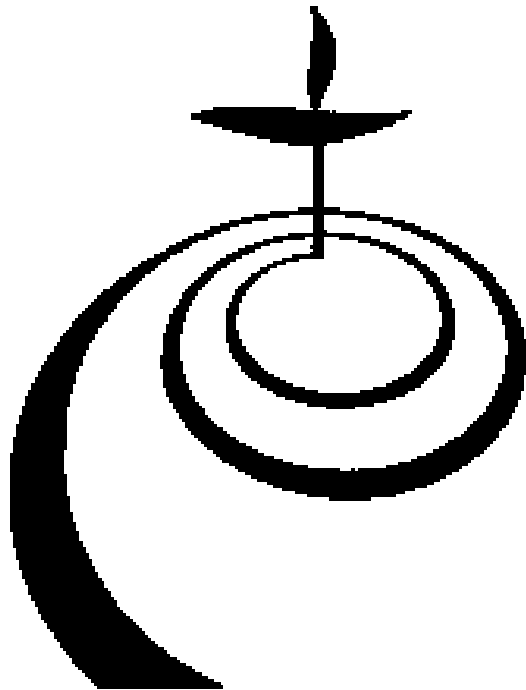


**Church at the Center**  
**A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist**  
**By The Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia**

**On June 14, 2009**



*The inner world is the world of your requirements and your energies and your structure and your possibilities that meets the outer world. And the outer world is the field of your incarnation. That's where you are. You've got to keep both going. As Novalis said, "The seat of the soul is there where the inner and outer worlds meet."*

~Joseph Campbell

## Reading

From Parker Palmer in Words of Encouragement newsletter:

....real abundance is found not in a surfeit of money and things, but in a rich network of relationships in which we can give and receive as need arises. If compassion means a capacity to accompany others in difficult moments and passages in life, there is more of it when we become more transparent and vulnerable to each other.

... beneath our narrow self-interest there is ....a deep imperative of the soul to live out life's brief span in generative rather than degenerative relationships, in circles large and small.

As I finished writing those words, I thought of the great American poet Walt Whitman and his poem "States!" (a reference to the United States), which begins with these lines:

*Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?*

*By an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?*

*Away!*

*I arrive, bringing these, beyond all the forces of courts and arms,*

*These! to hold you together as firmly as the earth itself is held together.*

Affection and compassion—and the courage to practice them—are the qualities we need if we are to find our way through the current carnage to a better way of life. I do not mean the affection and compassion we experience between family members and friends, but the kind we experience "in the company of strangers."

Clearly, our schools, religious communities and other voluntary associations are among the answers to the "where" question. These are the settings in which we learn certain habits of the heart, for better or for worse. We can teach young people in a way that cultivates habits of individualism and competition, or we can teach them the habits of mutuality and linking hands, and we can do so not with our words, via bad preaching, but with our actions, via good teaching. □ □

## Sermon

I am glad to see you here today. It's a choice that you made and I have profound respect for that choice – your time is precious. You didn't come here for amusement, for continuing education, for childcare, or even for coffee – you could get all of that somewhere else. But this place is like no other place – or at any rate this place has the capacity to be like no other place. What did you come here for?

What did I come here for? Well – I came here because I have a real belief, an abiding faith in religious community – I call it a faith because there are no guarantees and it is only my sense of the possibility that keeps me moving forward. Okay – not just that – also the combined wisdom of many, many clergy and lay leaders that religious community is a profoundly important project.

Still it came to me in a moment of faith – the first time I willingly attended a church service on Sunday morning about 25 years ago. By the time I left that morning – and it was too tender to say out loud at the time – I had a sense, a feeling, I was seized by a recognition that what could happen in that hour – truly an hour of power – moment as I like to say – of great moment.

I am going to suggest – in fact I am suggesting right now that you came here with

some hope.

I believe that we come to church – or to houses of worship – which – remember comes from the same root as the German *worthschippen* – to shape that which is of worth – or to assign worth – we come to houses of worship not because we hope to grovel before something but because we hope to rise above something – to be lifted, to discover and to shape something of worth in ourselves and – if we are honest and honorable – in the world as well.

Congregational life – is a remarkable creature. For one thing it appears to be shaped entirely by human hands – it exists because we put our hands together and, meeting by meeting, learning by learning, leading with love – we shape it.

