

World of Freedom, World of Joy

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

September 25, 2011

I want to tell you a little bit about my week.

Last Sunday afternoon, Linda West told me that Rudy was not expected to last the night. I drove to the hospital in Wellesley. I sang “Amazing Grace” at his bedside, and I recited the 23rd Psalm for him. Rudy died that night surrounded by his family.

The next morning, after taking my car to the shop for minor repairs, I bicycled home and facilitated a conference call of the leaders of Religious Witness for the Earth, the interfaith environmental advocacy network I co-founded ten years ago.

Monday afternoon I prepared my testimony before the Joint Committee on the Judiciary of the Massachusetts legislature in favor of eliminating juvenile life without parole.

Tuesday morning I emailed the Unitarian Universalist Association seeking advice on how to respond to the theft of our rainbow flag last week. Should we issue a news release now or wait until we’d scheduled a re-dedication ceremony? UUA Communications Director John Hurley emailed me back: Send out a news release immediately.

After telephoning Associate Minister Lilia Cuervo to reschedule our 11 am meeting, I got a quote from Social Justice Chair Marcia Hams, found and updated our media list, prepared the new release, and hit send. Five minutes later the Cambridge Chronicle was on the phone, followed by the Boston Globe, WBZ-TV, and WBZ Radio. “We’ll continue to stand on the side of love,” I told them. We’ll raise that flag again and again and again—as many times as we have to.”

Changing into my best suit and my clerical collar, I jumped on the Red Line and arrived at the State House just in time for the 1 o’clock hearing. The hearing room was standing room only, jammed with people, because it turned out the committee was hearing testimony on dozens of bills at once.

More than three hours later, my name was called. I told the legislators who hadn’t left by then about my friend Fred Clay, convicted at age 16 of a murder he says he didn’t commit and sentenced to life without parole. “What kind of people,” I asked, “cast their wayward children out, rather than bringing them safely home? Locking up our children for the rest of their lives does not make us safe. It makes us cruel.”

Then I took the subway back to church, where I finished my monthly report for the Standing Committee meeting that night. After picking up my daughter at school and leaving her at a playmate’s house for the evening, I returned to church, arriving a couple of minutes late for the meeting after talking to another reporter calling about the rainbow flag theft.

The next morning I was looking forward to worship and reflection with clergy colleagues at the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association meeting in Danvers, but at 8:30 am I was being interviewed by WBZ-TV about the rainbow flag. Then a police superintendent arrived with more questions about the theft. I never made it to the UUMA meeting.

Grabbing my guitar, I took the subway again, this time to Boston City Hall, where our partner Centro Presente was holding a rally against Secure Communities, the federal program that supposedly targets violent criminals but actually ends up deporting many immigrants without criminal records. I led the crowd in singing Andres Useche’s amazing song “Marching into the Light.” “The only secure community is the beloved community,” I said.

I had to leave the rally early to get back to church in time for our first Worship Associates training. The Red Line car was crowded, so I stood with my guitar case and backpack. Not wanting to waste the ride, I pulled out a book I've been reading, John O'Donohue's *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*.

O'Donohue was talking about a spirituality of the senses, beginning with the eyes. "Many of us," he wrote, "have made our world so familiar that we do not see it anymore. An interesting question to ask yourself at night is, What did I really see this day? You could be surprised by what you did not see. Maybe your eyes were unconditioned reflexes operating all day without any real mindfulness or recognition; while you looked out from yourself, you never gazed or really attended to anything. . . . It is a startling truth that how you see and what you see determine how and who you will be."

I read those words and I closed the book.

What had I seen really that day? Whom had I seen really that day or the day before or the day before that?

The last person I had truly seen was Rudy West as he lay dying three days before.

Since then I'd been charging through my life doing important things but without awareness, without any sense of the sacred. I'd been so busy I hadn't even meditated, even though I know my daily meditation is essential to my equanimity and my sanity.

Now here I stood on a subway car filled with dozens of human beings, human souls, each precious and unique, but to my jaded view they might as well have been mannequins in a window display, for all I noticed or cared.

And I have the chutzpah to call myself a minister—a "spiritual" person. Shame on me!

But like each of us, I have the power of choice in every moment.

Where will I place my attention?

What do I hold sacred?

Whom can I love right now?

I looked around that subway car and savored each face as a gift to me and to the universe.

By the time I got to the church and the Worship Associates training, I had come back to life.

I tell you all this not because my week was so extraordinary but because it was so ordinary. I suspect many of you had a week not fundamentally different—with too many things to do and not enough time to do them.

When we're in a hurry, people become means to our ends, merely instruments or obstacles to our advancement. What Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called the "I-Thou" relationship degrades to "I-It."

