

“To These We Give Thanks”

May 25, 2008

The Reading

The reading is by the Reverend John Taylor, retired minister from the 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Society of Ithaca, NY. Taylor served our churches in Urbana, IL, and Amherst, MA. The reading is from his sermon titled “Enduring: Our Moral Decision,” and published in the summer 1994 issue of *Quest*, the newsletter of the Church of the Larger Fellowship.

Here begins the reading.

When we think of moral achievements we usually think of courageous actions or brave stands. But the most noble act of all may be the single quiet act of endurance. Those who have been struck by the impersonal Furies of existence and still claim the right to their own attitudes and beauty are moral giants. They have faced the insanity of existence and have affirmed their own sanity. They have received the worst and still hold tightly to the reins of their beings. These noble men and women have not allowed the events about them or the disease within them, to destroy their decency or their dignity . . . .

The German dramatist Friedrich Hebbel provided an accurate and adequate philosophy when he said “Life is not anything; it is only the opportunity for something.” Men and women, the vast majority of whom have never heard of Hebbel, are practicing his philosophy this very moment. We refuse to believe that any event, no matter how tragic, can finally render us useless. It may be that the events which come in our day are indisputably insane, and their pain penetrates our bones. It may be that the truth which is revealed to us sends our minds spinning with fear. It may be that grief and sorrow darken our days for weeks on end – and they will cast shadows across all our years – still we do not cease, for the “opportunity for something” persists (pg. 6).

Here ends the reading.

“To These We Give Thanks”  
by  
The Reverend William Haney  
May 25, 2008

The Unitarian Universalist Church  
Columbia, Missouri

Memorial Day is honored as a day of ultimate passages – the memories of those no longer living with us. In times past, families that were still together would meet in the local cemetery and clear the weeds and unwanted growth away from the family graves. As a grave of a sibling, parent, an uncle, aunt, cousin or grandparent was cleared, memories would rush from the uprooting hands through the grateful heart and into the mind of stored recollections. Stories would be told, letting each generation share in the common family history. The dead would come alive. All would witness a resurrection of the loved one. Their immortality would be assured. One could feel close to the past, to those maybe never known, or even forgotten. Each new generation is brought into the stream of life. The extension of the family grows with the repeated tellings.

It is very strange. When my parents were alive and I was growing up, I had no contact with my larger extended family. Of course, there were aunts and uncles living in Southern California – and cousins, too: Frankie in El Segundo, Patsy and Dennis in Taft. I would have many chances to be with them at family gatherings, particularly when my maternal grandmother was present. Yet, there was a larger family from which I was isolated. On my dad’s side, there was granddad Haney, in Hutchinson, Kansas, whom I only met once. There was also Uncle Glenn in San Jose, Uncle Clarence in Pittsburgh, Kansas, Aunts Ula in Hutchinson, Gladys in New Mexico and Pauline in Arizona. On my mother’s side I had Uncle Albert in Washington State, Uncle Roy and Aunt Florence in Hutchinson. I rarely saw these relatives, some only once during their lifetimes. When my mother and stepfather moved from Southern California to Hutchinson, I had a chance to be with Ula and Florence more often. By then, Roy had already died. Now with the passing of my father and mother, I only have three aunts remaining of that generation: Florence, Gladys and Pauline. I send them Christmas and Mothers Day cards. My cousins in Hutchinson are in the process of placing Aunt Florence into an assisted living setting. Aunt Pauline, when she receives my cards, has to be reminded who I am by my cousin. She wants to go to Hutchinson for the first time since her childhood to visit the grave of her mother, my paternal grandmother whom I never knew, and didn’t even know she is buried there. With the pain and the sorrow of the death of my parents, there is also the blessing of beginning to know my larger extended family for the first time. Out of darkness, light can, light must shine.

This season of spring is a wonderful aid in bringing forth light. The fresh greenery has a luster to it that soon dulls in the summer heat. Summer itself is a season of intense light, often, too much light – probably more heat than light in fact. Memorial Day weekend is the threshold, the doorway into the light. It is an entrance into a new way of being for a while. For me, it can be a time for reflection, both of the past and the future. We look to a summer with hope and inspiration, with plans for rest and relaxation. I look forward to being with family during the summer months. As the generation of my parents fades, I have a yearning to learn more about what I missed as a youth. It is at times like Memorial Day that the words of my colleague, Sidney Wilde, take on significance, when she says:

Loss is the price we pay for living. From the day we are born to the day we die, we are shedding bits and pieces of ourselves as we shape and reshape ourselves, our lives, and our futures.

This time of memory can also be a time of discovery. Reflection can bring up hidden thoughts and feelings. I was shaped by those whom I knew in my youth. Now I have the opportunity to reshape myself by those who I did not know and yearn to know. There is something in my past that remains enduring.

The Reverend John Taylor suggests, “When we think of moral achievements we usually think of courageous actions or brave stands.” Such will be, and are, the case in those areas recovering from a natural disaster or under the siege of war. We are given in the media many images of the brave survivors and rescuers in China and Southeast Asia. We know that often “courageous actions and brave stands” are necessary. We are told of such incidents of personal sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan. As with natural disasters, Memorial Day is a celebration of the feats of bravery of soldiers in battle and of courageous survival of injury, present and past. However, with the current military emphasis upon Memorial Day, we tend to forget the simple act of clearing away the clutter around the graves of our minds and hearts. This is Taylor’s point, when he adds, “But the most noble act of all may be the single quiet act of endurance.” And so too for those of us who have recently lost a loved one, or are with the pain of a debilitating illness. “Loss is the price we pay for living.” The Reverend Wilde continues with her sense of loss, when she says;

Like a snake that must shed its skin in order to grow, or a bird that must first molt to make room for new stronger feathers in order to fly, we must let go of parts of ourselves – our identity, our sense of security, and those we love, in order to grow and flourish.

