

**Sunday Matters**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
April 11, 2010

**Meditation**

Gathered in this ancient house  
Sharing ancient wisdom

May we grow the love in our hearts  
so that our love may embrace  
every person, every living thing, all the earth.

May we grow the wisdom in our minds  
so that we remember who we are:  
part of one community and one interdependent web of life...

**Reading** – the words of Albert Einstein

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest -- a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

**Sermon**

Some of you may recall the story I've shared before from India during the time of the Buddha. It seems there was a murderer named Angulimala (and there is a long story I won't tell to explain how it is that he became such a brutal roadside killer). But one day the Buddha, against the advice of his followers, who feared he would simply become the next victim of Angulimala, chose to walk the road where the killer had been most recently seen.

Well, when Angulimala saw the Buddha, he began to run after him, but though the Buddha was calmly continuing to walk at his usual pace, Angulimala could not catch him. He yelled at the Buddha to stop.

The Buddha turned and responded, "I have already stopped, it is you who need to stop." This flummoxed Angulimala who asked the Buddha what in the world he meant. "I have already stopped harming living beings, but you have yet to stop. It is you who need to stop."

At these words and in the presence of the awakened one, the Buddha, we are told that Angulimala stood stock still and his heart was transformed. He vowed to stop his cruel ways, and he became among the most devoted followers of the Buddha.

What does this story have to do with “Sunday matters” at Old Ship?

Well, I would suggest that coming to this old house, being together, sharing our joys and sorrows, listening to beautiful music and ancient words of wisdom... is meant to be a little like encountering the Buddha on the road of our lives. We may not need to be transformed as dramatically as Angulimala – but the reminders we receive here are meant to turn us (as the Buddha turned Angulimala) ever more fully toward lives of open-hearted presence and compassion, toward the lives we most truly want to live.

For here’s a radical notion: The purpose of Sunday worship is *not* to make us feel good. We might come away from worship feeling good... I kind of hope we do! But it is not the *purpose* of worship to help us feel good, to get those serotonin neurotransmitters flowing in the brain.

A concert can do that. A good meal with friends can do that. A day at the beach can do that. And there is nothing *inherently wrong* with feeling good or with the desire to feel good, to be happy. Nothing at all.

But that’s not the *purpose* of worship.

What then?

It is about awakening and transformation.

Sunday worship – and church or any religious community in general – is meant to wake us up to who we are, who we *really* are, so that we might then act accordingly more consistently: kindly in other words, deeply attentive to one another, to life, to the larger world of which we are a part... with more compassion, with more love.

How does Sunday worship do this?

The most obvious tools we use on Sunday mornings are words, music, silence. But the most important dimension of worship may well be the simple act of gathering together in the same room for the same general purpose – meeting one another on the road of our lives, as Angulimala met the Buddha – since this gathering, this mutual meeting manifests and gives us in some beginning measure the *experience* of who we are, of how we are woven together in community, into something larger than our individual, only apparently isolated souls. (We heard Albert Einstein in the reading calling this feeling of separate isolation an “optical delusion of consciousness.”)

Then, sharing our joys and sorrows adds an exclamation point to this fundamental experience, reminding us more explicitly of the essentials of our the human condition which we share, reminds us that we share much more than we don’t share: birth, illness, death, and the various ups and downs, twists and turns that mark the road of our lives. We are in it all together – and we need one another along the way. Of this, too, we are reminded every Sunday.

Further, our worship service reminds us that we benefit not only by sharing our lives with one another, but also from the guidance of ancient wisdom.

And it is worth keeping in mind that we still have this ancient wisdom, these words of long-ago sages and prophets in large measure because of worshipping, learning communities (*institutions*) which have endured over time, over centuries, millennia.

This means that even for those who never go to church or temple, are not part of a religious community, it is likely that they are still drawing from the well of wisdom dug by someone or some community long ago, drinking from a cup or cups of wisdom carefully tended

over centuries of time. So we can be dismissive of institutions if we like, and institutions have their failings and at worst destructive corruptions – but at their best religious institutions carry forward in time irreplaceable treasures of our heritage of knowledge and wisdom and love.

To mix metaphors and bring this closer to home.