We lunge from deliverable to deliverable without ever finding deliverance.

Deliverance.

That's what church is for, isn't it? To change our way of seeing until we truly see.

Many Unitarian Universalists, asked why they come to church, answer "community." We feel lonely and seek connection with people with similar values. We're looking for relationships. Many of us are drawn to our tradition of social activism. Parents want to teach their children religious traditions and values without orthodoxy. As a woman says in the UU video, "Voices of a Liberal Faith": "We came for the children and stayed for ourselves."

But more important than what we came for is what we find.

If it does not change us, I think it unworthy of our time, let alone our devotion.

“Mature religion,” writes Franciscan monk and mystic Richard Rohr, “involves changing ourselves and letting ourselves be changed by a mysterious encounter with grace, mercy, and forgiveness. This is the truth that will set us free.”

Many of us think of religion as a set of beliefs and rules. Since Unitarian Universalism has no creed and few rules, we may wonder if it’s really a religion at all.

But authentic religion—authentic religion is not about conformity. It’s about unity—the unity of all things in spirit.

Authentic religion is not about faith, if faith is assenting to beliefs. It’s about freedom—freedom from the conformity of the world, freedom to follow the stirrings of the soul, freedom to heed a deeper wisdom.

Authentic religion is not about studying scripture or endless committee meetings, useful and important as scripture and committees may be. Authentic religion is about joy—the joy of rediscovering our true selves, the joy of noticing the beauty of the world, the joy of surrender to the power of love.

According to Richard Rohr, “Healthy religion is simply to name what’s real, what’s true, what really works, what finally works, what works forever. And of course [the] word for that [is] love. . . . The great spiritual teachers [have always said] you’ve got to get to love or you’ll never find your soul’s purpose, you’ll never find the deepest meaning of your life. . . . Without a certain degree of inner freedom,” Rohr continues, “you cannot love and you will not love. For Jesus and for [Saint] Francis, freedom was the way to love. . . . [Healthy] religion is simply to tell us where true freedom can be found: [in] freedom from the self, from my own self as a reference point for anything. What we need now,” Rohr proclaims, “is a second Copernican revolution. . . . The world does not circle around me.”

Philosopher Ken Wilber identifies two primary functions of religion, which he calls *translation* and *transformation*.

Translation, he writes, “acts as a way of creating *meaning* for the separate self: it offers myths and stories and tales and narratives and rituals and revivals that, taken together, help the separate self make sense of, and endure, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. . . . [I]t consoles the self, fortifies the self, defends the self, promotes the self.”

The second function of religion, transformation, “does not fortify the separate self, but utterly shatters it—not consolation but devastation, not entrenchment but emptiness, not complacency but explosion, not comfort but revolution—in short, not a conventional bolstering of consciousness but a radical transmutation and transformation at the deepest seat of consciousness itself.”

Translation, Wilber suggests, is a horizontal movement, transformation a vertical movement higher or deeper.

“Authentic transformation,” he declares, “is not a matter of belief but of the death of the believer; not a matter of translating the world but of transforming the world; not a matter of finding solace but of finding infinity on the other side of death. *The self is not made content; the self is made toast.*”

It’s not that translation is bad and transformation is good. As Buddhist psychologist Jack Engler acknowledges, “You have to be somebody before you can be nobody.”

“But at some point in our maturation process,” Wilber insists, “translation itself, no matter how adequate or confident, simply ceases to console. No new beliefs, no new paradigm, no new myths, no new ideas, will staunch the encroaching anguish. Not a new belief for the self, but the transcendence of the self altogether, is the only path that avails.” The transformed

consciousness, Wilber says, “settles instead into a glance that sees only a radiant infinity in the heart of all souls and breathes into its lungs only the atmosphere of an eternity too simple to believe.”

This, I think, is what Buddhism means by enlightenment, what Islam means by submission, what Christianity truly means by being born again.

And in this interfaith, multicultural, multivocal religion that is Unitarian Universalism, I think we must have the same intention.

That is the purpose of all our worship and prayer and meditation and contemplation and song and sacred dance and walking the labyrinth.

Not to be better friends or better activists or better Unitarian Universalists—although these are all good things—but to lose ourselves in the great Love, the great Holiness, the great Mystery at the center of the universe and of our own yearning hearts. To let go—to let go of the small self, the prideful self, the grasping self addicted to convenience and pleasure and the opinion of others—and embrace the freedom of the infinite Self—the universal Oneness in which each of us partakes in joyful communion—whose nature I believe is love.

If I can do that, if I can move even a little way down that path of light, I will be a better friend, a better activist, a better Unitarian Universalist without even trying.

Amen and Blessed Be.