



Readings and Discussion Questions
Summer Services 2010
Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel
73 Strecker Road, Ellisville, MO 63011

June 6, 2010

Reading:

Summer in America is defined by two things. First of all, for most of the country, it is HOT. Second, almost everywhere kids are out of school and parents are still at work. Whether or not you have children at home, the fact that neighborhoods are teeming with children and teens has an impact on our lives.

For some of these children, summer is a time to relax and unwind, after their hyper-scheduled school year. For others, it is a time to work and raise money. For yet others, it is a time to continue education at focused summer camps. This latter trend is new to this generation of children. *Time* magazine, in their article "The Purpose-Driven Summer Camp" (May 22, 2005) discusses how some parents fill up the summer with specialized camps, educating their kids in particular activities they hope will improve their job chances later in life.

Wishing the best for our children, summer is a time for parents to give their children choices not available during the school year, and every parent struggles with making good choices for their child. Some parents have the resources to provide whatever they believe is necessary for their children. Some parents do not, and the summer finds those parents struggling with the loss of school meals, child care, and programs. Summer in America reminds us of the class distinctions we have, and it highlights the ways in which parenting has changed and continues to change.

As UU's, we are invited to a discussion of Summer today not to critique individual children or parents, but to discuss trends as a whole, and how we adults help or hinder our upcoming generations.

Questions:

- What is your fondest summer memory?
- What do you think parents are struggling with when it comes to summer?
- What does our faith suggest, if anything, to help these parents?

June 13

Reading:

From a sermon by [Leslie Becknell](#)

In my early years as a Unitarian Universalist, a minister challenged the congregation to learn by heart the 7 UU principles and promised a prize to anyone who could successfully recite them. So I set out to memorize the principles and quizzed myself in the car with my handy pocket card as a prompt on the seat next to me.

[miming hands on a steering wheel]

OK, We Unitarian Universalists affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person. (that's the easiest to remember)
- Justice, equity and compassion... Justice, equity, compassion in what? Oh, yeah - Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

- Then something about encouraging spiritual growth... Right,... Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning (that one's easy too)
- Then the one about democracy in our congregations and in society, but what's that first part? Oh, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.
- Next is the one that sounds like the pledge of allegiance but not quite. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Right, we do it for the world, not just the US, and we add peace. That's good.
- And finally the interdependent web. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Whew. I did it. I learned them by heart. Pretty much. I didn't think I really merited a prize, but I was glad I had put in the effort to learn the principles by heart.

Learn by heart. Except that my heart wasn't really involved in this exercise. I was using my mind and occasionally my eyes glancing toward my cheat sheet. It was an academic exercise rather than a spiritual practice. The principles remained abstractions to me, worthy aspirations which didn't really affect me. They were floating around my mind, but were not having a real impact on my body. I didn't feel any different for having recited them.

What would it be like to really accept one another, to genuinely practice equity and compassion in the human relations with the actual humans in my life? As I genuinely imagined this possibility, I could feel something shift in my body; I could feel my heart open. It felt different to consider the principles this way. There were certain words that had an impact on me. Worth and dignity. Equity. Compassion. Search for truth. Interdependent web.

So there I was driving down the highway feeling my heart opening at the thought of treating the people in my life with genuine compassion, honoring their inherent worth and dignity. It felt good. I felt hopeful. Until suddenly two lanes of traffic were closed, and people had ignored the signs and were cutting in front of me. My heart immediately clamped shut as I started expressing my righteous outrage at these inconsiderate bozos. No compassion for what might be going on for them, how they might be feeling. No sense of equity. Those weren't people with inherent worth and dignity in those cars. I realized it wasn't so easy to carry these principles in my heart. The academic exercise of memorizing the words was much simpler than actually changing how I treated my fellow human beings.

As I considered the challenge of moving the principles out of the theoretical realm and into the sphere of everyday living, I remembered a challenge from another Unitarian Universalist minister, Harry Meserve, "If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" What might it mean to alter behavior according to these principles such that a case could be made to convince an impartial jury to convict a person of Unitarian Universalism?

Questions:

- Which Principle is easiest for you to live out daily?
- Which Principle is the hardest?
- Do you feel that the Principles can be applied on the world stage? Why or why not?

June 20

Reading:

In 1993, Don Eberly, a former White House advisor and civil society scholar, arranged a meeting of prominent thinkers to discuss the growing problem of father absence in America. Mindful of the limitations of government social policy, Eberly also wanted to talk about the importance of civil society and cultural mores in contributing to positive social change.

Child psychologist Wade Horn stated that “we realized that the growing absence of fathers was the most consequential social trend in our culture—for families and for civil society. But public policy is a weak instrument for reversing the trend; the answer is in the broader culture.”

The attendees agreed that there needed to be an organization that would stimulate a broad-based social movement to combat father absence and promote responsible fatherhood. And thus the idea for the National Fatherhood Initiative, or NFI for short, was born, grounded in the following propositions:

- Fathers make unique and irreplaceable contributions to the lives of children
- Father absence produces negative outcomes for their children
- Societies which fail to reinforce a cultural ideal of responsible fatherhood get increasing amounts of father absence
- Widespread fatherlessness is the most socially consequential problem of our time.

