

***Peering Headlong Into the Maelstrom***

**A Father's Day service in Poetry and Prose  
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska and Jay White**

**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka  
June 15, 2008**

**PART I**

*Introduction by the poet, Jay White:*

There is an often-repeated riddle that's shared in secret between the sick and the well:

*Sickness is not an enemy but a friend.*

Cancer is one of the best things that ever happened to my father. Why? Because he changed his eating and drinking habits.

He gained humility and he lived mostly by his word which was "All I want to do is live by the side of the road and be a friend to man."

And he lived for 28 years after colon cancer, which no one thought he would survive.

Knowing him and loving him gave me great hope for my becoming a friend to man because he and I didn't agree on any of the big issues like religion or politics. He was non-believer. I was not. He was a conservative. I was not. He believed force was the best way to gain the attention of other countries. I thought force was a perpetual failure of the imagination. The list of our oppositions was long.

But we did agree on one thing: we both loved sailing, boats, and water. So praise be for water and boats -- which became, in our family, stands-ins for love, truth and beauty. In the spirit of water and boats, I'd like to offer a few poems...

[Continue on next page]

“Erie Squall,” by Jay White  
From *The Salt Hour*

In the shade of the swinging boom,  
listening to the swell and flap  
of sailcloth, I could stretch  
my hands out to the shore, miles away

and peppered with brightly colored  
cottages, touch with my fingertips  
the sun-etched clump of trees,  
reach far into the heat, ablaze

with pollen and the scent of vineyards  
off Catawba, feel the corncob  
flicker on its stalk, peel away  
the worm coiling among fallen

overripe tomatoes. In that drowsy  
reaching, with a bead of sweat  
trickling into my eyes, the night  
quickened beneath cool Erie grass.

Below that window, perch and pickerel  
dropped into infinity, while emerald  
waves bubbled upward into whitecaps.  
through the nimbus heat of August

The elements mingled with whoever  
I was, mixed with my long distance eyes,  
my pollen-dusted fingers,  
and I lay there in the balanced swaying

of a slow-rocking afternoon  
until a jolt of wind quivered  
across my scalp and the horizon  
bruised gray then black,

the waves boiling against the rudder,  
my own family failing to outwit  
the sky’s swollen eye,  
our boat pitching under a fury

of fouled lines, heeled over  
till we tasted the rusty brass  
of that tumbled freighter’s lake,  
my mother’s prayers indistinguishable

from the flashing rain,  
my father braced at the helm  
shouting commands, the tears shuddering  
inside me as my sisters and I

clung to the pulpit, ripped the jib  
down the headstay, each of us  
peering headlong into the maelstrom  
with something akin to joy,

but even this sudden intoxication,  
born of cotton clouds,  
heat, and an unearthly reaching,  
would not last nearly long enough.

[Continue on next page]

## Prose for Part I

By Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

“Peering headlong into the maelstrom/ with something akin to joy.” This was part of the task, and part of the experience both Jay and I had with our fathers. As we met to talk and prepare this service, Jay and I discovered that, though our fathers were different in many ways, they also had some similar qualities. Both our fathers had life-threatening illnesses, and both had a sense of adventure. The illnesses and adventure, while not always happy, were also experiences and relationships that were “something akin to joy.”

Jay shared with me that for most of his early life he and his father had nothing in common, not with religion, not with politics, not with military service. But the one place they could connect, or at least relate, was in a boat on the water. Jay spoke about how his father thought nothing of taking his wife and three children out on a sailboat on Lake Erie in the middle of a storm. It was intense, it was passionate, it was immediate, it was exhilarating...and while perhaps not a long heartfelt talk, or even talking at all, sailing together in a storm was at least “something akin to joy,” and that intoxication, as he writes about in his poem, never felt like it lasted long enough.

My father, Charles Donald Saleska, was never the vigorous athlete or sailor that Jay’s father was. My dad was the stereotypical skinny 98-pound-weakling, never involved in any sport, never following any team, never a car mechanic or engineer, and never engaging in any kind of home improvement handyman. My father was not “manly” in any way. And for this, I loved him.

My story is perhaps different from the stories of many men and their fathers. In my family, my mother and I were the ones who argued and butted heads. And when I approached my mother with a question, she most often would continue what she was doing, usually not looking at me, and respond as she worked. My father, on the other hand, was the one who nurtured me, who listened to me, who supported me in all my endeavors and loved me unconditionally. And when I asked my father a question, he would always stop what he was doing, turn and face me directly, and say, “tell me what’s going on.”

My relationship with my father made it difficult for me, years later, to relate with other men. A vast majority of men relate to each other not by talking, but by *doing* stuff together. They fix things together. They watch sports together. They drink together. They camp or golf or hunt together. I simply wanted to talk about how I felt, and to hear how other men felt. When I did not get the same response from other boys and men as I got from my dad, I became a little angry, a lot hurt, greatly confused, and felt very lonely. But even then I knew I did not want to trade what I had in my father for any other father in the world.

