

## YOU ARE THE PEOPLE, THIS IS THE PLACE, AND NOW IS THE TIME

A sermon offered March 14, 2010

At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

Reading: "Widening Circles" by William Ellery Channing

*I am a living member of the great family of all souls; and I cannot improve or suffer myself, without diffusing good or evil around me through an ever-enlarging sphere. I belong to this family. I am bound to it by vital bonds. I am always exerting an influence upon it. I can hardly perform an act that is confined in its consequences to myself. Others are affected by what I am, and say, and do. So that a single act of mine may spread and spread in widening circles, through a nation or humanity. Through my vice I intensify the taint of vice throughout the universe. Through my misery I make multitudes sad. On the other hand, every development of my virtue makes me an ampler blessing to [the human] race. Every new truth that I gain makes me a brighter light to humanity. I am organically connected with the great family of the universal parent. Plainly then it is for my happiness that this family should be watched over and should prosper.*

It's time for the stewardship sermon -- or as we sometimes refer to it -- the Sermon on the Amount.

Now don't regret that you came this morning -- this is an important Sunday to be here -- to be part of this conversation. Like magic -- almost -- money transforms one thing into another. The other day I transformed some of my work into money and then the money transformed my work into a scarf I'd wanted for a while. Money is a transformative medium -- it is a part of what makes vision emerge into reality. Church is that place that helps to assure that we'll base our realities on a good and worthy vision -- nobler than a scarf. So for me the sermon on the amount is less about the amount than it is about spending time in reflection on the vision together.

If you are new -- be patient -- you can learn a lot about where we've come from and where we're headed as a congregation and a faith. I like this time of year because it is a time of setting priorities -- of course there are piles of meetings where committees and subcommittees wrestle with the numbers -- but over all the question is - what are the basics and above the basics -- what are our priorities -- what are we called to do? Unless you go into the ministry the word calling may be an infrequently used word. But there is a calling for each of us -- and for all of us gathered here -- there is a calling.

I believe that each one of us, as we are born, becomes part of the speaking of the world -- the voice of all that is. The blending of our voices -- every single living voice -- human and non-human, plant, animal, the very earth, the sum of history -- speaks. It can be a cacophony -- or sound like one -- like a tremendous discord. There are some moments when the multiplicity calls almost in one voice. It can be joyful or it can be the sound of discord -- still, that, I believe, is the calling.

I think of the words of Mary Daly that I shared last week -- that, in the beginning was not the word -- in the beginning was the listening. Our beginning is when we truly listen -- beneath the cacophony -- with focus and intent -- to our inner wisdom, to our times, and to one another. It is when babies learn to focus on others when we move beyond our private skins and into relation that we are ready to become full people. Then that we begin to hear -- whether we understand it or not -- the chorus of voice which is the world. And if we listen now... It's impossible for me not to think of Charles Dickens famous words from the very opening of the Tale of Two Cities:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had*

*everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way*

- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. Dickens could write and he could hear the voices of his times -- each individual story and voice and the collective sound...

It can be complicated to tease out from the surging sounds, the real character of the times. In large part we each come here to do this -- to quiet the noise -- to have the opportunity to focus, to have time to learn, reflect, question, expand our thinking, hear the voice within -- to clear our minds so that we can, in truth -- with a small "t" -- hear the voice of our times. Our superficial brains chatter away -- get the groceries, scratch that place behind my ear, get a snack, make that appointment, thank goodness spring is coming, maybe the utility bills will go down, how are the kids doing, is that sale still on at Target... it's almost as though everything around us is conspiring to distract us from the deeper voices - the voices that call to us with purpose and meaning. For so long Unitarian Universalism reflected the larger culture in our obsession with the individual. It was a good thing, to the extent that it empowered each person to think more freely and critically. At the same time, that rugged individualism became a stumbling block for us as a religious movement. Our congregations were full of talented, remarkable folk. But to move together was a challenge. Each one with his or her own direction -- like cats in a herd. But, gradually, in our congregations people began turning toward one another.

