

March 9, 2008
Rev. Clare Petersberger
Content

WELCOME

Good morning! Welcome to a community of spiritual seekers who have pledged to walk together in the ways of truth known or to be made known to us. We are committed to the truth that we do not have to think alike in religious matters to love alike. And we have promised to work together for a world transformed by our care.

In the Sayings of the Prophet it is written:

“Souls which recognize one another congregate together. Those who do not, argue with one another.”

Let us be souls which recognize one another. Let us take a moment to greet old and new friends around us by sharing how long we've been a part of TUUC and one thing we really love about this beloved community.

We gather agreeing to seek together the most radical, that is the root, implications of what it means to be religious. In its ancient meanings the word religion speaks of binding together, suggesting that by taking the fragments of experience, by applying to them the reason of the mind and the aspirations of the heart, we can bring out of those fragments a unity of meaning and a focus of personal commitment.

We gather to share in that adventure. To bind together that which is asunder in our lives, to heal the injured, to lift the sorrowing, to reaffirm the hopes of the heart, and renew the promises of our most worthy commitments.

OPENING WORDS

Our opening words are from *Spiritual Laws* by the 19th century Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson. A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us, that a higher law than that of our will regulates events....

Belief and love, — a believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care.....

There is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every person, so that none of us can wrong the universe.

There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word.

Why need you choose so painfully your place, and occupation, and associates, and modes of action, and of entertainment?

For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment.

Then the heaven predicted from the beginning of the world, and still predicted from the bottom of the heart, will organize itself, as do now the rose, and the air, and the sun.

CHALICE LIGHTING

Emily Dickinson expressed similar ideas in her poem *A Light Exists In Spring*. You're invited to join in a responsive reading of Dickinson's poem, printed in your order of service words with which to light the symbol of our free faith tradition.

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period --
When March is scarcely here

*A color stands abroad
on solitary fields
that science cannot overtake
but human nature feels.*

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope we know
It almost speaks to me.

*Then as horizons step
or noons report away
without the formula of sound
it passes and we stay---*

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

*We light this chalice as a reminder
that we are here to grow in wisdom
and to learn how to love better.
as we each do this in our own ways,
we slowly become a blessing to those around us
and a light to the world.*

READING

Our first reading is from a February 17th editorial in *The Washington Post* entitled *Not Reading an Iota in America* by Randy Salzman.

Twenty-nine adults, young and old, black and white, sit aimlessly in the juvenile court waiting room, staring at nothing. Two infants sleep in their parent's laps; two toddlers suck their thumbs. I put down my book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and walk across to the courtroom and look in.

At the front, the harried judge deals with at least one lawyer, a social worker or two, a pair of distraught parents and a teenage boy determined to exhibit perfect contempt. Behind them, at least two dozen adults and a handful of teens stare either into space or into that same pool of derision. No one here has a book, or a newspaper, or a magazine, even though all of us came aware that we might wait for hours.

Returning to the waiting room, I pick up my book – the stunning story of eight women who read and discuss Western novels in the Islamic Republic of Iran (despite threats of death, dismemberment and prison) so that, at least in their minds, they might see themselves as free.

Quote "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife," unquote. I read one of the women sardonically paraphrasing the opening of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Call it the paradox of the book.

Where we can read, where we should read, even in a place where reading might address the exact problem being battled and where there is little else to do but read we don't. But "over there," where the simple pleasure of understanding life through literature is denied, people are willing to suffer – and at least one of these women is jailed, raped and beaten – for the right to open Austen, Kafka, Nabokov, Tolstoy and Twain.

"To steal the words from Humbert, the poet/criminal of 'Lolita'," writes author Azar Nafisi, "I need you the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't. Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us in the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading 'Lolita' in Tehran. "And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us."

