

“Sustaining Faith”
Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
January 10, 2010
Rev. Leslie Takahashi Morris

On the last night of one of our annual winter pilgrimages, a group of us in the Modified Residency Program at Meadville Lombard Theological School gathered for our version of the last supper. We were an odd bag, those of us who spent our Januaries in the balmy climes of Chicago and after a month of study and being away from routine and family, we were giddy thinking about going home the next day. We got on the topic of Clinical Pastoral Education—the much-feared, chaplaincy training required of all candidates for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Tough training for any would-be minister: for UUs, an added challenge comes from being a religious minority. One of the women recalled how she was asked by a patient to recite the Lord’s Prayer. Having left Methodism decades before, she found that she could only get through the prayer by starting from the top at each line:

Our Father Who Art in Heaven, Hallowed Be Thy Name

(Pause)

(Our Father Who Art In Heaven, Hallowed Be Thy Name)

Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done on Earth As It is In Heaven!

(Pause)

(Our Father Who Art In Heaven, Hallowed Be Thy Name

Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done on Earth As It is In Heaven!)

Give Us This Day..etcetera, etcetera.

She made it through the whole prayer though with some quite dramatic pauses and a lot of sweat. We commiserated that this must have been the hardest moment of CPE. “Oh no,” she replied, saying that in the last weeks of her training, she became more confident. She knew that for a Methodist she recited the Lord’s Prayer, for the Catholic she would omit that extra line about the kingdom and the power and the glory and if things were more serious, call for a priest. For the Baptist or the Pentecostal, the 23rd Psalm and a prayer asking Jesus to intervene, the Jewish patients needed a rabbi and the Episcopalians were partial to Reinhold Neibuhr’s Serenity Prayer. “I really thought I had it together,” she said. “And then I walked in a room and the patient told me she was a Unitarian Universalist! My mind went blank. A UU? What do I do for a UU?”

The Rev. Gordon McKeeman, past president of Starr King School for the Ministry and a beloved member of the Charlottesville congregation we served, asked at the 2004 General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations—do we have what it takes to go deeper, to do more than than affirm freedom of belief, to being a place that holds lives and keeps them, a place where a legacy of truth is stored and passed to the next generation. Unitarian Universalist theologian, the Rev. Dr. Thandeka calls this being a “sustaining faith.” I’ve been a UU long enough to have passed from rapture to disillusion and back again. I stay a UU because I believe we do have a faith powerful enough to meet life’s inevitable, trying times.

In certain moments of our lives, we need all the silt to be washed away, to be left with the nuggets of our most sustaining truths. And because I am privileged to sit with many people in some of the best and hardest moments of their lives, I believe that the time to know what gems

you hold is before you need to hold them. For me, our heritage offers many gems. When someone asks whether we are a cult, I remember that Unitarianism was the religion of our nation's second president, John Adams. When I sit with someone struggling with depression, I think of Dorothea Dix who fought for the mentally ill when others thought them possessed by devils. When I am amazed and awed by what our children and youth dare to do, I think of Sofia Lyons Fahs who thought that children possessed intelligence which needed to be developed, rather than an innate heathen nature which needed to be defeated.

At the end of my time as a student chaplain, one of my colleagues said that he had spent the entire summer praying for me to be saved from my devilish beliefs. I have learned not to be defensive when others question who we are and our credentials as religious people. I just take a deep breath and tell them a little about us and how much we are part of this country. Some are skeptical, and yet many are intrigued by the story of our background as the meeting ground of the descendants of two groups of Christian heretics. People are often amazed that we are not some fly-by-night cult but a tradition carrying forth a heritage of sacrifice and strength that is almost as old as European settlement in this continent. I find sustenance in our heretical past with its emphasis on including more of the human experience and more of the human family. Religious scholar Karen Armstrong observes that the roots of the word heresy mean "to go one's own way"—and that, most certainly, is what we do.

In our sustaining faith, we have a proud history and those who came before us stand with us.

People gather with us each week out of the ordinary miracle of their lives. People holding down jobs or struggling to find them. People looking for ways to raise their children with principles and ethics, people coping with the challenges of relationships and work and aging. People seeking to guide the everyday and larger choices in their lives to a larger map. People just looking to connect in a world when we are all too much like the boinging and whooshing balls of our story. When I think about the need to connect, I think about Brandon. Brandon was a young man with multiple mental and physical developmental difficulties who came to both our services every Sunday for more than a year. Barely able to speak, living in group care, mobility challenged, he was about as different as possible from the independent, intellectual Unitarian Universalist. He was proud that he chose us as his religious home himself and would come up to light a silent candle every week in his electric wheelchair. When he died suddenly, the congregation realized how many people this young man who could barely speak had touched.

In the Charlottesville congregation, in less than two years, almost two dozen people died and it felt as if we lost a whole beloved generation as well as witnessed a numbing number of tragic events. This time forced me into the deepest dialogue with the saving nature of our faith. Almost every month and sometime week after week, David and I sat with those who were dying and with the families of people who had just died, privileged to hear lives recounted and commemorated. I cannot say with integrity that I was not sometimes envious of my colleagues whose faith allowed them to state that a dying person was bound for a better place, a perfect afterlife. Yet I know firsthand, because I live and work within its embrace every day, the immortality of good lives and the healing power of care and community. Each of the memorial services held testified to the power of living right in this world.

In our sustaining faith, we believe in the promise and the potential of this life and each life.

