

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

“What If?”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 18, 2009

Spoken Meditation

Goodness is a means, not an end.

Look within.

Who can stop the hunger

For more than we deserve?

Who can prevent a jealous thought

From urging us to protect our hearts?

Who can ward off all the uncertainties

That disturb the mind before we decide to act?

Were perfection required to be good,

All human existence would be a living hell.

Believe otherwise.

Embodying love is the endless means to be good.

In each moment, love stands at our side

ready to be chosen.

Choose wisely!

Readings

Below the Surface by Steve L. Robbins

Fly-fishing first caught my fancy when I saw the movie *A River Runs Through it*. Critics gave the film a thumbs-up for its theme, story line, and lessons. I liked all the scenes of big trout being caught with bamboo fly rods. It was a glimpse of heaven to me, watching those boys whip figure eights with their fly lines and cast their buglike bait with pinpoint accuracy. But what intrigued me most was watching the fly drift lazily on top of the water and then, without warning, get engulfed in a mighty splash. Now that's fly-fishing. Or so I thought.

After watching the movie, I went to buy fly-fishing equipment at a local shop. When I walked into the store, I looked around in amazement at all the gear, enough to plunge the purchaser into poverty. As I loitered in a mix of awe and confusion, the storeowner broke me out of my trance, saying, "Something I can help you with?" I told him I had just seen *A River Runs Through It* and wanted to get into fly-

fishing. He gave a little laugh and queried me further, "Do you want to really learn how to fly-fish or do you want to do it the way you saw it in the movie?"

I was stumped. I didn't know there was a difference. The owner began to explain, "What you saw in the movie is not how real fly-fishers fish."

"Real fly-fishers?" I mumbled.

"Yes, real fly-fishers are the ones who actually catch big fish on a consistent basis. They don't do that movie stuff."

"What do you mean, 'that movie stuff'?"

He continued, "In the movie all you saw were people fishing with what we call dry flies-flies that float on top of the water."

I interrupted, "Yeah. Isn't that fly-fishing---casting a fly, letting it float downstream, and waiting for a fish to come up and get it?"

"That's only a small part of fly fishing. When you're fishing for trout you have to understand that 90 percent of the time, especially the big ones, eat under the surface of the water. For example, trout generally grab nymphs as the nymphs are making their way to the surface. They rarely break the surface to eat. Most of the action takes place where you can't see it. In reality, the best fly-fishers use what we call wet flies and nymphs that don't float. To be an effective fly-fisher, you have to be keenly aware of what happens below the surface of the water."

Matthew 4:18-19

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."

Sermon

Tuesday will make history as the United States of America inaugurates its first African American President. Please come have lunch in Channing Hall as we watch that history unfold projected on a large screen. I know many of us will be beaming with delight that this great day has finally come.

And let me caution you now, on Wednesday, all that came before Tuesday will still remain part of our collective history. Inaugurating our first African American President will do little to erase the continuing effects of that history. And those effects are not just "out there," they are also "in here."

Those effects are what I want to talk about as we remember and honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday tomorrow.

Both the kid's story and the adult's story today come from a fellow named Steve Robbins. You wouldn't likely guess from his name that he is a first generation Vietnamese American. His mother married an American soldier who brought his family here in the 1970's. He endured much racism as a youth by those who identified him as an enemy in a poverty stricken section of Los Angeles. His step-father sexually abused his sister who ran away and was later murdered. The grief his mother endured was so all encompassing that she later committed suicide.

Robbins has known deep suffering and sorrow in his life. His response has been to bring hidden suffering and sorrow to the surface. He honors his mother's call to service. His mother routinely told him, "you walk on a path cleared by others, so it is your responsibility to clear the path for others." Robbins does this by using engaging stories to help us expand our capacity to include those who are unlike us, and appreciate their differences from us.

I'm sure most of us realize that electing an African American President will not erase the systemic and institutional racism that remains in our society and the fear and prejudice that remain hidden in the hearts of most Americans. While much positive change has happened on the surface, much deeper reservations remain. Pearl Buck wrote in 1943, "Race prejudice is not only a shadow over the colored--it is a shadow over all of us, and the shadow is darkest over those who feel it least and allow its evil effects to go on."