It isn't the purpose of this sermon to explore all the reasons that this happened -- but it's been a consistent trend. It's a time in which many people are recognizing not something new -- but something fundamental -- this essential aspect of our humanity -- our connectedness. We know we are connected, when we can put down the reins of our cowboy individualism. The Reverend Michael Dowd -- the minister who travels the country preaching the good news of evolution -- and who has visited and spoken here -- recommended the book "The Empathic Civilization" by Jeremy Rifkin. Rifkin says that we continue to evolve but we also are awakening to aspects of ourselves -- perhaps innate -- that have been part of our beings since the beginning. He also says "I think therefore I am, has been replaced by I am connected therefore I exist."

And that is a central truth of our existence.

It is a strange reality to face at a time when we've had centuries of apparent disconnection. Rifkin points out that times of peace aren't notable. News and history get written largely when there's struggle. The struggle is notable, he says -- because it strikes a discord in us -- it seems novel -- weird -- unnatural. Our economic system, our ways of living have been structured to keep us apart. So we think that's what it's all about: my own big car, my own snow blower, my own lawn mower, right next door to the neighbors own snowblower, lawn mower -- ultra super wide flat panel TV. But -- we know, deep inside, something very different. We have a yearning for one another -- a desire to share. We cannot survive to adult hood without countless hands nurturing us, countless voices encouraging us to keep on keeping on. We yearn for companions and we grieve at their loss. Remember random acts of kindness and senseless beauty -- we feel pleasure when we do kindness to others because we feel more really, our connection. The more we simply do kindness simply to ourselves the hungrier we get.

So why don't we live in a big puppy pile? Well -- we aren't that simple. We arise from connection and it's our nature -- but that sense can be lost to us. When there's great suffering -- sometimes it brings out the best in people. We join to support one another. Sometimes fear emerges and divides. When the storms hit -- Sri Lanka, New Orleans, Haiti, Chile -- there's a primal impulse to help. Our children show it -- their joy in raising nearly one thousand dollars for Haiti from the sale of their own art work was clear. But there are also those for whom the feeling that arises is hatred -- perhaps out of fear that they may be next hit with catastrophe. I think of Pat Robertson, whose venom seems to rise whenever people suffer anywhere in the world. I suspect that he needs to think that those who are struck by challenge and tragedy are so because they were somehow marked by God for such suffering. And that if he speaks shrilly enough in the name of God perhaps he will be spared. There are times when our culture seems --

as the pundits say -- more polarized than ever. I think that this is precisely because of the depth at which a much larger number of people have come to recognize that we need not be polarized. And when we are not polarized: everyone is precious and no one is special -- when disasters hit and you emerge in tact -- it was not that God was on your side -- but the luck of the draw or the help of many human hands. And that others did not emerge in tact was not because they deserved their fate. The polarization has always had a place because fear has always had a place. Today we heard the voices of fear so loudly because they have the means to broadcast -- but not because they are in the vanguard.

Perhaps it is the nature of their God that has made them fearful - not a Christian nor a Jewish nor an Islamic God -- but an all powerful, over arching God that could appear in any religion -- in the presence of whom nothing is as important -- it is totally vertical from great powerful force who takes sides in battle to the one who decides your fate after you die. But this vertical arrangement -- has been used by powers of state to justify their actions, to declare themselves anointed by God for power, to declare who is fit and unfit. Over time it has divided us further and further from one another. But there have always been, are now, and will always be -- those who do not believe in that God -- but believe in relationships that are more on the level -- creature to creature -- self - to self. Those who know that no lofty idea is more important than the person before us who needs us or even the one far away who needs us. The development of Unitarian Universalism came directly out of the faiths of people who believed these things -- that we are joined in love and that any God worth God's salt is part of the love that binds us together -- not by belief -- but simply by love -- in many names, forms, languages, religious paths. We arose from that place of unifying love and we have moved ever more firmly toward it over time. It is not that there are no other people who hold to a faith that connects and unifies -- but that we have embraced this -- increasingly over the centuries -- in such a way that we are radically inclusive in our faith. We fiercely cling to the belief that there is no one way to express the great mystery in which we live and move and have our being -- except that it is all and it embraces all. If there were ever a time for such a faith to speak up -- to be a presence for this precious idea -- now is the time.

