



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

**Strong Today,
Stronger Tomorrow
Canvass Homily**

Rev. Hannah Petrie
March 14, 2010

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

Welcome to Canvass Sunday 2010. I'm so glad we're inside this year. It's bad enough we have to spring ahead this morning and lose an hour of sleep, but thankfully we are not shivering as well.

I don't mean to sound so crotchety, it's just that, in the last few weeks or so, I've been trying to get back in shape after having a baby. I've been trying to exercise, and tone up my flabby thighs and my not-flat belly. In theory, this involves lots of crunches and sit-ups and bike-rides and running. In practice . . . well, I may look small and trim, but this robe hides a lot. You may scoff at this, but I'm getting old. My child is six months old and I've become an old lady! Perhaps you know what I'm talking about – how painful it is at first to try to get back in shape after getting so out of shape.

See, I used to love to bike-ride – Texas, Michigan, and Florida were all perfect states to do lots of biking, because they were flat. The church member who canvassed me and my husband a few weeks ago happens to be an avid cyclist. I complained to him, "I love biking, but it's too hard to bike around here – there's too many hills!" He kindly retorted, "aaah, but you have to embrace the hills." Embrace the hills. That thought stuck with me. The thing about riding uphill on a bicycle is that it's slow – it's not as easy and it's not as fast. You have to hunker down on that granny gear, and allow your attitude to enjoy the scenery. Of course, riding up lots of hills is what's going to get my thighs back to where they used to be.

Embrace the hills. Foey. I have to admit it's a useful euphemism for doing the hard stuff that's good for us - the hard stuff that makes us stronger. Could it be applied to society, to a church community, to the economy? While we hear hopeful signs day to day that the economy is improving, a lot of folks would still say these continue to be hard times. This is still hard stuff. It makes me wonder – is there any way to 'embrace the hills' when it comes to living through what some are calling, 'the new normal'?

As part of our staff retreat last month, the facilitator gave us a hand-out with the title, "Prevailing in Tough Times." These were notes taken from the California Wellness Foundation Conference last September. The first paragraph read, "In the U.S., we are using the language 'economic downturn', whereas the rest of the world is referring to the 'global economic crisis' that we are in. We have never 'turned around' in just a few years from such a deep crisis, even though this is what is being promoted in the US. We need to accept that this is not a temporary situation, but rather, a situation that will be with us for the rest of our lives most likely."

That was the first time I'd heard it put that way, and I know at first it sounds like bad news. But I was relieved to hear someone finally say it. We may live in a time of fear, but it's not as scary when we're able to talk about it and name it. One of the reasons I'm a Unitarian Universalist minister is because UU churches are places where we can talk about the untalkable; this church is a place where, at times, I can try to name what is so hard to name. I hope when I manage to do so it provides relief.

Another UU minister from the east, the Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern, brought up the subject of fear and the economy in a recent issue of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, or CLF. CLF is the church for folks who live in such rural areas that they have no UU church to attend, so church comes to them in the mail. Here is an excerpt:

"As the financial crisis goes from weeks to months to years, it is hard to tell which anxieties, which fears, are real and which are illusory. As Martin Luther King Jr. very rightly pointed out in his sermon on fear, fear and uncertainty are not innately dangerous or destructive. He writes:

Fear . . . is a powerfully creative force. Every great invention and intellectual advance represents a desire to escape from some dreaded circumstance or condition. The fear of darkness led to the discovery of the secret of electricity. The fear of pain led to the marvelous advances of medicinal science. . . . The fear of war was one of the forces behind the birth of the United Nations.

[she goes on] ... So, I have been thinking a little about the when and how of fear. As for the *how* part of the challenge, I like Emerson's reminder that life, a life that is lived boldly and with passionate commitment, is about daily surmounting some fear. You might say that for some of us these days are a boot camp training for that kind of Emersonian life. We are being called to reconsider our way of life. I expect all of us will slim down a little in the months to come, and not just our budgets. Some spiritual flab should come falling away too. And I expect we'll be stronger for spirited living in the end."

Last Tuesday in our Executive Team meeting, Jim gave us a week to think about completing this sentence: "Neighborhood Church is the church that . . ." The assignment is meant to get us thinking about what we offer in just a few words. Well, I quickly finished the sentence, and said, 'ha ha I'm done with the assignment!' which only made me sound like a smart-ass. BUT – I think it's right. I wrote, "Neighborhood Church is the church that offers the possibility of a better life."

How is life better when you are part of this community? Well, there's the easier stuff – there's showing up on Sunday morning to a beautiful campus where others are seeking the same things you are: a communal worship, music, contemplation, respite. There are small groups – chalice circles and affinity groups, such as the Motorcycle Ministry, where a common interest brings people together. Jim and I are looking forward to forming new affinity groups, and new opportunities to connect; let us know if you have ideas for this. The programs and groups where all you have to do is show up are easy ways to make your life better by building your community connections.

But this church offers the possibility of a better life in more difficult ways too. Like physical fitness, spiritual fitness also takes sweat and hard work. In our Spirit in Practice class, we are not only suggesting to folks that they commit to a spiritual practice, but also to do the hard work of choosing the right one for them. There are many spiritual paths, and it takes some serious discernment to decide what your spiritual journey shall be made of. But it offers the possibility of a better life.

Some consider service and serving the cause of justice to be spiritual paths, and this church offers many paths of this type. But it's not always easy to make these commitments. It can be hard to carve out time to make and serve dinner to the homeless, or to coach girls once a week for the Girls on the Run program, or to listen to kids read, or to commit to any type of on-going service commitment. But I bet if you talked to the folks who have been doing it a while, they'll tell you, 'it's hard at first. But then I feel so good afterwards, that it becomes easier.'

Huh, that kinda sounds like how learning to jog is. It's how I bet biking will get easier if I just start doing it on regular basis, if I commit to it, if I - *embrace the hills*. Now, I know which hill I want to embrace, hard as it may be, but it may be for some of you that you haven't even laid eyes on the right hill for you. You have to find your hill, and I can tell you that Jim and I and the program staff are always thinking up new hills for you to try. For instance, I know that direct service is not the kind of social justice that gets everyone excited, which is why I'm so excited that we're just months away from hiring the half-time director of the Jericho Road Project of Pasadena.

This is the project that will offer hands-on opportunities to create more systemic change in our larger community. The job of the Program Director will be to match volunteers with professional skills, or white-collar volunteers, with local non-profits. The mission is to enhance the quality of life in the Los Angeles area by building the capacity of non-profits through skills-based volunteering. If you read the most recent issue of the UU World, you know we are not reinventing the wheel here. This new model of social justice work was first discovered by another large UU church in the Boston area, and the UU World has a wonderfully inspiring article that describes it. I recommend reading it, because it is exactly what we will be aiming for here. Do let me know if you'd like to be part of some of the very first skills-based volunteer projects that will likely be taking place over the summer.

We are living in a time of fear and anxiety. But this is the church where we give you tools for living well, despite the fear and anxiety. This is the church that gives you the possibility of a better life. Yes, the ongoing struggle of our economy may seem like bad news at first, but this is the church that works to turn bad news into good news. I love how Rev. Southern puts it, "We are being called to reconsider our way of life." I strongly believe that the economic crisis represents a huge opportunity, perhaps society's best hope for spiritual transformation. This is the church that affirms this: the time to grow spiritually is now – the time to embrace the hills is now. And rather than alone, it's less scary and easier to do it together. Because we know this, we are strong today. And honestly, I can't even put into words how excited I am about all the ways we will be stronger tomorrow. See you on the hills!