

“For What Thou Art Preparing Us”
Membership Sunday Sermon
February 6, 2005
The Reverend Victoria Weinstein

I have a little pamphlet called “Uncommon Prayers” that I got at a Unitarian Universalist church somewhere. The prayer I like best from it was written by that great author Anonymous and it goes,

“Oh Lord, prepare us for what thou art preparing for us!”

For some reason this little prayer has popped into my head frequently in the past few weeks. It seems to me a good shorthand expression of what it is we do together as a church, and why we commit ourselves to the church life at all. In being part of a church we are preparing ourselves, in an intentional way, for whatever may come. Not in the practical sense, as we prepare for a storm by putting up bottled water and flashlights and firewood, or as we would prepare for retirement by putting money in a pension fund, or as we would prepare for a marathon by running fifteen miles a day. By being part of a church community, we are preparing ourselves to meet the unknown challenges of the coming hour in a dignified and gracious manner. We are preparing our hearts to be pure and our spirits to be resilient, and our minds to be open. We practice, not so we may be made *perfect*, but so we may be made *better*.

Church life is in itself a spiritual practice. Our interactions here, happening as they do within the bonds of a covenant, are more than they seem.

The committee meeting isn't just a committee meeting: it's a chance to practice love and care. A worship service isn't just an hour of sitting and listening and standing and singing, it is an opportunity to remember that we are

truly, existentially, one people with a shared soul. Coffee hour isn't just for social chit chat but for blessing each other with smiles and hugs and to appreciate that we're here alive together, today. We cherish it because we know that won't always be the case. We try to remember that what we're sharing is a little bit more than just a cup of coffee. Have you noticed how much effort goes into preparing the coffee hour spread? Some churches you go to, they open the box of Entenmann's and there's a plastic knife to cut up the coffee cake. Not here. Here you get *lavish* eats. It brings tears to my eyes, sometimes, the amount of care and hospitality that is evident on those tables. Thank you for that effort. I went to a UU church last weekend and they had a pretty nice table set, but not one person greeted me. Thank you for trying to notice our newcomers, our guests, and for welcoming them. And for the lavish eats.

In a kind of Zen way, we who practice churchmanship and churchwomanship are also preparing for those things over which we have *no control*. We learn here that one aspect of spiritual life is to allow ourselves to encounter our true helplessness in the fact of certain realities. We prepare for that helplessness by joining forces with other similarly helpless creatures, our church brothers and sisters, and by sharing that helpless condition with them. In doing so, we keep faith with the truth that helplessness does not need to translate to hopelessness. We say together, "We live, we die, we fall, we get up again. We sin, we mess up, we forgive each other and move on." All of this practice keeps the heart limber. It helps grant perspective. It helps some of us get through some dark nights of the soul, to know that somewhere across town or a town away, someone from this church might be struggling through the night

themselves. You believe they will make it through, so you figure you might just make it through, too. This is how we are truly connected in spirit.

I had hoped to see you all on January 24th, but we had that whopper of a blizzard and we cancelled church services. That didn't feel good at all, but I am glad we did so. The phone rang most of the day at the parsonage on Saturday and it was pretty exciting, and Karen Pritchard and I were so thrilled to see our church cancellation listed on Channel Five (yes, we're into mass media!!). We also sent out an all-church e-mail, and Debi Meddaugh posted the closing on our web site right away, and we left an outgoing message on the church phone line. If none of these modes of communication reached you, we hope you will let us know how we can do better the next time. I'm glad everyone survived.

I left town on Monday afternoon to spend a few days in Savannah, GA, which was a delight mostly because it was warm and sunny, and I sat on a porch overlooking the intracoastal waterways and read a pile of books, and got some writing done. I also caught up on some news journals and magazines, and I had a lot of thinking time. Here is a partial list of issues that I thought and read and wrote about:

Torture. Our use of it against prisoners of war and detainees.

The death penalty in Connecticut, and the stay of execution for Michael Ross.

The tsunami, and relief efforts.

