

Opening Words

In the words of Fyodor Dostoyevsky:

“Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”

Let us worship together.

Reading

Your gifts – whatever you discover them to be – can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power, the strength of the hands, the reaches of the heart, the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing.

waiting.

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up the wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred, do the work of justice or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy, comply with injustice or withhold love.

You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude to search for the sources of power and grace; native wisdom, healing and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community, the endeavor shared, the heritage passed on, the companionship of struggle, the importance of keeping faith, the life of ritual and praise, the comfort of human friendship, the company of the earth, its chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.

Together – that is another possibility, waiting.

Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry

On Living a “Good” Life Gary Lerude

20 years ago, in June of 1985, I first attended and then joined a Unitarian Universalist church. That began a 20-year religious journey that leads me to today. My journey started much earlier, of course, but it wasn't until that Sunday in 1985, in that UU church in Dallas, Texas, when I felt that I had found a road that had been traveled before and that I could willingly and wholeheartedly join the other seekers traveling the same path.

Since then, Unitarian Universalism has framed my life, and this morning I would like to share a few of the guideposts that point me in the direction of what I believe to be the moral or “good” life. I do not claim that I am a good example of any of what I will relay to you this morning. Nonetheless, this is what inspires me.

The Inherent Worth and Dignity

The first guidepost comes from one of our UU principles, which calls upon us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

One lesson in living this principle came from my early years at the Dallas church, where there was – and still is – a very active gay and lesbian community. The LGUUs, Lesbian Gay UUs, is one of the active church groups in the congregation. Among their activities, the LGUUs sell donuts on Sunday mornings, a favorite stopping point for the kids. More notable than having a group, though, gay and lesbian members serve on the church board, have been president of the congregation, and the church organist's fight with AIDS was a rallying point for the congregation during the last months of his life. I attended my first service of union in that church, and Lori and I taught parenting classes to gay parents raising an adopted son.

I'm somewhat embarrassed to speak of this, in that it was all so normal in the congregation and feels so normal to me. No big deal. Yet this was in Dallas, Texas in the mid 1980s, where the church culture was in marked contrast to that of the community outside the church walls.

When I started attending the Dallas church, homosexuality was an abstraction to me. I didn't know anyone who was gay or lesbian – or

anyone who had disclosed their sexual orientation. I don't think I had any real prejudices, other than the baggage of growing up in a culture where homosexuality was considered morally wrong. My involvement in the Dallas church afforded me the opportunity to meet and develop personal relationships with gays and lesbians and find that they did not fit the cultural archetype but were the same as the rest of us, the only difference being sexual orientation.

Throughout these past 20 years, as I have observed the contrast between the attitude, regulations, and laws of the external culture and the welcoming environment within our UU churches, I understand the importance of these simple words "respect the inherent worth and dignity of every human being."

Of course this applies to more than the example I've cited. Imagine how the world would be if those words were embodied by the Israelis and Palestinians; the insurgents in Iraq or those soldiers who have abused the prisoners at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo.

On a personal level, I find the words more challenging to live at work, when I disagree with the stand that someone takes on an issue. It is too easy to "dis" them. Or when I'm running late, and someone in front of me is driving slower than me. Or having patience with my own children, when their transparent arguments or lack of comprehension is showing.

Respect the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. Recall the phrase from *Desiderata*, a poem by Max Ehrmann: "listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story."

Humility

This brings us to a second guidepost and my favorite virtue: humility.

One of the tenets of UU theology is that revelation is not sealed. Our faith does not create a false dichotomy between science and religion. Rather, we ground our beliefs upon the discoveries of science and extrapolate from there. We accept that many of our questions will forever be unanswered and are content to live with the uncertainties of not knowing. We create meaningful and moral lives nonetheless.

To live contentedly amidst this uncertainty should instill a deep humility in each of us. Gazing at the stars – whether on a dark night or the powerful images from the Hubble telescope, seeing the birth of my children, or flying above the clouds across the country inspires me with a sense of wonder and awe. In the context of the majestic, whether measured by the grandeur of the constellations or the eons of time, I am a small player making a cameo appearance.

That's not to say that our lives are without meaning or purpose. One of the paradoxes of living is that each of us, while minute and finite, is a universe unto ourselves, living very full lives within the context of our families and communities. The challenge of living the humble life is to do things great and wonderful without thinking ourselves great and wonderful. When we forget our mutual interdependence with others, whether in our working organizations, our communities, or our families, we lose the humility that can keep us balanced and grounded.

Taoism has influenced my thinking about living humbly. In the book *Tao of Leadership*, author John Heider writes about success:

“If you measure success in terms of praise and criticism, your anxiety will be endless. Having a good reputation or becoming well known for your work can be a hindrance to your further development. Fame is as burdensome as caring for yourself properly.

“What is the problem with praise and criticism? If the group applauds one thing you do, and then you feel good, you will worry if they do not applaud as loudly the next time. If they are critical, if they argue or complain, you will feel hurt. Either way, you are anxious and dependent.

“How can a good reputation be a hindrance? A good reputation naturally arises from doing good work. But if you try to cherish your reputation, if you try to preserve it, you lose the freedom and honesty necessary for further development.

“How is fame like caring for yourself? In order to do good work, you must take good care of yourself. You must value yourself and allow others to value you also. But if you make too much of yourself, you will become egocentric. Egocentricity injures both self and work.”