It is made of our care for one another -- through Professional Ministry, Lay Ministry, and Care Ministry, and through compassion we form a circle of care – not a circle meant to keep others out – but to embrace one another as we make our way through challenging lives.

It's made of our enjoyment with another – through feasts, potlucks, parties, embraces in hard times and laughter in celebration.

It's made of our hope in one another – by providing religious education for all ages and creating an environment where we make it clear to our young people that we yearn to pass on to them life-affirming values – that we do care if they take it or leave it – that we see in them the future of Unitarian Universalism. Our hope in one another is manifest in our desire to care for our great building and our beautiful grounds.

It's made of our curiosity as we love to explore the world of ideas together and hope to help one another become wise in understanding our humanity and our world.

It's made of our recognition of the profound vulnerability of human life – which we recognize by honoring our losses together, providing care, and remembering to celebrate -- as often as possible – the holy days that remind us of the wonder of life.

It's made of our rites of passage – birth, naming, coming of age, bridging, marriage, death.

That's a lot for one place to do. It might be tempting to think of congregational life as a sort of one stop shopping center – get your spirits lifted, be fed, celebrated, meet some new friends, find comfort and maybe even get your car fixed. It's all here at the Countryside Center. Sometimes I envy Willow Creek or Saddleback – the mega churches that network people's lives so completely – it is like one stop shopping – but Mike Durall quotes Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon who called our society – the house, car, flat screen society “the vast supermarket of desires.” And then I don't envy those mega churches quite so much. It's better to refocus – it's not all about convenience – in fact it's about something quite different. In a society where we are always being trained into chasing after, acquiring, and hungering it seems like a disservice to be a full service shopping center and spiritual home. Instead it seems vitally and centrally important to be reminded of where real home – in here – out here – and in the larger world of dreaming and suffering. To be inconvenienced enough that we can find our way back to what is really important.

And, not least, – congregational life is made of our service – to one another and to the world. When we speak of the interdependence of life this is what we mean – that we are called by the world and to the world – we are needed and we – trite as it sounds – need to be needed. The truth is that when we live largely for ourselves and even for

our families we are missing a fundamental source of our fulfillment and our full humanity. Service has been at the heart of religion since the prophets called the Israelites to a new sense of justice – we find our own freedom and our own wealth in establishing it for others

These are all facets of congregational life and of the essence of real humanity.

Congregational life touches upon the core of humanity – through all these things – and still that is only the rich minimum. Here we are touched through word and music and silence – we are touched in spirit – it is not simply the events of our lives and our experienced responses to those events that matter – but the very meaning for which we seek. We strive to give our young people religious education – and this is the place where we can challenge ourselves – where we can strive to become what church consultant Mike Durall calls spiritually mature. One of my favorite quotes is from Willa Cather who said “The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.” I would add – about us, within us and among us. To borrow an old expression – we are deep – we are creatures of spiritual, emotional depth – our human greatness arises when we live from that depth. And that takes time, practice, and encouragement. En Courage Ment.

Ultimately when you roll out of bed on Sunday morning and forgo the golf links or the family outing or the pajama morning and you come through those doors – you are hoping to be touched – as they say – where you live – where you live. You know we talk about intellectual stimulation -- Unitarian Universalists love their intellectual stimulation. Egghead that I am, I love it myself. But on Sunday morning – or any time that I show up for worship either to offer it or to experience it from the pews – intellectual stimulation is a poor substitute for spiritual awakening – for feeling invited to be alive in the core of your being. Now that can be unsettling – the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre called it Nausea – well – he didn't really mean to – but that moment when we look deeply into our center and then open eyed out at the world – that is unsettling. It should be – it is the raw flame of life. Where the questions and answers tumble into each other – church is the place to come to share that unsettled feeling and to rejoice in the discoveries that are only possible when we are unsettled in just that way.

