeks and years and decades afterwards. In her pettiness, her jealousy, her rage, her vindictiveness, her utter disregard for the truth of your being, she manages to personify everything horrible about human beings.

It is easy to be lost in the shadow of the dark mother, but there has always been a way out. We can make a choice to see her, name her, and avoid her, until we have the strength to deal with her from a place of compassion instead of fear. We can choose to find nurturing and intelligent women to associate with, until we learn what we have never before been taught. And we can learn to be as fierce as she was, to protect ourselves when we have to, even if the ferocity only comes out in a diary, or therapy. It is the dark mother who brings the lesson "Never again. It stops here. I won't be that way. I choose life, I choose peace, I choose to nurture."

I have a wicked stepmother story from my own family history. My mother's great-grandmother died in childbirth when my mother's grandmother was nine years old. She told her best friend on her deathbed to take care of her husband, and she married him a month later. My mother's grandmother's relationship with her stepmother was never easy. The stepmother 'took against her' so hard that she did something that echoes down the years as a lesson to peacemakers.

In those days a married couple lived with the in-laws for a few years until they established their own household. My mother's grandmother came home from her wedding day, aged eighteen, and her stepmother told her: Take off that dress and feed the pigs.

When Aunt Olga – my mother's grandmother's third daughter – married a widower

with two children, Grandma Rempel wept when Olga left with her new family to homestead in the north. Olga said, why are you weeping, mother? We aren't going that far away. But Katharina wept for the stepchildren who would now suffer at her daughter's hands as she had. Though she loved her daughter, loved all her children, the memory of her own stepmother was so powerful in her that she felt Olga would necessarily behave the same way. Understanding this, Olga made the decision 'never again, it stops here'. Her stepchildren, now in their eighties, were loved; and their stepmother became not the mother they had lost, but the mother that they needed.

There are three other kinds of shadow mother. They are not evil. They are grieving. One is the mother who gives up her child voluntarily, to spare the child the torment of being raised by a woman who cannot afford it, emotionally or financially; one is the woman who cannot have a child and is consumed with longing for children; and the last is the woman who has had a child and lost that child. As we celebrate this mother's day, let us spare a compassionate prayer for the women who struggle with infertility and loss, and whose experience of motherhood has more to do with feelings of grief, guilt, betrayal, anger and bewilderment than the fuzzy sentiments on a dime store greeting card.

Speaking of greeting cards with their canned messages, let me read you an extended and lightly edited quote from Barry Lank, a newspaper columnist in New Jersey. I was actually going to write a passage that included all of this information, but he did a better job than I can, so I'm borrowing it.

"Born May 1, 1864, Anna Jarvis was very close to her own mother Ann Marie Jarvis — they're buried next to each other in a cemetery just outside the Philadelphia city limits. Ann Marie was active in promoting children's health, and once organized an ad hoc "Mothers

Friendship Day." So after her mother died in 1905, Anna Jarvis poured her heart and money into promoting Mother's Day. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed it an official celebration on May 10, 1908.

Fifteen years later, Anna Jarvis was suing to make it stop.

By then, Mother's Day had become the materialistic, commercialized pocket of excess with which we've all grown comfortable, and it wasn't what Anna Jarvis had in mind. She filed a lawsuit to impede the Mother's Day festival, and was arrested for disturbing the peace when she verbally abused some carnation dealers at a gathering of wartime mothers.

"A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world," she wrote around this time. "And candy! You take a box to Mother — and then eat most of it yourself. A pretty sentiment."

She died broke on Nov. 24, 1948 — the day before Thanksgiving, another holiday that's gotten away from us. It turns out she never got married or had any children of her own. But she did have one offspring: Mother's Day itself. Sadly, it grew up to be a great disappointment to her."

I'd like to escape from the dime store now and get a new perspective. Pick your spirit up and rise, straight up, 180,000 kilometres up, and picture the many times reprinted photograph of our earth rising above the surface of the moon.

Hold that image in your mind. Is Gaia not the most beautiful object in the universe? Meditate upon the fleecy clouds, the mighty oceans, the volcanoes, the rivers, the reefs and waterfalls and geysers, the fabulous array of life and abundance and splendour. Marvel at the patterns of energy as life forms give way each before each in a dazzling, never foreseen display.

We are part of that process, that dance of creation and destruction, the endless recycling. Every breath we take has some component that cycled through the lungs of Mary the mother of Jesus, and before her a mother dinosaur, and before her slid under the gills of a trilobite. These things are beyond conscious awareness, how very close we are to Gaia, and yet it seems our brains have lagged behind our bodies in understanding our special relationship with Her. Today life is still good for most of us. We can walk into the woods and breathe the fragrant air of the temperate rain forest. We can paddle a canoe into a still place, miles from the noise and dirt and neediness of the city, and be one with that stillness. We can make decisions about where to go and what to do with our energy and money that respect Gaia.

Whether you personify earth as being our mother, or consider the earth to be an elaborate machine that demonstrates the tendency to become ever more complex, we can all agree that the earth deserves better treatment from all of us than it has had. So I return to my original theme. We each have one mother. We each have one planet to call home in the universe. And for those of us who are fanciful enough to see the earth as our mother, we can tap into the deep wellspring of human experience of our mother earth as sacred, accepting, unjudging, and ultimately benign.

Happy Mother's Day.

## Stand on the Side of Love (Looking back from the year 2031)

I was asked to give a talk about our Stand on the Side of Love motto, because it's been our motto for almost 20 years and there's a rich history to it. Here it is 2031 already.... Has it been that long? And since I was present for a lot of the events and I've accidentally become the church historian, here it is. And it's why we have an old fashioned paper order of service today and no prompters or viewers and real candles instead of the projections. This is how services used to be. I see a lot of you shuffling around with the papers looking awkward, so I guess you'll all be glad next week when we go back to the future.

Our Stand on the Side of Love sermon has become quite a tradition at Beacon, since it debuted back in 2011. For those of you unfamiliar with this tradition, it started when there was a shooting at the UU church in Knoxville Tennessee in 2008, during which a man killed two and injured seven as a blow against liberals, Democrats, blacks and gays. He was angry at his ex-wife and he was angry about being unemployed, and he shot up a church in protest.

When Adkisson, the shooter, died in prison in 2018, most of the attendees at his funeral were UUs come to witness his life and his role in the extraordinary burgeoning of the

UU movement, and to witness that whether we are good, evil or indifferent, death comes to all of us. From death we drew life; from hate we drew the strength to put love and service at the centre of everything we do as a church. Martin Luther King Jr. said "Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that." We took up that challenge from the hands of someone who would destroy us, and we lived to return good for evil.

The UUA took out an ad in the New York Times after the Knoxville shooting, stating that "our doors and our hearts remain open". Yes, open. Open in the face of corruption, deceit, violence and hatred; open in the face of apathy, cynicism, uncertainty and fear; open in the face of our own doubts and feelings of inadequacy. There IS a better way. We are NOT alone. Our US counterparts called the campaign "Standing on the Side of Love."

Canadian UU's looked longingly south to what appeared to be a very successful campaign of social action and denominational growth, and at a truly extraordinary AGM in 2012 which I call myself privileged to have been a part of, we adopted the sentiment as a call to action rather than witness, which is why it's called "Stand on the Side of Love" here in Canada. What a day that was. With tears, with song, with a fire of urgency and a surge of strength, we gathered to commit ourselves to love, community and a bigger spiritual harvest than we could ever have in isolation.

With our Stand on the Side of Love banners, we have advocated and demonstrated and witnessed and testified; we've been shot at, harassed by law enforcement, jailed and stalked and beaten. There are two people sitting in this room who have done jail time for no other reason than that they were present at a rally in support of a young man who was queer-bashed and left for dead in Stanley Park; they stood between a number of physically disabled demonstrators and a neo-Nazi counter-demonstration and got arrested in the chaos. You will

remember that social unrest and high youth unemployment pumped up the numbers of neo-Nazi groups back in the teens. Youtube has passed into history, but at the time it was invaluable in showing that our two members had done nothing illegal.

A UU church in Quebec was firebombed – and I am thankful that there was no loss of life on that occasion – and our ministers and lay leaders have been dragged from their pulpits more than once by ignorant and violent opposition to the message of dignity and love, which is the purest distillation of what it means to be UU.

Our interim minister in 2018, an openly lesbian woman who lived with two other women in a polyamorous relationship, had her car's brakes tampered with and literally escaped death by inches when her car skidded off the highway close to her home. The perpetrator was never found, but I will never, ever forget what she said to us while she was in hospital.

She said, "Now I really know I am on the right path. She quoted Luke 6:22 "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake." She further said, if Jesus is God, and God is Love, then it is for love that I am being persecuted, and I will bear the burden of being persecuted in the name of Love to the end of the earth and my own life."

We'll never know for sure, but it was after she was the subject of a short documentary on CBC Television in which she made no secret of her theology, her sexuality or her (at that time, quite unorthodox) household, that her car was tampered with; but it didn't slow us down a bit; and we made a wheelchair accessible dais for her return which as you can see I had to use this morning myself as I am not as mobile as I once was.

That is what love does. Tolerance stands around bragging. Love gets off its ass and works for a better world.

In the years of ferment and work after 2012, we became our name. We were, and we remain, a beacon of love and hope for the disenfranchised, for the immigrant, for the sexually non-normative, and for anyone who doesn't share the same pigmentation as ourselves. We're still a pretty white church, and we spend a lot of time at congregational meetings moaning about that, but we've sponsored refugee families (author's note - that did come true, as Beacon sponsored a Syrian family in 2016) and been involved in initiatives to end homelessness in our cities and we've worked to shelter those whom climate change has turned into refugees for the last 35 years. We grew after 2012 from a little church with no building, whose average member age was well over fifty, to a church with this gorgeous, expensive building, a full time minister and an RE program that was so popular that some of our kids started attending church upstairs because their classrooms were so crowded. Some of you may remember Mandy Seever, who quit the RE program and started attending worship services when she was eight. She's in medical school in England now, but I remember the first time she lit a candle of concern. It was for the victims a renewed outbreak of cholera in Haiti. Her poise, and the heartfelt way she asked us to consider donating money to the Red Cross, didn't leave a dry eye in the house. Thanks to her family and the many other families who joined us, we became a church that could afford to purchase a building in Port Coquitlam, although we were helped in that endeavour by some fortuitous planned giving. You can tell I'm one of the cranky old-timers because I always ask 'what do we need a damned building for anyway?'

But never mind that. We advocated – over the strong objections of some of our

members, who left the church rather than support it – for the end of marijuana prohibition and for principles of harm reduction with respect to all then illegal drugs, and we endured the firestorm of controversy and the temporary closure of the US border (much to the dismay of the many American-born members) when marijuana was finally legalized in Canada in 2018. That was only a decade ago but sometimes it seems to me like something that happened in a black and white newsreel from a century ago.

