

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church
January 3, 2010
Rev. Clare L. Petersberger
You Are....

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church on this first Sunday of 2010 when we are gathering as a multigenerational religious community! Whether you entered on little feet, or walked in briskly, or ambled or rolled in, you are welcome here.

My name is Clare Petersberger and I extend a special welcome to visitors. We hope you will join us for coffee and conversation following worship!

With a new year, comes a new order of worship. So let us begin by lifting our voices in hymn number 298, and by lighting candles for a significant care or concern – thereby signifying that we each arrive to worship with joys and sorrows.

Let us wake, now, our senses to feeling the deep power of being in all.

PRELUDE

#298 *Wake, Now, My Senses*

(During the opening hymn, all are invited to come forward to light a candle for a significant joy, sorrow, prayer, or memory. This signifies that we arrive to worship with our individual experiences of celebration and grief that bind us together in religious community.)

OPENING WORDS

The start of a new year is a time to take stock of where we have come from and where we are going. Rainer Maria Rilke helps us to do so in the following poem:

*I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.*

*I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.*

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.

*I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know:
am I falcon, a storm, or a great song?*

CHALICE LIGHTING

Let us continue pondering our relationship to all that is as Georgia Beatty leads us in a responsive reading of the chalice lighting printed in your order of service.

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

THESE ARE THE WORDS WE DIMLY HEAR:

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.*

FLARE UP LIKE FLAME
AND MAKE BIG SHADOWS I CAN MOVE IN.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

JUST KEEP GOING. NO FEELING IS FINAL.
DON'T LET YOURSELF LOSE ME.

*Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.*

GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

SONG

Thank you, Georgia!

Today, we're contemplating Rainer Maria Rilke's understanding of God – which was NOT Webster's dictionary definition of God or the God described in dogmas or systematic theology. Rather, Rilke sought an intimate relationship with all of life – like a friendship. He often addressed God simply as "You."

With this in mind, Sam and Jane Beatty selected "a great song," to use Rilke's words, by Billy Jonas, entitled "God is in" They will now share part of this song.

GOD IS IN

*God is in the child's eyes, see them wide, wondrous, wise •
God is in the rain and snow, and each snowflake: this we know •
God is in the trees and air; the rocks, the birds, the bees, the bears •
God is in the clouds above; God is in each act of love •
God is in the oceans deep, some say God goes there to sleep •*

*God is in the mountains high, whistling a lullaby • God is in the darkest woods,
God is in your neighborhood •
God is in a place that's near; sometimes it's just not so clear •
God is in God is in God is in God is in God is in God is in*

*God is in the Christian house; bread and wine and holy cross •
God is in the Jewish home; shalom chaverim, shalom •
God is in the Muslim, Allah hu akbar salaam •
God is in the Hindu way, jai bagwan! namaste • God is in those dancing Pagans, in each drop
of perspiration •
God is in the Wiccan coven; twelve plus one -- a perfect dozen! •
God is in the Druid's song, that's why they go on so long •
God is in the Buddhist's chair saying "don't just do something -- sit there!" •
God is in the Vatican; God goes there for vacation •
God is in the Quaker meeting, sleeping 'til they start the singing •
God is in your guru; how do you spell that? "Gee, you - are - you" •
God is in the atheist, saying "yeah, I don't exist" •
God is in the flowing Tao, then and now and now and now •
God is in the Rastaman; I and I and on and on •
God is in the Moonie wedding; who gets who -- begin the betting •
God is in the Hare Krishna, rub their heads and make a wish now •
God is in God is in God is in God is in God is in God is in*

READING

Thank you, Jane and Sam!

The image of God that had meaning for Rilke was shaped, by his life experience. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy describe some of these formative experiences in their introduction to *Rilke's Book Of Hours: Love Poems to God*. They wrote:

The poet was born on December 4th, 1875 in Prague. As an only child, he endured the sentimental upbringing of a mother who still grieved the loss of her baby daughter, and who brought him up as a girl until he was six years old. She took him into churches to pray with her and, as he would later recall with distaste, kiss Christ's wounds on the crucifix.

While a 22-year-old student, far away from his mother's devout superstitions, Rilke was drawn to sort through his own religious assumptions and attitudes. He sensed that there must be an authentic ground to the imposing superstructures of his culture's faith. In a deeply inward process that contrasted with his busy life in coffeehouses, literary salons, and editorial offices, he wanted to find it.

