

Musical Pastries: or, Making a Bun Dance

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 02 March 2008
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FIRST READING James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Missouri, in 1902. Troubled by the effects of racism, his father abandoned the family and moved to Mexico. Langston grew up in Kansas; went to high school in Cleveland; and finally flourished in Harlem. He lived his life as a closeted gay black male; and he wrote some of the finest poetry of the 20th century.

“The Dream Keeper”

Bring me all your dreams, You dreamers, Bring me all of your Heart melodies That I may wrap them In a blue cloud-cloth Away from the too-rough fingers Of the world.

SECOND READING Jeanne Desy was born in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1942. She is now a member of First UU in Columbus, Ohio. Jeanne wrote this poem while being treated for breast cancer; it took several months for her to realize that she was writing about her own life. She refers to “clematis” in the poem; clematis is a flowering vine.

“Survival”

Three feral cats live in my neighbor's yard. They will not be touched or come inside, but in their circumspect fashion they belong. When she takes her morning walk, they follow discreetly, each step placed with slow confidence in the manner of cats, domestic or wild.

My neighbor uses the sidewalk, but the cats pace in a line down the center of the street. She worries. They clearly have no regard for automobiles. They stop and look, expressionless, when one appears and then walk on, three cats in single file, a car creeping behind.

After my neighbor returns to the house and closes the door, they condescend to eat the food she leaves. Their hunting has nothing to do with hunger, then, but with a deeper desire. One day, while my friend was staking the clematis, the mother cat trotted up, larger and wilder than ever, proudly gripping a warbler in her mouth.

Without thinking, my neighbor shouted *No!* The startled cat opened its mouth and the bird flew out unharmed, caught air, and swooped away.

The cat said something rude, angry, dismayed, you can never be sure, cats don't bother with language, they convey more by hissing or rubbing a cheek against your hand.

My neighbor was pleased and surprised that

the cat had listened. But when she told her husband, he explained the scientific facts... A cat's mouth carries a dreadful germ peculiar to cats. Once a bird has been caught for even a moment, though not a feather is broken, it is doomed to succumb, he said, to a fatal infection.

My neighbor was very distressed. She told me, *Sometimes you'd rather not know these things.* But I like to think of the bird, safely back on its branch in the redbud tree, remembering:

it was caught in the dragon's mouth, and escaped. It has no concern for tomorrow. It is simply free.

SERMON How many of you were here four weeks ago, when we wrote suggestions for something *joyful* on pieces of paper, then mixed them up and passed them out again? How many know I've been talking and writing about doing something truly joyful for yourself, as a spiritual practice for Lent? How many are willing to commit to doing something genuinely joyful at least once per week, for the three weeks we have left until Easter?

Experiencing joy is good for us; it is good for our health and our mood, and it is good for those around us. Gandhi said, “be the change you want to see in the world.” So, if we want our world to be a more peaceful, more happy place, we can start by experiencing some joy ourselves. Others will be affected; they may have their mood lifted when they see the joy in our lives. Other things are required, too, of course, but justice work isn't *all* serious work. One easy step toward world peace is to be more peaceful and more joyful right here, right now.

Let the congregation say, “yea, joy!” Let the congregation say it like they *mean* it!

We in this church community *are* “being the change we want to see.” Along with the rest of the congregations in our Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, we help to promote legal same-sex marriages; we provide food and other basics to people affected by the Gulf Coast hurricanes; we advocate for peace and justice in Darfur; and our UUA president frequently speaks against the war in Iraq. Our fellow UUs in Benzie county are helping to build homes for people in poverty. And right here in this room are people who help prepare and serve and fund the community lunch program; and people helping to bring a Ugandan musician here for the summer; and who fed the homeless in the Safe Harbor program; and walked in the CROP walk for world hunger; and provide funds for us to help people get their BATA bus pass; and help support Pete’s Place for our homeless teens. And all that doesn’t count things like Ken and Judy Weaver going to Africa, to help eradicate polio from this planet, and about a hundred other projects that you folks are part of.