When my mother was dying of cancer prior to the passage of that bill, the only thing that would help her keep food down involved me sneaking into her hospice with a vaporizer and some medical marijuana. I stood on the side of love then, trying to get a few calories into my dying mother. Thank goodness that Nasreen, the loving and competent nurse who held my mother's hand as she passed, rolled her eyes but made no other comment when I snuck into my mother's room.

Love has taken us places that daily life would make us fear to go. We started broadcasting our services on the internet in the same year we made Stand on the Side of Love our core value and our narrative hook, if you will.

We talked about moral values from a religious perspective without always finding it necessary to mention gods or supernatural critters of varying degrees of credibility. It seems weird to say it in front of all you brothers and sisters now that you've all swung back to theistic language, but Beacon used to be a very humanist church and in fact at one point I couldn't even find a single theist in a church meeting, which you folks probably find hard to believe. I mean, Beacon doesn't use hymnbooks because most of you have personal displays and we've got loaners for visitors. I'm making you use these old hymnbooks not just to remind you how it used to be, but to give you the feeling of having the hymnbook in your

hand. It's strange, isn't it? It's actually making me feel all weepy and nostalgic, which wasn't really the tone I meant to strike in this homily, so my apologies.

Anyway, enough of my rambling and reminiscing.

When we decided to really commit ourselves to stand on the side of love, very odd things began to happen.

We commissioned someone to make us an excellent and reasonably weatherproof banner with our new motto on it, and then we did something unprecedented in our church history. We said that any two people in the congregation, we didn't care who although minors had to be supervised, could take the banner to any event they thought needed it, and there were only a few things you weren't allowed to do, like lose it. When you signed out the banner you'd write down what it was for and which Unitarian principle or principles you were supporting and then you could go have a two person demonstration. The most unlikely people in the congregation demonstrated together and the friendships forged as we witnessed our individual truths together still fill this room today.

The ability of this church to let go of the notion of having a nice tidy way of witnessing, and instead having this occasionally contentious but usually fun and individualistic way of publicly declaring your faith... that was intense. Now it seems sort of quaint, but back then it was a big deal.

So many of us rode our individual hobbyhorses; the great part was we could point to our motto and say that is us. We didn't just stand around either; we got lots of letters published, worked on policy and helped draft legislation at the CUC level.

A couple of us marched in the Transgender Day of Remembrance; lots of us went to Pride, 'cause that is so much fun.

Some of us were interested in justice for aboriginal peoples in terms of language protection, aboriginal title issues and other justice issues, and aboriginal health. The banner is not just in our memories; it's in the social history of BC, where we made our presence known. We were small but we were consistent, we were vocal, and we walked our talk.

Some of us wanted to help exploited children escape sexual slavery, and although the internet mocked us and made fun of us, it didn't curb our resolve to end the sexual enslavement of children and not rest until there wasn't one left in the world.

We were the first church to publicly demonstrate for polyamory rights in British Columbia.

We demonstrated for immigrant rights, especially with respect to family reunification.

We had a small but dedicated group of people who took the stand on the side of love banner to every food security group they could, arguing that if Beacon couldn't make a decent Sunday snack, love wouldn't last long in our church, and that food is an essential component of human life without which love has no nourishment. Soup is still part of our church tradition, and was even in the leanest times. Food is love.

We needed more banners. One got lost in the shuffle and one got stolen by the RCMP because the poles were 'a hazard' – yes, this was before we finally got our own provincial police, which was in 2020. Our tireless banner makers always said the same thing, "My goodness, I hope no one was hurt." Then, "Well, I'll have to make a new one. I think I'll make two this time."

We had members who rarely came to church because of scheduling issues, but committed immense swathes of time to love and social justice because they belonged to a church that said "Test your actions against our principles and go forth boldly and show your

love."

Oh yeah, we made a LOT of noise 'n' trouble in those days. And it made people want to visit us, because they saw us out there, and it made people want to be part of us – people who already were part of Beacon got more committed and newcomers stayed to find out what it was about Beacon that made us so engaged with the world. We got better at dealing with the press because we became more controversial. Some parts of that process still give me the shakes when I recollect them.

Stand on the side of love changed us as an organization, too. We didn't abandon the democratic process, but we found ways of bringing our now strong tradition of consensus into church matters. They said it couldn't be done in a congregation of 200, but we did it. Beacon's like that.

A lot of you want to move on to another slogan for our church. I hope you come up with one that will keep you going for another 20 years. But I tell you, it will have to be very good one indeed to beat Stand on the Side of Love. It's what we do, folks. It's what we do.

Blessed be.

## Thanksgiving

All my relations, the salmon, the bear, the raven; the cedar, the fir, the alder; the seal, the whale, the otter; the salal, the blackberry, the blueberry. All my relations, I offer my thanksgiving this day for the beauty of the morning and the evening, the beauty of the children and the elders, the warriors and healers, the teachers and the storytellers. All my relations, we have come together to give thanks, in this year which has circled around again to the harvest.

Thanksgiving is a collision of symbols for Canadians. It wasn't even a separate holiday in Canada until 1931 – up until then, it was the same day as Armistice Day.

The American view of Thanksgiving is all about the turkey and the corn and the Pilgrims, and much of the European view of Thanksgiving is all about the goat's horn and the harvest bounty spilling from it. Thanksgiving in Europe is also a religious festival, during which regional hymns are sung and distinct decorations are placed in the parish church.

Today we consider Thanksgiving in Canada, where we stand at a crossroads of art, culture, food, bloodlines, language, civil liberties, nature, and urban life that's unparalleled in the rest of the world. It's a good a place to stand when you're reassessing the symbols in your life for worth and dignity.

I was requested to tie Thanksgiving, in all of its folkways and religious history, to the wisdom of the first peoples and the circle of life.... the medicine wheel ... the sacred hoop.

To cheerfully borrow the images and religious concepts of the first peoples is a dangerous gig for a middle aged white woman. Sure, as a Unitarian, I get a hall pass on acknowledging it as a source of religious inspiration, but I have a deep disquiet in me about approaching the subject without acknowledging the darkness in the relationships between settlers and the First Nations. So I will ask you this morning to do something hard, which is to ask for thankfulness in the face of long standing pain, misunderstanding and suffering caused mostly by white people on the first peoples of Canada.

There are a lot of people making a buck or political hay from the shaman shtick, and it's not my plan to be one of them. Instead, I personally offer my thanks this day to aspects of first nations spirituality which have touched my life, my heart and my faithwalk. I represent no one but myself, and I can no more steal a spiritual truth for myself than I can give you imaginary measles. Truth is truth, wherever you stumble upon it, however you draw it from the travails of daily life or moments of contemplation or ecstasy – or pain.

In the back of our minds, on the fringes of the firelight, in the headlines, in the place names... in all of these junctions and crossroads, woven fine, are the first peoples of Canada. In the last week, we have seen three headlines which remind us that the first peoples are here, are here, are here, and will not be subsumed or vanish into the convenience of the descendants

of those who occupied their homelands.

The swearing in of Steven Point, the new BC Lieutenant Governor, being of high ceremony, I will mention first.

The first man to hold the post, Joseph Trutch, referred to First Nations people as "The ugliest and laziest I ever saw." But Steven Point said that he thought it was cosmic justice that the 28th Lieutenant Governor would be aboriginal. As for the racist murals on the walls of the Legislature, which were covered for the purposes of the ceremony, he said they didn't bother him. May we profit as a people from his example.

I'm going to stop the headlines right there and insert a personal story.

Any family which has been in Canada more than 5 generations is guaranteed to be woven into the fabric of this land, not just in their nationality but in their bone and blood. A relative of mine who prefers not be named has a story about how he is bound, blood and bone, to the long history of Canada.

His Scottish/Irish great grandfather was a prominent and a wealthy man. He was a surgeon and physician with the Hudson's Bay Company, and he married a woman who was half native and trained her to be a nurse. Unlike many Canadians my relative has access to records of what his great-grandparents did, said, and worked on, from Hudson's Bay Co records, Anglican clergy diaries, and records of various committees and legislatures.

My relative hastens to add that he didn't do any of this research; his intrepid cousin did.

When he was about twelve years old, one evening while watching the movie Stagecoach on TV in the den, my relative found himself cheering for the cowboys. His father, reading the paper in his chair, poked his head over it long enough to say, "Ah, I think you're

rooting for the wrong side, kiddo!" which was a subtle hint that perhaps Scottish and Irish blood wasn't the only DNA in their family equation.

His cousin went to visit the Gwich'in in the Yukon and found out that there, the story was a little different. "Oh, yeah, we know there's some Scottish blood in there from some white people," was how they put it. Nobody had ever tried to hide it. The Gwich'in don't make a big fuss about who is and isn't one of them. If you can prove you have Gwich'in ancestry, you're in.

My relative cautioned me: don't make assumptions about your identity. And don't make assumptions about who you are, or are not, connected with. In the end we're all connected... you may as well face it first as last. To be able to acknowledge your identity, in all of the myriad forms it takes, and to celebrate it, light and dark and speckled, is a matter of thanksgiving. I would ask you take to a moment to celebrate your identity.

The second headline is.... the Willie Pickton trial. Whatever you believe or don't believe about the charges, I wish to draw something about the trial to your attention. Why did it take years and years for an investigation to bear results? As a community, it appears Canadians are not convinced that poor native women who may or not be drug addicted sex trade workers are worth worrying much about if they disappear off the street in quantity. It's as if the consensus is, at least amongst the folks who first look at the evidence, that no humans were involved so we can all move along.

When we look at the story so far, we see the signs of a failure. That somebody killed all those women and enjoyed doing it seems pretty clear to me. Somebody slew these women, and he or they got away with it for so long that each murder merely confirmed that heinous slaughter of marginalized people was the will of us all. How else could one get away with it

for so long? You can blame the incompetence of the police, but that's really dodging the question. The question is a deep one, about the things that we as a people, a culture, pay attention to. Not just in the media, which may grab a few hours of our attention every day, but what's going on in our entire lives and our daily lives as we live them. Let's be thankful that justice has some scope now, and very very humbled that it took so very, so shamefully long.

The third headline is about hope. The government of BC has announced new financial support for the sustaining of the languages of the first peoples. I imagine there are folks that find this kind of government expenditure frivolous; I'm not one of them, because I consider the passage of a language from living to dead among the saddest events of human history. A dead language is often a monument to genocide, and I'm not using the word for its shock value, but for the long years of horror and misery that a dead language represents.

Language is a funny thing. The Catalan, the Gaels, the Lapps, the Navajo. They have all managed to hang on to their language and to a great extent their culture while at times facing war, resettlement, racism and globalization – the biggest threat of all, at least these days. Each group now has a substantial web presence, and wishes to encourage as many people to learn the languages as want to. To lose a language is to lose a human map of how the world looks, feels, smells, tastes and sounds. Let us be thankful this day that we are now less likely to lose a map of how it feels to live in the Pacific Northwest.

