

Homecoming

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Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

Good morning and welcome home. Today is our homecoming day. Today is the day when we look around and see familiar faces and new faces and rejoice because we are here in our spiritual home together. This congregation does not hold regular Sunday services during the summer, so it's been a long time, months at least, since we have been gathered as a community in this place.

“We are here,” Annie Dillard wrote, “to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house” (SLT # 420). And whether you have come here today for the fortieth year in a row or this is your very first time, you are a sight for sore eyes and you are welcome. [Stop and greet one another. Say a word of welcome to someone you don't know.]

During the summer, we get to see what other people do on Sunday morning, all the other activities that could take up a Sunday morning out there in the world. You could be reading the newspaper right now, enjoying a second cup of coffee. You could be sleeping! Think of all the things you could be doing right now if you weren't here.

I was driving home from Vermont a couple of weeks ago on Sunday morning, and I saw people doing all kinds of things between 10:30 and noon. They were mowing their lawns, weeding their flowerbeds, riding motorcycles, playing golf and miniature golf, buying groceries, sitting on their front porches, playing baseball, playing soccer, cutting firewood, milking cows, selling corn, taking the baby for a walk—everywhere I looked, another way to spend a Sunday morning.

But you and I are not doing any of those other things today. We're here, at 4th UU, celebrating our ingathering, our homecoming at the start of another congregational year. You and I showed up here, for ourselves and for each other.

Showing up is the first great gift we give each other in this community, on Sundays and on other days, too. We give each other the gift of our time. In our busy, complicated lives, where it's easy to feel as if there are never enough hours in the day for all the things we need to do, we set aside this time, this Sunday morning, to come together in our community of faith.

Without each one of you, this community could not exist today. Some of us came in early to set up chairs and put on the gathering music and prepare the kitchen for bring-in lunch, to drop off the order of service, to practice for the singing, to greet newcomers and old friends before the service began. And there's always that moment, today it was around 10:15, when the ones who have come in early begin to wonder if anyone else is coming. And then the rest of you do come, you show up, bringing the gift of your time to this congregation, confirming once again that this Sunday morning worship is an important part of your life, something you need in order to become your best self, something you would miss if you were not here.

And we would miss you. Without you, there's no community.

We come here to celebrate the gifts we have been given. "We are of the stars...and we are of the earth" (SLT #445). We have been given the gift of life—each day a precious opportunity to grow and learn and struggle and love each other. We have been given this beautiful planet Earth as our home. Mary Oliver in her new book of poems called *Thirst* writes: "My work is loving the world/...Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?/Am I no longer young and still not half- perfect? Let me keep my mind on what matters,/ which is my work,/which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished/...which is gratitude, to be given a mind

and a heart and these body- clothes,/a mouth with which to give shouts of joy...” We come here to celebrate, to help each other remember to be grateful.

This summer I officiated for two memorial services here at the Fellowship, one for Stefi Fischbach, who died last February, and the other for Chet DeMilio, who died a couple of weeks ago.

It is our custom during memorial services to invite remembrances from anyone in the congregation who wishes to speak, and in both of these services many of the friends and family who had come to mourn shared touching personal memories. I learned so much about these two people that I hadn’t known before. I wished that I had known them better when they were alive. And I renewed my own determination to find more ways for all of us to tell each other our stories before we die. “We can’t return—we can only look behind from where we came” (Joni Mitchell, “The Circle Game”).

I like to say that you can’t be a Unitarian Universalist by yourself. In today’s reading my colleague Victoria Safford makes an even bigger claim. She says “you can’t be a person by yourself...because there is no identity outside of relationship. *Whose* are you?” she asks. “*Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices?*” (“Remind Us Again, Brave Friends,” sermon at the General Assembly, June 26, 2008).

Each of us goes through life embedded in an interdependent matrix of relationships, a community of other people who help us learn who we are and why we are here. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (SLT #584). This congregation’s mission statement begins, “We are a caring and inclusive spiritual community of children, youth, and adults who honor differences and support open- minded spiritual exploration and ethical development.” We are all in this together because we cannot live, we cannot learn, we cannot love by ourselves.

