

“Why Bother”

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church

January 10, 2010

Rev. Thomas G. Anastasi, Minister

PRAYER:

Hear the words of Marianne Williamson, words quoted by Nelson Mandela in his acceptance speech to become president of South Africa:

Our deepest fear is NOT that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves,

who am I to be brilliant,

gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of Divinity itself.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking

so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of the Divine

that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,

we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,

our presence automatically liberates other.



SERMON:

In not too many days we will be celebrating the first anniversary of the inauguration of President Obama. This year has been amazing in many ways, and we may have to wait to find out what the historians will say. But after all that's happened—for good and bad—I really am feeling better about the world and our nation.

As we enter the New Year, as usual, all the pundits are recounting what happened in the last year and the last decade—the “naughties” or “aughties” or what Paul Krugman called the “Big Zeroes”. Like many of you, I am so thankful that ten-year time is over and that we are living in a new time, a better time, and certainly a more hopeful time.

However, just as the President predicted in his inaugural speech, some things have actually gotten worse, and there are still a whole lot of troubles in River City.

There seems to be a glimmer of recovery in the world of economics, though many of us believe it is a false hope. After all, the folks who caused the financial meltdown are not only *not* in jail, they are still running the whole system. There is little doubt among those who know about these things that Wall Street has, in fact, purchased and now completely owns the Congress of the United States. I was sorely troubled by Bill Moyers' recent report, which openly declared such and that not very many ordinary folks are too much concerned about it, at least they're not bothered enough to do anything about it.

For propriety's sake I won't go into the other obscene developments, like the increased war efforts in Afghanistan or the insurance company's triumphant victory in the health care debate or the government's continued inability to connect the dots.

What I'm distressed about is that so many ordinary people seemed to be saying in response to all these cases is, “Why bother? There's nothing I can do about the predicament we're all in. There's nothing any of us, or even all of us can do! *Why bother?*”

Of course, that’s a very good question. Why is it that anyone should bother trying to fix a situation which seems so thoroughly cemented into the ground of our world? “This is the way it is, maybe the way it’s always been, and maybe the way it’s always going to be. Why bother?”

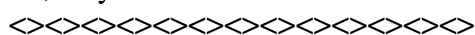
We could say that. We really could.

And, we could say something else, something like “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore!” Imagine that! Leaning out the window and shaking our fists to the world, and screaming we not gonna take it anymore. They might even make a movie about that outrage.

But where is that kind of outrage? Outrage is really where we need to be. We should be morally outraged. We should be legally outraged. We should be righteously outraged. And we really should not be willing to take it anymore.

But why bother? Because each and every person in this room, each and every person in Seattle, each and every person in the entire nation is the recipient of these guys’ malfeasance. We are the ones paying for this and they are the ones receiving the obscene bonuses.

So, why can’t we be bothered?



The first question to ask is, What’s wrong with the way things are, so that I am bothered at all? Why must I be bothered with anything?

It sounds like a silly question at first, but the truth is that many of us live our lives *as though* there is nothing wrong, nothing so out of whack that we need to be bothered with it. Most of us can look around our lives and see that the world is a fairly nifty place, at least according to the benefits we seem to have reaped from it.

In fact, some people might even be afraid to rock the boat by complaining or protesting the ways things are, since that rocking could very well upset their comfort and their advantage. They might have to sacrifice some of the benefits. We Americans live pretty well, at least in relation to many other places in the world. Our consumption of oil and other natural resources are pretty nice.

I’m talking, of course, about the fact that the 500 richest people on the planet control more wealth than the poorest 3 billion, more than half the human population. We here in America consume an enormous share of the world’s resources, and we may find it difficult to complain about that and especially to go out of our way to change it, to re-order the flow of advantage toward ourselves. This is a very good reason not to bother.

Those of us here in our liberal religious way try very hard to understand our cultural diseases—callousness, short-sightedness, denial—and we believe we must try to learn what it will take to heal our society and our souls. How then can we become convinced that we can do nothing to affect the future our children and grandchildren will inherit?

We usually don’t know where to start. Most of us would like to see people treated more justly and the earth accorded the respect it deserves. But we mistrust our own ability to make a difference. The magnitude of the issues at hand has led too many of us to conclude that social involvement isn’t worth the cost.

Such resignation isn’t innate or inevitable. It’s what psychologists call “*learned helplessness*”—a systematic way of ignoring the ills we see and leaving them for others to handle. We find it unsettling even to think about crises as profound as the extinction of entire species, the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the rainforests, and the oppression of desperate urban poverty right here in Seattle.

We’re taught to doubt our voices, to feel that we lack either the time to learn about and articulate the issues or the standing to speak out and be heard. To get socially involved, we believe, requires almost saint-like judgment, confidence and character—standards we can never meet. What’s more, our impulses toward involvement are dampened by a culture that demeans idealism, enshrines cynicism and makes us feel naïve for caring about our fellow human beings or the planet we inhabit.

Let us remember Unitarian Edward Everett Hale’s declaration, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

“I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

Imagine those words on a poster out in front of this church.

Does he mean that he is willing to be bothered, all the way to the point that he will actually do something?

History is full of individuals coming to that same conclusion. We sometimes call these people “heroes”, since many of them had to put their lives on the line as they did what they knew they had to do.

Naturally, this is a primary reason more of us refuse to act: we don’t want to give up our lives or at least the way we are living our lives. That is always considered a good reason not to be bothered.

