

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Imagination into Reality”

Rev. Sam Trumbore September 16, 2007

Spoken Meditation

Swamp Maples want to be first
 While the days are still hot and sticky
 Even before September starts
 Their outermost leaves begin to turn orange and red.
 As grasshoppers sing, “Carpe Diem!”
 The Swamp Maples are not taking any chances.
 No cold weather will catch them unprepared,
 their sap descending deep into the ground.

Why does the grasshopper
 not heed the preparations of the ant?
 Is burying seeds better than
 Serenading a middle of September sunset?
 Both must return to dust sooner or later.

Maybe we don't need to take sides.
 Respect the swamp maple's rush,
 The ant's industry and the grasshopper's oratorio.
 And maybe, just maybe,
 there is room for our quiriness too.

Sermon

We've been imagining this day for a long time, seventeen years Eva Gemmill reminded me this week. She has been preparing a supplemental history of our expansion project, a draft of which she let me review this week. The more seasoned members here may remember the three iterations of our Long Range Planning Committee, LRPC one, two and three. Each one moved us closer to being ready to design, raise the money and build this new space. Those seventeen years have been a time of inward focus and preparation to realize our vision of being a beacon of liberal religion here in the Capital Region in block, mortar, wood, glass and steel.

We've invested millions of dollars in infrastructure making that dream real. Now it is time to get real and focus our attention on what is really going on outside of this building.

Some of it isn't pretty. For those who might be new to this area, to our south and east surrounding Washington Park are some of the most affluent homes in the city of Albany. To the south and west thousands of students live. To our North across Central Avenue in the West Hill neighborhood, are some of the most blighted streets in Albany. Within a 10-block radius of our building we can find some of the best and worst that urban living has to offer.

Through the West Hill Ministers Fellowship, I've learned a great deal about the problems to our north. Forty years ago it was a thriving middle class neighborhood of German, Polish and Irish immigrants. As people left in search of lawns and shopping centers and fearful of urban living and Negroes, property values declined. Shop owners followed their customers out to the malls. While I see that trend beginning to reverse as Central Avenue is attracting new investment and as urban homesteaders renovate the better residential properties, the poverty in West Hill is still quite pervasive.

One of the disturbing trends throughout American cities that is finally getting attention at the Albany Common Council due to the agitation of Councilman Dominick Calsolaro from the 1st Ward and a long time activist named Dr. Leonard Morgenbesser is an increasing level of gun violence. The council has appointed a gun violence task force to look into the problem. Unlike Schenectady that just saw two murders, we've avoided a lot of street killings this summer in Albany yet the criminal incidents with guns involved continue to grow.

Just about any problem, whether it is guns, drugs, identity theft, prostitution, pornography, fraud, or counterfeiting, looked at closely at the local level, quickly expands to a much larger one. Our social problems have been globalized along with trade. More and more, international syndicates control the crime we face locally on our streets.

The problems around us on the streets of Albany are just the beginning of looking at what is going on outside our doors. We're bringing our personal problems inside our doors too. How many of us are addicted to recreational substances, licit or illicit? How many of us have suffered clinical depression? How many of us are struggling with increasing healthcare costs? How many of us have been denied coverage for a procedure or a test that would have been paid five years ago? If you haven't seen Michael Moore's movie Sicko, please do. I'll be speaking about the moral dimensions of our health care crisis in December.

One of the themes of that movie that riveted me was recognizing how fearful Americans are of their government. We live in dangerous times. Our Crusader President who sees terrorists under every hijab is threatening our civil rights. Woe to anyone the President decides is an enemy combatant or a terrorist!

Do you remember the hope we had as the Berlin Wall came down? The unity of world resolve after Kuwait was invaded by Iraq? The 1990's had a glimmer of hope for the development of global community. Yet just with a change in the administration and the attack of 9/11, our war President has retrenched in a foreign policy of world domination rather than seeking world community.

But as intractable as the problems are in West Hill and frightening as they are on the national and world stage, the problem that really bothers me, and integrally link Robin Street and Iraq: is our level of consumption of the world's resources.

If we are going to get real, we need to look at our carbon footprint. How much carbon do we take in and expel as waste every day? That usage is greater than you might expect. Energy consumption was part of just about everything we touch. Just about every item of food, whether organic or not, whether home grown or not, had non-renewable energy invested in some aspect of its production. Every manufactured item, every recreational activity, every time you turn on the tap or put on an article of clothing energy was used to produce, maintain and dispose of it ... and carbon dioxide is the byproduct. Just taking one plane trip will bust any one of our carbon budgets.

But long before we suffer much from global climate change, we'll start running out of oil. Ever since I met Bill Batt, I've been waiting in dread of peak oil. The theory goes that when consumption outstrips production, all hell will break loose because there is no give in our energy needs. How much elasticity do you have in your petrochemical consumption? What if you had to drive a quarter as much as you have in the past? Only heat your house to 50 degrees? Stop using hot water?

When I get real about the problems outside our doors, these are just a few of the ones that torment me, and I'm just getting started. Were I to let in all the pain in the media, I think I'd need to be hospitalized. The problems are overwhelming and the answers are often not known. Sometimes there are some great solutions but no political will to implement them.

For many of us getting real and facing this future is spiritually devastating. Are we just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? Today's spiritual challenge is figuring out how do we sacrifice for future generations when the future we project is so awful? If there is nothing we can do to save our children or grandchildren, well, why not just

watch football, drink beer and live it up while you can. That's what a lot of people are doing.

