

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY
“Attending to Unfinished Business”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 5, 2008

Readings

The title of this service comes from a quote from the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, minister in All Souls Church in New York City. He is struggling with a recurrence of esophageal cancer that has metastasized in a way that cannot be treated.

He has published a book titled *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, his summary of his 30 years of ministry at All Souls. He gave a workshop at General Assembly this year in Fort Lauderdale. He looked gaunt and haggard but his voice was still strong. His powerful presentation was greeted by a long, standing ovation from the audience.

One of the quotes he read from his book grabbed my attention about his acceptance of death. Church attributes his own near-immediate acceptance to the spiritual work he began when he stopped drinking eight years ago. He said:

"I had conducted a fearless moral inventory, made amends where it was possible and appropriate, recovered my good conscience, made peace with myself, then with others, then with God. If I hadn't, when this death sentence came, I know that I would have been crippled by regret."

"Don't get me wrong. I am not happy about the prospect of dying. I have things left to do in life, and regret the interruption of all my splendid plans. My acceptance, however, abides in a deeper place. I am free to die, I realized some time ago, because although I have much ongoing business, I have no unfinished business."

The 12 Steps (adapted slightly for inclusiveness)

- 1) We admitted we were powerless over our addictive behavior--that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God through our individual understanding.
- 4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

- 5) Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- 6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- 7) Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
- 8) Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- 9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- 10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- 11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God through our individual understanding, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
- 12) Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others struggling with addictive behavior, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Sermon

Forrest Church has been a towering figure in contemporary Unitarian Universalism for the last twenty years. When he was struck with cancer, it sent shock waves through our movement. Many have been moved and inspired by the courageous way he has faced the end of his life.

His goal was to reach his 60th birthday, birthdays his father and grandfather did not make and birthdays he hopes his own children will sail past. He was light-hearted, standing in the pulpit last Sunday, joking that this was his fifth farewell sermon from that pulpit. Yes, he did get to his 60th birthday but he is unlikely to see another one. He leaves us a rich legacy of words to transmit his vision of Unitarian Universalism.

So today I'd like to take up a little of that legacy and engage a statement from the talk he gave at General Assembly. Due to a conflict, I wasn't able to actually hear Church offer these words, but I did read the summary of the workshop. I'm attracted to the quote I read earlier, marveling at the sentence, " although I have much ongoing business, I have no unfinished business." I don't know about you, but this seems like a big challenge. How many of us here today can make this statement reflecting on our chaotic, harried lives that have so many loose ends left untied?

Human relationships have a way of being untidy. In moments of life threatening crisis, what is the most common thing that crosses people's minds? Again and again, people report thinking of people they love and regret not communicating their love effectively to them. If you get nothing else out of this sermon, I encourage you to go to those you love and tell them how much you care about them. After all, this could be your last day on earth. You never know ...

If you just imagined doing that, did anyone experience any resistance arising? If so, you may be realizing you have some unfinished business with that loved one. Maybe a fight that wasn't resolved. Could be an unacknowledged slight received or given. Increasing the level of intimacy with that person could upset the unconsciously negotiated level of closeness and distance you maintain with that person. Communicating, "I love you" can be a big challenge when we've felt contradictory emotions and sent contradictory messages in the past leaving unfinished business behind.

What really messes up human relationships is addictive behavior. I was stunned to discover Church had struggled with addiction and only fully confronted it eight years ago. He followed that path that so many millions have taken to sobriety through Alcoholic's Anonymous. Key to that path is making amends to those harmed, finishing their unfinished business.

I have great love and respect for Bill W. who founded AA. The twelve steps are a powerful way to live with addictive tendencies without letting them run your life. Bill's genius was in allowing people to conceive of God as God made sense to them. All one really needs is a concept of a power greater than your own personal power, which the recovery group manifests through its meetings. The process of addiction isolates addicts and damages their judgment. The recovery process teaches the restoration of relationships. Key to restoring relationships and finishing unfinished business is asking for forgiveness and making amends.