This is the “something,” as opposed to the “anything” that Taylor spoke of in the reading, when he quoted Hebbel, “Life is not anything; it is only the opportunity for something.” This is the endurance that gives moral fiber to one’s life and selfhood.

Endurance persists in our church life. We are the inheritors of a legacy established by those who went before us. This is not only in reference to our Unitarian Universalist heritage over the ages. It also means the contributions of those who preceded us in this church. Some of those contributions were courageous and brave – true leaders in the cause of liberal religion. Others contributed just by their warm and gentle presence among us. This Memorial Day worship service is an “opportunity for something” having to do with endurance, with courage and bravery. Although the clearing of the weeds that obscure memory is not complete, the names listed in your insert are of those whose presence was lost during my tenure as minister. Let us now read in unison those names of members and friends who, each in their own way, gave life to this congregation. To these we give thanks.

Leroy Rottmann	15 Apr 1918 – 19 May 1990
Richard Hirsch	25 Sept 1922 – 13 July 1990
Bob Eastman	18 Apr 1918 – 04 Feb 1992
Laura Walters	02 Feb 1912 – 29 Mar 1992
Bill Lichte	08 Apr 1911 – 23 Oct 1992
Kathryn Eastman	27 Sept 1914 – 28 Oct 1993
Clotilde Moller	11 Oct 1909 – 15 Mar 1994
Art McArthur	16 Dec 1910 – 30 Nov 1995

Conrad Stawski	08 Mar 1920 – 08 Aug 1996
Ruth Stone	24 Aug 1912 – 04 Jan 1997
Carmen Osborne	08 Jun 1929 – 28 Jan 1997
Shirley Pales	16 Feb 1920 – 28 Jan 1997
Dick Tyler	10 Feb 1932 – 20 Jan 1998
Margaret Van Valkenburg	18 Nov 1909 – 22 Dec 1998
Lilian Boyle	28 Jan 1914 – 07 Oct 1999
Emily Rieman	26 Aug 1920 – 13 Feb 2000
Albert Wilson	05 Dec 1918 – 14 Mar 2000
Dene Hammond	24 Apr 1938 – 11 May 2000
Clara Coffman	28 Jun 1942 – 25 Oct 2001
Peg Witt	08 Dec 1911 – 14 Sept 2002
Bernice Cudd	11 Jan 1923 – 24 Dec 2002
Arnold White	13 Oct 1923 – 13 May 2004
Bob Brietenbach	10 Oct 1923 – 14 Sept 2004
Dan Spies	16 Feb 1918 – 14 Dec 2004
Anne Robins	29 Mar 1929 – 17 Aug 2005
Lena Karns	1921 – 06 Feb 2006
Marianne Osorio	1957 – 02 May 2006
Janet Whitaker	1946 – 01 May 2007
Jack Mosley	23 Sep 1940 – 02 Dec 2007
John Patton	14 Jan 1952 – 31 Mar 2008

As Taylor says in the reading:

We refuse to believe that any event, no matter how tragic, can finally render us useless. It may be that the events which come in our day are indisputably insane, and their pain penetrates our bones. It may be that the truth which is revealed to us sends our minds spinning with fear. It may be that grief and sorrow darken our days for weeks on end – and they will cast shadows across all our years – still we do not cease, for the “opportunity for something” persists.

In many ways, that “opportunity for something” that can occur in this season of memories and memorials is to touch eternity.

I find that eternity is always present with us. Eternity is not an everlasting future. It is the ever present now that continues to unfold. We are the pulsations of eternity. What is eternal is what presently persists as endurance. Some call that endurance human will, others may want to speak of ultimate power, yet others, of God. I know that there are those who believe in eternal life, some form of life beyond the grave. I cannot dispute that faith, nor do I accept it. For those who wish life to continue beyond death, I cannot give much in counsel. Without being specious, I believe death to be just that – final for me, but not final for those I leave behind or who have left me behind. The Reverend Forrest Church, now facing his own imminent end, brings this into focus for me, when he says:

In a way death is life’s leaven . . . . Love’s power comes in part from the courage required in giving ourselves to that which is not ours to keep: our spouses, children, parents, dear and cherished friends, even life itself. And love’s power also comes from the faith that is required to sus-

tain that courage, the faith that life, howsoever limited and mysterious, contains within its margins, often at the very edges, a meaning that is redemptive, that redeems from death life's pain.

There is pain in death – great pain. This pain is not necessarily physical. It is emotional and spiritual. “Loss is the price we pay for living.” Love is the currency of birthing, living and dieing. For those who have gone before us, as family, friends and those in fellowship with this church, our love will not cease – “giving ourselves to that which is not ours to keep.” Let us be present this Memorial Day season for those who have gone before us. Let us not forget how our lives are touched by theirs. To these, we give thanks.

Amen.