

Peril ... Abundance
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
October 7, 2007

READINGS

Picking Blackberries

By Lynn Ungar, from *Blessing the Bread* (1996)

What will you give for a taste
of summer's last sweetness?
This jeweled crown of thorns
rings every path and highway;

No use pretending you
have not heard sweet temptation
chatter through the vines-
taste eat

Put your hand in the thorns
and come out dripping juice,
king's purple spread from
hand to tongue.

Reach gently,
or you will find your thumb
full of thorns, and your pail
filled with unbearable tartness.

Reach gently, but reach.
The sweetest berries hide
toward the inside, hidden
beneath leaves barbed like critics.

Balance, if you must, precariously,
held by will and longing from
the net of thorns. If you want
the ripest fruit, relinquish safety.

Guard yourself only with these words:
Peril abundance
whispered like a prayer
through purple lips.

Set In Stone

By Victoria Safford

In a cemetery once, an old one in New England, I found a strangely soothing epitaph. The name of the deceased and her dates had been scoured away by wind and rain, but there was a carving of a tree with roots and branches...and among them the words, "She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things." At first this seemed to me a little meager, a little stingy on the part of her survivors, but I wrote it down and have thought about it since, and now I can't imagine a more proud or satisfying legacy.

"She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things."

Every day I stand in danger of being struck by lightning and having the obituary in the local paper say, for all the world to see, "She attended frantically and ineffectually to a great many unimportant, meaningless details."

How do you want your obituary to read?

"He got all the dishes washed and dried before playing with his children in the evening."

"She balanced her checkbook with meticulous precision and never missed a day of work – missed a lot of sunsets, missed a lot of love, missed a lot of risk, missed a lot – but her money was in order."

"She answered all her calls, all her email, all her voice mail, but along the way she forgot to answer the call to service and compassion, and forgiveness, first and foremost of herself."

"He gave and forgave sparingly, without radical intention, without passion or conviction."

How will it read, how does it read, and if you had to name a few worthy things to which you attend well and faithfully, what, I wonder, would they be?

SERMON

Peril ... Abundance **Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**

Stories come down to us from Christian Scriptures about a homeless prophet who shared his wisdom about the human condition and his insight about our relationship with things of ultimate importance. In one story we hear how some of the prophet's students tell him they don't have enough food to feed the assembled crowd. The prophet asks how much food they do have. The students respond that they only have a few loaves of bread and a couple baskets of fresh fish. And the prophet says, "Well, go ahead and share what we have."

Then a miracle happens. The story, as it comes down to us, only says that more fish and bread return in the baskets at the end of the day than were sent out at the beginning. My reading of this story, based on what I know about human behavior, is that the crowd, when they saw the leaders sharing what little they had, began to reach into their own pockets and travel packs to share their own food and water that they also brought along. It is a simple miracle, but a mighty one. When we are in the presence of generosity the human heart may be turned from an attitude of desperation and scarcity toward an attitude of openness and abundance.

In a few weeks, this congregation will embark on a congregational effort to turn attitudes of scarcity toward attitudes of openness and abundance. On October 28, this congregation enters into an adventure to raise money to buy land in order to construct a new church home, a home that – in our vision – will provide us with the space we need in order to carry out the work we say we want to do. This will be the largest unified effort to raise money this congregation has undertaken since the purchase of this building in 1965. Alison Albrecht and Tom Lindquist are heading up this effort, but this effort will ask for commitment from all of us. This effort that Alison and Tom are coordinating is not something they are doing off in a corner by themselves; this is an effort that involves the entire congregation, each and every one of our seven Ministries, and each and every person. This is also an effort that goes far beyond simply raising money.

In short time I've been here, I've heard many stories about plans and discussions from 10 or 15 years ago to move this congregation. Typically, along with these stories I often hear disparaging comments of self-perception: people said they feel this congregation is like the "poor cousin" to First Universalist Church in Minneapolis, or to the Unitarian Universalist congregation in White Bear, where the congregation has just completed construction on a new green sanctuary and building renovation. One person also told me that in the year they were elected to the church Board, someone came up to them after the election and said, "I don't know whether or not to congratulate you."