Unitarian Universalist Association leaders feel the shadow of racism very keenly, far more deeply than most of our congregations. And well they should. We have our share of institutional racism in our heritage and history. The wealth that supported the 19th century Unitarian Boston Brahman came from the West Indies slave-sugar cane-rum trade triangle and the opium based trade with India and China. Unitarians were none too charitable to the Catholics from Ireland imported to work in the New England mills. Our first African American ministers had meager support from the American Unitarian Association.

This came to a head in the 1960's with the Black Empowerment Controversy. A million dollars was authorized to support empowerment work and never paid, partially because the UUA discovered it was in grave financial trouble and partly through lack of trust. Everything flew apart at the General Assembly in 1969. The UUA has been nursing this wound ever since.

It came to a head again at the 1993 General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina. A Thomas Jefferson Ball was scheduled and people were encouraged to come in period costume. African Americans asked what costume they should come in, rags and chains? The Rev. Hope Johnson spoke for the African American UU Ministers saying, "We refuse to participate in these activities which reflect a profound lack of sensitivity and judgment, particularly in view of the UUA's stated thrust this year toward racial and ethnic diversity."

I give you all this history to help you understand the drive the UUA has today to encourage us to go below the surface. Robbins says:

Those who have not faced or witnessed much discrimination tend to recognize it only in obvious acts--the "surface action" easily recognized by

most people...It's the remaining 90 percent of discrimination that should catch most of our attention. It's the below-the-surface, subtle activities that cause the most harm.

Lest we feel our socially active congregation is immune from this exploration, Glenn Durban passed on to me an email from his son who participated in our RE program in the 1950's and 60's. In those days, one of the ways we raised funds was to have a slave auction. Young people in the congregation would be bid on and bought to work for a day doing chores for the "master" and the money would go to the congregation. Glenn's son remembers an African American girl in our RE program who objected vigorously to the practice as racist. No one else had ever thought about how it would feel to be on the auction block if you were African American child ... or that child's parents.

Beginning with my membership in a progressive, urban Unitarian congregation in Oakland, California in 1984, I've been working on anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism on and off throughout my adult life within Unitarian Universalism. That's 25 years of examining my unconscious racial assumptions and biases. And I'm not done yet. I don't expect *ever* to be done. Not because I'm such a racist, sexist, homophobic pig. Inherited cultural patterns run very, very deep. Catching internalized racism can be very hard, emotionally challenging work. Robbins also says:

Unfortunately, most of us can't, don't, or won't look below the surface to see what's happening. And often, when we are told what's happening below the surface, our reaction tends to be one of disbelief or amazement.

When I bring up doing this kind of work, people unfamiliar with it respond to the surface issues where the little fish are. They look around on Sunday morning and want the surface to look different. They want to see more variety of skin tones in the congregation so we *look* more inclusive. The next comment that often follows is very telling: "Yes, we want our congregation to be more diverse but I don't want our service to turn into a Missionary Baptist song fest or have to revere our reverend."

Our Treasurer, Betsey Miller, participated in UUA anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural programming during the excellent UU Leadership Training Institute she attended this past summer. Inspired by what she learned, she came back to our Board and challenged us to spend some time looking at how our congregation could engage in this kind of work. The Board invited Dr. Karen Loscocco who works in this area to help sensitize us to the unearned privilege our society grants people with pale skin tones and limp, light colored hair. She talked to us about it as a "backpack full of privilege" the melanin challenged get at birth.

Those of us with this backpack don't even know it's there and take it for granted. It is the nature of the human condition to take things for granted. Many of us had a rude awakening during the December ice storm how much we take electricity for granted. Those who have lived in non-European dominated cultures may get the lights flicked off on their white privilege and wake up to it. For the rest, though, they take it for granted, just as many legacy children who grow up in wealth assume it as their birthright without a second thought.

The latest thinking from the UUA on how to do this work has been to encourage us to go below the surface where the big fish are. Effective social change integrates reflection and action. Acting against racism and oppression helps us discover its hold on us, hooking the fish lurking in our subconscious.