Today is a good day to be thankful for our many sources, one of them being:

Spiritual teachings of Earth centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

I suppose if you're living rough on the streets of Vancouver you'll be in intimate

contact with the rhythms of nature, especially with respect to hunger, weather and disease. The rest of us, mostly climate controlled and comfortable with only brief intervals of being exposed to the weather, need frequent reminders that it is hard to be properly thankful for things you haven't noticed. To appreciate the circle of all existence requires that you stop and think about it as well as peacefully observe and dance and sing in it. Humans, for the most part, are not made for long contemplation. Not only does it reduce the amount of time for fun, or whatever you use your spare time for, I find that spending long periods of time thinking about the same thing is good way of turning into a fanatic. Or a bore. Or both.

I have to admit I feel guilt enter my conscience on a spearpoint when I think of how far away from the rhythms of nature I am in my daily life. It's true that I get to walk through some woods on the way to work, so twice a day I learn what the weather is doing now; I can see snakes and juncos and Douglas squirrels and occasionally coyotes and blue herons and bald eagles and ravens, and I hear tell of bears but I've never seen one, and I feel like I'm on a first name basis with every slug in the Lower Mainland. There's a waterfall on my walk to work that makes a delightful sound when it's raining very hard. If it sounds like paradise, that's not far from the truth. It isn't enough to reconnect me.

Nature's cycles oscillate in different ways. You change many times in your life by force; nobody consults you about being born or growing or developing your gender identity; the choice is made for you and good or bad, the choice for you, life-affirming or soul-destroying, governs who you are to your dying day. So you age, and spring, summer, fall and winter mean different things to you over the course of your life. Babies are born and grow in front of you. Their growth is so beautiful and so inspiring of reverent awe, if we but pay attention. To pay attention, you must be present. You won't have much to be thankful for, if

you don't pay attention.

Abundance follows lack; life follows death; the sun heats the ground up and the puffy clouds form. The rhythms of nature, which I have so long shielded myself from, batter insistently against me. It seems that there are many people telling the truth and many telling fibs about global climate change; how am I supposed to prepare myself for the earth's new rhythms if science doesn't help me predict what course of action would be best? I am struggling with new information and predictions about this because this new information may tell me where I should be thinking about living in 10 years' time, or what I can do to prepare for climate change if I keep living in Vancouver.

In one fast step we've left the 'living in harmony with the rhythms of nature' pleasantries behind and wound up on the doorstep of science. It is true that religion provides a scheme for a human life, full of rituals, repetitions and rites of passage. It seems to me, however, that taking the concept of living in harmony with the rhythms of nature to a logical extreme means that you will be thinking very hard about the science of understanding it as well as the physical and spiritual aspects of harmony with nature. You can't wreck nature by trying to understand her.... she'll always be bigger than you are so graceful acknowledgement of this is a plus. And it doesn't matter if you think of nature in materialist or spiritual terms... it's always bigger than you, and not always in a pleasant way.

I think it makes sense to think of our whole earth in religious terms, or at least use the concept – to indeed have an earth centred tradition. Our earth is a speck in cosmic terms, and yet it teems with life and variety so dense, and with brains so full of neural connections, that as tiny as it is, it's somehow, at one and the same time, as big as the universe... because we can contemplate how big the universe is, and participate in the scale and grandeur of that

knowledge. Let us be thankful that our ancestors grew brains so we could live in harmony with nature, not just as animals, but as thinking beings, and co-creators of the world.

I hope that you have allowed thankfulness to enter your being; that you are human, that you are connected with others, as your presence here shows; that you are free to worship as you see fit; that you are free to follow the rigorous path of science and reason and be a lamp to dark places; that we and our children have enough to eat; that the tap water is safe; that our homes are warm and bright. I hope that thankfulness will go with you wherever you go, so that you are inoculated against despair and fear.

May it be so, now and always. Go in peace.

## Priscilla's Journey - Children's story for The Slave Next Door

#Priscilla's journey - Children's story accompanying The Slave Next Door

Author's note. This is a 'revisioned' telling of a true story, for the children's story at church.

This is a sad story. It does get better at the ending. Once upon a time, about two hundred and fifty years ago, a girl was stolen from her village in what is now a country called Sierra Leone in Africa. She was forced to walk to the coast, by bad men and women who beat her and didn't give her enough to eat and drink. When they got to the coast she was put in a terrible prison and everyone around her was angry and sad and scared and mean, so she sat very quietly and hoped nobody would notice her. When she was so scared and tired from being so hungry that she could hardly move, she was shoved onto the biggest boat she had ever seen and chained to a post so she couldn't move at all even if she wanted to. She had no mommy and no daddy with her and she was scared all the time. Some of the people in the big boat spoke her language but most of them didn't so she had hardly anybody to talk to.

After a very long time the boat stopped moving and she was taken off the boat and given a bath and a change of clothes and taken to a place called Charleston where she learned she was going to be sold like a sack of yams. She recognized a boy from her village and he told her she was going to be sold. She hoped she would get a kind master.

She was bought and put in a cart and taken many miles away from the slave market. She was still very scared, but at least she got fed whenever she wanted to eat for the whole trip and she didn't have to walk. It was the first time she had had enough to eat and drink in so long she couldn't remember. The driver of the cart kept pointing to her and saying "Priscilla, Priscilla". After a while she realized that was her new name. She was being called Priscilla. She pointed to herself and said "Priscilla" but inside she still called herself by the name her parents gave her.

She was given another set of clothes and then she had to do work so hard that every day she cried and wished it was her mommy and her daddy asking her to do chores. She thought she had had too much to do back home when she was carrying water and gathering firewood for her mother to cook on. Now she had to plant rice, backbreaking work in the hot sun with mean men hitting you if you weren't working hard enough.

She worked very hard and tried to do what she was told, which was hard at first because she didn't know what her master was saying to her. But she did know her new name.

One day she was asked to come inside to work in the kitchen. Priscilla liked it a lot better than working in the sun, although it was still hard work. Priscilla worked every day and became a strong young woman. When she got to be old enough her master allowed her to marry a man, another slave. She had ten babies and four of them lived to be grownups. And that is almost everything we know about Priscilla.

This is a very sad story and we should be sad and angry that anybody has ever had to be a slave....

Priscilla, whose African name is forgotten, has 25,000 descendants, and none of them are slaves. A descendent is like your great great great grandson or granddaughter. Priscilla, who had no freedom in her life after she was ten years old, still was a real live human being and she had a family and we know about her because the people who bought her kept good records and they survive to this day. We are lucky to know about Priscilla's journey, because we don't usually know what happens to slaves. And the happy ending is that Priscilla's great great great granddaughter flew to Sierra Leone and was able to meet a whole bunch of African relatives she didn't know she had. Sometimes we have hard lives, but we try to work hard for our children, and that's what Priscilla did.

Slavery is illegal everywhere in the world. No one is supposed to keep anybody as a slave, it's not allowed. The problem is that not everybody obeys the laws, and there are still slaves. Because Unitarians believe that justice and freedom are for everyone, we need to learn about slavery and not close our eyes when people are suffering. That's why we sell slavery-free coffee and chocolate in our church, because we do care. Everybody in the world has a right to be free, and that is one of the things we can and do work on together. We want a world where, even if there are still slaves in this generation, all future generations will be free, just like Priscilla's descendants.

## The Slave Next Door

October 2011

Each year in October Unitarian congregations are encouraged by the UU-UNO to celebrate their links to the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with a service on a particular theme. This year's theme is the Empowerment of Women for a better world.

I'm going to talk about the Sex Slave next door, the scale of the human trafficking and modern slavery problem and I am going to try to connect it to what Unitarians cherish as values. I'm also very aware that this is a gruelling and unpleasant topic, so it will be shorter than usual.

I could have written a service which talks about the Gogos, the grandmother's organization for African women raising their grandchildren after family deaths due to AIDS – but our much missed Marcy Green gave that talk a few years back. I could have talked about how three African women won Nobel Peace Prizes this past week regarding their work for

women's rights, or about various kinds of progress made, for example Saudi Arabian women being granted the right to vote, also a recent development.

But I couldn't do it. I find the topic of the Empowerment of Women for a Better World one of dust and ashes. I cannot feel happy or congratulatory or sweet tempered about the Empowerment of Women when aboriginal women are disappearing from the Highway of Tears and human traffickers move thousands of women - and men, and girls, and boys - around the planet every year. And at the same time, to beat people over the head with a heavy topic isn't a very friendly thing to do, even if it does feel necessary as part of our mission as a prophetic church. I decided when I was choosing hymns to pick spirited and light hearted ones, some from the African American traditions, and after my talk I want you to shake it all out and sing that song with all the heart and spirit you can.

My Quaker forebears sought to end slavery, back in England. I want to believe that we'll eradicate slavery in my lifetime, but I am a pragmatic individual. Perhaps our descendants will still be fighting.

When I chose this topic, it was because I knew that there are women enslaved in the sex trade in Vancouver. God help such a sojourner in our city, deprived of money, passport, liberty and hope, fearing every man who comes near her as a potential abuser or murderer. And yet such women sojourn in this, our city. What does common decency, what does spirit, what does heart demand of us in such a circumstance?

We are supposed to extend the hand of friendship to those who stay among us. It's part of the covenant of all religions, and even if you have no use for religion, some tenderness and fellow feeling for others should be part of normal life and not a special exception. I know that if I want to be treated with tenderness and fellow feeling I have to hold up my end of the

social contract. That means that I know I have an obligation to other people. That obligation is independent of the laws and customs of the culture you live in.... that's what having a moral sensibility means.

Right now, if a foreign woman is arrested in Vancouver as a worker in a brothel where she is forced to work, she goes to jail until the immigration system deports her. She'll get medical treatment, true, and she's not forced to work any more, but those constitute the only two advantages I can see that she has over her previous state. If she's lucky, she'll get a bed at Deborah's Gate, the Salvation Army transition house which opened in 2009 for trafficked women who came to Canada on a promise of a job and became domestic slaves or sex workers instead. Although it hasn't been documented in Canada, there are known cases in the US where a Mexican woman has been deported three times from the US, only to be re-enslaved and smuggled back in. The profit margins are so high and the chances and consequences of getting caught so trivial, that for every venal and brutish human who gets caught buying and selling slaves, more spring up, hoping to get wealthy. What good is the empowerment of women when a male dominated justice system, indifferent or openly corrupt policing and a greedy collaboration between smugglers, prostitution customers and pimps continually enslaves and brutalizes them?

Human trafficking for sexual enslavement for the most part targets women. According to the statistics, which are hard to gather for a hidden population, 70% of the persons trafficked for whatever purpose are female and half of the persons trafficked are under 18. Most persons trafficked never cross a border, which surprised me when I learned that.

I believe that as long as the global economy is still reeling from the last market crash, slavery will be hard to stop. I believe that while labour unions are fighting for survival in the

face of global crony capitalism, slavery will be hard to stop. And I believe that if we don't start challenging our assumptions about our own personal contributions to human trafficking, slavery will be impossible to stop. Without education and a justice framework, it will be impossible to stop. That is not the world I want to live in.

Now wait a minute, most of you are thinking. I didn't come to church to be lectured and bugged about something we all know is terrible. And after all, we all have our favoured charities and none of us have time or energy to take on yet another cause, however worthy. And it's not a nice clean, safe, topic, like empowering women with the Heifer Project or by purchasing jewellery made by women so they can send their children to school and break the cycle of poverty.

But it is a Unitarian topic, and somebody needs to say something about human trafficking. Turn to the front of the hymnal and look at those words, really look at them. Human trafficking directly challenges three of our seven core principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Sometimes we are faced with challenges to our world view. What good is a religion which never challenges you? You cannot work a muscle by watching an exercise video nor expand your consciousness without changing your thinking. The never failing wellsprings of UUism include the:

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

What can you personally do about human trafficking? Rather than read a list of steps to take, I've provided a short printout, which you can pick up at the back of the church after the service. For the rest of my talk, I am going to take a somewhat different approach than merely providing statistics.

Let's talk about c h o c o l a t e.

Most of the people in this room are aware that the overwhelming majority of cocoa picked each year is picked by children in Africa, many of whom are not doing the work voluntarily. I'll help you visualize the problem. Roughly the same number of people pick cocoa in Africa as live in New Westminster and Burnaby. Imagine that every one of the people you are driving by after you leave church today picks cocoa in the hot sun with no protection from the pesticides that get sprayed on the plants – so you can have a chocolate bar. It feels different when it's your neighbour, doesn't it? But our religion calls us to think of every human alive as our neighbour.

The solution is simple, and nigh on impossible. Don't eat chocolate that isn't fair trade. Don't buy it, don't eat it, don't hand it out at Halloween, and don't bring it in to work on top of a doughnut. Chocolate, as wonderful as it is, is a global commodity, and as such subject to crushing amounts of speculation and manipulation on the commodities market. The

increase in the number of slaves in the cocoa trade in 2011 is as a consequence of the collapse of the commodity price in 2005. Producers started looking for cheaper ways to grow cocoa to preserve market share, and slavery resulted.

There's a reason why we can buy fair trade chocolate and cocoa and coffee at church. It's because as a movement we are slowly making the connection between global crony capitalism and ourselves as individuals – how the choices we make in our daily lives directly affect agricultural workers in third world countries, not to mention the interdependent web of which we are all a part.

You may not have the ability to drag your friends to church (I know I don't, especially on Thanksgiving Sunday), but you do have the ability to ask your MP to tighten the rules about what kind of cocoa products are sold in Canada. You certainly have the ability to change your consumption patterns, and encourage your children, parents, friends, family and coworkers to do the same.

Some of you don't eat chocolate or drink coffee. But that doesn't mean your brand choices and eating habits are not supporting the exploitation and slavery of others.

Pick the top ten things you buy on a regular basis and educate yourself as to where the goods come from, and do what you can to ensure that it's a slavery free food or product. Remember, as you are making your purchase choices, what Cornel West said, that justice is what love looks like in public.

I am not asking you to save the world, for such is not in our power. I am asking you to educate yourself and think about what you buy before you buy it, that a slave might be set free.

Blessed be.

### Further resources regarding human trafficking

Human trafficking is defined in the U.N. Trafficking Protocol as "the recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, or fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation."

The definition on trafficking consists of three core elements:

- 1) The action of trafficking, which means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons
- 2) The means of trafficking, which includes threat of or use of force, deception, coercion, abuse of power or position of vulnerability
- 3) The purpose of trafficking, which is always exploitation. In the words of the Trafficking Protocol, article 3 "exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

(Source <http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/category/the-facts/>)

## FIRST THE BAD NEWS

There are 27 million people in slavery today.

## NOW THE GOOD NEWS

We can end slavery in our lifetime.

More details at [www.FreeTheSlaves.net](http://www.FreeTheSlaves.net)

Further reading – Canadian re chocolate

[http://www.northword.ca/connections/Past\\_Issue/winter\\_02/art/chocolate.html](http://www.northword.ca/connections/Past_Issue/winter_02/art/chocolate.html)

Further reading – Global Human Trafficking

[www.unodc.org](http://www.unodc.org)

What are the numbers and what do they mean?

<http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/category/the-facts/the-number/>

<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/slavery1.html>

Shelter for female trafficking victims in the GVRD

<http://www.deborahsgate.ca/>

In the Lower Mainland the number to report suspected human trafficking to is:

604-598-5306

Supplement to October 9 2011 Beacon Unitarian Church service

## The Digital Divide

May, 2011

This morning I'd like to talk about the Digital Divide, which is the idea that having the internet and being otherwise technologically savvy is better than not. This is a bit of an oversimplification of the idea, but there's only so much you can load into 20 minutes.

Before I get into the homily, let me just say that I looked for Unitarian commentary on internet access being a civil right and I didn't find much. If you think access to the internet is a civil right, then please make sure you add that plank to your personal social justice platform. I tell you, with no fear of being contradicted, that you do not need internet access to know how important the internet was to the start of the Arab Awakening in Tunisia, and to the fall of the Mubarak government in Egypt. In fact Mubarak was just this week fined many millions of dollars for shutting down the internet in Egypt, a court ruling which must be scaring some other dictators out of their socks.

In another example of how the internet has changed our lives and the headlines, when Ai Wei Wei, the colossally talented and courageous artist and activist from the People's Republic of China was arrested, he took a picture of himself framed by plainclothes thugs in a mirrored hotel elevator, and sent it to the internet before they had time to stop him. That is how fast the world moves these days. News is coming through unfiltered, and you need a strong stomach and a stout heart to deal with much of it.

I believe that uncensored access to the internet as a human right should be part of the Unitarian value system. I don't believe in uncensored access for impressionable young minds, though, that's for parents to decide.

Most of us are aware that the internet started as a way for US government computers to talk to each other, almost half a century ago. That invention has since ballooned into one of the most important developments in human history. It created a network of machine based nests for every conceivable class of ideas to take shelter in. The internet is not a small ecological niche, it's the Gaia of ideas, the place all ideas may potentially be connected to.

The printing press changed the world because poor but literate people could now learn on their own. The internet has made it possible for every extreme and every norm of human behaviour to find a home. It has not only has made more room for human ideas, it's made it easier for those ideas to get into any other human brain which can apprehend them. The internet itself could at this point collapse, but the idea of the internet would not; the internet has changed how a large number of relatively privileged human beings think about and value information, as well as changed attitudes toward how we store information and share it, and I will provide a concrete example of that later.

My brother, who has made a living working with computers in various ways since the

late 80's, says that the only revolutionary thing about the internet is the pace. Every piece of information that's on the internet you could get some other way; it would just take longer.

For those in the congregation who do not have internet access, whether by choice, physical infirmity, chance or lack of funds, I will not be attempting to convince you that you're missing something if you don't have it or tell you that it's cheap when that's not my call, nor will I be talking about how easy it is, or any of that nonsense, because almost three quarters of the world doesn't have internet access and life, strangely enough, continues along at its normal pace whether the internet is around or not. It can be argued that the internet is having an even more corrosive effect on social life and social discourse than the introduction of television. At the same time, a more powerful tool for staying connected to loved ones who are far away has never been invented.

In my view, in every Unitarian congregation there should be at least a dozen members who have nothing to do with this newfangled internet thing that seems to have so many people addicted to it, to keep the rest of us honest about how church really is about face to face interactions with real people whom we care about. I believe that to be in each other's physical presence must be a harmonious component of what church is; that it takes place in real time and in real space with real people who gather and worship with us.

The internet can enable and supplement the Beacon worship experience, but it cannot compete with Sunday morning, and it would be foolish to use the internet to try. We've said that internet access is necessary for Beacon Board membership, but is it really? We are revisiting that conversation among ourselves because it seems strange to call ourselves welcoming when we cannot accommodate a member in good standing on our board if he or she doesn't have internet access.

So far I've managed to avoid my actual topic. I'm not here to talk about church politics – although I hope I've shown the influence of the internet on even that; I'm here to talk about what I discovered when I started thinking about the digital divide and how it relates to our faith. After reflection, I realized that there are many fault lines which one could call a digital divide that aren't just about the haves and have nots of basic internet access.

There is not one digital divide, in my view, but three. They are age, infrastructure and government interference. I will mostly be talking about age as in Beacon's case it's most relevant. Everybody in this room has access; if you don't avail yourself it's because you don't want it or can't be bothered or the screen is hard to read or you have to go to the library or your computer is broken or you're not aware of the software and hardware assistive technology to those who have infirmities. We in Canada have the infrastructure, and we have the money and those who don't can get access at a library, and our government isn't censoring it although suspicious as I am of our current government (note, Stephen Harper was Prime Minister at the time) I wouldn't put it past them. The role the internet plays in the lives of young people is massive. Anyone under 20 in Vancouver has never lived in a world without the internet, without easy access; long enough to think the world was ever thus.

I'd like to quote the late science fiction author and noted atheist Douglas Adams on the subject of technology, which I think helps illustrate the gap between young and old with respect to the internet.

There's a set of rules that anything that was in the world when you were born is normal and natural. Anything invented between when you were 15 and 35 is new and revolutionary and exciting, and you'll probably get a career in it. Anything invented after you're 35 is against the natural order of things.

Anyone under the age of 20 is well aware what a cesspool of bad taste, antisocial political rhetoric and pornography the internet can be when one trains one's eye on its most extreme and septic reaches. I know that I still have the capacity to be unpleasantly surprised, which is why I tend to be careful where I go when I wander around the internet. Those under 20 either understand that they have no privacy or have somehow managed to reframe the notion of privacy so that they appear to their elders to be crazily cavalier about it. A careless comment on a social networking site can get you fired; many of the young people I know on facebook post pictures of themselves doing the standard range of stupid things young people do, with occasional bonus shots of them doing something illegal. I always want to flutter my hands anxiously and counsel them not to do it, but I don't because I'll get told to mind my own business.

The age fracture line is a difficult one. My children have never been aware of a world in which there was no internet. It completely permeates their lives. My parents, who are in their seventies, use the internet so extensively in the pursuit of their hobbies that both of them could be considered power users. You would think that with this access there could be a commonly shared set of values regarding the internet inside our family, but there is not. I think my family's experience is not unique.

My parents go to quite ludicrous lengths – at least in my opinion – to protect their privacy and their data. They find my blog – an online diary – useful, in that they can keep up with my daily comings and goings, but also horrifying, because I talk about things that people who were born in the thirties generally think fall under the category of "none of your beeswax". I in my turn do not talk about my sex life, because my mother reads my blog, so, ew, or my place of employment except in general and innocuous terms, because I want to stay

employed and it's possible a boss or customer might read it. But I have been candid on a number of other subjects, including my mental health, which, although I feel fine now, took a bad turn earlier this year. I talk about church a lot too, and politics, and atheism. I have very clear ideas about what I can and can't talk about. But as far as I can see from what my younger friends post, they will talk about every aspect of their lives, no matter how personal or trivial or potentially subject to attention from the police, and that is a very big digital divide.