Asking for forgiveness and making amends is good for every relationship. This is one of my great appreciations of the wisdom and practice drawn from the Jewish tradition. Jews believe that whether we live or die in the New Year, ushered in by Rosh Hashanah, is decided by how we have lived in the previous year. Those who have been particularly bad, may not be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. Thankfully God leaves the book open for the next ten days giving everyone a chance to reconcile with each other, ask for forgiveness and make amends, to finish their unfinished business. They have up until sundown on Yom Kippur to clean up their act and atone for their sins when the Book of Life is finally closed and their fates are sealed.

While a yearly clearing of the conscience is a good thing, most of us would benefit from doing it more frequently. Following the twelve steps, particularly step ten, teaches the habit of repairing the damage in relationships as quickly as possible rather than letting it build up. Although I haven't worked the program myself, study of the program and my work with people working the program have influenced my

behavior. About 20 years ago, I made a commitment to myself to resolve my missteps with others as quickly as possible.

Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun, writes, “Forgiveness is an essential ingredient [of living a healthy life]. It allows us to let go of the past and make a fresh start. Forgiveness cannot be forced. When we are brave enough to open our hearts to ourselves, however, forgiveness will emerge.

Unfinished business has other dimensions than cleaning up our mistakes in the past. It has a dimension of resolving our limitations in the present.

I remember reading Churches’ first book published in 1985 called *Father and Son*. It describes his relationship with his father who died the year before. I remember Senator Frank Church as one of the great senators my parents always praised. The shadow cast over Forrest’s young life must have been very significant. Forrest took awhile to find and define himself and figure out what he wanted to do with his life. His father’s expectations were quite high and, at times, the two of them had difficulties in their relationship.

I also remember growing up in awe of my father, whose passion was Physical Chemistry. He taught at the University of Delaware over 35 years before retiring. His research in radiation chemistry and his use of mystifying mathematics that, today, I would still be challenged to understand, impressed me as a child. I remember looking at the graphs and formulae in his papers or the tests of his students and wondering if I could ever measure up to his example. My father is also a strongly moral and ethical person, completely honest with his taxes to the point he would keep receipts for paper clips if he deducted them. If science were a religion, both my father and my sister would be ordained clergy.

I praise and celebrate my father because I also have unfinished business with him. Not so much with our relationship today but rather with my remembered relationship with him as a parent. I internalized some comments he was in the habit of making in ways that diminished my sense of confidence and self worth. I mention this not to blame him for something or to criticize him as a parent. Being a parent myself, I’m distressingly aware of how what I say and do can affect my own son and of the mistakes I’ve made learning to be a parent.

The unfinished business is not in my present day relationship with my father but with my internalized memory of my father. The healing work I have and continue to do focuses on old, buried emotions and self-judgments that can limit me in the present. As I work to grow into a excellent preacher, effective staff supervisor and community leader, I must move beyond the “not good enough” residue hanging on to me from the past for the good of our congregation and for the work of our congregation in the larger community.

I encourage all of us to look inside and examine the unfinished business that limits our personal vision of who we are and what we can be. Each one of us has so much to offer to make our relationships, our families, our congregation, and our

community stronger and healthier. Many of us ignore unrealized passions we are afraid to act on and bring to life. The Spirit of Life and Love moves through us presenting us with opportunities to make a difference in our own life and in the lives of others. What unfinished business holds *you* back from responding to the call to love and serve life?

Our congregation embraced the call to excellence as a way to prepare to occupy Emerson Community Hall. I've taken that challenge very seriously looking at everything I do to serve our congregation. Our staff is taking this call very seriously as we examine how we serve the congregation, making that service the best we can make it. We are working hard to provide the best programming we can for our children, youth and adults in the area of education, seeking a lifespan approach that connects the generations. Great things are in process here as we strive for excellence.

We need to be an excellent congregation so we can deal with the last area of unfinished business I'd like to mention this morning, the unfinished business in our community.