Tired of polarizations our faith has moved -- not away from honoring the worth, insight and value of the individual but toward valuing the deeper insight, the greater strength, the sweeter tenderness, the warmer comfort, the keener purpose, the higher energy, and more perfect union that comes from being together -- a community of common faith and common purpose. For seven years this congregation experienced uncertainties as minister's came and went and the search continued for a settled minister with whom to work. It was a valuable time -- because it demonstrated the great strength that resides in each person here -- it helped a gifted congregation to see, appreciate, and draw out the gifts of the people. And it illustrated your deeper truth that you are because you are together and you are together because a true purpose joins you -- joins us. For seven years you gestated, visioned, dreamed, had disappointments and visioned again -- now we have reached a time when vision is emerging -- even bursting into reality. There is so much energy here that it draws people to this place. We are in a state of vibrant growth. So many new people are here now -- our "us" is rich with the past, rich in the present, and rich with the future. New people are finding us and we are making it easier and easier for people to find us because we are finding our own voice. And our voice is a voice of service -- many forms of service. From Adult Faith Development's amazing movies that awaken the conscience and attune the spirit -- to social actions many initiatives that have moved this congregation forward and forward to align ourselves with a much wider community -- from the ever evolving Religious Education Program for Children and youth to the revitalized small group ministry Chalice Circles that are beginning in the fall that deepen our faith and our connections with each other. From the covenant of Right Relations which we are working toward to the energized program council that has accomplished so much this year. From the astonishingly and consistently nourishing music program with our active and growing choir to the conscientious team working to research and chart our course to a second Sunday morning service -- we are discovering in a myriad ways the joy of serving. And we are taking it even farther. As part of our successful Building Campaign we decided to earmark 5% for social justice -- for outreach that makes a difference in the lives of others. It was an important step for us. Not only are we ever hearing one another better and finding our voice -- we are growing to further embody our principles in the world -- hearing the world better. Every day, this brings us more energy -- the exercise we did earlier was a simple reminder of the sort of charge you get when you stop worrying simply about your own acre and begin to tend to others. We took an inventory of our committees at Program Council last week -- just to see how people are doing --

whether there are enough volunteers -- of course there is always room for more -- always more work -- but truly everyone around the table was smiling and reporting that their attendance was good and that there were new people and strong people involved in their committees -- making all this amazing stuff happen!

This congregation is less than 60 years old but we are entering spiritual maturity. That's why we plan to dedicate a growing percentage of our pledges each year to do the work of world healing -- social justice -- doing good. Not just because it feels great -- though it does -- it feels great because, at base, that is who we are -- not creatures of isolation and individualism -- but creatures who need one another and need to be needed by one another. We want our children to learn this earlier than, perhaps, some of us have -- that they are in and of the world -- that they are partners in a faith that will ever encourage them to branch and flower spiritually and to grow deeper roots into the world.

It takes time to learn this -- particularly if we didn't grow up in a community like this one. It takes time to learn how to engage, how to participate. And we are all learning together. Sometimes it helps when we watch our children. One colleague told a story of an eight year old in her congregation from a family with very little money who pledged and faithfully paid 1.00 a week. It was a lot of money for her and for the congregation it was a priceless gift. For her it was also an early sweet lesson in remembering that she is needed and appreciated and part of something. And we yearn to be part of something -- something larger than our families -- something that listens to the world and makes a difference.