Time for another aside. It's just like the internet, folks, one thing leads to another and the next thing you know it's two am.

I know I may sound heretical, but I believe that the closer we all get to a clear understanding exactly what 'normal' is – what human beings really behave like whether as individuals or part of a group– the sooner we can develop, as a society, understandings and folkways about how people should behave on a daily basis that are rooted in reality rather than hapless idealism, and are rooted in science rather than shame. As strange as it may sound, those young people, in being so open about their lives, may be doing all of us a service. It still gives me the willies, but part of the walk of faith is confronting what frightens you.

I mentioned earlier that the Canadian version of the internet is a pretty free place. It isn't a democratic one, but it is not a censored one. Let me give you a real life example of the censorship of the internet in other countries.

All the money in China will not get you access to the world famous picture of the man who stood in front of the tank in Tienanmin Square, during the pro democracy rallies of 1989; the Chinese government has fixed it so that if you look for that picture you will see pictures of happy foreigners in the square.

An entire generation of Chinese schoolchildren has no idea that a young man stood in front of the tanks approaching the square before he was hustled from harm's way. Access to the internet does not mean you can see everything; it really depends on where you are and of course how much technical knowledge you have or how much your friends have.

Restrictive regimes have a real problem with the internet. To not have it is to cripple local commerce and telecommunications. To have it is to provide a weapon to your citizenry to actively oppose the government and in some cases assist in toppling it.

The final digital divide is infrastructure. In Africa, internet access has increased by more than 10 times in a decade; it remains the fastest growing market. However, in Africa, the internet is more associated with cellular phones; instead of huge networks of optical fiber or copper, it's cheaper, faster and better to put up cell towers. In Canada, a company in Saskatoon will sell and set up a ground station for satellite internet access at any point on the globe for \$25 grand and expenses. It gives me a mental image that I could spend a week in a canoe along the upper reaches of the Amazon and there could be an internet café in the middle of the jungle.

What have I learned about the digital divide? I've learned that it exists in our congregation, and that we would be wise to come up with the resilience and forethought to address it. I've seen how where you are demographically affects how you use the internet and why. I've seen how repressive governments steal their own citizens' history out from under them so well that they can make uncomfortable facts vanish, even as the rest of the world knows what's going on.

Most of all I recognize now that I personally have been putting far too much weight on the importance of the internet. Of course it's important, but let me tell you a little story.

This past Friday, my friend in the IT department at work came by and said, "Internet's down in five!" My teammate cried aloud, "You prommmissed, it would be five thirty." IT guy said, "Five minutes, I'm just the messenger." It was four o'clock in the afternoon. He said five minutes but we were already losing access as he came walking through.

Everything I do at work depends on the internet. My email is hosted in Victoria. My contact management software is hosted in San Francisco. That means that the computers storing the data are in San Francisco. The entire phone system for my company uses the internet to carry calls even between one desk and the next, and the call center software I use which allows me to transfer calls to coworkers in the US at the press of a button is also hosted someplace in California. Without the internet, I can't do anything.

Since I couldn't work, I went home.

Then it occurred to me. My community will still be here, and the doors will open again next Sunday, whether or not the internet even exists this time next week. I realized that I had missed something important. The internet is a tool; this is a community. I used to think that the internet was important. I still do. But it isn't as important as the people in this room, and I'm glad that delivering this homily brought me to that realization.

Blessed be.

## The Terrible Baby Monster

Written to accompany UU at the Movies.

Oscar Wing's mom and dad and Grandpa and Gramma bought him a camera for his tenth birthday. It was very complicated in some ways, but Oscar was the kind of person who reads the manual. Within a couple of days he had video of his little sister laughing in her sleep, a picture of his mom working in the garden that his dad put on his desk at work, a video of his Grandpa snoring in a hammock, a picture of his dad waving a knife around while chopping vegetables, and a picture of his Gramma wearing a tutu and pretending to be a ballerina while twirling around on the patio.

Oscar liked the camera.

What he really wanted to do was make a movie.

He asked his favourite teacher, Miss B., what he should make a movie about.

She said, "What do you really care about? What makes you happy?"

Oscar thought about it. "Lots of things make me happy."

"What makes you happy that makes everybody else happy too?" Miss B. asked.

Oscar thought about it. "Olivia, I guess." Olivia was his little sister.

"You can always make a short movie about Olivia if you can't think of something else," said Miss B.

Oscar went home and thought about it some more. His Grandpa loved monster movies, and Olivia loved stomping around the house in her dinosaur boots.

Oscar decided to make a movie about the TERRIBLE BABY MONSTER.

He went to the internet and learned about what he would need to do to make a five minute movie. There were so many things to remember that right away Oscar wanted to do something else. His Grandpa said, "Ignore all that bunk. Just keep the camera rolling and then cut everything you get into five good minutes."

Oscar figured out that if the camera was lower than Olivia's head, it made her look gigantic, like a proper movie monster. He put the camera on a tripod and waited for something to happen.

Olivia chased the cat, smashed through a little toy town, and said RAWR, except she was little, so it came out WOAHH, WOAHH. She stomped in her dinosaur boots and used his Thor axe to knock over a bucket. That was when all the grownups wanted to know what they were doing, so Oliver stopped movie making for the day.

In the morning, Oscar woke up and watched the video he took the day before. His dad set him up with editing software and every night after supper, he worked on cutting it up into five good minutes. It took a lot longer than he wanted it to, but in the end, he had a movie with titles and credits and a soundtrack. THE TERRIBLE BABY MONSTER. Everybody loved it, and Olivia fell asleep. The End.



## UU at the movies

I have a confession to make. I love the movies. I read about them, I watch them, I critique them - I even had a bunch of movie reviews published in the early eighties. I'm not as obsessive as some, but I'm a good deal more obsessive than most. I jumped at the chance to speak about theology at the movies. But then, I realized with a sinking heart, I would have to reveal the great love, verging on mania, that I have for the art form; digital or analog, rotoscoped or all one continuous take, animated or live action or CGI. I love movies for their pounding soundtracks and their wistful leitmotifs; the energetic and subtle performances of human chameleons; the polish and precision of the planning, technology and execution of a really great shot; the behind-the-scenes dramas, tempestuous romances and epic legal battles; the way you can watch a really great movie twenty times and appreciate it more with each viewing; the way trashy movies from your childhood can cheer you up in no time; the way a movie that is an all-ages cross-cultural hit can make everyone feel, however temporarily, like we are all members of the same family.

As Willa Cather remarked in a novel, There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before. There are a lot of lists of plot types, but to me there are only three. Human vs. Human, human vs. Self, human vs. Elements. There are story traditions without conflict; the Japanese in particular have perfected ways of making movies in which there's no struggle, just life and all of its pains, pleasures and changes; they get called art films because 'nothing happens'.

Every time I hear somebody complain about the repetitiveness of modern movies, I have to laugh. Recycling plots and characters has been a feature of plays and entertainments for 2500 years. While a conformity of explosions and cleavage has taken over big budget movies, let us be thankful for the improvements in affordable cinema technology, which have allowed people like actor/writer/director/composer Shane Carruth to bring his visions to the screen with his science fiction movies *Primer* and *Upstream Color*. The drop in cost has allowed poor people and marginalized people to record and document and publicize their lives as Kimberley Rivers Roberts did in the documentary about Katrina called *Trouble the Water*. It has allowed us to bring our imaginings to bear on photographs of the deep sea and the forest canopies and the vastness of outer space, and tell new stories with new energy, a firmer grasp of what it is to be human, and less concern with commercial success. It is now possible to make a movie - a good movie, an interesting movie - for less than it costs to buy a new car.

My love of the movies comes from my parents. When I was little, my parents had 16 millimetre silent films; Chaplin and Keystone Cops and Laurel and Hardy; they had a sound projector too, so I watched the Weavers sing their songs, including an incredibly young and slender Pete Seeger. I associated watching films with family bonding time.

These days I ask two things from movies; one is "Can you take me somewhere I

haven't been before?" so that I am removed from my normal concerns and brought into a world I could not have imagined.

This demand for novelty isn't just 'show me something new', but "I wish to be told a compelling story by a confident and competent storyteller. Take me out of my comfort zone. Put me in a situation I would never find myself in, and walk with me and the characters. Avoid the clichés and the tropes and the bad habits of modern filmmaking; no explosions today, thanks."

The other thing I ask is the very simple, "Tell me your truth." If I am to fully live my values, I hope to spend more time asking myself how a particular film is going to bring more compassion, wisdom, or self-knowledge into my life. In documentaries, I want accuracy and accountability; in fiction I want a story that can be told no other way. For films which seek to uplift, a clear call to action is part of the experience.

Which is funny, because movies make you sit in one place for a couple of hours.

It's after the movie is over that the magic really starts. A good movie makes memories; memories of sitting around the coffee shop after the show and arguing about what the point of the movie was with your friends. A good movie becomes part of your artistic vocabulary, part of the catchphrases and in jokes of your family. A good movie is made by people who understand that it's going to have an effect on your nervous system and they won't make you pull out your handkerchief without a good reason. A good movie makes you think and feel and stretches you a little, shows you your mental quirks and cognitive biases - and loves you anyway.

How should we watch a movie? I want to be experiential, not prescriptive. Nobody wants to watch *Old Yeller* the week their dog dies, and nobody wants to watch *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* when they were jilted at the altar. I really don't want to tell you what to do; but I do want you to think about your movie watching habits. Mine have changed quite a bit in the last five years; I watch many more documentaries, and I'm trying to watch movies that have unstuck themselves from the gender norms and racial profiling that pursued us out of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

What to do?

One is to stop watching any movie if you think it is a waste of time. Turn it off. I frequently stop watching movies that I think are bunk, that are gory or sexist or trite or racist or boring. I've even walked out of movies I paid for. If we have but one wild and precious life, let's not watch crappy movies.

Another challenge is to think of a movie not as a piece of entertainment, but as a commentary on our culture.

What is it REALLY saying? About gender roles, about love, about violence, about authority, about the ages and stages of the characters?

Whose voices are being heard, and whose voices are on the cutting room floor?

Whose interests are being served by the assumptions that underly the plot and characters?

What shape is your own humanity in at the end of the film?

Some of you may already know about the Bechdel test, which was invented by Alison

Bechdel as part of her amazing comic series **Dykes to Watch Out For**. In it, a character says that in order for her to feel comfortable about watching a movie, there have to be at least two named female characters, and they have a conversation that doesn't revolve around the needs of the leading man. Most movies don't meet this simple feminist test (including a lot of movies I like) but that will just give you an idea of how there can be theological implications in your movie choices. If you believe in equal rights for women, why not show it in how you spend money at the box office?

One of my theological tests is that I immediately want to stop watching movies which show fathers as stupid, lazy or incapable of appropriately interacting with their own children. My father wasn't like that. My husband wasn't like that. If there are fathers in the congregation like that you've done a good job of hiding it. Why spend money to support an outdated and morally bankrupt view of men? It isn't funny!