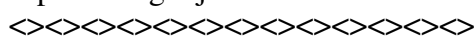
And there plenty of other reasons we don’t want to be bothered:

- There are so many important issues to consider, so many needs, so much injustice, I am overwhelmed. I am ethically exhausted.
- I am living in despair. “I give up. There’s no use. It’s impossible to address these things.”
- “I’m just one little speck in the universe. There’s nothing I can do.”
- “I am not a natural born leader and cannot become one.”
- I am not qualified. “I don’t have what it takes to be a *saint*...” There’s never going to be a statue of me in a church somewhere, with people kneeling and praying to me.”

“I don’t have what it takes to be a *spokesperson* for the group...” “I don’t have the necessary eloquence to represent the cause.

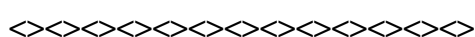
“I don’t have what it takes to be a *hero*...” Like Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr.

- “Charity begins at home.” “What about *my* life?” I have to take care of my own house first and foremost.
- I am full of FEAR — afraid of my inadequacy. Afraid of my public exposure. Also, I fear my own power.
- And of course, some of us like me are just plain lazy. It’s a whole lot easier to take a nap than it is to get out in the street protesting injustice in the world.



And finally, these words from Dorothy Day (The Catholic Worker):

“People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thought, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.”



What work can we do?

1. Take our assets out of the big banks and into credit unions and local banks. I’m not going to let these greedy men to take my money and do the evil deeds they do.
2. Mount letter-writing campaigns to congress people demanding they pay attention to their responsibilities as representatives of the people—not Wall Street.
3. Be a public witness.
4. Be a voice of liberal religion crying in the wilderness, proclaiming that the way we spend money is a moral issue. The way I spend my money is a moral act. The way this church spends its money is an ethical issue. The way the United States spends the vast sums of money it has (or goes into debt for) is a profoundly moral issue.

Somebody needs to remind us of that, someone like Amy Goodman or Rachael Maddow or Bill Moyers. We should support them as they pound on the table crying our: “We need to wake up and not allow these criminals to take over our world!”

Why bother?

Remember the story of when Moses was talking to a bush one day. And it was burning. Out of the bush came a voice, and it was the voice of God. God said, I’ve got a job for you, Moses. I know you’re doing OK. I know that you’ve married this woman from Median and that you’ve got these big flocks of sheep that you’re taking care of.

But, I want you to go back to Egypt, and I want you to go right up to the Pharaoh and say, “The time of slavery for my people is over. I demand that you let my people go!”

And Moses’ response was, “I’m not gonna do it. I’m not going to be bothered by that. I’ve got better things to do.”

You know what happened: the bush kept burning. The flame would not go out, even as Moses refused to respond. The command would not go away.

It’s a lot like our conscience. As liberal religious people, one of the substantial claims for our identity is the value we place on the power of *conscience*. We know there are things we must do. Our UU tradition commands us to bother, not about what we believe, but about what we do. Our deeds comes from the flame of our individual and collective *conscience*.

We have been given the gift of life and that we must respond to that. And it is that fiery place within in us which reminds us of our responsibility to respond to that which has been given to us. We respond by *bothering* about the things that are wrong with the world.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith rest on what we do and how we live our lives. That is who and what we want to be. It’s a matter of how we live our lives.

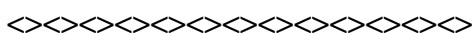
Each of must daily decide whether any particular causes is a wise or foolish. We must also believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile, that what we might do in the public sphere will not be done in vain. The challenge is as much psychological as it is political as it is moral.

As the Ethiopian proverb says, “*He who conceals his disease cannot be healed.*” As long as we are not bothered by the swirl of things happening in the world, we shall not be healed.

This is why we should bother, why we *must* bother.

Now there’s the other meaning of the title of today’s sermon. Not only is it a question, Why bother?—it is also an answer. It is an elliptical phrase which explains: this is why we bother

Our Unitarian Universalist faith rests on what we do, how we live our lives. That’s who we are. And that’s who we seek to become. It’s all a matter of how we live our lives.



Here are words attributed to Pastor [Martin Niemöller](#) (1892–1984) about the inactivity of German [intellectuals](#) following the [Nazi](#) rise to power and the purging of their chosen targets, group after group:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out

—because I was not a communist; □

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out

—because I was not a trade unionist; □

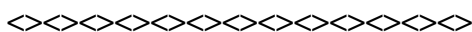
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out

—because I was not a Jew; □

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out.

May we seriously think on these things; may we imagine the possibilities of these things; may we pray sincerely with these things.

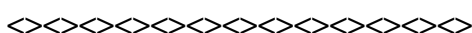
Amen.



BENEDICTION:

“If I am not for myself, who will be? □ If I am only for myself, what am I? □ And if not now, when?” --

Rabbi Hillel



READING:

Audre Lorde, in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

“For those of us who live at the shoreline standing upon the constant edges of decision, crucial and alone.
For those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice;
For those of us who were imprinted with fear like a faint line in the center of our foreheads learning to be afraid
with our mother’s milk;
For by this weapon, this illusion of some safety to be found—the heavy-footed hoped to silence us.
For all of us, this instant and this triumph—we were never meant to survive.
And when the sun rises we are afraid it might not remain. When the sun sets, we are afraid it might not rise in
the morning.
And when we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard, not welcomed.
But when we are silent, we are still afraid.
So it is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive.