

The Best Things in Life Are Free... But...

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church), Unitarian Universalist

February 5, 2017

Readings

“This House” by Rev. Kenneth Patton (*No. 443 in our hymnbook*)

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature. It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle. It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person. It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion. It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers. It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks. It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress. This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

“Choose to Bless the World” by Rev. Rebecca Parker

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.
The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
The chorus of life welcoming you.
None of us alone can save the world.
Together, that is another possibility waiting.

Sermon

One summer, might have been about 1960 or 61, our family spent a week in a rented cottage in Cummaquid, by Cape Cod Bay.

Among my vivid memories of that week, here are two:

My brothers and I, suburban Long Island boys, almost getting stranded at low tide in some sort of boat quite some distance from shore.

Then there was the gradually strengthening aroma of sour milk – resulting from a broken bottle of milk that my father decided (in the absence at the moment of my mother) would best be cleaned up by mopping the milk all over the wooden floor.

But these memories pale in importance to the memory of our parents' visit to the Barnstable Unitarian Church on the Sunday morning of our week on the Cape. We boys did not attend church that day (maybe that was the morning we got stranded at low tide...), but the ripples not of Cape Cod Bay tides, but of that Sunday morning church visit transformed our lives – mine perhaps most of all.

I come from a line of Presbyterians, included two generations on my mother's side of Presbyterian ministers. But my parents had become dissatisfied with the Presbyterian church, and their explorations had led them to discover Unitarianism – just prior to the consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations – hence their first visit to the Barnstable Unitarian Church that summer.

So, soon after that summer we were attending the Unitarian church in Freeport, Long Island, the next town over from our home in Baldwin. I rarely went to Sunday school, but often attended church with one or both of my parents. And though I do not remember any sermons, in my mind's eye I still see the printed order of worship, which featured on the cover a circle of symbols from the world's religious traditions (including symbols now on this stole you gave me fifteen years ago); and I recall at the front of the church not a cross, but a large marble Mobius strip, symbol of infinity (a representation of which also appears on my stole).

Each of these symbols a sort of invitation to the spiritual journey – a journey that for me, perhaps needless to say, continues.

Beginning with the first flush of religious freedom. How liberating for me as an almost teenager to learn I could believe as I chose – liberating enough to lead to an essay on Unitarianism in my seventh grade English class. Didn't matter that I misspelled "Unitarian" – I was free!

Yet this was only a beginning, a beginning that, over time, would deepen into an understanding of what is now our fourth UU Principle, "the free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning." It's not that you can freely believe whatever whim would have you believe; rather you end up believing what, after careful and heartfelt thought, you feel you must.

Then, by the time I entered our UU seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry, years after our family's entry into the Unitarian fold – I had begun to develop a more complete understanding of Unitarian Universalism, including our embrace of truth from

many sources, ranging from the world's religions to the discoveries of science, and including our fierce if imperfect history of shared work for social justice.

So, Starr King – yet another transformative gift to me from Unitarian Universalism – where, with the freedom (that word again) to design my own course of study, I deepened my religious and theological grounding, learned the rudiments of counseling, and literally broadened my horizons (with the bonus of academic credit) on a Pan American round-the-world ticket with Susan, including visits with members of the World Citizens Assembly in Hong Kong, Thailand, and India, and a peace tour of the Soviet Union.

Then... thirty years ago, a few years after seminary which included time serving Cambridge Forum, a social justice media ministry of First Parish Cambridge which had at the time increasingly tenuous funding just as our family was growing – Sandra a toddler, and Adam a babe in arms – thirty years ago it was time to find what we might call more secure employment.

Yet it wasn't only for the security that I began my search for a parish ministry. I had gradually come to appreciate yet another dimension of our tradition that for a long time I had not adequately recognized: community.

Nothing unique to Unitarian Universalist congregations in that. But community in a UU congregation meant and means community of minds and hearts united and mutually respectful and supportive in the common quest for truth and meaning, for justice, for spiritual growth and transformation – yet at one and the same time a community in which everyone is *not* expected to believe or think alike, whether on religious or political matters.

Well, with no exaggeration I would call my arrival at Old Ship thirty years ago one of the best UU gifts thus far in my spiritual journey. I do not say this to flatter you. It is simply the truth.

For here at Old Ship I (and we together over these years) have discovered and re-discovered what Ken Patton named in the first reading, that ours “is a house of friendship, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle”. We have discovered and re-discovered what he named our “house of freedom... a platform for the free voice (for) the full and undivided conflict of opinion” as we each in our own way seek the truth and work for a better world, for this is, too, “a cradle for our dreams” and, in the words of Rebecca Parker, a place which supports us as we, each in our own way, seek to bless the world with our gifts.

Now, if this begins to sound dry and abstract... you and I know it is nothing of the sort.

Here the “haven in trouble” is no abstraction. It is real as we share joys and sorrows each week, as we bring a meal to someone after surgery or in the midst of grief, as we send a note or email. Real in the soup delivered to me when I had pneumonia; real in the extraordinary support beyond words that you gave to me and our family after my mother died.

My story, my experience, I well know is one of hundreds among us.

Further, here the search for spiritual and life meaning is also no abstraction and is not in isolation. For we continually engage in what I have long called “conversation about things that matter” whether personal, spiritual, or political: whether in a class, a parlor discussion, coffee hour, at a social event.

I don’t know about you, but for me the conversations in the parlor for example, whether about an ancient scripture, a poem, or a social issue, have been deeply grounding for me for all these years, these decades – once again, beyond words to adequately describe. I do hope this is true for many of you.

And I hope also that you have seen, as I have, whether as parents or simply as members of our community, the remarkable, spiritually alive and socially committed young people that grow out of our Old Ship programs educating minds and hearts.

Yet further, here, our work together to heal and help – also no abstraction – whether serving meals at Father Bill’s, learning to be advocates for the hungry and homeless, or advocates for equal marriage rights (I could not be more proud of this congregation than for our work for those rights)... and so much more. Nothing at all abstract about any of this.

And now in particular when it comes to our work for justice? In these tumultuous times? Simply put, I know we will continue this work, sometimes together and sometimes each in our own way, yet consistently grounded in our UU Principles and in this community, and always with mutual respect, always recognizing that we do not here all think alike when it comes to this or that social issue or political opinion or vote.

Yet I know that we will, because we have before, however imperfectly but always with good intentions, rise to the challenge of community in these times as at other times.

So I am particularly grateful for this Old Ship community in such a time as this. For without this community at any time of challenge or crisis or tragedy, we (I know this is true for me) would each feel more alone, more at sea – maybe caught far from land at low tide.

So now I will remind you that though yes, the best things in life are indeed free – kindness, compassion, love, mutual respect and support...

... to be able to *nurture* these qualities in community, to be stronger together than we are alone, to be a shared voice for love and justice in this world... we need *organized* communities... like Old Ship.

Which means we need to maintain these buildings, pay insurance, plow the driveways; which means we need to pay a staff in order to tend to our buildings and manage our office, in order to educate and nurture our children and ourselves, in order to be inspired by beautiful music, and (I hope) by a helpful word or two each Sunday.

None of this is free.

And no one other than you and me, each and every one of us, is going to pay those bills to sustain and strengthen our mission of healing and helping, our mission grounded in freedom and love and an ever-deepening awareness of how our destiny is intertwined with the destiny of all our brothers and sisters and with all life on this dear earth.

For you see, about three-quarters of our roughly \$400,000 budget comes from our personal annual giving, our pledges. We have plenty of money to maintain and enhance and enrich and extend our mission – we simply need to move that money from our individual pockets to our shared pool of resources. For when we make a pledge and then fulfill that pledge, we are not giving to some worthy organization or charity over there; rather, we are sharing what we can among ourselves in order to fulfill our shared mission.

How much to pledge and give?

The guidelines many of you have seen before and that you will all be receiving again – at the dinner this Saturday and in a follow-up mailing – suggest for members and active friends giving in the range of 2% - 4% of your annual income, less if your circumstances mean you can only give less, more if you can give more. This is in fact what I am able and willing to do and have done for years, and I invite you to do the same if you too are able, and if you too love this community and feel the importance of our mission anywhere near as acutely as I do.

For the past few years I have watched our Old Ship leaders agonize over deficit budgets, pledge campaign short-falls, even as we have deferred essential maintenance on the parish house and this year woefully and sadly cut back our contributions to the Unitarian Universalist Association. It distresses me to see our parish leaders spend so much time and worry over our finances – when it could be otherwise, when their efforts could be directed to deciding what to do with all the generous gifts pouring in from all of us who love this church and are poignantly aware of its importance to our lives, to our community, and of the important role Unitarian Universalism plays well beyond these walls.

Once again, no one else is going to pay the bills for us; *it is* only us; may we each look freshly at our love for Old Ship and Unitarian Universalism, and then look freshly at our ability to share our resources to strengthen who we are and what we do together.

Yes, the best things in life *are* free.

But this Old Ship community supports those best things in immeasurable ways, helps us each along our way, help us to learn and grow, helps us each do our part to relieve suffering, to make a better world, to create more justice, more peace, and to sustain our earth systems such that life, human life and all life, can flourish.

May we in turn, support our Old Ship community.

So may it be.