By covenanting to respect the inherent worth and dignity of others and recognizing that revelation is not sealed, our UU faith calls upon each of us to live humbly. The Book of Micah in the Old Testament conveys this same theme: “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”

Making the World Better

The passage from Micah is a good introduction to my third guidepost: to do justly or to make the world better for our having lived.

Being an “open ended” religion, meaning that we are open to new truths, has given Unitarian Universalism a long and proud history of challenging the prevailing orthodoxies of the time. That’s why we call ourselves a “liberal” religion (i.e., broad minded and open to new ideas). We tend to be on the front lines of societal change, one of the most recent examples of which has been advocating for equality of marriage for gay and lesbian couples.

Three of our UU principles speak to our desire to make the world better: justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. As individuals and as congregations, we believe in these principles and seek to live them out through the actions of our lives.

This church has a strong commitment to outreach, as evidenced by our Sunday collections and the additional service projects that raised more than \$33,000 this past church year. In addition to financial support, our members have donated time and energy to the larger community, supporting such worthy endeavors as the Granite State Organizing Project, registering voters, and raising money from the dentists in the region to support the Greater Nashua Dental Connection. And Carol Lasselle, our now-retired Sexton, demonstrated a strong commitment to the environment with all the recycling of the church’s trash that she did.

On a personal level, I feel it is very important to share the blessings of my life, in gratitude for the gifts that have been given to me. As a family, we do so through contributions to a variety of causes, both supporting the lives of people and protecting the environment. I have largely invested my discretionary volunteer hours to the church and

Unitarian Universalism, working to strengthen our church and provide a place to attract new members.

My challenge has been and continues to be how to develop an effective voice in the political process, beyond voting and an occasional letter to the editor or a Senator or Representative. It's in this realm that I feel I fall short of the model of citizenship I aspire to. Namely, I don't spend the time required to understand the depth of many of the issues we face from the local to the global stage. Perhaps you feel the same way.

As Marion Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, said: "We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee."

And so, in gratitude for the gift of life, our UU faith tradition asks that we make a positive difference in our world. Recall the question posed by Rebecca Parker: "What will you do with your gifts? Choose to bless the world."

Seeing the Sacred in Every day

My fourth guidepost is striving to see the sacred in every day.

I have a hunch that as civilization moved from an agrarian lifestyle to the industrialized age, from rural to urban living, we lost touch with the natural rhythms of sunrise and sunset, the moon and the stars, the creatures that inhabit the forests and prairies. As our lives have become more and more enabled and controlled by the ingenuity and productivity of humans and the amazing feats of technology have become mundane, we have lost some connection with the sacred.

One of the purposes or outcomes of religion is to help foster that connection. In the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, God is the ultimate connection with the sacred. With Unitarian Universalists, the sacred is more diffuse. The tie may come through the grandeur of Nature, close relationships with people, the miracle of our life, a piano sonata, a principle well served, or the totality of being.

Although we UUs tend to be a very rational bunch of people, I think each of us needs to develop and practice some means or process of recognizing and renewing our spiritual connection with the sacred. We

need a way to step outside of our habits and routines to see and hear as if for the first time.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen master, speaks and writes of being connected to the sacred while doing the mundane, everyday tasks that we all do. He refers to this practice as mindfulness. In his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes of being mindful while doing the dishes:

“There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes.

“If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not ‘washing the dishes to wash the dishes.’ What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact, we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future – and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life.”

How often do you find your days a swirl of compressed activities that you are not able to appreciate, with no sense of the sacred? How often do you find the routine of your days boring, seemingly going on forever, with no connection to the sacred?

In developing a spiritual practice aligned with my UU faith, I can’t say that I regularly meditate or pray. I can say, though, that I try to be mindful throughout the day and have developed certain markers that trigger a thoughtful connection. Flying, jogging in a new and scenic location, listening to music are several ways I can reconnect to the holy. And often the church service will do the same, like last week’s recognition of our graduating seniors, teachers, and choir.

Having reached the point in my life where serious illness and death have intruded upon my family, friends, and people I work with, I am becoming more personally aware that life is a finite gift, not to be taken for granted.

Two years ago this congregation lost a beloved member, Donna Purkhiser, to the complications of breast cancer. Donna was the clerk of the board prior to her death. Before her cancer was discovered, when she did the chalice lighting at one of our meetings, ironically she read this poem written by Jane Kenyon:

I got out of bed
On two strong legs.
It might have been otherwise.
I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe flawless peach.
It might have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did the work I love.
At noon I lay down with my mate.
It might have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver candlesticks.
I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls
and planned another day.
But one day I know,
it will be otherwise.

Our lives are gifts. Amidst the uncertainty of why we are alive or what may come after, we should treasure them and ensure that we live to the fullest of our abilities.

As a Unitarian Universalist, with the freedom and responsibility to search for my own truth and meaning, I have found these to be guideposts for living a “good” life, not meaning comfortable but worthy of my years here. I share these thoughts with you this morning, not to suggest that they be a prescription, rather to inform your own search as a member of this liberal religious tradition.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Religion is to do right. It is to love, it is to serve, it is to think, it is to be humble.” Amen.

Closing Words

In the words of William Murray, former President and Academic Dean of Meadville Lombard Theological School:

These are the days that have been given to us;
let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives;
let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder;
let us cherish and celebrate them
in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us;
let us make of them stories worth telling
to those who come after us.