

Forward Thru the Ages

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

June 10, 2018

Rev. Paul Beckel

*Education is not the filling of a bucket,
but the lighting of a fire. ~ W.B. Yeats*

The great end in Religious Education is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own. Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly with their own. Not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs. ~ William Ellery Channing

*We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig.
We are forever bound in community.
~ adapted from the Hebrew Scriptures*

WELCOME

We gather today — some of us bursting with joy, some haunted by sorrow. Let's sit together with that truth for a moment, and invite into our hearts the spirit of beloved community... such that our embrace might be large enough to hold the fullness of the life we share.

Our music today is by Ruvara Marimba — Dawn, John, Rayma, Jane, Liz, Aja, Nancy, and Rick. This will be music you almost can't help responding to with your heart and your body. Even a grieving heart, I think, and an aching body... ready to receive the embrace of summer.

In contrast to this bewilderingly bouncy marimba music, the title for today's service, *Forward Thru the Ages*, refers to a song in our grey hymnal that is set to the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers. *Forward Thru the Ages* has very different words, but the same unwavering melody and regimented beat that call forth mental clarity.

Our focus today is on Religious Education. The lifelong pursuit of religious knowledge *and* engagement, clarity *and* curiosity, determination *and* surrender. Religious Education: the lifelong pursuit of religious knowledge *and* engagement, clarity *and* curiosity, determination *and* surrender.

To ready ourselves for the journey, first, let's surrender to the frogs. Listen closely and you'll hear them singing.

PRELUDE*Amoxoxo (Frogs)***LIGHTING THE CHALICE / COVENANT****GATHERING SONG***Gathered Here***BRIDGING CEREMONY**

Cat: The bridging process is intended to honor the transition — the bridge — from youth to young adulthood. Unitarian Universalists understand that significant transitions in our lives are to be celebrated, and this is one of them.

This is not a farewell, but rather a celebration of the blossoming of our most precious resources, our children into full adulthood.

Today we recognize and honor Haley Holmgren, who is a high school senior. She is on the cusp of so many changes in her life, ready now to assume the challenges of young adulthood. This morning, our community holds out its hand to her, welcoming her as a new adult in this faith community and in the larger world.

- Comments from Lauralee Carbone and presentation of Bridging Bag
- Comments from Ro Donelson and presentation of rose
- Comments from Cat McIntyre, with input from Alicia Alford

Rev. Paul: Haley, you have come to a point in life where society treats you as an adult in many ways. This can be a confusing time because you will learn that there are still restrictions — as there will be all your life — and many people will not treat you as an adult. Some, like your family, may do this out of habit, some because they don't look at you clearly enough.

We, your religious community, have a responsibility to remember that you are a young adult now, worthy to be granted the privileges as well as the responsibilities of adulthood. And so we will.

All together now we are going to create a bridge or passageway so that you and we can ritually mark this passage. I'd like the children and youth to start the bridge by lining up along both sides of the center aisle. Rob, Harriet and Ben Holmgren, and other family, I would like you join the children and youth at the beginning of the passage. Anyone who has worked with Haley in Religious Education, please continue the bridge. Anyone who has worked with Haley in other BUF or community activities, please join them to make the bridge.

Now, I invite everyone else at the ends of the pews along the center aisle to complete the bridge. Everyone else please turn toward the center and put your hands on the shoulders of those in front of you to strengthen the bridge.

Haley, are you ready to make this journey? We take this moment then to hold you in our heart. May the flame of your Unitarian Universalist heritage light your path. May it be a beacon for justice, equity and compassion, and forever remind you of the love that we as a faith community

hold for you. And may you always remember that you have a home in this place and in our hearts.

Haley walks, we sing:

Where are you going my little one, little one?
Where are you going my baby my own?
Turn around and you're two, turn around and you're four.
Turn around — how can it be you're going out of our door?