A two-month sojourn in Tuscany drew Rilke into the world of Italian Renaissance religious art. Avidly he drank it in, exhilarated by the sensuous colors and forms, and the warmly human portrayal of the divine. The unmannered tenderness of Fra Angelico and Botticelli conveyed an authentic, alluring devotion, and showed Rilke that the holy can be rooted in the body and in human relationships.

Rilke began *The Book Of Hours* when he was twenty-three years old. He received what he called "inner dictations," words that came to him mornings and evenings and that struck him with their force

and persistence. These intensely inward conversations with God distilled the seeking of the past years for an unmediated and intimate encounter with the heart of the universe.

The poems were not intended for the public. They were intimate, sacred to him, (Rilke called them prayers) unmentioned in his letters and even in his journal. He chose the title inspired by the French medieval tradition of the Book of Hours, devotional breviaries for lay use.

He wrote of them, "I have begun my life."

HYMN

In honor of Rilke's spiritual search for an unmediated and intimate relationship with the heart of the universe and of our own, let us join in singing Hymn # 20, *Be Thou My Vision*.

PRAYER/MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation by Rilke from his *Book of Hours* which will be followed by silence and then a meditation in music.

*I'm too alone in the world, yet not alone enough to make each hour holy.
I'm too small in the world, yet not small enough to be simply in your presence,
like a thing – just as it is.*

*I want to know my own will and to move with it.
And I want, in the hushed moments when the nameless draws near,
to be among the wise ones – or alone.*

*I want to mirror your immensity.
I want never to be too weak or too old to bear the heavy, lurching image of you.
I want to unfold.*

*Let no place in me hold itself closed,
for where I am closed, I am false.
I want to stay clear in your sight.*

*I would describe myself like a landscape I've studied at length, in detail;
like a word I'm coming to understand;
like a pitcher I pour from at mealtime;
like my mother's face;
like a ship that carried me
when the waters raged.*

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Shubert's *Impromptu in G-flat Major*
Joseph Gascho, piano

READING

Our next reading is comprised of three poems from Rilke's *Book Of Hours* which trace his spiritual journey. All three poems are addressed to the heart of the universe – what some call God. Again, Rilke does not use THAT three letter word. Instead, he addresses the heart of the universe as “You.”

Tom Zeller will deliver the first poem:

*I read it here in your very word,
in the story of the gestures
with which your hands cupped themselves
around our becoming – limiting, warm.*

*You said “live” out loud,
and “die” you said lightly,
and over and over again you said “be”.*

But before the first death came murder.

*A fracture broke across the rings you'd ripened.
A screaming shattered the voices
that had just come together to speak you,
to make of you a bridge
over the chasm of everything.*

*And what they have stammered ever since
are fragments of your ancient name.*

Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal

Rilke yearns to reunite these fragments and to be united with the source of our being as we hear in his poem *You, God who live next door*

*You, God, who live next door –
If at times, through the long night,
I trouble you with my urgent knocking –
this is why:*

*I hear you breathe so seldom.
I know you're all alone in that room.
If you should be thirsty, there's no one
to get you a glass of water.*

*I wait listening, always.
Just give me a sign!*

*I'm right here.
As it happens, the wall between us
is very thin.*

*Why couldn't a cry
from one of us
break it down?*

*It would crumble
easily,
it would barely make a sound.*

Du wirst nur mit der Tat erfaßt

Rilke does not always feel God's absence. But he remains a spiritual seeker as we hear in the final poem:

*Only in our doing can we grasp you.
Only with our hands can we illumine you.
The mind is but a visitor:
it thinks us out of our world.*

*Each mind fabricates itself.
We sense its limits, for we have made them.
And just when we would flee them, you come
and make of yourself an offering.*

*I don't want to think a place for you.
Speak to me from everywhere.
Your Gospel can be comprehended
without looking for its source.*

*When I go toward you
it is with my whole life.*

OFFERTORY

Schubert's "Valse Sentimentale"
Joseph Gascho, piano

Only in our doing can we grasp the heart of the universe. With this in mind, our morning offering will now be given and received in grateful appreciation for a religious community that gives us the freedom to forge our own relationship with the meaning of life and death that gives us the freedom to go toward the meaning we discover with our whole lives. 15% of undedicated gifts will be returned to the community to feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the addicted, inspire a love of literacy, and advocate for issues of justice.

SERMON *You Are....*

So here we are at the beginning of 2010, a decade having ended and a new one beckoning. But in one way, I'm reminded, the more things change, the more they seem to stay the same. In 2002, at the end of our congregational survey, the COM reported that five TUUC members felt that I, as your minister, incorporated too much God language in worship services.

We've just completed another congregational survey. The issue in 2009 did not seem to be God vs. no God. Instead, the comments reflected different views of "spirituality." There are those who wrote, "I enjoy the services that create spiritual introspection." Others wrote, "Don't really understand the need for so much 'spiritual' language and talk." Perhaps it will ever be thus for TUUC.

But my dream for this congregation is that someday, individual responses to our survey will reflect, not our differences, but what we have in common. One thing, sadly, that a majority of Unitarian Universalists felt we had in common at the beginning of the last decade was that there was something missing in our faith. 75% of the respondents to the UUA Fulfilling the Promise survey felt that we were lacking "spiritual discipline and depth," or "spirituality." This is a large number of people. And it is particularly striking since we say that our primary mission as an association of congregations is to pursue the free and responsible search for meaning.

But a young adult, who was raised in a Unitarian Universalist congregation wrote: My affection for actual church attendance was quashed once I experienced a strong spiritual awakening. Defining my spiritual self through what I did not believe was no longer sufficient. And spending every Sunday questioning rather than worshipping began to ring rather hollow."

She continued, "The local Quaker meeting I sometimes attend has the same theological breadth as any UU congregation... but when they worship, they worship. They focus not on their differences but on their common need to find a power greater than themselves that is reassuring and supportive in a dangerous and confusing world."

She concluded, "THAT is what I came to desire from my UU community and which I found lacking." Given that we identify and name, this power greater than ourselves, in different ways, how do we help one another to build our own theologies?

In seminary, the systematic theologies we read all assumed that theology had something to do with knowledge of, or reasoning about God. But my colleague Mark Belletini observes that in fact, the Greek word for God means "to come out of."

So theology is really the words we use to express "what we come out of." Mark writes, "...trying to express the wisdom of our lives in the wisdom of words... that's theology." I was reminded of this in my introduction, twelve years ago, to Rilke's *Book Of Hours*.

I was attending a retreat designed for Unitarian Universalists to build their own spiritual practice. And this spiritual practice consisted of identifying words of wisdom to nurture one's mind, heart, and spirit. The goal was to be in relationship with our source of hope in the midst of our own trials and

tribulations; and to be in relationship with our source of reassurance and support in a dangerous and confusing world.

Another goal was, through the resource of inspirational words, read on a daily basis, to cultivate our spiritual lives. One of the poems we were invited to reflect on came from Rilke's *Book Of Hours*:

*You are the future,
the red sky before sunrise
over the fields of time.*

*You are the cock's crow when night is done,
you are the dew and the bells of matins,
maiden, stranger, mother, death.*

*You create yourself in ever-changing shapes
that rise from the stuff of our days---
unsung, unmourned, undescribed,
like a forest we never knew.*

*You are the deep innerness of all things,
the last word that can never be spoken.*

*To each of us you reveal yourself differently:
to the ship as coastline,
to the shore as a ship.*

I was struck, at the time, that Rilke, who was NOT a Unitarian Universalist, chose to name the deep power of being in all not only as sunrise and sunset, not only as time and love, but also as death. So I wanted to learn more about his spiritual journey and what led him to write the Book of Hours.

It turns out that at the age of 23, Rilke was romantically involved with a 36-year-old Russian woman who was writing a book on Nietzsche. Rilke's young adult rebellion included not only rejecting images of the holy which made no sense to him, but also articulating those that did.

And so, unlike Nietzsche who pronounced God "dead," Rilke wrote, "You are not dead yet, it's not too late to open your depths by plunging into them and drink in the life that reveals itself quietly there."

The life Rilke reflected in words was often the life he saw, with his own eyes, in the natural world. In one love poem to God, Rilke confessed,

*I want to portray you
not with lapis or gold,
but with colors made of apple bark...*

In order to see the holy in apple bark, Rilke had to be looking at and paying attention to apple bark! This he was trained to do when he went to work as a secretary for the sculptor Rodin. There, he experienced the master's discipline in creativity. Rodin wanted time alone and sent Rilke to the zoo

to study the animals for hours. Rilke would come home from these observations, and go to his own room which looked out on Rodin's massive sculpture "Buddha At Rest."

Rilke wrote, "...in fanatical speechlessness stand the likeness of a Buddha, dispensing the inexpressible unity of his gesture under all of the skies of day and night in silent reserve. It is the center of the world."

Like the Buddha, Rilke saw urban poverty and suffering and identified with it. Rilke writes of sweeping himself up "in alleyways... out of garbage and broken glass;" of being "a house gutted by fire where only the guilty sometimes sleep" of being "scattered in pieces, torn by conflict, and washed down in drink."

Like the Buddha, Rilke witnessed death and wrote, "No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond, no belittling of death, but only longing for what belongs to us and serving earth, lest we remain unused."

Like the Buddha, Rilke was a spiritual seeker who wanted to be in relationship to, and to express, the inexpressible unity at the heart of existence. But unlike the Buddha, Rilke did not write an eightfold path to enlightenment. Instead, Rilke wrote a series of love poems addressed to "You" as a guide to living.

In Rilke's understanding, God needs us as much as we need God. God needs us to witness to, and to praise, existence. In Rilke's world view, "nothing has ever been real without... beholding it." And once we behold – be it the beauty of the tree – or the suffering we humans inflict upon one another – the only faithful response is to praise. Appreciation and gratitude are the beginning of love and transformation.

Later in life, Rilke would write in the 9th elegy, "Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window..."

...And these Things, which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient, they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all."

Rilke was even moved to wonder, as many lovers do, what would happen when his relationship to God ended. Rilke wrote,

*What will you do, God, when I die...
Without me what reason have you?*

*Without me what house
where intimate words await you?*

*In losing me you lose your meaning.
What will you do, God?*

Some have critiqued Rilke's Love Poems To God as the ruminations of a young adult yearning for real human love. But reading them, I'm reminded of what Kristal Stendahl once said in a seminary class on the psalms:

Authentic prayer is not asking a supernatural power to grant us humans our wishes. Prayer is about paying attention to our lives; to the movement from joy to sorrow; or of sorrow back to joy; and naming it; giving voice to it; which is an act of love.

During the spirituality retreat, we were introduced to some of Rilke's love poems addressed to "You." We were next invited to write our own "You" poem, speaking directly to the power, or the person, or the issues most affecting our life. What I took from it was the experience of addressing both the challenges in my life and my sources of hope and love in very personal terms.

This gave me a new perspective – more grounded, more whole. And I have carried this with me in the years, since. Sometimes, especially when I'm feeling under stress or pressure, I find myself creating a "you" poem. This practice requires a kind of attention to something other than one's own worries and preoccupations which gives one's spirit space to breathe. This practice requires words which express what we have found to be lovely, true, good, just and courageous. This practice helps Unitarian Universalists to build our own theology – as we deepen our relationship to something beyond ourselves with words which reflect the wisdom within and through us.

A couple of nights ago, my father asked, in a conversation, if I'd seen the Rilke poem in the Speaking Of Faith newsletter from Krista Tippett... about approaching prayer. I had not. But I was not surprised that Rilke's poem was from the *Book of Hours*. After reading it, I'm going to invite you to write your own "You" poem with the hope that this creative exercise will deepen your relationship to yourself, to others, and to the holy in life itself at the start of this new year.

Rilke wrote:

*I love you, gentlest of Ways,
who ripened us as we wrestled with you.*

*You, the great homesickness we could never shake off,
you, the forest that always surrounded us,
you the song we sang in every silence,
you dark net threading through us,
on the day you made us you created yourself,
and we grew sturdy in your sunlight...*

*Let your hand rest on the rim of Heaven now
and mutely bear the darkness we bring over you.*

In the next few minutes, on the file card you received with your order of service, I invite you to complete the sentence "You are..." to reflect what sparks your wonder, nurtures your growth, gives you hope, and offers the possibility of transformation.

I want to leave you with how Rilke imagined the "You" he was addressing, might have responded to love and praise. Rilke wrote:

*I am.
Don't you sense me, ready to break into being at your touch?
Hasn't my longing ripened in you from the beginning
as fruit ripens on a branch?*

*I am the dream you are dreaming.
When you want to awaken,
I am that wanting:
I grow strong in the beauty you behold.
And with the silence of stars
I enfold your cities made by time.”*

With this vision of unity, of the love which holds us even though the stars may wander, mindful of what we have in common, our search for meaning, and inspired by Rilke’s love poems, let us make of ourselves a great song in the coming year. And let us begin by joining our hearts and voices in singing Hymn #108.

HYMN

My Life Flows On in Endless Song

CLOSING WORDS

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise. Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

So may it be.

GO NOW IN PEACE
