



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Into the Heart of the Holy

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson, Senior Minister

June 12, 2011

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

From Rabrindanath Tagore

The traveler has to knock
At every alien door
To come to his own,
And he has to wander
Through all the outer worlds
to reach the innermost
Shrine at the end.

And from Bob Karnan

"If you take the spiritual out of life, you dehumanize it, it is not human life any more. I do not care whether you are an orthodox Christian, advanced skeptic, agnostic, or an atheist, your situation is much the same: I do not for a moment mind where you think these experiences come from: you cannot escape the fact of them. At the center of this awareness is the feeling of responsibility for our fellow [human beings]: the urge to be kind: the simple goodness of ordinary living interwoven with what is not so good: golden threads on a warp of coarse homespun. And beyond all this there is the morally heroic: the great saints who stand side by side with the great sages. "So that when someone asks, 'Where, now is thy God?' we can answer, [the sacred] is where [it] always was: in the struggle. Not on some altar, awaiting the incense that the shallow hearted bring; but in the struggle! In the pain in our hearts, in the slowly growing clearness of our minds! In the sharpening edge of conscience! In the welling up of courage!"

There are all kinds of ways to think about our lives, I guess, and all kinds of reasons people come to houses of faith, coming mostly I imagine in the hope that their lives might become a bit better. People come for hope, hope that their life might make sense or that the world might become better; they come here in pain and in sorrow from loss or illness and hope to find some comfort. People come in joy, too, dedicated to pitching in in the work of the world. People come for their children, for themselves, for others. For hope – the doors of this place are the doors of hope, hope.

Some come for intellectual stimulation, or for moments of silence, some for moments of jubilation and celebration. Some come for beauty. Some are not sure why they are here. Most come to be with others, for community, for relationships. You come hoping to find something, hoping that whether life is good for you now or not so good, hoping that it can be better.

Philip Larkin put it this way:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Hope is a dynamic word; it suggests movement. Vaclav Havel said that the fact that we hope is proof for the existence of God. Hope is dynamic – it looks to something different. It suggests movement, a journey, perhaps.

The idea of life as a journey is a very old one. Our oldest ancestors were nomads, wandering from place to place for food and shelter. We go on trips; we take walks, we saunter – a favorite religious practice of early American Unitarians [think Thoreau and Emerson], we take hikes; maybe like Ishmael, we take to the sea. We take vacations and they are often journeys somewhere.

The people that became the Ancient Israelites that became the Jews, wandered from their land and then wandered back; Jesus walked through Palestine and the pilgrimage is a central discipline in Roman Catholic Christianity. One of the pillars of Islam is the hajj – a pilgrimage. Hindu seers go on long pilgrimages; Buddhist priests arise each day and walk; Australian Aborigines go on walk-about. Journeys are part and parcel of the religions of the world.

We travel from birth to death, from dawn to dusk, from youth to old age, from here to there and from there to here. From belief to non-belief or non-belief to belief, sorrow to joy, from despair to hope and on and on and on.

Maybe as we remember Juneteenth today with our annual barbecue, we should remember the journey from bondage to freedom. The journey to freedom from bondage for people of color in our country, for women, for the whole LGBTQI community, for the poor, for the mentally ill, the disabled, the outcast – the journey out of the bondage that is our culture is not yet over.

Journeys. If we stop we die. One step at a time; one foot in front of the other. Life is a journey, not a destination, Emerson said. Melville said the world is a ship on its voyage out. The Buddha said 'There are two mistakes one can make along the road to truth...not going all the way, and not starting.'

Life is a journey – and a central part of the spiritual life is the inner journey, the journey to find and meet our soul, to journey deep within to hear the voice of our life, to hear that inner-most voice.

The inner journey, into the caves of our lives, into the depths, into the center of our being, into the heart of the holy. This is true for each one of us and it is true for us as a beloved community.

As you know, we are beginning a quick capital fundraising to complete the courtyard between the program building and the pre-school building. I have affectionately called it the dirt patch. It has been impossible to keep grass growing there, and when it rains, well, it can be a mess.

So this is what I hope we can do – we received a \$20,000 matching grant from a UU foundation for this. The hope is to cover the area with pavers, which will provide a flat and useable play surface for our children – that is the number one priority. There will be benches at the corners so that water will drain into drywells on the other side of the pre-school building to capture the water for the trees growing there. The benches will be memorial benches – with names inscribed either on a metal plaque on the bench or inscribed in the stone – two benches have already been purchased. There will be donor pavers and memorial pavers – some of us want to have a general fund to have pavers for people who no longer have family in the church – George and Ann Moses, and Noel Vore, or Mignon Henriques, for example. I have bought two donor pavers recognizing the years of ministry of Brandy Lovely and of Lee Barker.

There will be a labyrinth with a chalice in the middle, and this will be a part of our ability to offer more opportunities for spiritual practice. Please contribute – you should have received a letter with suggested donations – check our website for info and forms. Stop by the table on the patio after the annual meeting. We want to conclude the fundraising by the end of the month so that we can do the work this summer while the schools are not here.