These days our world seems fractured and stressed -- we live in what seems to be greater uncertainty than ever. But that, too, is an illusion. Until very recent generations every generation lived in uncertainty -- life was fragile, we were dependent upon the forces of nature, and we did not live so heavily buffered against it. For one or two generations it seemed as though this was changing -- but that was only a part an illusion to keep us consuming things that we did not need and that we could not rely upon. Built Ford Tough and Solid as Rock our world was anything but. I suspect that is another reason that new people are appearing here all the time -- because instead of turning to those illusions for fulfillment -- those things that leave us emptier and poorer -- we are, increasingly turning toward places of real value and real values -- where we are richer with every fresh experience. Instead of turning toward things we are turning toward one another. And for those who have been here a long time are rediscovering their energy and enthusiasm for the projects of the congregation and hoping for even more. These are not dreams -- they are intentions. I have been struck in so many meetings over the last couple of months at how much profound agreement there is among us all. Oh there are differences in methods or timing or some strategies -- but there is this strong building spirit -- this sense of purpose -- that we don't have this place simply to relax in -- that we don't have our skills and gifts merely to enjoy and admire -- that we are not here for ourselves primarily -- but for one another and even more for those who are not here -- those whose hearts ache for a community of spiritual support and freedom, those whose lives are torn by conflict, those who are hungry, those who have fallen on hard times, those who experience the sting of injustice.

So we come here -- to create a place of some certainty -- no tidy answers -- certainly -- but the certainty of acceptance and love and nurture. Some of the certainty is mundane -- that the service will happen at the appointed time even if we forgot to change our clocks. That the copier will work sooner or later. One of the things that has rarely been certain here is when people actually pay their pledges. So I appeal to you -- no I more than appeal I urge you to do three things -- one is, that you think on your pledge sooner rather than later so that we can know where we stand for all the amazing things that we want to accomplish in this coming church year. Too often our Stewardship Season drags on as people forget or put off filling out their pledge card. Remember that your pledge card is your expression of hope and commitment to this faith and this congregation. Fill it out within the next two to three weeks at the longest. It is not for service rendered but the foundation for making vision a reality. Each year this season is our time not to think simply about dollars and cents -- but about commitment to this congregation. Second, that, if you have the time, you will attend one of the Stewardship parties. They are only, in part, for pledging -- even more -- they are for remembering that we are not here to be members of a virtual community -- but instead to be part of a community of living, breathing, snacking, talking, spiritually growing, justice seeking, faithful folk meeting face to face, heart to heart. These

gatherings will help you -- in the same way that circle suppers or parties or potlucks or small group ministries do -- to experience the true warmth and sense of gathered purpose of this community. Enjoy that presence for yourself -- be there to be a presence to others. Third to remember to give with all your heart -- as you are truly able to. Of course there are charts to help you figure out your pledge -- but only you know your real situation. We must each give so that we can feel that it makes some difference in our lives -- but not so it jeopardizes our lives. The dollar a week from that 8 year old was a fortune given and received. I know people in this congregation who have lost jobs or who have suffered terrible setbacks. This may be a time to reach out for help and support rather than pledging. It cannot go without saying that you are not welcomed here because you pledge -- but that you pledge because you are welcomed here and it is you who are welcomed - not a fictional character with more money than you have -- or, for that matter, less money than you have. But you -- as you are -- at your most generous and committed not at someone else's. We each have to struggle with that. I do each year. But this past month as I was writing out another pledge payment, I felt the deepest satisfaction. I don't know where my particular money goes and I don't care. I only know it helps enable this remarkable congregation to keep thriving and moving forward. We are both poised for change and changing -- we making vision a reality. In a world of uncertainty we are creating some sort of certainty together here for one another -

Certainty that people's walk will reflect their talk. Certainty that this place will hold us that we may hold one another that we may reach out and embrace our world. Within us each there is a voice that calls us into relation -- it is our core -- our nature. It is the task and the calling of this faith and our congregation to hold us each that we may unfold and reveal our deepest, finest nature. We create together this sacred place that can give to one another this chance. We create together this sacred place that we may offer this same healing to our world -- that we may bear witness to the oneness of being and our deep responsibility to act on behalf of that oneness in the spirit of our principles. Therefore, give generously of your fullest self that we may fulfill our calling together. The world and our times are calling us forward -- give yourself to this calling that we may all answer together. For we are the people, this is the place, and the time is Now.