The pain isn't just coming in the future, it's already here. I see the quality of life already going down for young people. Young people today have it tough. They leave school carrying huge student loans. They pay exorbitant rents and insurance. Young parents postpone child rearing until they think they're financially stable in their 30's and then find themselves infertile. They don't believe there will be any social security left for them when they retire.

Then we have an information age turning into information slavery. Our inboxes are overloaded. Cell phones and wireless access force us to be available 24/7 even on vacation. My new cell phone allows my Global Position to be tracked so the FBI can know where I am at any time. My communications can be monitored without anyone knowing it.

Let's get real. What can we do about all of this? People come in our doors beaten down by the world. We have an hour of refuge together. I sit down every week and imagine you sitting here spiritually wounded and wonder what I can say when I too suffer from the same problems.

It gets worse. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I can't give you THE answer. I have no magic phrases that you can just believe and make it all better. I could give you my answers, I suppose. I think I've found some really great ones that work for me, mostly. But I too have moments when it all goes out the window and I want to shake my fists and lament this isn't the way it ought to be. Animal and plant species shouldn't be driven to extinction so we can live more comfortably. Babies shouldn't die of famine or flood or even suddenly in their cribs. So many needless deaths around the world for want of easy, inexpensive treatments. Why must I suffer with the physical and emotional limitations I've been dealt? Why are their times when my heart closes just as I would will it to be open? If I were running the universe, this isn't how I'd design a world, thank you.

What sustains me and brings me hope in these crisis-of-faith moments is tenacious uncertainty. I take comfort in doubt and reservation. I'm not sure what will really happen next. All the bad things that might happen are not inevitable. The future is not established for sure yet. Not only am I unsure and retain reservations, I keep a firm hold on them, stubbornly and persistently. In my tenacious uncertainty, there is space for the new and the unthinkable to emerge. We are forever tossed between either-or dilemmas when we don't see the third or fourth option we'd never considered.

What nurtures my tenacious uncertainty is being with people who aren't exactly like me. Tenacious uncertainty is best practiced with people who are very different from us because it increases the opportunity for novelty to emerge. And it can be pretty darn irritating too. And it can be pretty darn frightening also.

And learning how to be with and appreciate people who are different from us is the only way we're going to figure out how to save the human species from annihilation.

Unitarian Universalism is on the cutting edge of what we need to do to save human civilization. Up till now, if you didn't like someone, you could leave town and move somewhere else. Or you could drive them out of your town or kill them. We are moving into a world where that isn't an option any more. When everyone has weapons of mass destruction, and this is just a matter of time before it is the case, the powerful will no longer be able to bully the weak. We're going to have to learn to live together and share this planet more equitably, even more compassionately, or utterly destroy it.

The most important spiritual problem humanity faces today is learning how to get along with each other. Meditation is great, yoga is vitalizing, Journaling, gardening, walking are all wonderful sources of renewal. The needed work that can heal the world happens when we apply our spiritual resources to making our relationships work. The challenges ahead will be around difference not around similarity.

What we have built here is a container that allows more people to gather in one space and learn to get along with each other, dare I say love each other. Not the squishy, starry-eyed love, energized by sexual desire. This is neighborly love. And just like your physical neighbor, the person in the chair next to you right now is your neighbor in this congregation. They may not be as poor or as wealthy as you are. They may not have the same skin pigment as you do or the same number of freckles and moles for that matter. They may not vote the way you do. They may not eat the same foods you do. They may not be attracted to the same kind of person you are. They may not have the same abilities or disabilities that you do.

But each one of you has a heart in your chest that pumps blood the same way. Each of you wants good health, freedom from suffering, and a long, meaningful and satisfying life. Each of you has those who are near and dear to you, who you also want to have good health, freedom from suffering and a long, meaningful and satisfying life. We all want enough food to eat, a safe, warm and dry place to sleep. We all want to love and be loved.

Over the eight years I've been here, I've been working slowly and methodically to heal and bring together this congregation and increase our capacity for neighborly love. All these religious traditions that crow about how good they are at loving God are doing **the easy work**. The really hard work is learning to love our neighbor. With this building expansion I hear us saying, "We've got room in our hearts for more neighbors." That's good! We've just got another 6 billion to go.

But we've got to start where we are. We've imagined this day for seventeen years and here it is. How are we going to do it? I've got lots of ideas, but more important, I've got tenacious uncertainty on my side. To really love your neighbor you have to be ready to hang in there and be surprised. To learn to love your neighbor you have to encounter your neighbor face to face with an open mind and an open heart.

We have built an intentionally polymorphous place. In one moment Emerson Community Hall can house our Sunday service. In another moment, it can transform into a lecture hall, a dining room, a performance space, a place for weddings and memorial services, and even a grand dance hall. But most of all, it is a place for people to meet face to face, encounter each other's humanity, and discover their love for each other. This congregation is a laboratory to expand our capacity for love.

The great problems of our age will not be resolved through hatred and violence. We know this. The great problems of our age ARE the end result of attempting to resolve them with hatred and violence. Love is indeed the answer and this is a place to learn how to embody it better. Let's get real and make love real in this place.

Benediction

The distress of the world is way too much for any of us to bear.
 But when we join together in love, a capacity for action is created
 greater than any one of us.
 If you've felt that loving spirit today,
 carry it with you as you leave this place.
 Let it open your heart to greater action in your chunk of the world.
 For when our heart is in a holy place
 the Spirit of Life can move through us and
 feed the hungry, clothe the naked,
 and bring restoration and healing to a troubled world.