It will be gorgeous and I think a wonderful place for our kids to gather and for our whole church to gather.

Journeys – while there are good practical reasons for doing something to the dirt patch – particularly providing a better play area for our kids[and the schools who rent from us], a place for outdoor gatherings and receptions, and better and more environmentally sound water drainage] I want to share some thoughts about what it might mean in a deeper sense..

The first is as a memorial. In the recent issue of the UUA World magazine, Peter Morales, our president, talks about change and how everything changes. He cautions against hanging on to the past, and says that the Unitarianism of Channing and the Universalism of Ballou are gone forever. Everything changes, Peter claims. I understand what Peter is getting at, but what he says is what one of my colleagues called ‘100% half true.’

And dangerous for that. Much does change, but not all. I am looking forward to seeing the new Werner Herzog movie, ‘Cave of Forgotten Dreams,’ about paintings from 30,000 years ago – the images are astonishing.

The paintings in Chauvet, France are as modern as any painting can be - the drive to record and understand, to give symbolic shape to the world has not dimmed, or changed, for at least 30,000 years. Letting go of the past wholly leaves us prey to our own arrogance and ignorance. The religion of Channing still survives. You can throw out the baby when you throw out the bathwater. As much as I respect Peter, I think he is a very wrong about this.

We are linked to our past by memory and to our future by hope. Last week we heard our 8th graders and they gave me hope. But we remember, too. At the annual meeting following worship, I will read the names of those who have died. We should remember them.

My Mom died a year ago, Brandy Lovely died last September; many of you lost loved ones this year. We remember, and I really believe it matters that we let our memories reside in a place. I worry about the common practice of cremation and the scattering of ashes. I believe we are better by having a place and a name to say that ‘his memory is here; her memory is here.’

I want to remember, when I am here, that Brandy Lovely was a part of this community, that Rei Osaki was, and Noel Vore, and Richard Davis, and George and Ann Moses, Marynette Fauvre, Tom Yeakle, Mignon Henriques – there are so many others. Many of you have no idea who they are that I named, but if their names were here, they are a part of your history, too.

The courtyard can hold memory for when we are gone; it can hold the heart of the holy – lives lived – as a witness for us. A place where the names of this historical community can be. Have any of you been to the Vietnam memorial in Washington, DC? You know how powerful that is? Names. Our names are the markers of who we are – we should remember them and honor them.

And the second part of this is to have a labyrinth. I have heard enough – I hope you know that I hear a lot of what is going on here – the scuttlebutt - and I have heard that enough of you think this is the best part of this project and enough who think it is irrelevant. And no doubt both sides are right.

But – hear me out.

I had never been one for spiritual practices. For me, earlier, religion was a matter of belief more than it was of practice. Growing up Lutheran, I learned what Luther thought was true, not how to pray or meditate. Faith was a matter of doctrine – more what I thought than what I did. Practice was not a part of my upbringing. That is the Protestant way.

But others have said that spirituality is primarily practice – Thich Nhat Hanh the great Vietnamese Buddhist monk says that religion is only practice – only. Is there anything worth our while that is not based

in practice? We practice in music; I practice in golf – the professions were traditionally thought of as practices.

Let me ask you this: have you ever felt lost? I don't mean geographically, though that is an interesting notion, but lost – existentially, spiritually, emotionally lost? Ever felt that? Alone, not so sure of where to go or who you are?

Lost? You know the line from Dante: something like 'Midway through my life's journey, I found myself alone, in a dark wood ...'

Ever felt lost or alone? I sure have. Often. I don't like it. It comes and it goes. The dark night of the soul. The dark wood. The sense of having lost my way. I don't like it. The maze, the labyrinth, being lost.

It happens to us all. To everyone one of us. And we don't find our way out or back by doctrine because that leads to closed rooms where others can be shut out, but rather we find our way by practice, by the things we do.

So what is your practice? Do you imagine that you can think your way to meaning? Is it just a matter of the right kinds of thoughts and thinking? Or can you feel your way to meaning with just the right emotions?

We are pretty good at thinking; our tradition has always and must always emphasize the critical mind; if we lose that we have really lost our way. And we are pretty good at the emotional, the psychological, and we should maintain that. We do social justice really well; we understand how to teach and how to learn; we know how to care for each other – and we will continue to do all those things well.

But the spiritual? Not so easy for us is it? And it is our great frontier. This is the great unexplored spiritual world for us here, and we are just beginning this part of the larger religious journey. It is the inner journey, into the heart of the holy.

As you know, I sit most mornings for 20 minutes and then write a prayer. I have been doing this for over a year now, and I feel like I am just beginning, just starting to hear, just starting to see.

Remember Annie Dillard's words?

I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam. It is possible, in deep space, to sail on solar wind. Light, be it particle or wave, has force: you rig a giant sail and go. The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.

This journey into the heart of the holy, centered in practice, is a wilderness for us. It is entering unknown terrain, but terrain that is luminous, that is filled with hope, with love.

Amen