Though my dad was not quite the vigorous adventurer it sounds like Jay’s dad was, my father did have a quirky sense of humor, often quirky views on life, and a sense of adventure in his own way. His adventures most often revolved around his encounters with other people. As a minister, he worked for many years in the 1960’s and 70’s in inner city programs, and would share stories with us at night about how he engaged people in a deeper exploration of their lives than they had ever engaged before. I also remember trips out west when I was 8 and 10 years old, when my father would climb rocks and hills with my brother and me, and stand in the wind with us at the edge of a precipice while my mother waited nervously down below for all of us to return.

[Continue on next page]

In my conversations with Jay, I discovered that his mother also waited, literally “down below” in the cabin of their sailboat during storms, as his father was “braced at the helm/ shouting commands.” On a sailboat, a sailor cannot afford to leave the helm during a storm. If a sailor does that, the boat will flounder, the sails and masts may get destroyed, and the boat may even capsize.

I have a similar sense about life. As we “peer headlong into the maelstrom” of chance and brutality and grace in our own lives, we have *at least* two choices – we can wait down below as someone else navigates until the storm passes, or we can remain at the controls, engaging and responding, as well as we know how, to all the winds that attempt to blow us off course. In our conversation, Jay and I agreed that storms are everywhere. The more encompassing issue is just that we need to learn more about them.

[Continue on next page]

**PART 2**

“Up High in a Bosun Chair,” by Jay White  
From *The Salt Hour*

I threaded the wire halyard into the drum  
And winched him up the fifty-foot mast.  
His bucket of tools dangled from a bosun chair  
And nearly always caught at the spreaders  
To spook me with its bobbled tipsy climb.  
I gripped the winch handle with two fists,  
My head throbbing with simple instructions,  
My stomach jumping that I might jam a gear,  
Lose grip, and send him plummeting to the deck  
Of the *Peregrine*. Yet, up there in a breeze,  
Above the rooftops, he never seemed to rush  
His repairs on a sheave or weather vane.

“How much longer do you need?” I shouted up.  
“No time at all,” his words hung in my ears  
Like a riddle plucked out of the sky.  
Quiet as a monk, he fiddled with a knife  
And pliers with the view of the breakwall,  
The water tower, the crisscrossing skiffs,  
The bikini girls, maybe even his own death,  
All unobstructed for him to look on equally.  
While he worked at the top of a sailor’s world,  
Commenting occasionally on the passing sights,  
I gulped thickened air and battled the weight  
Of my father’s life swinging from my hands.

[Continue on next page]

## Prose for Part II

By Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

In the normal, ideal progression of life, parents hand down knowledge and wisdom over many years. If a parent does their job well, education and trust and autonomy grow in the child, and the child goes off into the world, no longer in need of the mother or father. A primary job of parenting is to equip the child with the resources to live without the parents.

Sometimes, though, ideal parenting does not occur. Sometimes a short circuit happens – a parent gets sick or dies, or a parent is abusive as a result of their own harsh treatment as a child, or a parent has a mental illness, or any number of real life intrusions into this ideal world. In extreme cases when a short-circuit happens, roles get reversed and it is the child who takes care of the parent.

In Jay's poem, "Up High in a Bosun Chair," the child is holding the rope that keeps his father suspended in mid-air; the child is literally holding the father's lifeline. For me, that image was powerful and moving.

When I was 16, shortly before Christmas of my 11<sup>th</sup> grade, my father was diagnosed with *sclerosing cholangitis*, a hardening of the colon. It was a rare disease, no more than a few hundred known cases, and it was terminal. The doctors gave my father five to ten years to live. As it turned out, he lived for eight more years in a long, slow decline. About a year after I graduated college and about a month shy of my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, my father died at the age of 55.

At the beginning of my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, our family moved from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Gainesville, Florida, when my dad was called to be the Unitarian Universalist minister of the Gainesville fellowship. Though adventurous, the move was also very hard. All our friends and extended family lived in Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana. School was already a difficult place for me, but when my dad was diagnosed with a terminal illness, school almost ceased to be relevant. I remember times when my classmates would be freaking out about an algebra test. Next to the reality of my father's impending death, I could not muster the will to study or care about academics. I loved life – but also thought, "What's the point?"

Like the child in Jay's poem, I also felt myself holding the weight of my father in my hands. It was a period of my life, lasting many years after my father's death, when I "went down below," attempting to withdraw from life because I no longer felt I knew how to engage life. I never became addicted to drugs or alcohol, but I did struggle with relationships for years. I remained adventurous, riding a motorcycle all over the country, camping, winter camping, whitewater rafting and kayaking, backpacking, and rock-climbing throughout the west. Yet, when it came to relationships, I felt too scared to commit because the emotional investment just seemed like too much. I was afraid to lose someone I loved again, and that fear was overwhelming.