I scan the waiting room again. Two women to my left are talking, but everyone else appears to have no thoughts, no ideas, no desires. They are just there. Maybe just one book in a juvenile court waiting room picked up by one bored kid might pull him or her back from disaster? I know it's not much, but it seems worth the chance. After all, as the National Endowment for the Arts put it in a study released last November: "The cold statistics confirm something that most readers know but have mostly been reluctant to declare as fact – books change lives for the better."

I don't quite complete *Reading Lolita* before the commonwealth's attorney tells me that my testimony won't be needed. But later, when I do, the concluding lines haunt me: "Hardly anything has changed in the nonstop sameness of our everyday life. But somewhere else I have changed. Each morning with the rising of the routine sun as I wake up and put on my veil before the mirror to go out and become a part of what is called reality, I also know another 'I' that has become naked on the pages of a book." The pages of a book: the bringers of magic, of knowledge, of hope.

PRAYER/MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation adapted from The Reverend Mark Belletini which will be followed by moments of silence.

Here we are together in this space of beauty.
We are all under the shelter of the wooden beams that form the ceiling.
We are in front of a window looking out on greening trees.

Together we take in all the colors of the multiple palettes of the current Gallery Unicorn show.
Together we can slowly breathe in the air which yesterday wafted over the Great Lakes and tomorrow will arch over Labrador.

In the air, molecules and atoms and empty space, molecules and atoms and emptiness which once may have been part of the hand which the Dutch heretic Spinoza called his own, and another atom of air may have been breathed by Buddha's wife over the crib of their son, and still a third may have been part of the wooden house in Chicago where Jane Addams sat down to read the text in the gospel: "Blessed are you poor."

The whole history of the world is in this room, not just by the imagination of the human heart, but by the revelation of the physicist and statistician. Thus, this is indeed a sacred place. But no more sacred than everything outside its doors, from the Memorial Garden within view of this pulpit to the star Epsilon Eridani ten light years away, a beautiful star which itself is washed in a silence that is much like this sacred silence.

Remembering that our common history is in this sacred room in a sacred universe, we dare to lift up our own personal history, and link it to that greater, embracing history, by naming in our hearts the people in our own lives whom we remember, revere, struggle with or are blest by – people without whom we are not who we are.

Blest is our common world. Blest is our common story. Blest is each individual story. Blest are the joys and sorrows we lift up with the candles we now light. And blest, the music that hallows it all with beauty.

READING

Susan Jacoby was in a sentimental mood writing about the content of civic discourse sixty years ago compared to today in her recent book *The Age Of American Unreason*. She wrote,

It is almost impossible for people accustomed to hearing their president comment on complicated policy issues with statements such as, "I'm the decider" to imagine the pains taken by Franklin Roosevelt, in the dark early months after the nation's entry into the Second World War, to explain why the armed forces were suffering one defeat after another in the Pacific.

Roosevelt's first fireside chat after Pearl Harbor came in February 1942, and he had asked Americans to spread out a map during his radio address so that they could follow and comprehend the geography of battle.

The New York Times quoted one E. O. Schmidt, sales manager of a Manhattan bookstore, about the public response to the president's request. Schmidt had rounded up 2,000 copies of a new atlas to meet the expected demand, and, by the night of the fireside chat every map had been sold.

Roosevelt told his listeners – who included 80 percent of all American adults that he had asked them to use maps so that they might better understand a war being waged, unlike previous wars, on “every continent, every island, every sea, every airplane in the world.”

In explaining the strategic situation to the public, Roosevelt was able to draw on his own extensive knowledge of geography, acquired early in life through his well-known hobby of stamp collecting. He had told his speechwriters that he was certain that if Americans understood the immensity of the distances over which supplies had to travel to the armed forces, “they can take any kind of bad news right on the chin.”

This is a portrait not only of a different presidency and president but also of a different country and citizenry, one that lacked access to satellite-enhanced Google maps but was far more receptive to learning and complexity than today's public.

According to a 2006 survey by National Geographic-Roper, nearly half of Americans between ages 18 and 24 do not think it necessary to know the location of other countries in which important news is being made. More than a third consider it “not at all important” to know a foreign language, and only 14 percent consider it “very important.”

In the same young adult age group, two thirds of those surveyed in December 2005 to January 2006 – after more than three years of combat and 2,400 American deaths in Iraq – were unable to find Iraq on a map. Eight out of ten young Americans with at least a high school education have no idea of the location of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel – four countries intimately linked to American interests.

OFFERTORY

Here, part of introducing our students to the Bible entails bringing out maps to follow the journey of Abraham and the Hebrew people's flight from Egypt and where Jesus is reported to have delivered the sermon on the Mount and where Jerusalem is located. We do this so that our students will have a deeper understanding of the stories they are exploring and appreciation for the people who wrote them.

With this in mind, our morning offering will now be given and received to support the mission of this church:

to walk together in the ways of truth known or to be made known to us that we may speak to the world in words and actions of peace and goodwill. One way we speak of goodwill is to give 25% of undedicated gifts to the offertory back to the community to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to heal the addicted, to teach literacy, and to build beloved community.

SERMON

Content

Yesterday afternoon, I arrived home from TUUC where Paul Racuuglia and Nathan Chadsey, two TUUC youth who consider TUUC their religious home, had just been awarded their Eagle Scout Badges. Glancing at a clock, I realized the electricity must have gone out from the afternoon winds for a brief period of time. And I thought to myself, “Oh, good. That reminds me, I have to set the clocks ahead an hour to get to church on time tomorrow.”

It was the Industrial Revolution that launched the widespread use of clocks. And with them the concern to make every minute count. This obsession with clocks and doing rather than with nature and being led Emily Dickinson to observe of the changing light at noon in March

“...it passes and we stay
A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.”

I was reminded of how a perceived lack of time affects our content on Friday during the class on Philosophy and Film I’m auditing at Towson University. I asked the professor if he could recommend a book about Martin Heidegger’s philosophy – how a constant awareness of our own mortality helps lead us to live more authentic lives.

The professor thought for a moment and suggested one title and author and reassured me that it was a short book. Then he added, “If you like biography, there’s a much longer book that explores how Heidegger’s own life influenced his thought.” The professor added, “But I don’t know if you have time to read it.” As I took down the title and author of the longer book, I assured him I would make the time.

The professor has good reason to wonder how many students have time, or are making time, to read. According to a National Endowment for the Arts study: In 1982, 82 percent of college graduates read novels or poems for pleasure; in 2002, only 67 percent did. And more than 40 percent of Americans under the age of 44 did not read a single book – fiction or nonfiction – over the course of a year. The number of 17-year-olds who read nothing (unless required to do so for school) more than doubled between 1984 and 2004.

This decline in reading correlates directly with a rise in personal computers and other technology providing access not only to information but to entertainment. This begins way before high school. A University of Washington study found that infants between 8 and 16 months recognized an average of six to eight fewer words for every hour spent watching videos.

The Kaiser Family Foundation found that, today, children under the age of six are read to by their parents for 39 minutes a day. These same children are watching two hours of television and video a day. Does this matter? According to the science writer Steven Johnson, it does not. He believes that watching a screen can teach children to focus.

But other studies would suggest that we are focusing on less content, not more, as a culture. A Harvard University researcher found that the average sound bite of a Presidential candidate

In 1968 was 42.3 seconds. By 1988, it was down to 9.8 seconds. By 2000, it was down to 7.8 seconds. You can do the math for what it probably is, today.

How much content can be communicated in a few seconds? Does this matter? Susan Jacoby discovered it mattered back on September 11th, 2001. Walking home to her Upper East Side apartment, after the attack on the World Trade Centers she felt overwhelmed and confused. She stopped in a bar. As she sipped her Bloody Mary, she overheard a conversation between two men who were dressed in suits.

One said, "This is just like Pearl Harbor." The other asked, "What is Pearl Harbor?" The first replied, "That was when the Vietnamese dropped bombs in a harbor, and it started the Vietnam War." That's when Ms. Jacoby decided to write a book on *The Age of American Unreason* lamenting our anti-intellectualism.

She writes, "I cannot prove that reading for hours in a tree house (which is what I was doing when I was 13) creates more informed citizens than hammering away at Microsoft Xbox or obsessing about Facebook profiles. But reading does expand the depth and range of the reader's knowledge and imagination in just about every area of conceivable interest to human beings."

Ms. Jacoby's point was illustrated, recently in Sara Rimer's description of a Boston Latin English class. Ms. Rimer interviewed sophomore students reading *The Great Gatsby*. Many of these immigrant students identify with F. Scott Fitzgerald's youthful characters and THEIR dreams. Many are drawn to the green light at the end of the dock which symbolizes the woman for whom Jay Gatsby longs. Applying this symbol to their own lives, for one, "the green light at the end of the dock" is Harvard; for another, it is to make his parents proud; for another, it is to live comfortably; for another, she is her mother's green light, and she's not sure she can live up to her expectations; and for another, there's a green light beyond the green light, which is to return, after getting an Ivy League Education, to her country of origin to help the people there.

Can you remember which book inspired you in high school and gave you an image or symbol that has carried you through rough times and that you've carried with you the rest of your life? For me, it was Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and the image was oriental rugs which held the secret of life.

Ms. Jacoby's point is that such books leave one with "the great and the quotidian dilemmas of life in every era and the content for intellectual discourse." By "intellectual discourse," Ms. Jacoby is not advocating turning off "Lost" in order to sit down as a family and read Wittgenstein. She means that we give ourselves the time, make the time, to open ourselves to new ideas, to reflect on them, and to discuss them.

Speaking as part of the Villa Julie lecture series, last week, Salman Rushdie described someone who refused to do this. After his *Satanic Verses* was published and Rushdie was forced to go into an undisclosed location, he still had access to television. And he watched as the man who had issued a Fatwa, a threat on his life in London, was being interviewed. The interviewer asked this religious leader if he had read *The Satanic Verses*.

The cleric said that he did not need to read that book, he knew the blasphemy that was in it. So the interviewer asked this religious leader if he had read any of Rushdie's other books. The cleric replied, "I do not read books." Salman Rushdie concluded, "And there was the problem, in one sentence."

It is also a problem in this country. In what is the most religious nation in the developed world, a majority of Americans cannot identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible. If this simply meant that a majority of Americans would not be good contestants on Jeopardy, that would be one thing. If this meant that a majority of Americans would not have an appreciation of all the visual arts, music, and literature that have been inspired by the book of Genesis, that would be a loss.

But even more tragic, at the same time, two thirds of Americans, according to the Pew Foundation, want creationism, based on the story of Genesis, to be taught along with evolution in public schools. So a number of Americans who haven't read Genesis or at least haven't read it in a Bible, want it taught as science in the public schools.

And in 1998, one in four public school biology teachers believed that humans and dinosaurs inhabited the earth simultaneously. This was not based on a fundamentalist religious background but on poor education in science!

Are we content with such content? Are we content that after five years into a war, only 17 percent of Americans could locate Afghanistan on a map and fewer than 15 percent could find Iraq? Are we content that one in ten Americans thinks Joan of Arc was Noah's wife? Are we content that one in five Americans thinks the sun revolves around the earth? And if not, what will we do to improve the content of our shared culture?

Susan Jacoby decided to go a week without television. She writes, "Turning off the television actually meant turning off all screen entertainment for a video-free week, and what an uncomfortable week it turned out to be for me – as it apparently does for most people who sign on for the experiment."

She continued, "It is shaming to admit, especially within the privacy of our minds, how often we choose video toys to block out our own thoughts or the demands of those we love as well as to avoid more active forms of entertainment – from reading a book to attending a concert."

For my part, I have not forced myself to go through withdrawal pains from Jon Stewart...especially after the three month writer's strike! But I did sign up for two courses this spring, to intentionally structure more reading and thinking time into my week. I was, in part, motivated to do so by Mary Oliver's poem *An Afternoon in the Stacks*.

She wrote: "Closing the book, I find I have left my head inside. It is dark in here, but the chapters open their beautiful spaces and give a rustling sound, words adjusting themselves to their meaning. Long passages open at successive pages. An echo, continuous from the title onward, hums behind me. From in here, the world looms, a jungle redeemed by these linked sentences carved out when an author traveled and a reader kept the way open. When the book ends I will pull it inside-out like a sock and throw it back in the library. But the rumor of it will haunt all that follows in my life. A candle flame in Tibet leans when I move."

While I have yet to have the personal experience of a candle flame leaning in Tibet when I move, I HAVE learned another amazing theory for the creation of our universe – as the moment two parallel universes collided. This happened in the first session of the second course I'm taking on Hubble's Expanding Universe. And it's already proved useful.

Yesterday, in a conversation with Brandon Cohen about his job, he asked, “How much do you know about modern physics?” I replied, “Ummmm....” Brandon said, “Well, there’s this stuff called Dark Energy” and I said, “YES! And it’s making the universe speed up! Even more than Daylight Savings Time!” And Brandon said, “Well, I’m going to be measuring it!” And I went home content in the knowledge that a youth from our congregation will be providing the content to help humanity understand our place in the universe.

Here at TUUC, the content of our curricula is designed to give children, youth, and adults basic knowledge of religion and ethics and to help us to build our own theology through exploration, sharing, and action. I was reminded of both the philosophy and content of our lifespan religious education reading Anne Monius’s Harvard Divinity School Convocation Address.

Anne observed, “In the study of religion, one so often encounters human beings in extremis, at their most confused, their most panicked, their most depressed, their most traumatized, their most emotionally overwrought, their most profoundly reflective.”

She described a colleague who opens the first lecture of his introductory course on the religious texts of ancient China by pounding the lectern and shouting, “Take these texts seriously, and they will change your lives!”

Anne said, “What he means, is that the CONTENT Of the seemingly obscure and arcane also matters, that we can actually learn something important, something real, human FACTS from even the most remote time and place....”

Certainly, good books do this for us. Reading the book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the juvenile court room led Randy Salzman to make the connection “between not reading, and not thinking, and a national system that spends \$22,650 a year per inmate to keep people in prison.” As a result, he persuaded his book club to donate used books to a prison book-donation program in Charlottesville.

Closer to home, I’m so grateful to TUUC members who support the Banner Neighborhood Reading program with book donations and with time to go and read with students. And I’m grateful to Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice who are working to turn around the erosion of general knowledge in our public education system.

The Industrial Revolution has given way to the Information Age. But “the constant delivery of undigested information bits makes knowledge wither away into information.” Valuable human content takes time to acquire and ponder; to question and discuss. And that leads to contentment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson lived during the Industrial Revolution. But what he wrote about spiritual laws hold true for the Information Age. “There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. Why need you choose so painfully your place, and occupation, and associates, and modes of action, and of entertainment? Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment. Then the heaven predicted from the beginning of the world, and still predicted from the bottom of the heart, will organize itself, as do now the rose, and the air, and the sun.”

So may it be for us in the content we intentionally seek, find, and share. And in so doing, may we, indeed, be impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment. with joy let us claim the growing light and the spirit of enlightenment!

CLOSING WORDS

Fix your hearts on the love of truth, and your minds on the truth of love, then compassion and justice will follow your steps. Venerate our common human destiny and be confident that it moves us toward and not away from the divine in living. Know THAT power of love which moves our spirit and the spirits of all persons toward wholeness.

And go, now, in peace.