Trust your instincts. You may not be able to put your finger on or put into words why you find a movie disturbing, or overly commercial, or ugly in some way; but I guarantee that if somehow you object to the moral tone of a movie, you won't hurt anybody if you refrain from finishing it. Even if you paid for the movie... hey, maybe you can get your money back. And if you're at home, even more reason not to.

Spend your movie dollars differently. If you have \$12 in your pocket for a 'movie experience' you might want to consider using that money to fund a documentarian or minority film-maker working on challenging subject matter. You'll have to wait longer for your movie, but you'll be living your values in a different way.

There are a remarkable number of Unitarian congregations who run movie nights on social justice themes, and have really great discussions after the movie to consolidate what's

been learned and felt. We could do that. We could rate movies on our facebook pages with a seven star system, one star for each of our principles, letting other Unitarians know when movies meet basic requirements.

Whenever you watch movies, be the part of the audience that stays mindful. Resist the urge to have some sentimental popcorn and turn off your brain. When something offends you, respectfully engage with the producers, directors and studio - leave the actors alone, since in most cases they didn't finance it. And when something is good, and respects all persons and the world we live in, don't forget to share it with your friends!

I will let Willa Cather have the last word, since it sums up my fierce obsession with the movies. "There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that's my creed and I'll follow it to the end, to a hotter place than Pittsburgh if need be."

Blessed be.

## The Tyranny of Nice

In this life, there is much ambiguity. Thus, when you are presenting a talk that has a title identical to something else, you are obliged to tell your listeners in what ways your talk will differ from whatever it is has the same name.

Thus it is that I feel I must tell you that I am not going to talk about an eighty page rant by two Canadian persons of letters on the subject of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, which is called the Tyranny of Nice. Nor am I going to talk about the work of a Toronto psychotherapist on the subject of how being too nice can be self-destructive, which was called the Tyranny of Niceness. I am going to comment that it's hilarious that the two instances of the Tyranny of Nice that I could find are both Canadian. We really think we have the monopoly on Nice, and any commentary on the subject, don't we? So much for our national character.....

I'd like to talk about my own personal concept of nice, and how much that concept bothers me. You see, I like to think that all of my prejudices have a sound theological basis, so

whenever something bothers me I attack it like a dog worrying a rat hoping to get sport and exercise and hopefully results.

I generally try to link my talks to one of the UU principles. For those of us who are relatively new to Unitarianism, we are not a creedal church. What we do have are a number of principles, which our representatives voted on some years back and which are printed at the front of our hymnals and are reproduced on the wall behind me. Two principles in particular I'd like to draw your attention to this morning. One is

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

And another is

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

I'd like you to keep those principles in mind as I mount a full on attack on the concept of nice.

Nice is an English word which started its life meaning a cloud of ideas which drifted over time into meaning quite a different cloud of ideas. Language is, after all, a natural process, with gesture and necessity woven into its DNA. Nice comes from the Latin word *nescius*, meaning foolish or ignorant. Over time the meaning shifted; in Shakespeare's day it meant wanton or profligate, later it meant coy, and now it means some of each of pleasant, courteous, respectable, fussy and agreeable, at least as far as dictionary definitions go. The use of the word stretches those definitions, though. Nice is a very nebulous word.

Contemporary use of the word is sarcastic, "Nicely done!" or commendatory, "Nice!"

or parental, "That's not nice!" or non-committal, "He seems like a nice enough guy," or cozy, "Nice and warm."

When I think of the word nice, I think of a sickly sweetness, an avalanche of treacle and dusty paper flowers, and I think... I think of censorship. I know. That's a strange place for my mind to go, but that's what I think. I think when people are being nice lies are being told and advantages are being taken.

Why would I hate the word nice so much? One reason is school, another is feminism yet a third is our adult institutions, in this case church although work would do just as well.

Nice, in the public school sense, is a word of such weighty social conformity it feels to me like an anvil tied to everything. At school you fast learn, if you were not fortunate enough to be taught gently at home, that everything that comes out of your body is not nice, and that the words that come out of your mouth have to conform to the nice spectrum or you will be ignored or punished or both depending on the whim of those nicer than you. Who, incidentally, are more powerful than you.

The word nice in my mind, and especially as it's taught in school, is tied to a concept of power. It's linked to shame, groupthink, and the powerlessness of those who are learning the social ropes. Those of you who enjoyed the Harry Potter books and movies will remember the character Dolores Umbridge, whose hunger for absolute power over the children under her supervision was disguised by the appearance of being pleasant – of being nice.

It made her a horrific character. I felt watching her that her version of nice was the worst ever. Her character operated on the assumption that she was the arbiter of nice, and that she could set societal standards and expectations of behaviour, and do it without ever being elected or held to account. If she oversteps, or harms those in her care, with her careless

and disrespectful beliefs, she defends herself with her good intentions, and says that she only wanted harmony.

When you're a child, and you have feelings that you have been led to believe 'aren't nice', there's nothing that makes you feel more helpless and hopeless than to have these feelings exposed. Those feelings are not treated as part of being human. They are split off. They become a marker for inferiority and a way of being placed on the bottom of a pecking order. Worse, if your feelings are natural and normal, the fear of being not nice can drive you away from your true state of being. As an aside, this is one of the reasons our RE program is so important to our whole church; we recognize that children need guidance when they have feelings outside the norm, not judgement and shame. Many children are told as they grow up that homosexual feelings or not fitting into some imaginary normal gender category makes them not nice. And yet the people saying, "That's not nice," when what they really mean is "that's not normative, that's not acceptable" are trying to do the right thing, in the face of what they see as the amoral perversity of children. And that is what is so troubling about nice to me, that we can use and be used by a social concept that means well but doesn't see us as we are. Our individuality and moral agency is sacrificed to a collective desire to avoid conflict. That's what I am getting at in calling this homily The Tyranny of Nice.

One of our principles is the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. There's nothing in there about nice. There shouldn't be. When we hold hands during the linking, we're holding hands with our inherent worth and dignity, not all the crud and vice and error that we sorrowfully acknowledge. We have made an agreement to accept it all, the dark and the light, but we side with the light, as exemplified by our chalice.

Nice is a word full of unchallenged assumptions and flattened emotions. Nice is an

enemy of creativity. If too much weight is given to appearances and not enough to truth, creativity withers or flees. Great art isn't nice. Great art grabs you by your gut and your intellect and your senses and pushes you out of your comfort zone. Nice is all about the comfort zone.

I really don't consider myself to be a nice person. I swear too much, I am unsparing in my use of humour and sarcasm, and I'm not always perfectly coiffed when I get to church. But I would like to be known as a useful person, a kindly person, and a person who is sympathetic to outsiders and people who don't toe the conventional lines with respect to both norms and needs. And I'd like to be known as somebody who does things besides talk.

If you're a feminist, the word nice is a tripwire tied to a tiresome form of oppression called gender essentialism. Briefly, this is a view that boys are boys and girls are girls and there are aspects of boyness and girlness that are intrinsic, unchanging and immutable, which may then be used as an excuse to treat boys and girls differently from birth. The problem is that most human activities and thought processes are not really dependent on what shape your naughty bits are. The concept of nice enters our lives as a tool of social control over children, but it seems to work its worst against women. We get it at home, church, school and work and in the media - it's an avalanche of advertising messages and political tropes, standing by one's man and keeping a nice home. Oh, and never ever being angry.

Anger is natural, but that alone doesn't make it good or right. We know that anger hurts people's feelings and injures the person who is angry, especially if the anger is not proportionate in any way to the offence. However if going to church is going to be psychologically and spiritually useful to us, we have to acknowledge our darkness, whatever form it takes, and recognize that the acknowledgement alone may take us out of the sphere in

which we can think of ourselves as good or nice.

In order for us to genuinely live our lives, we must wisely live with the anger we feel at ourselves, other people, institutions, and nature. It is not impossible to live without anger, but I don't know anybody who ever managed that besides my grandmother, and she was a special case.

I'd like to comment about niceness in relation to the volunteer work I do for the church. I'm on the board at Beacon, and one of our strengths as a Board is that we all feel safe about expressing anger, doubt, disappointment and fear – all negative emotions, definitely emotions that do not fall under the banner of nice. If the purpose of the Board was for us to ever be in agreement, to wear smiles and aim for the false consensus that comes when people fear to rock boats, we'd be in poor shape. No, our job is to provide leadership to Beacon and support to each other in the process. Leadership that works is not nice, because it doesn't run away from conflict. It is candid, thoughtful, inclusive and forbearing, and it is decisive. It doesn't wait for consensus to arrive on perfumed stationery. When we talk about buildings and budgets and our hopes for a minister, consensus comes from respect and an ability to hear each other out, not from our differences being ignored in the hopes they will go away. We've had some very heated discussions on matters both great and trivial, but at no point did any of us sacrifice our ability and willingness to speak because we wanted to play nice. Maybe we were waiting for the right thing to say and the right moment to say it in, but that is not the helpless self-censorship that comes when group cohesiveness is more important than the reason you are in the group in the first place.

The free and responsible search for truth and meaning isn't intrinsically nice. It's hard work, and it cannot exist without conflict. The word responsible is in that principle to remind

us that we can't just jump out of our seats and call somebody an idiot or in Unitarian speak "misguided" at a congregational meeting, however much the prospect appeals to us; but we're not supposed to sit on our hands and avoid conflict to preserve the appearance of being nice, either.

If you see something that isn't working, the responsible thing to do is to say something, or to think about what you're doing and act, even if it isn't the nice thing to do. For if you are right, you need to feel confident enough that a responsible discussion or action will vindicate you, and if you are wrong, you need to feel like you will at least get a hearing until you have a chance to be convinced otherwise. In the process of hearing each other out, we must sacrifice niceness to the greater good, and candidly, I'm always anxious to do just that.

Fight back against nice. Pull it out of your vocabulary and send it far, far away. For we should not aim so low as to merely be nice people, and I hope we never do. May we be hospitable people! May we be kind people! Let us be compassionate and caring, may we commit much to justice and equality. May we have the courage to say things that many in this culture would not consider to be nice – if they are true, and need to be said. May we be people who think, and people who feel, and people who create. But for us to be nice, I think that would be a tragedy. Nice means inoffensive, and inoffensive never changed the order of things or spoke truth to power. That ain't what nice does. Nice is incompatible with angry, and it's impossible to be engaged with the world in these times and not be angry on occasion.

Does Beacon want to be a nice little church, full of nice and inoffensive people who do nice things? Oh, puhlease. Do we say, "That Jesus fellow seems very nice" after he said things like "I bring not peace but a sword" and whacked the moneychangers in the temple courtyard with a leather thong? If Jesus had played nice he never would have come to mean

what he does to billions of people.

If I ever overhear one of you say again that Beacon folks are nice people, I'm going to remind you that we have had members jailed by Nazis and McCarthyites. In the memory of our sainted elders, and trusting that we and our children may yet have to fight our century's battles with our words, deeds and lives, let us live our values and remember that we can do it without ever succumbing to the Tyranny of Nice.