These comments and self-perceptions remind me of some of the teenagers I used to work with. For part of my life I worked as a youth director in Unitarian Universalist churches, and for part of my life I worked in wilderness areas of Idaho with teenagers who were foster kids. Inevitably, I encountered delightful and gifted kids who talked to me privately about feeling stupid or worthless. Yet, as the adult leader, I saw the energy that each kid brought to the group, or the insight, or the quiet contemplation, or the silliness, or the compassion. I saw in each one a yearning to be more whole, but I also saw in them a quality of leadership and a deep presence of a divine and beautiful soul.

What I saw in those teenagers is similar to what I see in this congregation. Here I encounter delightful and gifted people who inevitably tell me one-on-one about their fear and anxiety. It is a sense of scarcity, that this congregation does not have “enough”: not enough volunteers, not enough time, not enough money, not enough energy. People seem to fear we will not be successful and we will not meet our goals: once more we will step to the edge of the high platform over the pool of abundance, and once more we will step back out of fear, and once more we will not take a leap of faith.

I see your desire to be more whole. Yet I also see the energy you bring, the movement you’ve made and the successes you’ve created. I marvel at how well you have made this limited space work for you for so long. I see your gifts of leadership, dedication and commitment deeply embedded in your sense of community. And I see here a deep presence of a divine and beautiful soul.

In her poem, “Picking Blackberries,” Lynn Ungar describes a tension within a common late summer and early autumn activity. From our homes, from our cars, from our campsites we are lured outside in late summer or early fall to the edge of the yard, the edge of the road, the edge of the forest, to a place where we may discover delicious, succulent, sweet, juicy, ripe blackberries! We are lured outside, called by the wilderness, called by the ancient ritual of harvest, called by the deep longings of our desire. The poet describes the tension between pain and joy, sweetness and thorns, desire and consummation, peril – and abundance. Through the act of picking blackberries, the poet describes for us a life of faith.

A life of faith is not nurtured by living with a feeling of scarcity. A life of faith is nurtured by challenge, by calling us outside, beyond our comfort zone, by calling us to the realm of the possible within the wilderness of the unknown. As Lynn Ungar urges us:

Reach gently, but reach.
The sweetest berries hide
toward the inside, hidden
beneath leaves barbed like critics.

Balance, if you must, precariously,
held by will and longing from
the net of thorns. If you want
the ripest fruit, relinquish safety.

Guard yourself only with these words:
Peril abundance
whispered like a prayer
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For me, these final lines from Lynn Ungar echo the words of Annie Dillard I shared with you during the Sunday service a few weeks ago. Annie Dillard says it is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats to church. Instead, she says, “We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Crash helmets. Life preservers. Sunday worship. Peril. Abundance.

In Lynn Ungar's poem the words, "peril" and "abundance," are written on the page like fraternal twins: not looking at all alike, yet connected somehow by blood. These words, "peril" and "abundance," are written on one line, the only words on that one line, but with a separation of five spaces between them. These words, "peril" and "abundance," are written side by side, as though they are the entire text of an instruction manual for living a life of faith.

It was faith that inspired the prophet in Christian Scriptures to tell his students to share their small amount of bread and fish with the assembled crowd. It is faith that asks us to let go of our control and allow ourselves to be drawn out by some waking god to a place where we can never return. It is a life of faith that asks us to hold "peril" in one hand and "abundance" in the other, and then to "Reach gently, but reach," because if we want the ripest fruit, then we must relinquish safety.

And so, as we look to the future of this congregation, we must ask ourselves what, for us, is the ripest fruit? Then we must ask the next obvious question: are we willing to relinquish some safety in order to obtain that ripest of fruit?

