

## Our Living Tradition

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 06 January 2008  
Chip Roush

### OPENING WORDS

Poet Denise Levertov was born in England, in 1923. She served as a nurse in London, during World War II, and wrote against the Vietnam war. This is her poem, *The Fountain*

Don't say, don't say there is no water  
to solace the dryness at our hearts.  
I have seen

the fountain springing out of the rock wall  
and you drinking there. And I too  
before your eyes

found footholds and climbed  
to drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes,  
frowned as she watched-but not because  
she grudged the water,

only because she was waiting  
to see we drank our fill and were  
refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.  
That fountain is there among its scalloped  
green and gray stones,

it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,

up and out through the rock.

For the next sixty minutes,  
and for the rest of our lives,  
may we be intimately aware  
of the fountain of love springing out of us.

### FIRST READING

Maria Mazziotti Gillan was born in New Jersey, in 1940; after her parents had immigrated from Italy. She is the founder and Executive Director of one of the most well-respected resources for poetry in the country.

### My Daughter at 14: Christmas Dance

Panic in your face, you write questions  
to ask him. When he arrives,  
you are serene, your fear  
unbetrayed. How unlike me you are.

After the dance,  
I see your happiness; he holds  
your hand. Though you barely speak,  
your body pulses messages I can read

all too well. He kisses you goodnight,  
his body moving toward yours, and yours  
responding. I am frightened, guard my  
tongue for fear my mother will pop out

of my mouth. "He is not shy." You giggle,  
a little girl again, but you tell me he  
kissed you on the dance floor. "Once?"  
I ask. "No, a lot."

We ride through the rain-shining 1 A.M.  
streets. I bite back words which long  
to be said, knowing I must not shatter your  
moment, fragile as a spun-glass bird,

you, the moment, poised on the edge of  
flight, and I, on the ground, afraid.

## SECOND READING

Hayden Carruth was born in Connecticut, in 1921. He lives with his wife in a village in central New York state.

### Testament

So often it has been displayed to us, the hourglass  
with its grains of sand drifting down,  
not as an object in our world  
but as a sign, a symbol, our lives  
drifting down grain by grain,  
sifting away — I'm sure everyone must  
see this emblem somewhere in the mind.  
Yet not only our lives drift down. The stuff  
of ego with which we began, the mass  
in the upper chamber, filters away  
as love accumulates below. Now  
I am almost entirely love. I have been  
to the banker, the broker, those strange  
people, to talk about unit trusts,  
annuities, CDs, IRAs, trying  
to leave you whatever I can after  
I die. I've made my will, written  
you a long letter of instructions.  
I think about this continually.  
What will you do? How  
will you live? You can't go back  
to cocktail waitressing in the casino.  
And your poetry? It will bring you  
at best a pittance in our civilization,  
a widow's mite, as mine has  
for forty-five years. Which is why  
I leave you so little. Brokers?  
Unit trusts? I'm no financier doing  
the world's great business. And the sands  
in the upper glass grow few. Can I leave  
you the vale of ten thousand trilliums

where we buried our good cat Pokey  
across the lane to the quarry?  
Maybe the tulips I planted under  
the lilac tree? Or our red-bellied  
woodpeckers who have given us so  
much pleasure, and the rabbits  
and the deer? And kisses? And  
love-makings? All our embracing?  
I know millions of these will be still  
unspent when the last grain of sand  
falls with its whisper, its inconsequence,  
on the mountain of my love below.

#### HOMILY

How many of you stayed up at least until midnight on New Year's Eve? How many have other New Year's customs that you follow, pretty much every year? Why do you do those things? (Okay, that's a rhetorical question.)

One of the ministers interviewed for this month's "Sacred Spaces" program said that, according to his understanding, the whole point of religion is to go to heaven. I'm trying to believe that he did not mean that, that given some more time to think about it, without the pressure of the microphone in front of his face, he would come up with a better answer.

He professes to be a Christian, to follow the teachings of Jesus, and yet his answer to the meaning of life is a selfish one about earning one's own ticket to paradise? The way I understand Jesus, he suggested that we love and respect each other, not in order to earn points toward some ultimate reward, but because we are all reflections of god. That's why he encouraged his followers to worry less about following the rules, and more about changing their hearts.

The question is not "what is the minimum amount of good works I must do, in order to earn my way into heaven?" the question is "how can I better embody or transmit the fountain of love that pours in and through me?" "How can I give the fullest expression of the capital-L "Life" that beats and pulses and yearns in me?"

How many of you can finish the phrase, "like sands through the hourglass...so are \_\_\_\_\_"? "the days of our lives," right? I always found that to be a depressing image, our life-energy running out, pouring inexorably down the little hole into the bottom of the glass. That's one reason I like the Carruth poem from our second reading. He writes of our ego being transformed, as it goes through the hourglass of life, into love. Nearing the end of his life, he says, "now I am almost entirely love," and he talks about the "mountain of love" in the lower chamber.

That is what I think life is about. We are born into this world as little babies, little beings, full of need with wide eyes, and as we grow, we experience joys and sorrows, first kisses and dances and the deaths of loved ones, and through it all, we may accumulate wisdom, and learn to love—more deeply, more truly, more fully.

And that's why I celebrate New Year's. It is a great opportunity to reflect on the previous year—who or what did I lose? who or what did I gain? what have I learned? do I express the Love that is the force of the universe more fully and more authentically than I did one year ago?

And how might I express it even more fully, in this new year, just begun?

I don't mean this in a guilt-producing, feel-bad-about-yourself-and-your-circumstances, kind of way, although that is often the way it happens in our culture. I mean, that it's like one of those maps in the rest stops along some highways, that has a star or an arrow showing, "You are here." Looking at one of those maps once, I realized I had

been traveling the wrong direction for an hour and a half. It is good to *pause* every now and then, and get your bearings, and either confirm that you are going where you want to go, or correct your heading, or pick an entirely new destination!

So that is what we will do this morning. We will each have an opportunity to come forward and name something significant from the year 2007. Would those children who want to, please help us to distribute these stones? I invite each person to take a stone, and in a few minutes, you can come forward and drop the stone into our big bowl of water. If you like, you may speak into the microphone and tell us what your stone represents. If you do choose to speak, please keep it brief—be respectful of our time together, and keep it to an hour.

First, though, let us take a few moments to reflect on the high and low points of the previous year. Take time, especially, to contemplate the events that you do not wish to speak about publicly. And sift through those which you would mention, to pick the one that feels the most important today to name and honor with this ritual...

{contemplative music}

{living tradition ritual}

So may we be.

#### CLOSING REFLECTION

Thank you for sharing some of your greatest joys and sorrows from 2007.

I talk a lot about abundance, usually in the context of generosity. This congregation *\*is\** full of abundance, I am continually impressed by the amounts of time and money given by the members and friends of this church community.

And I am continually impressed by the abundance of exquisite joys and shockingly difficult sorrows experienced by our members and friends, as well.

That bowl of water was half-full when we started; were we to continue much longer, it would begin pouring over the sides. Like our tears, sometimes from gladness, sometimes from grief, which overrun our eyes. Some of us cry only rarely, some of us weep twice a day. All of us feel the stirrings of life and love within us.

As Denise Levertov wrote: "Don't say there is no water. That fountain is there...it is still there and always there with its quiet song and strange power to spring in us, up and out through the rock."

This year of 2008 will bring more tears, of happiness, of relief and of sorrow. Let us give thanks for our tears, for they mean we are alive at one more turn of the calendar page.

So may we be.