Some of us met on Wednesday with Albany Common Council member, the Honorable Barbara Smith. A Dream Catcher subcommittee and the Community Outreach subcommittee of the Social Responsibilities Council met with her to explore unmet needs in the community that our congregation might want to address. Barbara painted a disturbing picture of governmental neglect and indifference to the problems in our poorer neighborhoods of West Hill, Arbor Hill and the South End. The systems of oppression and the culture of poverty collude to create a web that catches many minority youth in the criminal justice system and sabotages their future. Those, like Barbara, who have a vision of ways to break that cycle of poverty and oppression meet fierce resistance. I believe there is a critical public advocacy role we have to play here we are beginning to identify.

Institutionalized racism, sexism and homophobia are our collective unfinished business. Even though I personally haven't used racial slurs or practiced racist hiring of employees, I live in a culture that does. All of us who have unearned white privilege in our society inherited this unfinished business whether we like it or not. While I appreciate the peace Church as found by working the program and cleaning up his act that allows him to face death, the rest of us aren't there yet. We have work to do, particularly addressing Albany's unique version of apartheid we're learning about. This congregation has a history of fighting that system that goes back to our former minister Nick Cardell in the 1960's working with the Brothers and fighting the five-dollar vote.

Many of us are familiar with the work of Michael Lerner and get lots of emails from him advocating for a spiritual progressive movement. He publishes a magazine called *Tikkun*. The Hebrew word is part of a phrase, *tikkun olam*, that means "repairing the world" or "perfecting the world." Traditionally, the phrase is connected to doing *mitzvots* or good works to hasten the coming of the Messiah and

the Messianic Age. Lerner has a little different understanding. He sees the work of repairing the world as challenging:

the ethos of selfishness and materialism that has led people into a frantic search for money and power and away from a life that places love, kindness, generosity, peace, non-violence, social justice, awe and wonder at the grandeur of creation, thanksgiving, humility and joy at the center of our lives.

Attending to unfinished business is ultimately about repairing the world. As we heal our relationships, we repair the world. As we face the internalized oppression that limits us, we repair the world. As we work to end systemic racism and oppression around us, we repair the world.

We still have a few days left before the Book of Life closes on Yom Kippur, on October 9th. I urge you to join in solidarity with Jews around the world to attend to your personal unfinished business and to attend to the unfinished business in society.

Benediction

Please be seated for the benediction as it is a little longer than usual. I borrowed this quote from a sermon by Alan Taylor the UU minister at Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois. It didn't fit in my sermon but it is just too good not to share, so I'll close with it now:

In his lovely little book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom writes about his visits with his former professor Morrie Schwartz. They occur during Morrie's last years of life as he struggles with Lou Gehrig's disease. During one of these visits, Morrie focuses his conversation with these words: "Forgive yourself before you die. Then forgive others." He tells Mitch, "There's no point in keeping vengeance or stubbornness. These things"—he sighed—"these things I so regret in my life. Pride. Vanity. Why do we do the things we do?" Then he asked me a question, pointing to something on the shelf, "Do you see that sculpture?" The sculpture was a bronze cast, the face of a middle-aged man, wearing a necktie, with a tuft of hair falling across his forehead. "That's me," he said "A friend of mine sculpted that maybe thirty years ago. His name was Norman. We used to spend so much time together—swimming, trips to New York. He sculpted that bust of me down in his basement. It took several weeks to do it, but he really wanted to get it right."

"Well, here's the sad part of the story. Norman and his wife moved to Chicago, and a little while later my wife, Charlotte, had a pretty serious operation. Norman and his wife never got in touch with us, though I knew they knew about it. I was very hurt, so I dropped the relationship. Over the years I met Norman a few times, and he always tried to reconcile, but I didn't accept his explanation. I was prideful. I shrugged him off. Mitch . . . a few years ago . . . he died of cancer. I feel so sad. I never got to see him. I never got to forgive." The tears rolled off the side of his face, rolled down to

his lips, as he said “You need to make peace with yourself and everyone around you. Forgive yourself, forgive others. Don’t wait.”

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