Linda had suffered for many years from bipolar disorder—her life and the life of her family had been turned inside out over and over again by that awful disease and when she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, she was living on her own to give them a break. Her church friends made sure she was not alone. They gave her rides to the doctor. They brought her ice cream when that was the only food her chemo allowed her to stomach. They vacuumed. And she and I talked about what she believed about death and also about what she wanted to say to the people she loved before she died. Hard things, deep things: she kept putting them off. One night I visited her and she was losing the ability to talk.

Her words were coming out in random order, and yet because ours was an on-going conversation, I could guess at what I thought she wanted to say. I asked her questions and she said yes and no. And then, when even that grew too hard, she nodded. “There are things that will have to go unsaid, aren’t there?” She nodded. “To the people you love so much.” She nodded. “It’s not what you wanted to happen,” I said. A tear ran down her cheek. “It is not fair, is it?” And she smiled and we both laughed, hers silently and we sat there holding hands. That was the last time I saw her conscious.

The last fall we were in Charlottesville, one elder gave our congregation an amazing gift. Dick chose to invite us into his death, not in a reality television, self-aggrandizing way—rather with an integrity and bravery that still astounds David and me both. When his pain became unbearable, he didn’t fade away from church life. He told the congregation of his decision to enter Hospice, the organization he had worked for when he was healthier, because he wanted to model a good death. For the last years of his life, he had been on a long search for the answer to take away his fear of death. David and I met with him regularly and both of us saw him the day he died. He never found the exact thing he wanted to find and yet he built a community of other caring seekers around him. In his last days, he relaxed when he realized the church would carry on the work of his life, promoting good and dignified ways to die. In his final hours, he was surrounded by those who loved him and at one point, in the emotional and spiritual euphoria that can accompany the shutting down of the physical being, he looked around and exclaimed, “You all are here. It is so wonderful!”

In our sustaining faith, our communion—that which we hold in common-- is community and our hope of a transforming unity can only be sought in its depths.

During my time in Clinical Pastoral Education at the University of Virginia Hospitals, I realized anew the transformative power of our faith tradition. When my conservative and even mainstream Christian colleagues debated their internal feelings of revulsion to people who led lifestyles of which they did not approve, I was able to be present to these lives. I could talk to those struggling with addiction. I could baptize a baby at the request of a teenage mother whose partner was in prison. I certainly did not condemn those in interracial marriage. I could perform a special blessing at the moment when a young mother gave her baby to the adoptive parents who would raise her. I could listen to the fears of a lesbian mother in a state who did not acknowledge her right to be in a hospital room with her sick child. I could talk to people who simply wanted to say what they were afraid of without having the chaplain invoke a God they

did not believe in. In all these life- and truth-filled moments, I did not have to wrestle myself into a relationship *against* my religion's beliefs and so could use my energy to be present.

One afternoon in my chaplaincy training, I pushed the button to gain admission to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit which was my assignment that summer. The charge nurse gestured me to approach her desk and then announced in a stage whisper. "Shaken baby in Room 4. Social work on the way over." As I walked into the room, another nurse was standing over a blanket-wrapped infant of only a few months. The little form was connected to the tubes and machines that never seemed right attached to a baby. A man and a woman stood, before the acrylic bassinet. Their faces were stiff and expressionless: The nurse's mouth was twisted into an expression of hatred unexpected in a place where the staff is so dedicated and so loving in the immensely challenging work they do. She frowned when she saw me take a step towards the parents and I hesitated. Then I took a breath and stepped forward. "I'm the chaplain," I said. "Can I do anything for you?" "Oh, can we pray?" asked the mother, grabbing my hand. As I spoke into the agony of that room, both parents began to cry. Child abuse is abhorrent to me. Yet the humanity of those parents could not be dismissed. Every time they saw me, they would ask if we could pray and in that oasis, I would feel their struggle and shame—and hope—in a way I did not feel it in their frozen masks the rest of the time. Perhaps, that opening was the place for the "new light to break through" in Charles Howe's words.

In our sustaining faith, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity, the potential for good, in all.

I dream that a generation from now our amazing, powerful faith is truly sustaining to more people, those who today have never ever heard of us and those already in our fold. One of the disservices we do is when we play to our least common denominator, failing to claim our amazing legacy and to pass it on. Some of you have heard me talk about a conversation I had a few years ago with one of our youth, a birthright Unitarian Universalist who had started in the church nursery and continued into the high school youth group. "I think religion is really interesting," she said. "When I grow up, I think I will get one." Her words haunt me, knowing that her Unitarian Universalist experience allowed her to bounce against many truths and caring people—and never connect deeply with any one.

I stand before you, as one who has felt her own life transformed by this religion and whose sense of call is about bringing its meaning to as many lives as possible. People who do not understand us think it must be easy to be in a religion with so much freedom. I think to make it walk in the world is one of the most challenging spiritual practices one could imagine. In our religion, we must do the tough work of sorting out for ourselves what we believe, passing our own lives "through the fire of thought" as another of our forbearers, Ralph Waldo Emerson instructed. We must do this as individuals and as communities. We must be willing to find our own sustaining truths and proclaim them to the world. What are yours? Here once again are mine:

In our sustaining faith, we have a proud history and those who came before us stand with us. We hold the promise and the potential of this life and each life. Our communion is community and our hope of a transforming unity can only be sought in its depths.

We embrace the inherent worth and dignity, the possibility for good, in all.

We live in a time when we must know what holds us. May our sustaining truths sound in our day-to-day lives and may our sustaining faith be one we are not afraid to claim out loud and in public, for in its truth, we are never alone. May we be the ones to make it so.

Benediction words of Theodore Parker

Be ours 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.