

“A Faithful Resolve”
Sermon, Sunday, January 10, 2010
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On Sunday, January 2, in the year 2000 I preached a sermon entitled, “Apocalypse Now.” Remember, that was the year we were all frantic with worry that our internet world would become irretrievably disabled by the date of the first day of the new millennium. Apocalypse, I said, it’s a word ripe with juicy meaning most folk don’t quite understand. Is it the end of the world as we know it, which is what most people think, or the beginning? And when will it come; now, or never, or sometime in between?

The word is simple enough. It comes from the Greek apokalypsis, to disclose. The first syllable, apo, means from, and kalypsis means to cover. Out from under cover, out in the open.

As we all know now, the Apocalypse did not come, or happen, on January 1st, 2000. The world as we know it did not end that day. And maybe that’s because “Apocalypse” is really a verb and not a noun. The need to uncover, to come out from under the covers, is not a static thing, something we go through just once in life, but a need that is always with us, every day of our lives; the need to strip away that which is the mask or the costume we wear in public to hide our vulnerable selves, our neediness, our sense of smallness in contrast to the bigness of the world, the universe, and the powers they contain.

Back then, on January 1, 2000, the New York Times editorial column said, in part, “History teaches that the surest way to reach across time is through the transmission of enduring values and ideals...For we are the custodians of an attitudinal revolution that developed in the last decades of the century...We have come to see the need to organize the world’s affairs in ways that bridge territorial, political and cultural boundaries and to act in concert to protect the health of the earth itself...Globalization has become a term of art for unifying trends in trade, communications and management.

“But it could as easily refer to a generous new consciousness about how the world should manage not just its enterprises and armies but the task of crafting a shared destiny...True...We have not conquered the violence born of bigotry and political division...[Yet]...We [do] have the humane vision and technological means to lift the world family to new levels of liberty, affluence, health and happiness. Forging that possibility into reality is the task that greets us in the morning of the new millennium.”

These words could have been written on January 1, 2010. In fact something along the same lines was brilliantly written by Rebecca Mead in the first issue of The New Yorker for the second decade of the new millennium. She points to September 11, 2001, as the “decade’s defining catastrophe.” And she credits President Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech as the signal of the decade’s end, quoting his discussion “of the ‘difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace, and our effort to replace one with the other,’ and his painstaking outline of the absence of any good answers to the questions in question.” These, then, for Mead, are the two poles of the past decade.

“History teaches that the surest way to reach across time is through the transmission of enduring values and ideals,” the New York Times said in 2000. I think that’s what this President is trying to do, and that gives me great hope. Many of the pundits on the News Hour and NPR say that President Obama’s success rests in his insistence on an inclusive conversation that gets the pole positions out on the table, and then he stretches for what is possible; without insult to anyone’s dignity or ability to stay in the conversation. Doing this will not get any of us the precise health care policy we want, or the exact education system we want; or the tax and spend policies we believe best. But it will move the whole country forward. It will show us the possibilities of responsive and responsible dialogue. Isn’t that exactly what we’re trying to learn how to do in this church this year?

I am reminded here of a story called *The City of Everywhere*, shared with me by my dear friend and former UUA Moderator, Denny Davidoff.¹ This is a tale of a person who might have been me, for I dreamed one time of journeying to that city. I arrived early one morning. It was cold, there were flurries of snow on the ground. As I stepped from the train to the platform I noticed that the bagger man and red cap were warmly attired in heavy coats and gloves, but oddly enough, they wore no shoes. [I wanted] to ask the reason for this odd practice, but repress[ed the urge.] I passed into the station [to ask] the way to the hotel. [Astonished, I saw] that no one in the station wore any shoes. Boarding the streetcar, I saw that my fellow travelers were likewise barefoot. At the hotel I found the bellhop, the clerk and the habitués of the place all devoid of shoes. Unable to restrain myself longer, I asked the ingratiating manager what the practice meant. “What practice?” said he. “Why,” I said, pointing to his bare feet, “Why don’t you wear any shoes in this town?” “Ah,” said he, “That is just it. Why don’t we?” “But what is the matter? Don’t you believe in shoes?” [I asked.]

“Believe in shoes, I should say we do! That is the first article of our creed – shoes. They are indispensable to the well-being of humanity. Such cuts, sores, suffering, as shoes prevent! It is wonderful!” “Well, then, why don’t you wear them?” “Ah,” said he, “That is just it. Why don’t we?”