ERACISM MINUTE

Haley Holmgren described an exercise she experienced at a youth conference. Participants lined up along a starting line. Then were asked a series of questions, to which they were to respond by taking one step forward or one step back. The exercise was designed to demonstrate privileges of which we may not be conscious.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

Misorodzi II (Tears of Joy, or Sorrow)

REFLECTIONS

“Why I’m Glad I Raised my kids UU” by Bonnie Phinney

Lew and I attended our first UU service 38 years ago, one week after the birth of our second child. We were living in Panama City, FL where the first question out of everyone's mouth was, "what church do you go to?" We didn't attend any - hadn't since we were teens - but now that we had children, we knew that had to change. There were very few options available to a couple of skeptics like us, but a new UU Fellowship was forming in Panama City, and we got involved for our kids. We never looked back.

In considering why I am glad I raised my kids UU, I thought about it in two ways - how we ourselves modeled what it means to be a UU through our own behavior and expectations AND how the R.E. programs at the various churches we attended provided a fertile ground for their religious education. For our own part, we tried to both live the UU principles and encourage our girls to do the same. We never tired of impressing upon them the importance of the first principle - a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Whether we were talking about disagreements with friends or major political issues, we always stressed the importance of treating people fairly, honestly, and with respect. We talked about everything - bullying, civil rights, gay rights, women's rights, animal rights, environmental issues. We explored a lot of ideas and encouraged them to make up their own minds about what they believed, to think for themselves, to be open minded, to be flexible, to be independent. (*An aside here...we learned to be careful what we wished for. Indeed, when our first child at age 17 went off to the Czech Republic for a year as a exchange student - this before email, computers, cell phones, etc - and when both girls chose colleges far away from Colorado - we asked ourselves, why was it we wanted them to be independent?!!*)

We also taught them to stand up for what they thought was right. Our younger daughter, Erin, when she was editor of her school yearbook in HS, faced a controversy over what the "powers to be" *deemed* controversial pages. She stood her ground - a very brave thing to do in a room full of adults. Well, she didn't win the argument and she eventually lost her position as editor, but she

learned a much more valuable lesson - the necessity to *speak the truth to power*, regardless of the consequences. We knew we had done our job well. She had more courage than I did and I was immensely proud of the stand she took.

Our girls have manifested their UU upbringing in different ways, but both reflect many of the values we tried to teach them. One is a world traveler, having lived and worked abroad for a number of years. She and her family, in fact, have just left on a four year cruising adventure in their 41 foot sailboat. She says she sees the whole world through a UU lens - one that allows her to experience other people and cultures with an open and flexible mind. She truly understands the interdependent web of which we are a part.

The other continues to speak truth to power. She is our activist, our vegan, our sign-carrying marcher, and even the former president of her UU congregation in SLC. She told me that she sometimes is frustrated with the "dogmatic" UUs in her congregation who can get "high and mighty" about their superior open mindedness. It makes her question her own church membership. But then, she says, because she was raised a UU, she is comfortable questioning everything, even her own church, and knows that ultimately it's OK. Again, I think we did our job!!!

What the girls learned from us was clearly re-enforced at church school: the 7 principles, the way to treat others, finding their own truth, respecting the interdependent web, freedom of conscience. However, three specific RE experiences come to mind when I think about how important it was to raise our girls as UUs.

First, both have expressed an appreciation for learning about different religious traditions. It has given them a better understanding of the religious impulse in all people from all cultures in a non-dogmatic way. They honor the many ways in which our human family expresses spirituality. It is what makes both of them good travelers.

Second, religious education gave them a UU perspective on our western religious tradition. I fought many a heated battle during my years as an active member of an RE team over the teaching of biblical stories. I argued that our UU kids needed to be religiously literate so they could understand the profound influence of Christianity on western literature, history, and art - even if we ourselves did not, in some cases, consider ourselves Christian.