The death by murder and starvation and deportation of over 300,000 black Africans in the Darfur region in Sudan, which lead me to research the current state of the United Nations, and to wonder about its future.

The confirmation hearings of Condoleeza Rice and Alberto Gonzalez.

The privatization of Social Security.

I read and thought a lot about the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp Auschwitz.

Global warming, a topic that is hard for me to get a grip on.

The Oscar nominations (very serious stuff!).

I thought about our church, and many of you, and the springtime programs we have coming up, and I also thought a lot about my personal life and all the relationships and responsibilities and joys and sorrows that go along with that.

I learned some new recipes.

And I realized, in everything I read about and thought about and considered and took in, that my church and my religious life informed almost every single aspect of all of it. Much of my long laundry list of things to contemplate and learn about concerned fairly upsetting topics, troubling and ethically complicated topics. In wading through them, my religious practice was the single most helpful factor in framing how I thought about issues, how I saw connections between them, how I managed my own anxiety and fear in worrying about them, and in giving me a sense of clarity in understanding what, if anything, I might do about them.

The things I just mentioned are almost all potentially overwhelming issues, and of course if you're looking for things to worry about in the community or the family or in the world, you could add a thousand more items to that list. But the purpose of religious life is not to over-burden us with a sense of the pain of the world; I don't want to give the impression that it is. The purpose of religious life is to be more awake, more attentive, to have life more

abundant. A student visited a Zen master and said, "I want to be enlightened." The Zen master replied, "When you walked into this house, there was an umbrella standing in the hallway. What color was that umbrella?" The student shame-facedly admitted that he did not know. The master replied, "For you to have known the color of that umbrella; that is enlightenment."

So we are not asked to rush into dramatic gestures and save the world, but to be awake and attentive, and to know the landscape where we are. Sometime that umbrella is not a pretty color, but if it is there, it is there and we should notice it. We are asked not to be heroes but witnesses; to regard and hold the world and its people with compassion and respect, to listen to stories even of people who are not like us, to remain open and creative in imagining how we might more peacefully share this life.

Involvement in a spiritual community is an invitation to go deeper in every aspect of living: to consider everything we do from the perspective of one who feels called to love and to serve. Sometimes people call the church office and they ask, "Is this the right church for us?" They are doing what we call church shopping. I have done it and many of you have also. But what I think these church shoppers are really asking, from the depth of their souls, is "Will this church demand enough of me? Will it help break me open and scoop out a deeper place for my spirit to flourish? Will it give me a sense of higher calling to which I will most desperately want to be true and loyal?"

If spiritual life involves a commitment to live more deeply, church membership invites a going deeper into the life of *this very church*. It happens when someone asks, "How can I better love and serve in a way that reflects the shared and enduring values of this community? How can I deepen my

understanding of this tradition so that its strength and its wisdom can help me live out my call to love and to serve in everything I do?"

I say this to our newest members, our new dear ones:

You could have found a home in many congregations. It is an exciting mystery that you felt a sense of home-coming in *this* particular congregation, a small miracle which should inspire us all to renew our own commitment to membership, to re-open that old invitation to deep living, to love and service. and awakes and preparedness. ...Yes, being awake and aware, attentive of the world's and our private struggles and sorrows can flood anyone with a sense of responsibility and burden. But there is good news. The good news is that the church asks not that we fix or to solve, eradicate or save. The church, in the action verbs of our own covenant, asks that we

unite

that we cultivate,

that we promote,

that we minister,

that we celebrate,

and that we honor.

Lord, prepare us for what thou art preparing for us. We don't know what may come, we can only guess that it will be more life, the usual demanding and complicated and interwoven set of challenges that comprise all human existence. What a joy it is to have found a place to face it together, to be forged together in the fire of our most deeply cherished values and aspirations. May we welcome in many more such days together. Amen.

(Today we formally welcomed twelve new members to our congregation: Stuart Twite, Laura Campbell, Colin Campbell, Michael Williams, Bernadine Williams, Harry Heineman, Jeff Drinkwater, Mary Nickerson, Patti Walters, Lisa Messersmith, Thomas Kane and Elizabeth Robinson.