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## **PART III**

### **Prose for Part III**

Kent Hemmen Saleska

One primary task of adolescence is the exploration and discovery of how we are unique. A primary task of adulthood, though, is the exploration and discovery of the ways we are connected. Perhaps some of the most painful and most joyful and most meaningful of these discoveries revolve around our parents.

One of the most powerful and transformative moments in my life after the death of my father came a little over three years after he died. In the summer of 1994 a movie came out that has become one of my favorite animated films of all time, “The Lion King.” At one point in the movie, Simba, the main character, is haunted by the death of his father, and even years after his father’s death, still feels he has no gifts to bring to his community. Even if he did, Simba feels they would not trust him or even want him around. Then one night, the young adult Simba encounters a wise and strange old orangutan. In the course of their meeting, the strange orangutan tells Simba that his father is still alive. Simba is in disbelief, and sitting in the theater I too was filled with cynicism about what I thought would be a completely unrealistic and typically Disney-esque happy ending.

I was completely taken off-guard after the orangutan led Simba on a wild chase through the jungle, finally parting the leaves of a bush and whispering to Simba, “Your father is down there.” When Simba approaches the break in the undergrowth, he looks down to where the orangutan is pointing and sees in a clear pool, his own face reflected back in the water.

I recall the tagline for the Lion King movie: “Life’s greatest adventure is finding your place in the Circle of Life.” I believe that religion at its best, and this faith in particular, inspires us explore and discover our connections, and calls us to unite our beliefs with our actions. Religion at its best, and this faith in particular, helps us find our place in the Circle of Life by breaking down the compartments of our lives, helps us to become whole people, walking through the world with a sense – and a practice – of grace and forgiveness.

Over the years since my dad’s death, I have felt anger towards him and felt cheated for dying when I was so young. I have also missed him dearly. But more and more now as I grow older, as I explore my faith and explore my connections to my father and to the world, I see the image of my dad shimmering over my own image in the things I strive to do.

Charles Donald Saleska was a Unitarian Universalist minister who sought to serve the call of justice, and to draw out the stories and discover the goodness of all he met. He also nurtured me, listened to me with his time and full attention, and gracefully prepared me to live on in this world after he was gone. As I strive to build a healthy relationship with my own 19-month-old son, Parker, and as I strive to live fully as a whole person in the world, I daily draw upon the power of this faith, my memory and a constantly growing awareness of my connection to all that is around me. Our place in the circle of life is to be here together, right here, right now, together “peering headlong into the maelstrom” that falls all around us.

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*Closing words for Part III, and poem by Jay White:*

The last time I talked with my father  
was on Father's day, four years ago.  
Four weeks after his 90th birthday, he was fading fast. I knew it. He knew it.

I did most of the talking by phone.  
It was halting conversation with only  
a few words exchanged. Small talk.  
I didn't want to hang up. He didn't want me to go.

Then, a long pause we each settled into  
and fought, and wanted to break and repair  
and turn into something rich enough to  
reach across the distance.

Then, he dug deep and offered the last words  
I ever heard from him:

*We're going to have fun today, fun tomorrow,  
fun the day after that, and the day after that.*

His last words were a tidy summation of his philosophy of right now, every  
moment, as well as his own pagan description of eternity.

It was a fitting end to a storybook sailor's life.

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“Letter to the Wild Blue Yonder,” by Jay White  
From *The Sleeper at the Party*

Some sailors should live forever,  
Not because they are great or even good, but because  
They sweep you up into a story until it becomes your own,  
And a word like *South* is not just a direction  
But an island floating inside a compass rose  
Commanding you to skim the white-sprayed coast.  
At 85, my father can't sleep. Can't eat. Can't poop.  
And he's ready for the deep six. But I say no,  
Yes, maybe to his desire, thinking, unlike the geese  
Scrabbling south into the late October flyway,  
He doesn't know where the iron winds lead,  
Over what stubble a ship is stripped of keel timbers.  
Faith or no faith, who can say where the body travels  
After the running lights turn down into troughs?  
As I watch him in memory, sea-booted on a rolling deck,  
Loving the storm's harness, how he can't match it  
With any hurt or gladness, only merge with it  
Until it blows itself out, I think I will miss most  
His blue eyes dredged from looking far into the salt,  
And not seeing why we came to this illogical  
Dimension of love long sought for, found and let go  
Invisibly before we know how to hold it all.  
What's left of a life lived at the water's edge?  
Sea and wind. A few gulls scattered like torn pages  
Over the undertow, nothing audible except  
The arrival and departure of the oldes rhythms.  
My sister, who claims to have already touched  
The mother-shell of heaven, says he'll find the way home  
Even though he never once polished his Sunday shoes.  
In your soul, she tells me, you're free to travel anywhere –  
So he'll consult his tidebook, see when the slackwater  
Gives passage to the wild blue yonder and he'll be there,  
Among other sailors telling stories, some of them true  
And lovely and long enough to bring the morning on.

[End]