And, *finally*, both daughters told me that their experiences with regional and national UU youth programs were the most significant and meaningful part of being raised a UU. Our older daughter was active in YRUU and traveled to a number of CONS all over the west. She said these experiences solidified her identity as a UU. It was only then that she could truly be herself, where she could say what she was thinking without rebuke or ridicule, where she could have an open, honest discussion about ANYTHING. It was that openness and acceptance that meant the most to her.

For our other daughter, it was the 9th grade trip that Colorado churches organized that affected her most profoundly. I close with her own words, because I couldn't say it any better: "*My life was dramatically impacted by the 9th grade trip, our coming of age experience with 9th grade uus*

across Colorado. The purpose of the weekend retreats during the year, culminating in one week in the desert volunteering our labor on two native American reservations, was personal exploration. We were encouraged to think deeply about our own beliefs, to create our own theology, and to find our own truths. That experience changed my approach to the world. I became a vegetarian (later a vegan), experiences outdoors became more spiritual for me, and, with time, I found a comfort zone with religion and god. "

I truly am glad I raised my kids as Unitarian Universalists.

SOCIAL and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

for Northwest Youth Services

Siyakudumisa (We Praise)

REFLECTIONS

Rev. Paul Beckel

Melody Moberg was a regular attendee in the 5th or 6th grade religious education classes when I was called to be the minister of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Wausau, Wisconsin. Well, regular in that sense, but she was a quirky kid, not inclined to let conformist expectations dictate her life. Before the age of 20 she led a Sunday service on food justice -- in a community where that message was not especially welcome. You might not be terribly surprised to learn that a kid like this has now found a supportive community at University Unitarian Church in Seattle. I'm also pleased to say that she's a big part of *creating* supportive community there as the Director of Religious Education.

My son Rick, age 25, attends University Unitarian Church. Unprompted last week he told me that he was thinking about teaching RE next year. I was a little surprised. Even though he's given two sermons from this pulpit, teaching RE, in my mind, takes guts.

Rick grew from preschooler to second grader while I served SouthWest UU in Cleveland Ohio -- a brand new church formed primarily by young parents. This was a small church if you just counted adults. The number doubled when you counted children. So we did as much together outside church during the week as we did inside on Sundays.

Six or seven years later, passing thru Cleveland, our family was invited to a potluck dinner with the old gang. It was wonderful to see how the adults had aged gracefully, and how the kids had grown up, and what they were doing. And it was a bit startling to hear from the other parents -- all who had shared duty as RE teachers. They'd meet Rick, now a teenager, look at us, and with tongues tied they'd say, "That can't be..." They couldn't quite find words but what they seemed to be trying to say is "he's so... mellow, and composed." Jane and I had known that Rick was a challenge, but maybe we didn't realize the depth of the gift his teachers, his friend's parents, had given to us.

Kids at SouthWest UU were an integral part of everything we did. So much so that it sometimes interfered with our ability to engage in adult-level activities. Like any congregation — of any composition — we had to be self-aware and conscientious in order to ensure that we offered

developmentally appropriate programming across the spectrum: child-centered *and* adult-centered, *and* intergenerational.

I have a fond memory of the church auctions. Kids attended, and assisted, and undoubtedly observed how their parents expressed their values at this big annual event. Kids contributed goods and services to be auctioned, and you wouldn't believe how much money we made in the bidding wars over babysitting services.

There was also a bidding war over the big chocolate cake that Rick and his little brother Ben made for the auction one year. Maybe it was because they had completely saturated the chocolate frosting with candy bars, chocolate kisses, gummy worms and every other kind of candy they could find.

I don't know if my children could have learned a more profound lesson about generosity than when what they labored over — and created from their own candy stash — was received with such appreciation. They knew that they had contributed something of value to something important.

I hope they learned, too, when Jane and I *explained* the value of generosity, or *modeled* generosity. But there's nothing like the *experience* of doing the right thing yourself and having it turn out well. The experience can't be too contrived and the response can't be too effusive. But when, later in life, doing the right will not always not be rewarded, I think such positive experiences have sticking power.