## Six Sources and Seven Principles in Seventeen Minutes

Some folks think that Unitarian Universalists are very wishy washy, very mushy, and very boring about what we believe. That's not true; individual Unitarians are very able to speak about their personal beliefs. As congregations we covenant (that's promise) to affirm (that's publicly declare) and promote (that's tell people about) our Seven Principles.

I don't think there is anything mushy about the Seven Principles. Other religions have catchier declarations of faith. Ours don't have the power of the Shma of the Jews or the Nicene Creed of Christians or the brevity of the Shahaadah of Islam. What our principles represent instead is a stage in the evolution of our church's understanding about what is important. Unitarians as a rule are quite happy with the Sources and Principles, but most of us would be horrified at the notion that it could never change. We know it will; we're okay with that. Anyone searching for a religion which will never improve or discuss its principles would find U\*Uism quite troubling.

So what DO we believe?

The children's version of our principles goes like this:

1. Each person is important.
2. Be kind in all you do.
3. We're free to learn together.
4. We search for what is true.
5. All people need a voice.
6. Build a fair and peaceful world.
7. We care for Earth's lifeboat.

We want to tell everyone in the world that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person has value and rights. This was recalled to me quite firmly when I mocked George W. Bush at a U\*U event and a church elder – whom I knew didn't like him very much – said I was being disrespectful (Author: anyone who knows Marcy Green won't disbelieve me.) Whatever the private feelings and speech of individual Unitarians, as congregations – as publicly accountable religious bodies with special tax status – we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And that's everybody, including people we may have reason not to like.

We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Justice means that the wronged have meaningful recourse, equity means that laws and rules are applied equally to all within the jurisdiction, without reference to race or religion or disability, to orientation, sex or media coverage. Compassion means not enacting justice with a view to applying cookie cutter rules to everyone; it means taking the long view, and being humane and sensible and

supportive in both the development and the practice of the rules by which we live together, both in the church and in the larger world.

We want the world to know that we believe in acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. That seems really obvious; in practice it's damned hard. Unitarianism is a religion which encourages a very broad spectrum of personal belief, from theists to atheists, from pantheists to Santeria practitioners, to meet in the same room and learn from each other. I believe that a valid worship experience takes you to the place of awe, thankfulness and simplicity, and there are a thousand, thousand ways to get there. I am reminded that the religious experience across the human family is immense, and the more I can do to breach that gap, the more I am doing to make the world a better place, and one in which the individual spiritual and religious experience is honoured.

The next of the seven principles: we believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Free means we don't tell you what to think, as you walk along your path of consciously trying to be a better person, which ideally is what religion should be, at least in my view. Responsible means you don't mock, injure, or undermine others as they walk beside you. So Unitarians are loath to comment on the piety or religious practices of others; we want for others what we wish for ourselves, and commit to providing a religious environment in which this difficult balance is not only possible, but an essential part of who we are.

We believe in the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. We are all welcome to speak our truths – with love, with respect, with conviction, with passion – and to democratically bring about changes and improvements as we move forward together through time and with faith.

We believe in the goal of world community with peace liberty and justice for all. Not

world government. World community, in which we are all participants in a great world of dialogue, learning, mutual support with each person enabled to reach potential in safety and freedom from tyranny.

We believe in having respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Unitarians do not participate in a creed which says God gave us the world and we can do what we like with it. We are part of that world; an injury to the world will sooner or later be an injury to us, as a spider can feel holes being torn in its web without necessarily being immediately in peril.

Unitarians have a living tradition. We look back to a magnificent tradition of prophets and seekers, and we look forward to expanding and building on it. Some of those traditions include:

- direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

In other words, we believe in your individual experience of transcendent wonder, and your right to it however it is experienced;

- words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

And we believe this because without the example of the prophets, saints and troublemakers of this and other eras, we may lose encouragement in our struggles to make this world a better one, and also in some part because we don't offer our members the promise of heaven and the threat of hell;

- wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Which sometimes gets us in trouble, since it opens us up to the criticism that we are a 'pick one from column a and one from column b' kind of religion, but which enlivens our church life immensely and is one of the things I like best about my church;

-Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves;

We haven't thrown the Bible out with the bathwater; the Bible is still important to us, but it has been many long years since the U\*Us thought it was the inerrant word of God.

-Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

To expand on this, I can do no better than quote Rev. Paul Beckel of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin:

What are idolatries of the spirit? Believing that we have a handle on God. Believing that our understanding of God is sufficient. Believing that God can do it all.

What are idolatries of the mind? ... reason itself can become an idol. And likewise science, without ethics.

Unitarians also draw upon one last source:

-Spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

That can sound like New Age nonsense. But as I have myself learned, sometimes to celebrate the sacred circle of life, I must learn from the elders of the human family. From the First Nations of Canada to the mountains of the Andes, from the hills of Madagascar to the steppes of Russia, there are earth-centred traditions which have raised my eyes from my rational comfortable life to a more subtle appreciation of the joy and challenge of this splendid

burgeoning of body, soul and intellect, this beautiful and painful life we share.

Unitarianism has forced me to think very long and hard about what I believe, and why I believe it. It has forced me to confront my unconscious prejudices against people of faith. It has humbled my intellect, without diminishing or belittling it, and filled me with nourishment – physical, spiritual, musical, emotional. May it do the same for all seekers who make it their church home.

## The Useful God of Fiction

This homily was not delivered.

There aren't many churches which can deal with atheists with equanimity. The Unitarian Universalists, at least in North America, are among them, and it is there I go when in need of spiritual sustenance. Nobody there thinks I'm going to hell or that I'm automatically a bad person for not having a relationship with Allah or Odin. I've delivered many a homily there, including one about atheism.

It is fashionable, these days, if you are an atheist, to ride the horse of stubbornness, and use it as a platform for the trumpet of stridency. All hail the new millennium of reason; out with the irrational, hated religion in all its forms; down with its tyranny and horrible record across the ages!

So it has always been among those who wish to challenge the constructions and idiocies of power without justice. From slave to free; from ignorant injun to subtle jurist; from

non-person female to equal; from abused workman to union organizer; from perverse queer to full citizen; from immigrant to representative of the state; over lifetimes of travail and anguish and suffering and legal squabbling and attacks in the press, through lynchings and rapes and seizure of children and property and ancestral land, of suppression of religion and language, those with less in the way of civil rights have fought their way to a place where justice, equality and inclusion in the civil family are at least possible, if grudging.

And now the atheists are doing the same. First they poke the religious folks in the eye, by merely breathing, by merely announcing their existence, by putting signs on buses.

Atheists don't have full civil rights, and the reason for that is not far to seek; we're hip deep in theists who either want us dead – literally – or think reading the Bible will fix us. We are fighting for our civil rights, because we must, against an outworn set of folkways, that may have worked when our ancestors lived in tents and didn't know about germs, but lose both dignity and usefulness when we can scan our own brains and show where the special madness that is religious sentiment arises. Most atheists try to live their lives without being too concerned by the idiocies of religion. Some cannot, and will not, now or ever. As is always the case in oppression, a small, vocal, minority, in this case, of atheists, proclaims its desire to destroy its civil enemy, in this case religion, entirely.

Please believe that when I say, "Good luck with that" I'm both exasperated and sarcastic. In the end, I am merely tired all over. For if we are made by nature to have religious feelings, religious feelings would creep back into daily life even if the more radical atheists achieved their dream of stamping out religion entirely. Somebody would reinvent the notion of God, and ten minutes later there would be tree worshippers and Rush Limbaugh worshippers and people who worship their iPhones. Human beings are hierarchical,

imaginative, social and inclined to in-group altruism. Push us into a river, and some of us will pop up praising buoyancy, and the rest will find a God to thank as they splutter to the surface. Modern atheists are like King Canute. They rail against the multiple stupidities of religion, and by God, there are too many to count, but rationality by itself – pure thought – cannot alter the nature of reality, and the sea comes in anyway. It is action, not prayer or hope or philosophy, that makes the world either better or worse.

I would like to put my own relationship with God in front of other atheists because I think I have something useful to say on the subject, and because I'm tired of the hair-pulling, name-calling and assorted nonsense and bushwah that surrounds the current culture war between religion and reason. God is my thought experiment in imaginary friends.

When I was writing a homily on the truth, my son, whom we raised atheist, then in his early twenties, said something very profound. "How far," said he, "Are you willing to go in the pursuit of truth? Are you willing to abandon fiction?"

And the answer, of course, is "Good God, no!"

My brother – another atheist – we were raised atheist – remarked recently that we had to find replacements for the God language we use when annoyed, astonished or thankful. "Jesus Christ!" we yell when annoyed. "Thank God!" we murmur when a friend escapes death in an accident. We joked about saying Praise Darwin or Thank Murphy instead.

As a writer, I find such constructions awkward and as an atheist, defensive. If we acknowledge God's grandeur as fiction, we may use Him as we see fit. It's not that God doesn't exist; He does. He's just no more real than Moby Dick or Frankenstein's monster or Aragorn or Grendel or Anna Karenina or Shiduri. One is much less likely to come to blows over an interpretation of Anna Karenina or Moby Dick than of Job or Jesus, but nobody

would deny that it's easy to imagine two graduate students getting into a dust up over Grendel, especially if there's alcohol involved. People fight over imaginary things every day, from the supposed merits of a football team to the right of their children to go unpunished for their transgressions.

Even atheists fight over imaginary things. Why should we be angry at our fellow human beings, for being so quick to defend their favourite actor (Jesus, and his unctuous, mealy-mouthed minions), in their favourite soap opera (daily life)? Well, we are angry at them, because it isn't an actor, it isn't a soap opera, and theists are trying to tell us what to think, research, write, fight for, teach our children and most of all say in public, and most atheists consider this ongoing, selfish and unreasoning denial of the essential rights of human beings to be at the very best unjust, and at worst not in the long term best interests of themselves, their children, and the very planet we depend on for the grace of life itself.

I hope I have hinted that atheists are only slightly more rational than theists, whatever their rights and history of injuries as an oppressed minority. If it's by right of rationality that we announce our superiority to theists, we're leaning on a feeble reed. I have yet to meet a living soul who didn't behave irrationally. If, however, we consider atheism as a world view that allows us to put what rationality we can muster in the service of all humankind, regardless of the crap theists lay out on us, then we are at least keeping our irrational hatred of theists in check long enough to acknowledge our common humanity. That's all I'm expecting my imaginary God to ask of me. What we need, by God, is an atheist Martin Luther King Jr. Somebody who can argue our case with grand enough language that the essential cruelty and mean-spiritedness and ignorance of the average theist towards atheists may be put into a societal context that nobody can ignore.

Until such a paragon arises, let me put it thus: God is a useful fiction, and to deny Him his due in this regard is foolish, in my view.

God has four principal fictional uses for an atheist.