Moreover, research has shown us that, on average, without involved fathers, kids are more at risk to be poor, become teen parents, fail in school and come in contact with the criminal justice system.

Father absence has high economic costs as well. NFI research shows that the federal government spends \$100 billion of taxpayer money on programs that support father-absent homes.

That's why, in 1994, National Fatherhood Initiative was created - to ensure that every child has what they need to succeed: the love and support of an involved, responsible and committed father.

Its mission is based on improving the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible and committed fathers. NFI President Roland Warren is fond of saying, “Each child has a hole in his/her soul in the shape of his/her dad.”

The strategy of the organization is to educate and inspire all Americans, equip organizations and fathers in six different sectors such as military, corrections, churches, healthcare, community-based organizations and work family balance and engage all sectors of society around these issues.

The second reading is a famous quote from Mark Twain

“When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

Questions

- How has fatherhood changed during your lifetime?
- Who do you consider to be good father figures in today's society?
- How do you envision the role of father for the future?

June 27

Reading:

"When Life Is Messy" a poem by Richard S. Gilbert

It is easy to pray when the sun shines
And we are grateful for another glorious day of being.
It is hard to pray when wind and rain and thunder
Plague our every step and spoil our every plan.

It is easy to be virtuous when life goes well
And our existence is a journey from bliss to beauty and back.
It is hard to be virtuous when life assaults us
And our very being is a pilgrimage from bad to worse to worst.

It is easy to be cheerful when health bursts in us
So that we can feel the very pulse of life.
It is hard to be happy when pain and fatigue beset us
And we wonder if we can go on.

It is easy to do good when our goodness is rewarded
And we feel the power of pride in accomplishment.
It is hard to do good when we suffer for our efforts
And are troubled because we have been misunderstood.

It is easy to feel religious impulses well up inside us
When inspiration lives at our elbow and walks on our path.
It is hard to feel religious when we are tired with work to be done
And discouragement seems to mark our every move.

O God of order and neatness, we give thanks for all that is good.
We are grateful for manifold blessings bestowed upon us.
O God of chaos and disorder, be with us also when life is messy.
Bless our coming in and our going out from this day forth.

Questions:

- Unitarian Universalism comes from a Protestant tradition which values work over rest, order over chaos. How does this inheritance burden you?
- How does this inheritance strengthen and challenge you to be your best?
- What of this poem struck you as applicable to your life?

July 4

Reading

The following is an excerpt from a sermon by David R. Weissbard entitled Going It Alone given at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford, Rockford, IL.

A reading from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" speaks of our belief in the virtue of "going it alone." That is an important part of our cultural heritage - particularly the liberal heritage. Remember Emerson's words:

It is only as a [person] puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him [or her] to be strong and to prevail. What did Emerson prefer in a church? The silent church with people sitting around in utter privacy as if they had walls around them, which, in New England box pews, they did.

Traditionally, Unitarian Universalist churches attract people who are independent - people who are not looking for a religion in which they are dependent on a supernatural power or an authoritarian structure. People who want those things do not stick around long. I have come to believe that self-reliance lives in a healthy tension with community. Our individual integrity is important, but so is cooperation. One of the great concerns of our time is what is being called "the new communitarianism" - a realization of the need among people for community.

This excerpt is from a sermon given by Paul Beedle entitled Bending Toward Justice: One More Step.

America has a long and complicated relationship with a mountain called Inequality. We say—because Thomas Jefferson wrote it in our Declaration of Independence—that "all men are created equal." And we interpret "men" to mean everybody, women too, because once upon a time when people meant everybody they said "men." That was true within the lifetimes of many of us here. Many of us here remember Dr. Martin Luther King Jr giving a speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC—most of us have seen it on video, at least a piece of it—and he said he had a dream "that one day this nation [would] rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed ... that all men are created equal." And he meant everybody, and we all knew it. And we also knew, from our own experience, that in fact we are not equal. We are not the same. We are diverse in many, many ways. Still, there is something true, and something important, that Jefferson meant by saying we are all created equal.

Questions:

- How do you think Jefferson or Emerson would react in today's global economy and the world of interdependence?
- In the first reading, Emerson references his belief in self-reliance or "going it alone". What virtues do you think stand out in an environment of self-reliance? What did Emerson miss out on as a result of his independent stance?
- How should Emerson Chapel balance its need to provide a level of independence for its members to search for their own truth along with the need for people to be in community?

July 11

Reading:

The first reading is by Karen Solveig Anderson entitled The Kindness of Lo-Mein

My friend Marcy and her boyfriend Brian recently ate dinner at a local Chinese restaurant. As they enjoyed a plate of lo mein, engrossed in conversation, a hand reached down and ushered away their platter of noodles. A voice quick and agitated mumbled "Sorry!" and a thin, poorly dressed woman left the restaurant with their plate of lo mein.

