

**Something More Enduring**  
Sunday, October 5, 2008  
Rev. Kenneth H. Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

**Meditation**

May we pause, find a quietness of body and spirit,  
breathe more easily...

Allow whatever tensions and anxieties of the day, of the week to ease...  
for a time at least... to ease...

That we might renew from the depths of our souls our felt connection...  
to something holy at the heart of things, at the heart of our lives...  
connection to one another... to all life... to all...

From this centeredness, from the love at the heart of our lives...

May our prayers be with those who are hungry, or without a home...  
May our prayers be with those in the midst of violence and war...  
May our prayers be with those affected most directly and direly by the financial crisis...

May our prayers be with our leaders, that they might have the wisdom to lead us through  
these times...

And may we know, that whatever else the day and the times bring... there is love, there is  
kindness, there is gentleness, there is compassion... at the heart of our lives...

**Readings**

The first reading is from an ancient source, as interpreted by Stephen Mitchell - Psalm 1:

Blessed are the man and the woman  
who have grown beyond their greed  
and have put an end to their hatred  
and no longer nourish illusions.

But they delight in the way things are  
and keep their hearts open, day and night.  
They are like trees planted near flowing rivers,  
which bear fruit when they are ready.  
Their leaves will not fall or wither.  
Everything they do will succeed.

The second reading is by Rev. Rebecca Parker, the Unitarian Universalist minister who is president of Starr King School for the Ministry, in Berkeley, California:

“Choose to Bless the World”

Your gifts  
whatever you discover them to be  
can be used to bless or curse the world.  
The mind's power,  
The strength of the hands,  
The reaches of the heart,  
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting.  
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
bind up wounds,  
welcome the stranger,  
praise what is sacred,  
do the work of justice  
or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door  
hoard bread,  
abandon the poor,  
obscure what is holy,  
comply with injustice  
or withhold love.  
You must answer this question:  
What will you do with your gifts?  
Choose to bless the world.

## **Sermon**

As if two wars were not enough. As if global warming were not enough. Then this harrowing crisis of confidence in our financial markets, now rippling through the economy. Jobs threatened, credit denied, retirement savings shrinking by the day... and we don't know, can't know how it will turn out, whether the bailout bill will work...

As I've been thinking about all this, the image of the Wheel of Fortune came to mind. It sounds like a game show, but it's an ancient symbol. Joseph Campbell talked about it in the “Power of Myth” interviews with Bill Moyers years ago. As Campbell put it, you have the rim of the wheel and then there is the hub of the wheel. “If you are attached to the rim of the wheel of fortune, you will be either above going down or at the bottom coming up. But if you are at the hub, you are in the same place all the time.”

Campbell reminds us that this is the sense of the marriage vow. There will be ups and downs, but for better or worse I will be here: “I take you as my center... not the wealth that you might bring me, not the social prestige, but you.”

Together, in marriage, the vow says, we will be here in the center of what Campbell called bliss... whatever else may come.

It can be the same in our individual lives, Campbell was suggesting. We all

experience the ups and downs of life's wheel of fortune, but if we have found our center, our bliss, that place in our lives where we feel most alive (using our unique gifts, as Rebecca Parker reminded us in the reading)... well, then, perhaps we can better weather the going up and the coming down of the wheel – not attached to the rim, but at home in the center.

It seems to me that there are echoes of this idea in the Psalm we heard earlier, which described the person who is grounded ethically and spiritually – as Stephen Mitchell put it in his translation, the person, who has grown beyond greed and illusions – who is like a tree planted by the water, who shall not be moved.

Why? Because they have found their center, which is by its nature beyond greed and illusions – the ups and downs at the rim of the wheel.

But what is this center, this place more enduring than the triumphs and tribulations of our lives?

Well – maybe love to begin with.

That one is obvious.

And when we have lost touch with that center of love, sometimes tribulation and tragedy brings us right back to it. Because we *do* take care of each other in the midst of hard times. We always have.

Did you read about the woman in China who, when eight months pregnant, was buried in the rubble of the earthquake last spring, buried for fifty hours. Fifty hours. All the time (of course) she prayed for the well being of her baby.

The woman was rescued by dedicated workers – by their love you might say. She emerged dehydrated... bruised. But otherwise surprisingly well and healthy.

The baby was born sometime later. Doctors, nurses, hospital staff showered mother and baby with gifts... with love. The mother, Zhang Xiaoyan, named her baby girl Ai – which simply means “Love.” The mother said she hopes her daughter will become “a useful person who helps people in need.” In other words, a person who loves.

Love. Which of course all the traditions teach.