They are: God the Parent; God the Creator; God the Witness; God the Judge.

I'll start with God the Judge. I find it amusing in the extreme that virtually every time atheists I know get together to discuss religion, one of them will eventually remark that the worst thing about being an atheist is giving up a hell for one's enemies to be boiling in for all eternity. Or they will refer not to a personal enemy, but to a really evil, nasty person, like a mass murderer, or that needle-voiced jerk who talks on her cell phone in the theatre.

God the Judge is SUCH a useful fiction. He allows one to go to sleep at night thinking, "He'll get his," when thinking about another human being who richly deserves punishment for some crime, and is not likely to get it in this life. Strangely, one never thinks about how God the Judge might render His awful judgement on YOU personally, although when I consider it, I rapidly experience relief that I'm no theist.

For someone with a depressive frame of mind or personality, God the Judge is a terrifying shadow across all of human life. But, as anybody who's watched an atheist friend kill him or herself, it isn't just the concept of God's judgement which drives people around the bend. I've said it before and I'll say it again. We all have our cognitive cross to bear.

Atheists choose not to make God the tent pole which holds their ideas up, but there are plenty of other things one can get wrong over the course of one's life. The God of Judgement is a comforting fairy tale, like Santa Claus or the check is in the mail. Provided atheists can understand the difference between the psychological desire shared by all humans for justice and the notion that somebody with lightning in his pockets is gonna fix all our scrapes and

bruises, not to mention let us view bad people as they poach in a lake of brimstone, it's all good. I have always liked the idea that "Judgement belongs to God" because I can only view what people do, through my own particular lens, and externalizing Judgement forces me to think that whatever people may do, I simply can't understand what the hell is going on in their heads, and it's a comforting fiction to think that somebody does. Judging what people do, that's easier. That, at least, is based in physical reality, and is less subject to dispute.

God the Witness is not the same thing. I'm very partial to God the witness. Isn't it a great idea, to think that somebody knows everything? When you've been trying very hard, when you have to keep a secret, when you're forced to do things you really don't want to do for some greater good, and would love to announce it to the world, but you can't because you have to keep a promise.... Ah, then it would be so nice to think that some intelligence has got a grip on the good you've done. And the bad other people have done.

Once again, it's interesting for an atheist to do all these thought experiments, because then the lunacy of religion, sometimes buffed down to smoothness by frequent repetition, leaps out in detail. Human beings long for God because they want SOMEBODY to fix us, settle disputes, smooth conflicts, comfort the mournful. In one short breath, we go from wanting a Lord of Hosts to smite our enemies to actually inventing him and then trying to figure out what our imaginary friend would like to have in the way of altar cloths.

God is fiction run amok; there are so few people willing to ask the kids to put their fairy tales away, even among atheists. I can't even remember the last time I went toe to toe with a theist; it's bloody pointless most of the time. And what can ya do? It makes family reunions very uncomfortable. Just ask my mother, an unapologetic atheist, who has to keep her cakehole shut when her hordes of Mennonite relatives tell her that they are praying for

her, and who react with outraged horror on the few occasions she makes her views known.

Yet my mother (sure, I am biased, but so what?) is one of few people I've ever known who came anywhere close to living essential Christian principles, without ever leaning on that old rugged cross, or taking it to the Lord in prayer, or testifying to his loving care or to the power in his blood. (Yecch!) Like all atheists, I know that you don't have to be religious to have meaning, honour, compassion and awe in your life. I am fortunate in that I learned this at my mother's knee, and didn't have to fight my way out of a straight jacket of dogma to win this precious knowledge.

So when I tease my mother, and tell her that God alone knows her trials, we are acknowledging in our bleak joke that it would be simply grand if there was a witness who could really understand her forbearance and kindness. As it is, she'll have to accept my thanks for not emotionally demolishing her cousins with the intransigent rationality which so often characterizes contemporary atheism. She comes from an older generation of atheists... those who believe that matters of conscience are essentially private, and do not belong in the thoroughfares, where they reduce the effectiveness of honest work by calling into question the beliefs of those who perform it.

Having said that, God knows we need atheists who fight for their rights. Madalyn Murray O'Hair was a crass old she-goat, but she got prayer out of the schools. I'm not saying we need her now to roll back the tide of capitalist Christianity which has overwhelmed North American theism in the last 40 years, but it would be nice if somebody with her energy and organizational skills, & without her sociopathic tendencies, provided a rallying point for the current civil rights issues atheists face.

Atheists shouldn't be surprised her son ran off to be a preacher. Let that be a lesson to

all atheists; your belief system, no matter what it is, can never afford you *carte blanche* to be a jerk, a thief and a lousy parent. Even as bad as she was, her son said she didn't deserve to die that way, tortured and chopped up into little pieces; but all atheists know that there is a substantial fraction of theists who are as pleased as punch that not only did she die under brutal circumstances, she's now servicing Satan's buddies in hell, that being all part of God's plan. I'm just glad that she will never feel pain again. So much for hell.

O, how humans long for a loving parent to pick them up and hold them sometimes! God the Parent is such a beautiful fiction for those of us who had less than ideal families. Somebody to tuck you in, to repel monsters, stand down bullies, find our lost cats, bring the perfect gift, and get supper on the table, night after thankless night. Yup, we could all use a loving parent. An idealized parent. A parent we never fight with, who never beats us or loses us or abandons us or belittles us; a parent who never drinks or dopes or drops trou. What an unimaginable comfort it is, for those who truly believe. As a fiction it's well nigh irresistible. Once you think about God as your parent, once He occupies that part of your mind, of course he's going to get you in trouble with those pesky rational atheists. The first time somebody criticized your mom and you were old enough to protest, did you? If you were fortunate enough to have a mother you loved? Of course you did.

God the parent is a very important fiction for atheists to emotionally understand, so that we may more effectively develop compassion rather than contempt for theists. When you criticize a person's religion, you are kicking their Dad in the goolies, and that, frankly, is never going to win you friends. Even people who hate their church, and every pasty-faced hypocrite in it, will get snarly if you criticize it, because you're asking them to question Dad, to defy Dad, maybe even to hate and murder him. How can your feelings about your own

father ever be rational? If somebody asked me to criticize and defy my own father, I'd feel sick, and then angry. Not murderously so, but I'd be pretty mad. Less sophisticated theists literally can't tell the difference, emotionally, between a real dad and a Sky Dad. Remember that when you're making your points.

The last fictional God is the God of Creation; the grand Author of all we see.

As an atheist, I believe, based on what I understand of science, that the physical Universe arose subsequent to the big bang. But that's just descriptive. What was here before? Does it ebb and flow over multibillions of years, compressing and exploding over and over? Did it only happen once? How many Universes are there, and how are they related? There are times when I long for there to be a God, so that I could meet and ask him about his creation. Was it a story that got out of hand? Did he get bored? Was he lonely? Did he invent all these characters, these elements, these weak and strong forces, knowing they would eventually swirl together and make life? How can humans be the only story?

But as an atheist, I have to sigh over my longing to meet him at a bookstore, so I can get him to autograph his latest work, and ask him some pesky questions about causality and the math that seems to hold the world together.

As an atheist, my ability to see the fictional God for what he is, one possible and entirely natural outgrowth of the way our minds work, which, like all inherited things, physical, genetic and cultural, doesn't present the same way for all people, is an ongoing trial. It's not that I want to believe; I don't believe and I don't want to. There isn't an ache in my heart or a hole in my life that only God can fill. There's probably no God, and I act as if I know or believe that he doesn't exist. There's nobody except my fellow human beings to have a relationship with. When I talk about God, it's like I'm talking about Lafayette, a character

in the TV show True Blood. I can get really wound up about the subject, and talk about his past and his plans and his feelings as if he was not a scripted character on a phosphor dot screen. For a minute, overhearing me, you might think I was talking about a real person. Unlike theists.... I can tell the difference.

God is a fiction, needed by some more than others. You don't whack a kid for still believing in Santa Claus, or show him contempt. Sometimes you get on the floor and tell the story as if it were really true. Don't hate theists because their version of "once upon a time" is such a bad story, with so many repellent 'morals'. It's best, for your own peace of mind, if you try not to hate theists at all.

Try to tell a more compelling story. And when you realize just how difficult and arduous and challenging that is, perhaps you will then realize why atheism will always be the blessed privilege of a small minority. Those of us who are prepared to live outside the story in order to grasp the truth of the world we inhabit will always be outnumbered by those who wish to gather round the campfire of human memory and tell tall tales.

It's time atheists gave up on the notion of ever being in the majority. Once upon a time will always trump the truth. In the meantime, we have to get off our asses and defend our rights as members of a minority, and leave the fictions to their fans. The theists, dear friends, we will always have with us.

## Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank a number of people at Beacon Unitarian Church for their ongoing support as a fellow traveller along the pilgrim road that is our faith.

Peggy Lunderville and Tom Lunderville have taught me more about hospitality than I thought I had room for in my brain.

Sue Sparlin has my eternal thanks for her principled and cheerfully undignified approach to church politics. She is a beacon among beacons.

Rev. Katie Stein Sather and her husband Al Sather have lived a life full of nature, mind and faith, and I'm always interested to see where life takes them.

Lutina Santing, creator of beauty, Bareld Nieuwenhuis, appreciator of beauty (and brevity!), David Hamilton, musician and mensch, and Ralph Greer, a peerless Unitarian, now all passed on, all of whom put my feet on the stairs up to the podium, I thank with a smile and happy memories.

The Worship Services Committee, past, present and future, for everything they do to bring our simple sanctuaries into glorious colour and life, deserve my thanks and praise.

Donna Hamilton, for providing much of the fabric art that brightens the sanctuary, deserves special mention. John Hagen, who was my chosen companion as service coordinator for many of these homilies, helped me choose music and kept me on track.

Marcy Green, with her unwitting lessons on inclusiveness and her concision and kindness in expressing her views has been a model for me.

Dennis Probst, for providing me with a useful glimpse into how I might grow old gracefully, I thank with my hand on my heart. The afternoon I spent with him to talk about his life is one of my golden memories.

Ivy Hubbard, whom I kept in mind as I wrote many of these homilies, as being the 'perfect congregant' to write for.

The children of the congregation sat still for my stories. Even if I didn't they'd be an important part of the church.

I'd like to thank my former spouse and forever friend Paul Caspell, our (now grown) children Keith and Katie, and my late brother-in-law John Caspell, who all kindly sat still while I read various drafts aloud, and whose comments occasionally made it into the homilies.

I'd like most of all to thank my mother for her encouragement, and my father, who has absolutely no use for Unitarianism or any religion whatsoever, liberal or otherwise, but who read the Epistemology homily for any gross philosophical errors – since he does have a graduate degree in philosophy.

And for everyone who ever asked me why I didn't pursue the ministry; thanks, but

have you met me? Ministry consists of many tasks and aptitudes, and homiletics are merely one among them. For the other tasks of ministry I am singularly unfit, and I am content to let it be so.

Blessed be!