

**First Unitarian Church of Baltimore**  
**Sermon: Challenges and Choices: Life is not always easy!**  
**February 1, 2009**  
**The Reverend Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.**

"Unless someone like you  
cares a whole awful lot,  
nothing is going to get better.  
It's not.

Dr. Seuss--from "The Lorax"

These are paradoxical times. On the one hand, we have elected a president who appears to be an intelligent and strategic visionary, concerned about the nation and all our people. A president who is signing new legislation for fair pay and encouraging wider availability for health care for children and adults. The new president has lifted some of us from deep despair and feelings of powerlessness.

Yet, I see increasing pain and despair all around me. Neighbors – good people -- who worked for the last administration, have lost their jobs. Both the husband and the wife. My niece who speaks three languages, has a doctorate of jurisprudence, has been looking unsuccessfully for a job for over six months. Another young relative lost her job nearly a year ago. Both are discouraged and depressed.

I see and feel increasing pain from folks right here in this sanctuary. Not a week goes by that I don't learn of one of us who suffers the pain and anxiety that goes with getting laid off, losing treasured positions through no fault of their own. Not a week goes by that I don't receive phone calls from people who need help with a mortgage payment, a temporary loan to avoid falling behind on a credit card payment. Not a week goes by that I don't learn about another homeless person.

Practically every week I learn of one of our members who has sustained an injury, has fallen ill, has learned she needs surgery, has undergone surgery.

Frequently I learn that we have lost a beloved member, most recently Jeannette Cabeen, whom I was privileged to get to know.

These are wonderful times in so many ways, but great pain and suffering are interwoven with the joy.

I find the extent of the pain I learn about discomfoting. I feel helpless. I feel impotent. I want to fix things for people. I can't get comfortable with the fact that I can't. I vacillate between joyousness and sadness, attended by frustration. The minister's

discretionary fund to aid our members who experience financial emergencies has long since been depleted for this year. The Social Action Clearinghouse is updating our list of resources for the homeless. But all I can do is listen, visit, make a phone call, hold a hand, offer to pray, and listen. I want to do more, as I'm sure many of you would.

Progress is slow. I don't like slow. But we **are** making progress. The Committee on Ministry has set a goal for the year to develop and implement a plan for a Pastoral Care Team. Some of our members have difficulty getting to church and would welcome visits. Hopefully a Pastoral Care Team can be developed and trained in the near future. Meanwhile, suffering, often silent, surrounds us and pervades our congregation and the world.

Pain and suffering dominate many of our days. Anxiety lives in our hearts and minds. Will the test reveal that I have cancer? Will the surgery get it all? How long do I have to live? What did I do wrong? Why didn't I put salt on the steps to melt the ice?

And so I say this to you, all of you who are in pain. Reach out. Pick up the phone. Send me an email. Get in touch. You are not alone. Neither I nor anyone else may be able to rescue you financially, but we can provide information about shelter. We can let you know we care. We can listen with all our hearts. Sometimes just talking about your suffering, your pain, your anxieties can transform feelings into something different. Sometimes people can marshal resources they didn't know they had simply by talking about the problem, describing it and explaining it to another person.

We are a caring community, and that means we can call on one another in time of trouble. You don't always have to be the giver or the listener. Maybe it is time for you to let someone know you need help.

I feel like I'm constantly urging all of you to give more – more time, more money, more love, more money, more skills, more money. So don't feel shy about coming back at me or a friend in the congregation if something is troubling you.

There once was a liberal Jewish woman named Emma Goldman who said something like, "I don't want to be any part of a revolution where they don't dance." We are in the midst of transformational change, a revolution and restructuring of our country from top to bottom. And some of it is joyous. There are times when we are dancing. But we all know that we are dancing on broken glass. We are in *kairos* moment, not understanding the paradigm shift we are in the midst of. Ready for change, yet unsure of what our roles will be in this new world that we are all recreating. Somewhat bewildered and uncertain about the shape of things to come, yet hopeful and willing to pitch in and do our part to make a better world, to create a better, more equitable system.

That's why it is important for as many of you as possible to participate in Lobby Day in Annapolis, to secure equal rights for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community. That's why it is important to let your legislative representatives know if you are opposed to the death penalty in Maryland. Lift your voices, raise your hands, stand up and be counted on the issues that you feel strongly about, in the neighborhood, in the city, county and the nation. Are you willing to stand up? I want to see it if you are. (Note: Everybody except some very elderly people stood up.)

Our new president, who reportedly prefers a room temperature about 78 degrees, is in hot water with Washingtonians. He made light of the city's decision to close schools during the iciest time, jokingly comparing the nation's capital with Chicago, where frozen sidewalks and streets are normal several months of the year, and snow removal capacity is massive. Where no one has to drive or climb up or down a hill. People in Washington were not amused by his comments. And he created concerns among the young folks, as well. Yesterday's letters to the editor of the "Washington Post" included an anxious question from an eighth-grader at his daughters' school. "Will I ever get a snow day again?"

Lift your voices, raise your hands, stand up and shout, write a letter to the editor. This is not a privilege, it is a right and a responsibility, I'd say it's an obligation of citizenship. And did you know that people who are engaged and active in their communities and their religious organizations are reported to live longer? Hey, it may not be heaven, but social action and compassionate engagement might just buy you a little time.