Each of us has particular gifts to bring to this community and our work together. We honor differences here because we know we are not all the same. We do not think the same so we have to remain open-minded. Each person here brings different talents and interests and skills and passions to the mix. Some of us are skeptical, some of us are patient and kind, some of us are good with numbers, others are better with words, some can sing, some can dance, some have come looking for a new friend, a new thought, a new challenge.

Some of us are faithful and persistent. Others are impulsive and adventuresome. Some of us are serious, and some of us are silly. Most of us like to talk. Some of us like to listen. Many of us are good cooks. Among us are good leaders and good followers, great teachers and willing learners.

The second sentence in our mission statement says, “We celebrate life, nurture each other, and provide support in loving and open-hearted acceptance.” We accept each other in all our differences because we know that it takes more than one kind of person, more than one theology, more than one personality, more than one temperament to make up a liberal religious community.

We understand that the biggest challenge facing the world today is how to accept ideas and personalities and theologies that are different from ours. We meet this problem everyday in our families and in our schools and in our communities and in our fellowship and in our nation and in our world. People are different. We often do not agree about fundamental things.

And each one of us longs for a better world. We see the way the world is—full of savage inequality, poverty and hunger, violence and war—and we know it could be better: more fair, more free, more peaceful, more loving. We come together here to deepen our passion for justice. The last part of our mission statement says, “We commit ourselves to

social justice through action in our local community and the larger world.”

And so we are many things as we come together here in this meetinghouse this morning. We are a gifted congregation in many ways. Our mission statement shows us the way to become deeply happy and deeply whole. Each of us brings our individual passions and our personal skills to the work, and these gifts help us decide how we will spend our time in our lives and in this community of faith. Since no one of us can do everything, even everything we would like to do, we are continually making choices.

Frederick Buechner, [say BEEK nur] a Presbyterian writer and theologian has written about vocation, what God means for us to do with our lives. (If this God language is uncomfortable for you, my UU colleague the Rev. Kurt Kuhwald suggests you could substitute “your heart’s most authentic desire” for God.) Buechner wrote, “The work God [or your heart’s most authentic desire] usually calls you to is the kind of work that you need most to do and that the world most needs to have done...The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet” (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*).

The Fourth Unitarian Society is an ideal place to search for and find “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Here in this community we honor each other’s gifts, and we help each other learn what they are. We accept difference and enjoy diversity. Here in this community of faith we can hone and practice the talents and passions that most nourish us, reaching for the ideal expressed by Kahlil Gibran, who said, “Work is love made visible.”

I invite you to come now into a time of meditation and introspection. Sit quietly, settle your feet on the floor, notice your breath, and then follow your breath.

Take a few minutes now to identify for yourself one of your strengths, a gift that you bring to the work of this congregation and your

work in the wider world. What makes you feel most like yourself? What gift do you bring?

[Congregation joins in a ritual called “Come, Build.” Everyone is given a small wooden block and a pen.]

Look carefully at your block of wood, and remember the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, who said that everything in the universe is contained in this piece of wood: the sun that grew the tree from which the block was cut, the rain that watered the tree, the logger who cut it down, the logger’s father....everything is in this block of wood.

Now, write your name and the name of the gift you bring to the congregation on your block. Then, together we will build a structure with all the blocks that stands for our community and its beauty and strength. [While people are coming up and adding their block to the structure, everyone sings “We’ll Build a Land” (SLT# 121)]

This structure stands for all of us and the power of our gifts to build a strong community of faith together. Remember that if it falls down, we can build it up again.

The Rev. Forrest Church, Minister of Public Theology at All Soul’s Unitarian Church in Manhattan, gave his best advice for living to a gathering of UU ministers last fall, He said, “Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.” Together in this community of faith, let us help each other to move toward these lofty goals.

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