Non-plussed, I checked in, secured my room and went to the coffee shop. I deliberately sat down by an amiable-looking man who conformed to the convention: he wore no shoes. Friendly enough, he offered me a tour of the city after we had eaten. The first thing he showed me was a huge and impressive brick structure. “You see that?” he said, pointing with pride. “That is one of our outstanding shoe manufacturing establishments.” In amazement I asked, “You mean you make shoes there?”

“Well, not exactly,” he said. “We talk about making shoes there, and believe me, we’ve got one of the most brilliant young fellows you ever heard. He talks most thrillingly and convincingly every week on this great subject of shoes. He has a most persuasive and appealing way. Just yesterday he moved people profoundly with his exposition of the necessity of shoe-wearing. Many broke down and wept. It was wonderful.”

“But why don’t they wear them?” said I, insistently. “Ah,” said he, looking wistfully into my eyes, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

Just then as we turned down a side street, I saw through a cellar window a cobbler actually making a pair of shoes. Excusing myself from my friend, I burst into the little shop and asked the shoemaker how it happened that his shop was not overrun with customers. Said he, “Nobody wants my shoes. They just talk about them.”

“Give me what pairs you have,” said I eagerly, and paid him 3 times the amount he modestly asked. Hurriedly, I returned to my friend and offered them, saying, “Here my friend, some one of these pairs will surely fit you. Take them, put them on. They will save you untold suffering.”

But he looked terribly embarrassed. “Ah, thank you,” he said politely, “but you don’t understand. It just isn’t being done.” “But why not?” said I dumfounded. “Ah,” he said, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

And coming out of the “City of Everywhere” into “Here” over and over that question rang in my ears: “Why don’t we? Why don’t we? Why don’t we?”

If I know what I ought to do in a given situation; if I see the action that I should take in order to be true to the deepest thing in me, if I look it steadily in the eye and see it not, then the light that is in me becomes darkness.

¹ Told by Denny at Rev. Daniel O’Connell’s ordination.

On the other hand, if I look it steadily in the eye, really look – like Dick and Jane of our childhood reading...Look, Look, Look, See, See, See; if I really see it, uncover it, bring it out from under the covers and stretch toward it with the very breath of my life, then my flame only grows in light and the warmth of its glow.

And the little boy said to his father, “I think the seven wonders of the world are the birth of a baby, being able to see, talk, walk, learn, touch, smell...” and then he and his father agreed on the 8th wonder of the world: being able to love.

Our first Unitarian Universalist principle is to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person...not just the ones we like, not just the ones with whom we agree, not just the ones who speak kindly, but every person, including the ones we don't like, with whom we don't agree, and even those who speak hatefully.

Our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle is to affirm the interdependent web of all life, not just the life of our families and neighbors, or the species we favor, but all life.

On January 1st, 2010, David Brooks and Mark Shields were asked their New Year resolutions for this country on the News Hour. Mark Shields said that living in this democracy is a privilege that cannot exist for all the people unless we are willing to get involved ourselves; to look, see, talk, hear, learn...and to love the purpose and the process.

Last Saturday, before beginning the actual writing of this sermon, I checked church email and found a trail of emails from Social Justice Committee folk about a demonstration scheduled on public property around Concord High School Monday morning from 7:15 to 7:45am. It was being organized by members of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. Listen carefully: the website address for this “Church” is www.Godhatesfags.com. Both internet commentators and the Concord police feel this group demonstrates to bring attention to their hateful positions on issues. Sometimes when counter-protesters have gotten upset they have crossed the line of peaceful demonstration, leading to this group collecting significant amounts of money through lawsuits. So what should we do...ignore them? Or get involved? These are the two poles between which we have to learn to express our enduring values and ideals.

The Concord police suggested Concordians should ignore the Topeka folk, in order not to feed into their quest for an ever larger audience. The Principal of the High School agreed. Emails went back and forth weighing the poles: ignore them, or get involved. A UU who is a CHS student parent emailed me that she would get involved. She would escort her child to school so he would know she would face whatever the protesters had to say with him. Hillary Clinton famously said, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Where would the village be if we all ignored the protesters and left our children to face them alone; with none of us standing in solidarity with them?

Ignore them or get involved? I didn't know what the right answer was, or even whether there was just one right answer, but I knew the right answer for me was to go, to be there, in silent and respectful witness for and with our High School children. Why? Because ignoring hate does not make it go away. Because not looking hate in the eye with our own eyes open does not help us to learn how to defuse the trauma hate can inflict. Because not being willing to see and hear the words of hate does not help us to learn how to put salve on the wounds of hate. Because not being willing to witness what hate looks and feels like doesn't teach us how to walk and talk a path to peace with those whose thoughts are filled with hate. Because the people of this Topeka “church” of hate need every chance we can give them to know there is another way to do church...to be church, and that is to

stand in solidarity with and silently affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every man, woman, and child, no matter what.