Jesus: Healer. Prophet. Teacher.

Who said, quoting more ancient Hebrew teaching: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

*(Matthew 22-39)*

Jesus who gave his life for love.

Buddha: Physician of the soul. Teacher. Awakened one.

Who said, “Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings.”

*(from the Metta Sutta)*

Gautama Buddha, who lived his life for love.

Rumi: Sufi saint, universal poet, bridger of traditions.

Who said, “Be foolishly in love, because love is all there is.”

And, “Anything born in spring dies in the fall, but love is not seasonal.”

*(from Rumi: Bridge to the Soul, translations by Coleman Barks; p. 76)*

Love endures... at the center of our lives... even when we have forgotten...

And there are of course many exemplars of love made manifest in caring, in work for justice and peace in our own Unitarian Universalist tradition....

Love. Not love that is sentimental only. But powerful and practical love which steps up and steps in to help, to do the real work of caring for each other in ways small and large guided by ethical precept and conscience.

For it is not only love at the center. There is and must be wisdom too – practical wisdom guiding us from the center of our lives. Nothing esoteric. An example of the practical wisdom of applied love (as we might call it) is before us at this time of year.

On the Jewish calendar we are in the midst of the Days of Awe, the period between the new year, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

A central spiritual practice during this period has to do with reflecting on the year past, and noticing when we fell short of our ideals, when we hurt someone, perhaps someone we love dearly, and then making amends and resolving to do better in the year to come – in short, as I would understand it, resolving to live more attuned to that ancient central commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yet at the same time grounded in a range of ethical virtues: honesty, fairness...

Virtues, a conscience, which is also part of our center, the true bliss of our lives... and which can perhaps be summarized as wisdom...

All this said... we know that while love and wisdom might endure, they not always manifest.

In other words, we too often fail, whether individually – as we each poignantly know... or collectively... one has only to think of the government's failures to respond effectively to Katrina or to think of the leaders of Myanmar refusing aid for the victims of the cyclone there.

I don't have to go on.

There is in short another side to our lives, to the world; there is cruelty, there is terror, there is war, there is torture, there is – in some ways worst of all – indifference.

But we don't even have to think only of the extremes of human behavior. We all get carried away from our center. We all sometimes make the mistake of thinking that the most important things are at the rim of the wheel of fortune.

We see, for example, the extreme of greed that is one of the causes of the Wall Street debacle.

But we all sometimes forget the things that matter most.

We all need to remember again... and again....

Sometimes the example or another human being can help us remember. Not a saint or prophet, just another ordinary human being.

Paul Newman was profiled on the news the other night. He said that if he is remembered someday it would be not for his movies, but for the Hole in the Wall Gang camps he started for kids with life-threatening illnesses. Many of you know Maddie Dillon here in Hingham who went to one of those camps – her grandparents, members of Old Ship Charlie and Jean Kachin, never could stop talking about that camp and what it did for Maddie. That kind of influence lives for a long time, endures.

And it was there because Paul Newman was a man – not a saint or prophet, just a man – who spent more time at the center of love and wisdom, and less time controlled by, disturbed by the ups and downs at the rim of the wheel of fame and fortune.

I don't know how *he* did it.

I know that one thing that helps me, and I'm guessing helps you, since here you are, is a community such as ours. And I think it is why we need communities such as ours. At times like this... but always...

Communities within which we *nurture* things, qualities, more enduring. Nurture and manifest love, honesty, fairness, integrity, courage... wisdom... all in the face of cruelty and violence, injustice and indifference, all in the midst of triumph or tribulation, the ups and downs on the wheel. Striving (in the words of Rebecca Parker which we heard earlier) to bless the world with our lives.

This is why we are gathered by covenant not creed, to remind us not of common beliefs but of our common humanity, to remind us... each week when we gather... to remind us of the spirit with which we most deeply and truly desire to walk together... to remind us of love... of wisdom...

For us as Unitarian Universalists all embodied in our Principles and Purposes.

Yet also, as for all human beings, in our hearts and minds. Love and wisdom.

And all this *is not incidental. It is essential.*

For this is as important a time as ever to remind ourselves that even in the midst of such an uncertain (to say the least) time, love endures, ethical grounding and virtue: wisdom – endures... yet not by magic. No, we must choose to bring love and wisdom each day to one another, to this hurting world, whatever may come, in sickness or in health...

Like a tree planted by the water bearing fruit in good time... things more enduring... blessing the world.

So may it be.

(Oh yes, and isn't it good that other realities and qualities of our lives endure as well, endure through hard times as well as good: beauty, music, friendship, hope... I invite you to make your own list of things more enduring...)