The life of faith, the life of peril and abundance, asks of us a deeper question than one that simply involves money. The deeper question deals with our very sense of congregational identity. If all we ask from our members is to fund the operating budget or to fund a capital campaign rather than being invited to become generous people, our giving will remain small. Remember the bumper sticker slogans from a few years ago that said, "Anyone But Bush"? People had a person they wanted to fight *against*, but they did not have a person to fight *for*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be inspired by a "*not* something." I mean, when was the last time you sprang out of bed in the morning, completely inspired to face the day and said to yourself, "Today, I am going to be less bad!"

Unitarian Universalists are quite liberal in their religion and spirituality, and are often liberal in politics. But when it comes to finances and money, we are ultraconservative. We talk about money the way other more conservative religions talk about sex. We look at the bottom line and ask questions like, "What does this church do for me?" or "Is what I'm getting out of this church worth the pledge I'm giving?" This is a mentality of scarcity, of a sense that we don't have enough money to go around. Well, I need to let you know one very important thing about our upcoming capital campaign: we already have all the money we need. We have enough money for the land we want to buy, we have enough money for the architecture drawings, we have enough to construct and finish the building, and we have enough money for all the staff and programs we could want. The thing is, all that money is still in our pockets!

Victoria Safford, in the reading we heard earlier, asks us "How do you want your obituary to read?" In our context, if not an obituary, then how is it we want the world to know this congregation? What kind of faith do we choose to create and model and live in the world? Will people look at us and say, "they gave and forgave sparingly, without radical intention, without passion or conviction"? Or if we had to name a few worthy things to which we attend well and faithfully, what are those few worthy things?

I do not believe this church is any "poor cousin" of anyone. I believe this congregation is full of generous people who yearn to attach themselves to a compelling vision. I believe this congregation, nestled in one of the more wealthy suburbs of Minnesota, has a latent power it has not yet discovered. I believe that at least part of the compelling vision we seek is to be found in our uniting together to build a new church. I believe that the purpose of the church is not just to nurture the spiritual lives of its members, but to be a radical force of love in the world outside these walls. I believe this congregation has the resources, in our gifts of time and money and

energy, to make anything happen here that we want to make happen. I believe that each and every one of us has the capacity in our hearts and souls to make this church a priority. I believe that we are asking more from ourselves than has ever been asked, and believe that in response we will rise to a level of commitment that we have never before been made.

I understand the desire to share stories about what this church means to each of you. I too have dozens of stories about how my involvement with Unitarian Universalist congregations all across this continent has changed my life. But as we envision our future together as a religious community, I want to know more than that. Next to the commitments you've made to your closest family and friends, I want to know what it will take to make your investment in this congregation the most significant commitment of your life.

I am sure I remember one president years ago who said, "Ask not what your congregation can do for you, ask what you can do for your congregation"!

So as we look ahead, I prefer not to focus on what we get "out of" the church. Rather, as we move forward together in our communal stewardship, as we move our faith to a new location, as we seek out and engage our vision for the future of this congregation, I seek to discover, to emphasize, and to question what we are willing to give. I want to hear what promises people are willing to make to the church, to hear what kinds and what amounts of dedication people are eager to commit to the larger community. These voices of commitment are the ones I want to hear most because they are the voices I find most inspiring.

Of our seven Ministries, our social justice ministry is the only one without any members and without a facilitator. Our adult education program is in need of people who will teach programs and people who will sign up for those programs. Alison Albrecht and Tom Lindquist are looking for people who will make a 60-day commitment for the first phase of our capital campaign. Our religious education program for children and youth is looking for people who will help make it possible to have a complete religious education program during both services.

This congregation made a choice to move. We are moving physically, we are moving structurally, and we are moving spiritually. What will you give? What promises will you make to this congregation? What leap of faith will you take?

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of summer's last sweetness? ...
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As we hold "peril" in one hand, and "abundance" in the other, we ask more from ourselves than we have ever asked before. Create this prayer as we move our faith.