The stream of wisdom from which we drink here at Old Ship is fed upstream by multiple tributaries of all the world's traditions including our own living tradition of Unitarian and Universalist saints and sinners.

All this, too, reminds us of who we are – no more isolated in time than in space, but woven together across generations.

Downstream? This depends upon us, doesn't it. Will we add the water of our love and our wisdom so that future generations downstream will continue to be spiritually nourished, continue to remember who they are, and therefore continue to care and to serve? In short: Will we tend to the institutions, the church and our association of churches, that make this flowing river of wisdom and love possible?

It really is up to us, only us. And I don't know about you, but I support our individual Old Ship church as well as Unitarian Universalism more broadly not only because the church supports and nourishes us individually, but because I believe the world needs the church, needs the more spiritually alive and engaged human beings we hope are indeed nourished by, grown by, the church.

Now, I do understand what people mean when they say they are spiritual but not religious, that they strive to live spiritually rich, ethically grounded lives but apart from any organized religious life.

Even so, I want to suggest (alert: another metaphor!) that this might be a little like saying you love tea, really appreciate the flavor of tea, and like the way it wakes you up a little in the morning... but that at the same time you have no use for teacups and teapots.

Well, how are you going to drink your tea?!

If we love our tea, we need to keep pot and teacups nearby.

If we want to grow spiritually, to wake up to life, to learn wisdom, to be kinder and more compassionate... well, there are many paths, but a religious community – like Old Ship – a container of ancient wisdom, just might help.

Does it take work? Does it take generosity? Of course it does!

Which is actually a good thing.

There is a story about a man who died and found himself in a beautiful place, a place with every possible comfort and service. A white-jacketed servant came to him and said, "You may have anything you want – any food – any pleasure – any kind of entertainment."

Wow! What a great place! So days went by as the man enjoyed all the experiences and pleasures of existence.

But after awhile he grew bored. He called to the attendant and said he was tired of all this, that he needed something to do. "What kind of work can you give me?" he asked.

The attendant shook his head and replied that this was the one thing that couldn't be provided: "There is no work here for you."

To which the man answered: "That's a fine thing! I might as well be in hell!"

The attendant said quietly, "Where do you think you are?"

(from *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, edited by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield)

So let us be grateful that it takes work and generosity to support and sustain our Old Ship religious community.

For we know, as the poet Marge Piercy wrote: “The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.”

Just so, we come together in community not so that all our needs will be met with the snap of our fingers, but so that we can work together – paraphrasing our Old Ship covenant – to grow spiritually, to care for one another, and to serve life.

And what a lovely movement of the soul our Covenant (and by extension also our new mission and vision statements) mirrors: movement from the transformative *experience* of our lives as connected, part and parcel of one another and of the divine by whatever name, and so towards our caring for one another beginning here and now in this community as we learn to more fully open our hearts to another human being, and so seeking together to serve life: Seeking peace, justice, and ecological sustainability, not because these seem to be proper liberal, progressive goals, nor out of a sense of duty, but, again, out of a felt experience of *who we most truly are* as human beings.

For in spite of the many ways that our culture, through advertising and political grandstanding, tries to tell us that we are nothing but a collection of individuals with individual needs and desires that we must fulfill at any cost... the reality that religious communities such as ours must lift up over and over again is that our lives are indeed intimately interwoven, that we are all in the same boat sailing around the sun, and that we can no longer afford to pretend otherwise (can no longer be like the fellow in the stern of the rowboat who notices a hole in the bow, so tells the guy in the bow that *he* has a problem).

So... yes, a transformative religion for our time, must remind us of who we are, offer us the *experience* of who we are as we meet one another on the road of life, so that it soaks into our bones, so that we behave accordingly, living more simply, caring for one another with open hearts, and serving *life* and life more abundant.

Isn't this the sort of *world* in which we would like to live?

Well, inspired by ancient wisdom passed from generation to generation, and inspired by one another here and now in this community, we can choose to live as if it were already so.

Each of us, then, with our two hands and generous hearts: may each of us and all of us together help our Unitarian Universalist Old Ship Church to continue to be among those institutions that work these fields of awakening, transformation, mutual care, and shared service.

Yes, Sunday *matters*. This Old Ship *matters*.

May it always be so.