We are being the change that we want to see. Many of us in this room give generously of our time and money, to all sorts of good causes.

In fact, we have such a reputation for generosity that I have had a number of people tell me that they are concerned that they cannot give enough. Just in the year-and-a-half that I have been here, I can think of several people who wanted to join, but were concerned that they could not afford the minimum pledge to belong.

There is NO minimum contribution to belong to our UUCGT congregation.

I do have high expectations, yes I do, and I also have high compassion. No matter what amount—if any—you feel you can donate to our church, I will love you, and care for you. And, because I love you, and want the best for you, because I want the most rich, most satisfying, most joyful life for you, I have high expectations for your involvement here. Because, like most everything else in life, the more you put into our communal journey, the more you will get out of it.

Ideally, we could all give *both* some time and some money to the church. Some of us have less money than we’d like, so we give more of our time. Some of us cannot give much time, so we provide more financial support. Some of us cannot give either, right now, money or time, and instead give the gift of grateful acceptance.

If you want to donate more time to our congregation, and thereby enrich your own life, at the same time, there are many possibilities. I suggest helping with our religious education program; you could help with the Sunday morning educational experiences, or assist with the weekly errands, or lead an outdoor activity, like tagging birds or participating in a spring beach clean-up.

If you have not served as a “greeter”—the person who meets people at the door on Sunday morning, and passes out orders of worship, and helps take the collection—this is a simple job, without much more time commitment than you’d be here, anyway, and it helps you meet more people in the congregation.

And ALL of us are encouraged to buy and sell tickets to Mike Zernow’s talk. Besides being a fundraiser for Pete’s Place and for us, the more people who go to Mike’s talk, the more fun it will be, and the more fun it is, the more likely some people are to come check out our congregation. And the more people who visit us, the more people who will have their lives changed by our transformative message of liberal religion.

How many of you heard the statistics about the changing face of religion in the United States? The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a report this week that says 44% of people in the US have switched spiritual affiliation. It says Catholics have lost the most people, but Protestants are down, from 66% of the population, in the 1970’s, to just about half today. If we are not now, it won’t be long, before the United States is no longer a Protestant country. The only churches who are really growing are the nondenominational churches, including the various evangelical “megachurches.”

It was not the Pew study, but other research shows that we UUs are growing, but we are growing less rapidly than the general population, so we are also losing ground. The good news in all of this, is that unlike most of the other traditions, who have already hit their peak, or who are just about at saturation, this research shows that there are over 2 million people in the U.S. who are essentially Unitarian

Universalists, but who just don't know it yet. Now, we have a little over a thousand congregations and something over 200,000 members, so we have a *900% growth potential*.

Rarely do things in the real world reach their theoretical maximums, but imagine if we as a movement grew by half of that—imagine if we grew by 400%. Just in this congregation, that would mean over 1,200 members.