That is where we find spiritual maturity – at the intersection of the inner and outer worlds – at the intersection of the personal and global – at the intersection of yearning and aspiration. What Joseph Campbell said has real power - “The inner world is the world of your requirements and your energies and your structure and your possibilities that meets the outer world. And the outer world is the field of your incarnation. That's where you are.” Well – amen Mr. Campbell. I remember so clearly how overwhelmed I was when Joseph Campbell came to my college in my ever so raw first year. He was profound – so profound that I left the auditorium feeling shaken up, confused, excited and challenged – so challenged that his hour or so talk pushed me to spend much of my life trying to understand what he was saying to his young audience. What I know now is that that intersection – that place that he said – “that's where you are” is not only where you are – it is where we are – where – at our best – we can be. It is the center of the center – and it is where are centered.

That centering is spiritual maturity.

Last night while wrestling with this sermon I tuned in a past episode of Bill Moyers Journal in which he was talking about the murder of the seven Amish girls a couple of years ago – the brutal murders in which the man, distraught over the death of his young daughter and angry with God entered an Amish schoolroom in Pennsylvania and shot ten girls – killing seven and then killing himself. The Amish community drew together and comforted each other and then they prayed and prayed and out of their prayer came forgiveness and mercy. They went to the family of the killer and offered their comfort to his widow and children. They attended his funeral. They did not claim that it eased their grief – but they said that it relieved them of the heavy burden of bitterness and anger. From my perspective – that’s spiritual maturity. I’m sure that it did not come overnight and not easily – but it carried each grieving family and the entire community through the bleakest of times and allowed them collectively to be an inspiration to the many people. Religious community should make such maturity possible – it should change us – and make us capable of things that we’d otherwise not dream of. It should bring us the courage to press our creative edge forward and to live from our new creative center. It should bring us some peace in times of hardship and give us strength to think beyond our own lives to the hardship of people near by and far away. Above all, religious community, what we have here – or are working on having here – should bring us back into the world in fulfillment in love and in service. Durall says, “Sunday should be the first day of the week.” What he means is that somehow what you receive here on a Sunday should in some way wash you clean of the week before and renew you for the week to come.

Spiritual maturity is like any other form of maturity – it doesn’t just swoop down and then occupy you completely – it requires time, commitment, and practice. It shouldn’t only be Sunday – each meeting, each rehearsal, each conversation is an opening through which transformation can come. And that’s our business – the transformation business – transforming sorrows into healing, transforming injustice into justice, transforming individual lives into rich shared experience, transforming timidity into the courage to create, and transforming our world through good faith, love and service. Now some of you may still be sitting there thinking – Hey – I am fine as I am and I don’t need to be changed – thank you very much. And you are welcome to think that – but you are going to change whether you like it or not – because change is our nature. A couple years ago when I read Jim Collins successful book – From Good to Great I was struck by this – he wrote. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline. Therefore let us choose something that can galvanize us as a congregation and point us in toward the good.

I want to challenge us to think in the next year – about spiritual maturity – don’t get hung up on the word – Sometimes I think that people have concerns about the word “spiritual” in order to keep it at arms length – but really – we know – the spirit and the spiritual live at that intersection between the inner and outer worlds – we where live – where we are – where the church lives.

This is a shared project – when I walked into that church that first day 25 years ago I saw that a congregation is, perhaps, the most powerful transformative unit that we have. Religion is meant to be the place where we engage issues of ultimate meaning. I remember thinking that if the minister cared, if the people took themselves and one another, their spiritual lives, and the cries of the world seriously a congregation could

enable generations of cultural creatives and world changers, that the notion of existential aloneness is a myth and the reality is that there is a unit that invites us into a communion that could easily – I mean easily -- transform the world. In such a young congregation as ours -- only a little over 50 years old -- all that it requires is the usual hokey pokey – that you put your whole self in, that you find shared and fundamental values, and that you live them into the world.

Unitarian Universalists are fond of saying that we are a religion of seekers and that we can ask any question that we want in our search for truth and meaning. But it is conversely true that we need a place where we are questioned – where we are invited to be more. Where we are called back to our Center. A center that we have created together. This is my last sermon of my first year with you. And we have created this year together. I am more excited than I was a year ago – because I know you better – because I know that you are capable of remarkable growth and change – flashing creativity, generous hard work, and a growing compassion.

You see -- it takes more than the work of our hands – the work of our hands is brought to life by our values, our choices – it is that spirit that guides us – we may call it by a hundred names – but there is a common spirit that moves us into our common life – a Unitarian Universalist spirit, a timeless spirit.

Circle

Let us share and magnify that spirit –