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Ministry is all that we do together — here, and *wherever we are; whatever we do* in service to our covenant. Religious Education, Pastoral Care, Social Justice, washing dishes, learning each other's names, financial stewardship, engaging differences with courage and respect... these are all a part of our shared ministry.

In the same way everything we do together here is Religious education. Our work for social justice is religious education and religious education is an important form of our work for social justice. Pastoral care is religious education, and religious education is pastoral care. Music likewise, and so on.

Everything we do and say that reflects on how we are perceived... everything that we promote or allow, for better or for worse, is religious education. Hypocrisy, self-righteousness, cliquishness, whining, and any other behavior that has ever shaped your experience of congregational life has been a form of religious education.

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My first encounter with Unitarian Universalism was Religious Education. I brought my three year old, Rick and Ben's older half-brother, to the Religious Education program led by Beth Brownfield at the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis. Across the age spectrum that year, in developmentally appropriate ways, the kids were learning about death. Wow, I thought, this place

is unique, and what they're doing is important.

My second encounter with Unitarian Universalism was with the Young Adult group just down the hall. I call it religious education not because there was any administrative connection between these programs, and certainly not because of the word "young." But because that's where I learned, thru direct experience, profound lessons in trust and gratitude and belonging when I needed them most.

These experiences have profoundly shaped my ideals of beloved community. I have attended, observed, preached at, consulted with, and served as minister at dozens of congregations of multiple traditions since then. All of them have added to my impression of the ideal. None of them have perfectly met the ideal, and they never will.

And yet I remain optimistic as I promote Beloved Community and the religious education which undergirds its covenant.

Most of all I promote and support religious education because I have so much to learn. And I need you. I trust you to be my companions in learning. More importantly, I trust you to be my teachers.

I need to learn how to lead. I need to learn how to follow. And I need to learn to get out of the way.

Two weeks from today our Sunday service theme is the variety of forms of spirituality. I've read about spirituality in many books. But I need to learn from you, engage with you, find depth and joy with you not in the theory, but in the many forms of spiritual *practice*.

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I need to learn how to slow down. Or, heaven forbid, to stop.

I need to learn that words are not the only means for the expression of truth. And good intentions are not the only way to express love.

I need to learn that while social media are capable of expressing both truth and love, they remain at least one step removed from the magic of direct experience.

Which brings me to generations ahead. Social media, artificial intelligence, unimaginable biotechnologies, these are likely to be even more complicated aspects of ethics, identity, and meaning for the generations to come. Each generation experiences unprecedented pressures to rediscover what is truth, what is beautiful, what is good, in all of its evolving forms.

So each generation has much to teach the next generation. And when the adults can't figure it out themselves we will have the privilege of taking lessons from and following the lead in situations like we're now seeing as schoolkids stand up to the threats of gun violence.

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Forward through the Ages, written by Unitarian Minister Rev Frederick Hosmer, was first published in 1928. Since then the text has been set to a variety of tunes, and has appeared in not only in our own hymnal, but in those used by Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Episcopalians, the United Brethren, and United Methodists. Several of these are specifically identified as hymnals for Sunday school and youth.

I believe that the sentiment of this lyric will remain pertinent from age to age, even as the rhythms and melodies change... and even as the forms of theological expression continue to evolve.

Sometimes we encounter an idea differently when it comes to us in different forms, so instead of singing it today, let's read the words together, responsively. ... #114

Of the many things I look forward to for the children of my children, and yours — and of course I am not talking precisely about children of our specific DNA (since we've learned in our own time that our DNA is virtually identical) I'm looking forward thru the ages to the connections across cultures, across religious differences, that are today still glimmers in the eyes of the youngest among us.

The thing that troubles me most about my own death is that I will not be around to see what they do with the challenges and the opportunities that lie within the increasing complexity and awareness of this interdependence. I can only call upon the wisdom of the ancestors, and the contemporary experience of which I am mindful, that we are creating here and now.

CIRCLE 'ROUND for FREEDOM