A fisherman knows the stimulation of hooking a fish. The struggle begins as the fish takes the bait, diving deep into the water, trying to get away. If the hook isn't set, and the line isn't kept taut, the fish may escape. Anxiety surges in the fisherman not knowing the size of the monster fighting at the other end of the line. A slackening of the line might let it get away. Finally, when it surfaces, its finite size is revealed ... as well as its beauty.

The UUA is urging us to fish below the surface for vestiges of racism, sexism, homophobia and ablism (just to name a few of our inherited and acculturated prejudices). If you don't fish for them, you're much less likely to be able to bring these prejudices to the surface of consciousness. Yes, there is some fearful anticipation not knowing how big a fish you might catch. Yes, there is some struggle bringing it to the surface. And if the fish is too big or too scary, you can always cut the line and let the monster go. But almost always, the fear disappears when the fish is out of the water and flopping around in the boat, exposed.

Prejudices have power over us when they lurk unseen and unknown in the depths of our consciousness. But when we've begun catching and examining them, we can begin to classify them and observe their behavior. We can start to recognize what kind of bait they'll strike. We become more aware of what is swimming around in our heads so when they surface, we'll know how to handle them and deflect their potential harm.

Notice I'm *not* talking about *eliminating* them. We could try to catch them all, but that is a very, very difficult task. Even as we're fishing out one species, another may be taking hold in our mental pond. The mind has a way of breeding prejudices as part of the way it works. Better, is to learn how to fish for them, learn their ways, and how to prevent them from doing any harm, working with them as a part of being human.

And remember, fishing can be lots of fun. There are benefits to this inner work. Catching a prejudice before it turns into a harmful action is a very satisfying moment of self-awareness. Choosing to help rather than to harm is a satisfying moment of liberation from future suffering.

What if, this kind of inner work became the story told about each one of us? What if that was how our congregation was known here in Albany? What if that is how our congregation was known in our Association of Unitarian Universalist congregations?

So, how do we go fishing below the surface?

One excellent way is to engage with our neighbors. The results of personal, institutional and systemic racism plague residents of West Hill, Arbor Hill and the South End. If you want to know what kind of fish are swimming in your pond, spend a little time in these neighborhoods. You don't have to cross Central Avenue, Henry Johnson or Delaware Avenues. Just walk down West Street.

There are a number of organizations working on these problems that could use our support. Last week at the forum, we heard from Common Councilwoman the Hon. Barbara Smith about the work of the Inner City Youth and Family Coalition. Members of our Social Responsibility Council have been going to their meetings. Common Councilman, the Hon. Dominick Calsolaro, wants to see the findings of the Gun Violence Task Force implemented.

Our neighbors on the other side of Washington Avenue are potent allies in this work. The vision and imagination for how to address the racism in us and in our community can come from the University of Albany. They need us to urge them to be responsible to the larger community and partner with us.

We can also fish below the surface as individuals in our own lives.

Some of us attended the yearly Capital Area Council of Churches' Martin Luther King Scholarship service Thursday night at the Metropolitan Baptist Church on Second Avenue. We listened to some ecstatic singing and powerful preaching that had some people on their feet clapping and waving their hands on the border of hysteria. The fish were jumping in some of our UU ponds for sure, particularly when the preacher referenced "God sanctioned marriage." Yet, for me, the experience was overall quite positive. Even though the theological language was not the kind I prefer, the spirit in the room was loving, appreciative and moving, especially as an eleven year old girl sang, "If I Could Fly" with the poise of a professional.

With Barack Obama being inaugurated on Tuesday, now is the time for us to go fishing. Wednesday morning, let us vow to do what we can to address the vestiges of prejudice in ourselves and our world. I hope our congregation can find a way to take advantage of this moment to partner with our African American brothers and sisters in this work. Let us work together to address the racism that poisons our communities and our inner lives.

Yes, there may be a few extra cookies in it for us ... but there is a far greater reward; the great inner satisfaction of bringing justice and mercy to life.

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