Some 15 of us met at church at 6:45 last Monday morning. We carpoled to South Fruit St., and walked up to the High School. The main driveway to the school has a Y entrance. There was a police car parked in each of the legs of the Y. There were three policemen in the driveway. On the school side of the police cars there were perhaps 2 dozen school children gathered, just standing around, waiting to see what would happen.

There's a telephone pole island in between the two legs of the Y, and we claimed it as our turf...that's where UUs like to be, right, right in the middle of things? And we fanned out on the sidewalk on either side of the Y, and Craig Whitson and a couple of others took the opposite side of the street. It was Craig who took the photo on our Order of Service. We had signs, all home-made, some beautifully done, some, well, just done. They said things like,

“Standing on the Side of Love,”

“Concord Stands for Acceptance and Inclusion for all People”

“My God Hates No One.”

“God Loves Everyone”

“Gay and Straight. We Are One.”

Others wanting to witness for the children began to join us, and our line of support stretched further and further toward the corners of the sidewalk in both directions. And a funny thing happened...the children who had been watching behind the police cars came down the driveway and fanned out behind us. They, too, had signs, one of which was, “God Hates Figs.” Subtitles included, “Jesus rebuked the fig as an evil abomination.” That's Matthew 21:18-20, in case you'd forgotten. Another was “God Promises Terrible Vengeance Upon Any Fig-Loving Nation.” That's Jeremiah 29:17.

It was as though the kids were ready to respond to the “Topeka Taliban,” as one of our folk told me a friend of hers had referred to the protesters from Topeka, with gentle, if tongue-in-cheek humor, rather than meeting hate with hate. Maybe it takes kids to raise a village, just as it takes a village to raise kids.

I wanted to know who some of the others who had come to witness were. So I walked down the sidewalk introducing myself. South Church has as many folk there as we had. I met a Catholic man, two secular humanists, a member of Temple Beth Jacob, some folk of no faith at all. It was so fulfilling to know that so many other folk had come to represent their faith in support of our children.

Lorna Landry emailed me to tell the story of one of our UU young adults and the woman from Topeka, Margie Phelps, who engaged her in an exchange. She said, the dialogue “was about praying, which [our UU] said she did. [Ms. Phelps] said something really awful which I have luckily forgotten. I had a visceral reaction standing there. It was so unpleasant. I wasn't angry. I felt almost nauseated, and could feel my belly become hard, as if waiting for a punch. It was an assault. After a particularly venomous spew, a Concord Police officer and I made eye contact. He, too, seemed disgusted.”

I was facing Ms. Phelps when the photo on the front page of Tuesday's Concord Monitor was taken, and I saw with my own eyes the appalled, even horrified, look in the eyes of Samantha Lyons. That happened just after Ms. Phelps told me I would burn in hell for ever, and that God hated me for all the blasphemous words on the placard I was holding silently in front of me. It said, “We love and respect all children, men and women.” Not very creative, no humor, but it was clearly enough to enrage Ms. Phelps.

Soon it was over. A few of us came back to church to warm up and collect our experiences together over a cup of hot chocolate. Right now I'd like to pause to ask each one of you who was there in body or in spirit, or who was part of the profound conversation of what best practice would be, to stand up and be recognized for the concern of your faith you brought to the discussion and to the witness. (Pause) Thank you, thank you with all our hearts.

Jon Hutchinson was there, and he emailed me this:

In the cold and snow

Making a warm powerful statement

So glad to see young and old walking – many feet singing – many voices. Amen and alleluia.

John Warner wrote saying, “I was pleased with the experience. That said, it could have gone the other way. Six of us and twenty of them might have been a different story.”

“Why don't we?” “Ahh, that's just it.” It's a risk. It may or may not turn out well. It may or may not be the right thing to do. It's so very hard to know what is right when we face the unknown with no experience.

All human beings have the power to say whatever hateful things they need to say for whatever reason. Our only responsibility is to decide how we will respond. We have the power to respond with peace, with wordless solidarity, with respectful disagreement. No, it's not always as easy as it was this past Monday. Yes, you could be injured or killed. It is always a risk. We can only choose what we think the right thing to do is in each moment. That is all.

“A Faithful Resolve” is my sermon title this morning. It was going to be about the meaning of New Year's resolutions. In light of Monday's experience, I think it's about standing with that little boy of our story this morning, holding onto his eight wonders of the world...the birth of a baby, the blessings of sight, talk, walk, learning, touch, smell, and love. Surely that would be standing on the side of love.