

The Vision Thing

Jamaica Plain, May 22, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

It's springtime. For the wider church it's Ordinary Time, the season after Easter and Pentecost. In some traditions it's Trinity Sunday. It's certainly a time of great busyness. On Monday I attended the annual meeting in Plymouth of the Massachusetts Convention of Congregational Ministers (both Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ), which bills itself as the oldest Protestant clergy association in North America. Tuesday included the Standing Committee meeting and a special celebration of Equal Marriage at UUA headquarters downtown (a large heart made by our church school was prominently displayed). Wednesday was Building Your Own Theology class and writing. Thursday included the UU Urban Ministry's annual meeting and my son's school band concert. The Mass. Council of Churches held a big interfaith event on Friday morning. Two of my kids had MCAS tests during the week and one daughter was in a play performance, another in a chorus concert. This afternoon we exercise our rights under congregational governance in our annual meeting. It's certainly MAY!

Busily I drive around, rushing from one thing to the next. I usually keep the radio turned off, something I started doing during Lent. Sometimes I remember to pray that I'm not missing something essential in my busyness. Some years ago, a divinity school held its annual preaching contest. Students were to speak on the topic of the Good Samaritan, that figure in Jesus' story who stops to help a wounded man after a priest and Temple official pass him by.

The students were secretly part of a study. Some were told to arrive at a set time, and admonished not to be late. Others were given a range of several hours in which to give their sermon. Others were told to show up whenever they wanted. Whenever the students arrived, they all found a man in obvious need lying by the chapel door. Most of those who could preach anytime stopped to help; some of those with a range of times stopped to assist the man, and those with the hard and fast deadline ignored him. They were too

busy to care. In our congregational busyness, we need to focus our vision, to better understand who we are, who, like the wounded man, needs our help, and what to do with our time.

Unitarian Universalist Mike Durall's recent book *The Almost Church* has a lot to say on those subjects. It's an "in your face" book, and people tend to love it or hate it. I think it has many useful ideas, and that it would be a good read for next year's standing committee retreat. Drawing upon the growth of evangelical mega churches, Durall argues that we need to make the requirements of UU church membership more demanding to be more meaningful. Regular, every Sunday worship attendance is to be stressed. I admit that I have often said to infrequent attendees, "We're glad to see you, we don't take attendance." Then again, maybe someone needs you to talk to in church this week. Durall would have us be more upfront about financial needs and asking for money to build program. He'd also throw out most of our tradition and worship, arguing that 20 year olds would never come to one of our churches. (I must admit that as a long haired 20-year-old I would never have imagined that I would darken the doors of a church, much less be the minister of one!).

For Durall, the worship of the future will be a service at least two hours long and highly participatory, along the lines of a liberal version of the Black church. A high quality catered meal will follow the service (no more potlucks!). I would argue that good worship can take many forms, and that quality and integrity are usually more important than a particular style. I also am old enough to remember when the future of UU worship was supposed to be sitting in a circle and sharing, while someone played the guitar.

Durall also has clear ideas on congregational vision. He feels that a church's vision should be clear and distinctive. Instead of a long congregational process, which he says usually produces a bland and boring document, Durall argues that the minister should provide the vision - the congregation either supports it or doesn't. I find this idea challenging; when I was in school the minister was supposed to be the facilitator of good things from the congregation.

Thinking about our vision at First Church in Jamaica Plain, UU, I would say this: First Church in Jamaica Plain, Unitarian Universalist is both heir to the Puritan meeting house, where one encounters the world, and a healing sanctuary where one can disarm and be truly human. We are an urban neighborhood congregation whose worship is rooted in living Unitarian Universalist and Judeo-Christian traditions, but open to the religions of the world. First Church seeks to foster spiritual growth and inclusive welcoming community, and to work for justice in our city and our world. I'd be interested in hearing your visions!

Durall is also big on the mega churches' use of small intentional groups. I find a more attractive version of this small group work in a recent book by Quaker author Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*. He argues that people are involved in many types of groups; his idea is to form what he terms "circles of trust" to grow one's soul. Palmer uses the word "soul" but says he means the same thing as Quakers who speak of the "inner light," Hasidic Jews who talk of the "divine spark," Buddhists who talk of the "true self," and Humanists who talk of "integrity."

Parker sees our lives as divided between our outer world and hidden inner world. We need others to allow us the space to listen to our "Inner Teacher" and grow our soul. Such groups do not try to fix or solve personal problems, but sit with the others honoring the mystery, perhaps discussing evocative poetry or writings. Drawing on models of Quaker "clearness committees," the finite groups make listening a key practice, listening as a form of love. Palmer says such "circles of trust" where people can be truly themselves are rare in churches because religious institutions have right and wrong answers (not a problem in our church!). While not politically oriented, involvement in such "circle of trust" groups often leads to increased justice work. I'm interested in experimenting with such groups next year.

One of my first sermons at this church in 1983 drew upon another book by Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, which spoke of finding the holy in the stranger. One

example he used was today's lesson of Abraham and Sarah at Mamre. The elderly couple entertain angels with their hospitality and are rewarded with a son, Isaac. This Genesis passage, where the three angels are addressed in the singular as LORD, is the basis for the Trinity icon, which represents God as a loving conversation and community. (I brought in a copy of this icon, with its three androgynous angels, today.) On the other hand, the great Jewish commentator RASHI describes these three angelic messengers as representing Gabriel (associated with births), Michael, and a third angel around for the baby's circumcision. In any case, Abraham and Sarah provide a feast of food (not following kosher dietary laws) for the divine figures, Sarah laughs, and the elderly couple are promised a son. The boy will be Isaac, whose name means, "he laughed."

We worship today during Trinity Sunday, Ordinary Time, springtime, and what my friend and colleague Michael Boardman calls "the depths of May." Michael, who was a member of our congregation, is dying suddenly and rapidly in Kentucky. Parker Palmer talks of a "circle of trust" as being like sitting with the dying. We honor the mystery and listen, not trying to "fix" the individual. Being with the dying, we let their "Inner Teacher" show them what they need and have to do.

Death and its reminder of our own mortality clarify the importance of community and vision. We need to understand who we are, who is in need, (individuals or groups), and how to live our time. We need to discern and respond to our call. Some of that vision comes from the minister, as Durall says, some from congregational process, and some from ongoing Ordinary Time discernment. This afternoon we gather for our annual meeting; the Quakers regard such occasions as meetings for worship, and a time for the Spirit. Like Abraham and Sarah we will share a meal, ours potluck (and circle dinners in the future). Feasting with such angels and divine folk, what better time to slow down and look into one another's eyes for a sense of our vision, to engage in soulful conversation, and to laugh like Sarah. Our congregation is over 200 years old, but we can still birth new life!

What are your thoughts on our vision?