In astonishment, they watched her walk down the street, holding the plate with the flat of her hand as she stuffed noodles into her mouth, slapping sharply against her face. The owner realized what had happened and darted out the front door, chasing after the noodle thief. He stood firmly in front of her, blocking her way and grabbing a side of the plate. A struggle ensued, noodles slid uneasily from one side to the other, slopping over the edge. He surged forward and pulled with a heroic strong-arm attempt to retrieve his plate. The woman's fingers slid from the plate. Noodles flew, then flopped pathetically on the sidewalk.

Left empty-handed, with soggy, contaminated noodles at her feet, the woman stood with arms hung dejectedly at her side. The owner walked victoriously back to the restaurant with the soiled plate in hand. My friends were given a new heaping plate of lo mein, although they had already consumed half of the stolen plate. A stream of apology in Chinese came from the proprietor. Unable to eat anymore, they asked to have the noodles wrapped up and set off to see their movie.

A block later, they happened upon the lo mein thief. The woman was hypercharged. She simultaneously cried, convulsed, and shouted at a man, who rapidly retreated from her side. My friend, unsure about what to do, listened to her boyfriend's plea to just walk away. But she didn't. Instead, she walked over to the thief and said, "Ah, we haven't formally met, but about ten minutes ago, you were interested in our noodles. They gave us some new ones, are you still hungry?" The woman nodded and extended her bony arms. She took the styrofoam container in her hands, bowed ever so slightly, and murmured, "Thank you, you're very kind."

What makes us walk away from discomfort? Or stay? You could say a lot about my friend's story -- a lot about generosity, kindness, attention, and thievery. I'm more interested in what motivates us to confront that which makes us uncomfortable and makes us look at the guts and grit of decisions, the choices to not address things that are uncomfortable, uneasy, unbalanced, unnatural, unbelievable. When our foundations start to shake, we can feel the tremors move up our legs and into our torsos. And we want more than anything to make it stop. Any how. Any way.

My friend Marcy could feel herself shake. I know because she told me so. But she chose not to walk away, she dealt with uncomfortableness. She held firm in the muck. Sometimes, that's all we need or can do to get to the other side -- the side where generosity, comfort, and kindness reside, the side where foundations are firm and stable. Where one's shaking walks back to the other side.

The following words are by Maryell Cleary

Knowing that we do not always live up to our best expectations of ourselves, let us in quietness seek the good within, which some call the inner light, and some "a spark of the divine."

Knowing that we live in a society which falls far short of the ideal, let us in quietness resolve to do one thing this week to aid those suffering from want and injustice.

Knowing that the earth is our home and that we have too often abused and poisoned it, let us in quietness consider how we might be part of making it more healthful for all living things.

Knowing that each of us has some sorrow or anxiety hidden within, let us consider in quietness how we may reach out to one another with our smiles, our handclasps, and our encouraging words.

Questions:

- What ways do you think a church should provide for the greater good?
- Have you ever been faced with providing compassion as a time when it also made you uncomfortable?
- How has our level of compassion developed (or not developed) over time?

July 18

Reading

"How Do You Live Your Dash" by Linda Ellis

I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.

He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning... to the end.

He noted that first came her date of birth and spoke the following date with tears, but he said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years. (1934-1998)

For that dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth...
and now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not, how much we won; the cars...the house...the cash, what matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard.. are there things you'd like to change?
For you never know how much time is left, that can still be rearranged.

If we could just slow down enough to consider what's true and real,
and always try to understand the way other people feel.

And be less quick to anger, and show appreciation more
and love the people in our lives like we've never done before.

If we treat each other with respect, and more often wear a smile.
Remembering that this special dash might only last a while.

So, when your eulogy's being read with your life's actions to rehash...
would you be proud of the things they said about how you spent your dash?

Questions:

- What do you consider are the marks of a life well lived?
- Do you have a plan for achieving those goals?
- How does our faith inform what we consider important?

July 25

Reading

"Einstein on Time" by Ken Nye

Someone told me once that
Einstein thought
time is a variable.
That is to say that time is not a constant.
Are you following this?
I think Einstein was right.

When I was a child, a year was a YEAR!
Now a year is a week.
When I was a child, a week was a whole bunch of days
of limitless possibilities,
so numerous that I planned ahead
only as far as the afternoon.
Now a week is a few meetings
interspersed with frenetic activity
that I have apparently convinced myself is important.
Never mind enjoying the moment.
Never mind stopping to smell the roses.

Yesterday, a lifetime was forever,
immeasurable,
like a light year.
But today, swirling in a mix of tomorrows and yesterdays,
a light year is comprehensible,
measurable,
and finite.

But let's not talk cosmic stuff.
Let's not throw in big words to impress.

If Einstein was right,
and I think he was,
where is the throttle?
How do I slow this thing down?

Questions:

- How do you discern what is important vs. what is urgent?
- How do you determine when it is time for things? For important conversations, for certain life-events, or even more simple things like when to house-hunt or when to look for a new job?
- What is one memory you have of knowing that something happened at just the right time?