Dream with me a minute, and just imagine: we now own the building at Fifth and Oak, and we provide space to the Quakers, and the NA group, and of course the Tuesday version of the Community Lunch. Each of our satellite congregations—in Benzie, Kingsley, Petoskey and Sutton's Bay—have over 100 members, and we have a half-time minister, and an intern minister every year, dedicated to help provide sermons and pastoral care to these satellites. Our annual meetings have outgrown our buildings—they've outgrown the Kaliseum, and now we rent Wuerfel Park once a year so that all of our members can sit in the same congregational group. We employ a congregational nurse who works out of the Fifth and Oak building and provides basic health care to everybody who asks. Our religious education program has 400 children and youth; and we offer the OWL sexuality education program to fifty teenagers every year. The OWL directors' office has a bulletin board totally dedicated to the thank-you notes she gets from teens and young adults who have made better choices about sex and relationships because of our OWL education. We publish a booklet every year of all the adult religious education programs we offer, from spiritual practices like Buddhist meditation and quilting to a hard-core ethics forum, every other week, and dance and art and Crones and Scones, of course, and young family -oriented activities and senior citizens' activities and two different singles' groups—and Wednesday Night Supper, and Monday, Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday Night Suppers, and Saturday Breakfasts. Our buildings boast plenty of religious education space, a kitchen and social hall that is rented out virtually every week, a sanctuary five times this size—which is still filled twice every Sunday—a separate wing for offices, a huge library, including a climate-controlled room for our archives, and plenty of storage, although we are already wishing we had more closet space. We do so much social justice work that, whenever the TV or newspaper reporters want a religiously liberal take on ecological or social issues, even if they are only trying to appear "fair and balanced," they call *us*. Our music program has two adult choirs, a children's choir and a handbell choir, and a dedicated choir bus, which is separate from the other church bus. And when other churches, UU and otherwise, call us and ask us to come teach them our secret, we tell them it is as simple as: "good people, with big dreams, and the commitment to make them happen"

All of this has been done, and is being done, in other UU congregations. We could do it, if we wanted.

About six years and two months from now, our congregation will turn 50 years old. Imagine the tears in Mary Ann Force's eyes when we break ground on the Religious Education building named after her on that day.

If you're going to dream, dream **large**!

How many of you share at least a part of that vision? How many are willing to donate some time and/or some money, in order to make part of that dream come true? How many think we'd have a better shot, at creating that vision, if the national economy weren't headed for a recession, and our state economy already there, and the war draining another 275 million dollars every day...?

And not only are we experiencing a financial crisis, but there seems to be a "time famine" as well. People are over-committed and over-scheduled like never before. There doesn't seem to be enough time to do all the things we want to do—and there certainly isn't enough time to relax and rejuvenate, after doing all the other things.

Now, I do prefer being a little over-busy to being under-busy. I once took a job where the person who hired me was promoted the same day I started. I don't know for sure that the new boss even knew I was there. The first two weeks of that position were mind-numbing. I was almost to the point of begging for some real work to do.

But neither way-too-little nor far-too-much work are sustainable ways of living. The idea of a Sabbath, of taking one day in seven away from work, for rest, and relaxation, and revitalizing recreation, is not just a quaint Jewish custom. It is a way to live a better, longer life, and be more productive over a longer period of time. It's a bit like food in France, compared with food in the United States. A typical meal in France

has smaller portions than the standard meal here, but they eat a wider variety of flavors and textures, so they derive more satisfaction.

So, give up something. As part of our 40 days of joy, stop doing something, or two or three things. Take a break from it; wait until you've totally recovered, and you're getting to be bored, and then come here and take up something, about which you are really passionate. Explore what is most meaningful for you, and live life more fully, in smaller bites.

I said earlier that I have high expectations, that I do want virtually all of us to volunteer in some way or other—and I have high expectations that we will volunteer in ways that best use our talents and our passions. Our church isn't about "should" and "ought" and guilt and dogma, our congregation is about sharing the most joyful, most challenging and most rewarding journey possible.

And I still haven't addressed the economy. Like our little ones are learning, two rooms that direction, everybody is afraid of something. Perhaps the most defining characteristic of Unitarian Universalists is that we are middle class, socioeconomically. I don't mean that there aren't many UUs from other demographics, some of us in this room would define themselves differently, I am sure. And, the vast majority of us are essentially middle class. According to a seminary professor whom Reverend Kevin and I both respect, the Rev. Mr. David Bumbaugh, the main characteristic of being in the middle class is fear of losing that status, and falling down the socioeconomic ladder.

Yes, it is a human condition, to fear loss; and many of our human cousins fall victim to the misunderstanding of equating wealth and moral worth, so that poverty is perceived as a sin; and especially in the U.S., where we inherit the Protestant work ethic that defines both poverty and leisure as affronts to god; we are compelled to solidify our standing, and our children's standing, as upstanding, worthy, middle class citizens.