Now, the Buddhists tell us that the first cause of our suffering is our desire, wanting something beyond our reach, wanting something we can't afford, wanting someone to love us who doesn't want to love us, continuous striving for more, like Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill, never achieving his goal, reaching the summit. Competitiveness over material things, bigger houses, fancier jewelry. Never being satisfied. I had a relative like that once. Got a nice car, started planning for the next, fancier car. Got a nice briefcase, started worrying about getting a briefcase with a more prestigious name, to impress people. Bought an Armani suit, began planning to have his next suit tailor-made. Rude to waiters. Never happy. Constantly fretting over his perceived unmet needs. Always trying to impress people with how important he was. Well, he suffered and probably still suffers in the classic Buddhist sense, not understanding that his own desires cause him pain. My bet is that most of us in this room are beyond that. I certainly hope so.

I suppose have to acknowledge that wanting what we can't have, longer life, more comfort, more energy, is suffering we can take responsibility for.

One of the things that has always troubled me about other religious faiths that put everything in the hands of a god who controls all and has the power to intervene, is that so many bad things happen to good people. Do we really deserve all this suffering? Is God punishing us? Or are we bringing it on ourselves with our unrealistic wants and desires that are impossible to hope for?

Or do painful events that cause suffering just happen for no reason at all, caused by no bad deed, or judgmental god. I leave it to you to ponder these possible explanations. I don't know the answer.

But this much I do know. We have the power to make things better for our fellow humans, and animals, and the earth. We have the power to listen non-judgmentally without feeling that we have to solve the problem. We have the power to suggest resources. We have the power to offer to care for a harried mother's children from time to time. We have the power to dance and sing, even on broken glass, as we remake our world. We have the power to sit with someone in the hospital. We have the power to read to children. We have the power to read the paper or a story or a poem to someone who can't leave home. We have the power to make a casserole for a neighbor. We have the power to welcome strangers, and visitors. When people wander into church it's for a reason. Something is missing in their lives, or not quite right in some way. That is why it is so important to welcome, and to show we care, whenever we are honored by guests and visitors. Perhaps we can lighten their load with a smile or a kind word, or a listening ear.

And what can this faith do for us, and for all those who suffer? How can liberal religion enrich our ability to withstand pain and suffering? How can Unitarian Universalism make a difference to us in this time of enormous change, when the whole world is reshuffling resources, reordering power structures, reorganizing financial systems, and when joblessness and homelessness continue to increase?

According to Rebecca Parker, in her 1998 lecture at General Assembly, many Unitarian Universalists feel something is missing in our faith, spiritual depth and discipline. We long for deeper meaning. "By patient pursuit of this longing...the fresh vision will come...the place of limit becomes the place of revelation" (17r374) "We must seek and continue to seek...until...we find...that there is a Universal love of which we are a part, that there is something that will not let us go, and it is in obedience to this truth, that the promise of life is fulfilled in us and we become a blessing to the world."<sup>i</sup>

Another Parker, the Reverend Theodore Parker, spoke of the intuitiveness of religion which resides in instinct, conscience, emotion, and in reason. We need not look to creeds and doctrines to tell us what we must believe. We must look to our own hearts.<sup>ii</sup>

Yet another great Unitarian, James Luther Adams, spoke of the value of voluntary organizations, and congregations that joined in mutual community and mutual responsibility to one another, and joined together in the larger community to build a relational world of love and mutual responsibility.

Indeed, the beauty and the challenge of our faith is that doctrines do not guide us. But love, conscience, emotion and reason, in the dialogue of our communities, enable us to create new meanings for events, to create new meanings for life, new purpose for being and doing, new meanings of love and compassion. Our freedom to take wisdom from many sources challenges us to grapple with emerging issues, and to struggle with how to live our principles.

In times of great stress and anxiety, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center, fear of terrorism, engagement in wars that most of us don't understand, economic recession and loss of jobs and income, I would suggest that our faith offers us opportunities to share our concerns, our losses, our worries, and our anxieties in our caring congregation. This is a place filled with love and compassion. This is a place where we truly respect the inherent dignity of each and every baby, child, youth and adult. We should not be reluctant to express our pain and fears to each other or to your minister. To be here for one another in this time of social and economic transformation, to hear the deepest sorrows and pain is an honor, even if all we can do is listen and show we care.

This is the center of our faith, to care for one another. For we are a relational religion. This faith, when we live it, encourages us to transform our feelings, our thinking, and to love one another whether rich or poor, happy or sad, healthy or sick. Wherever we go, when we live our faith, we can offer love and compassion. And that love and compassion emerges from the shadows of our lives to smile upon us when we least expect it. Casting the bread of love on the waters of the world, on the waters of this congregation, expecting nothing in return, is its own reward. Living our faith in relationship to one another with kindness and generosity is not a gift to another, it is transformative for us.

Theodore Parker reminds us, "May ours be a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space, its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living."<sup>iii</sup>

Let it so be, in love and faith.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Rev. Rebecca Parker. “What They Dreamed Be Ours To Do: Lessons From the History of Covenant” from her UUA General Assembly lecture in 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Rev. Amy Russell. “Theodore Parker: Courage of Convictions.” Sermon. February 8th, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Rev. Theodore Parker.