Fear is not a bad thing. Fear is not failure. Like poverty and leisure, fear is not a moral flaw. Everybody is afraid of something. What matters is how we deal with our fear; how we manage it. Heroes are not unafraid; heroes are afraid, and they manage their fear, and do their thing anyway.

Our goal, most of us, is to have a long, good, healthy, fun and fulfilling life. And we rightly expect that we need sufficient money to do that. However: our fears make us over-estimate how much wealth we need. Beyond a certain set of basics: food, clothing, shelter, etc., beyond a certain point, money brings us diminishing returns, as far as happiness and life satisfaction go. Our real wealth comes from health, and from good relationships.

Like the relationships in this room.

When you are sitting in a hospital waiting room, and somebody comes to sit with you, maybe to talk, maybe to knit, maybe to just wait together and share the sluggish way that clocks move differently in those circumstances, that's real wealth.

Or when you are in a hospital bed, and people visit or call or send cards and emails and you do not feel forgotten, but you know that your life matters, that is *real* wealth.

When you have just had a baby, and people bring you delicious and nutritious meals so you and the rest of your family are well-fed, that is real wealth.

When you need a place to stay, because you are between homes or some tragedy has struck, and somebody opens their home to you, and welcomes you in, that is real wealth.

When we need rides, to the airport or the doctor or the grocer... when we need the truth told to us, like only a real friend can do... when we want a nice reception, to feed and comfort our loved ones after a memorial service, and a whole host of people swoop in and make the arrangements and set it up and clean it up and they even pour the tea and coffee for us, so all we have to do is share memories and shed tears and laugh at our lives together, that is real wealth, and that is what we share here, together.

A budget is a moral document. And the budget that our board has proposed for the church year beginning July 1st, 2008, is a document with very high morals. For the first time in the history of this congregation, it includes a three-quarter time Director of Religious Education to inspire and guide our children. The proposed budget includes a large step toward returning to our forty-year tradition of being our Fair Share

dues to our district and national associations. The proposed budget includes debt service so we can finish the building expansion that we've been planning for four years, to make our building more useful, both for us and for potential renters.

This building expansion is real progress. It is a tangible demonstration of the health and vitality of our congregation. It is a demonstration of good stewardship, that our leaders have listened to us, and are using our donated funds in responsible and visionary ways. It is a commitment to our future, and it has already begun to inspire and galvanize us into even larger dreams for the next part of our congregational evolution.

Not terribly long ago, there was an empty, basically-abandoned building downtown. With some big dreams, and a lot of money and a lot of sweat, now you can see the stars overhead, and the stars on the screen and people all over the world know about Traverse City's State Theatre.

About fifteen years ago, on the advice of my physics lab partner, I went to visit the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in Harlem. Under construction since 1892, it is already one of the most gorgeous buildings in the world. Hundreds of workers—generations of artisans, grandparents, parents and children—have dedicated their labor to this monument.

When I entered the Cathedral, I was overwhelmed by its majesty. Not necessarily by the religious iconography, but by the combined efforts of all the people, over a century, to work together on such a masterpiece, a tribute to human cooperation. I was literally stunned by its glory. Reeling, I had to fight the urge to sink to my knees, in respect for the passion and commitment that produced this incredible building. I thought to myself, "I want to be part of something that could inspire people to do this."

And now I am. The church structure we are expanding—the building we are building— is not as glamorous as the Cathedral, but it is beautiful. More importantly, we are building something with our lives. The magnificent structure that is our congregational community *is* the inspirational vision I longer for, fifteen years ago.

Thank you for supporting our work to make our lives and our world better. So may we be.

BENEDICTION Our dreams are not too fine for this lifetime; they are the only way that the "too-rough fingers of the world" can be made more gentle. Whether we have one more day, or 100 or ten thousand, let us catch air and swoop into the sky, and sing of our intention to live. So may we be!