

***Reach In, Reach Out, Reach Forward
with Memories of Kay Witter***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
March 5, 2017
Rev. Paul Beckel

**Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.
Indeed it is the only thing that ever has. —Margaret Mead**

WELCOME

Today we incorporate our theme of reaching in, reaching out, and reaching forward with our memories of Kay Witter, a longtime member of BUF who died this past month.

As we light the chalice let's say together our covenant: Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

If you are new to BUF please understand that it isn't typical to embed a memorial service within a Sunday service. But it is not our purpose to be typical. Our purpose is to respond to what is going on in the lives of the beloved community within these walls, as well as our local civic community, our national and international communities, and especially the community of the natural world of which we are all a part.

In order to respond to, and even to take a lead in these various communities, we develop programs for Sundays and throughout the week with a variety of content and style, using a wide range of voices. Unitarian Universalism rejects the notion that there is one right way to do things, or one authority with the last word. This was important to Kay Witter. She, like myself and many of us here, had pretty much given up on religious organizations. So what she found here was no surprise. BUF has all of the challenging dynamics of any organization: personalities, opinions, fundraising, and tons of hands-on work for volunteers. And yet, Kay dug in to the work here, and pushed passed the periodic aggravations, because she felt loved ... because she found the work relevant to the progressive values she lived to promote, and because fallibility and imperfection, whether in a person or an organization, fallibility and imperfection were not a big deal. There were more important things in her life.

She *would* be concerned though at about this point if she thought this gathering was going to be all about her. She'd be saying, well, what about all of these people who didn't know me? What about all of these people who came here today needing to laugh or celebrate or practice mindfulness or learn about Unitarian Universalism. You'd better make this relevant for them.

I think we can. In today's service we will explore the second of the six sources from which our living tradition draws inspiration. That is: Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the

transforming power of love. We dedicate ourselves today to all whose words and deeds have so inspired us.

GATHERING SONG *For the Earth Forever Turning #163*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Grandma's Shoes, by Libby Hathorn*

Summary: A little girl delights in hearing stories and having her hair braided by Grandma. When Grandma dies, everyone says that no one will be able to fill her shoes. The girl feels a deep need to re-connect with Grandma's spirit. Discovering Grandma's shoes in the closet, she finds that when she puts them on, she is able to soar into the heavens. When she finally finds Grandma, she begs her to come back, but Grandma says she can't come back — besides, she likes it where she is. Then she tells the girl to put the shoes back in the closet until she is big enough to wear them. Somewhat disappointed, the girl finds a way to connect to Grandma's spirit in real life, then, by sitting with her little sister, telling her Grandma's stories, and braiding her hair.

MESSAGE

Our Unitarian Universalist principles play a significant role for our inner lives. Our principles are not surprising or unique, but fairly intuitive. When we look inside, when we pay attention to the voice of conscience, I think these principles have a natural resonance: affirming equity and compassion; the democratic process; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.... We can reach within to remember and to reaffirm these principles, as well as to discover our inner strength, courage, and wisdom when these are in short supply.

The principles play a role as well in our outer lives. They call us beyond ourselves, just as we read in the Epistle of James in the Christian scriptures: *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things they need, what good is that? Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

Reaching in. Reaching out. And are the principles relevant too, as we reach forward? As we consider the legacy that we leave to those whose lives will be impacted by our choices?

Perhaps this question has occurred to you this week as you / breathe in, breathe out, and plant your feet firmly on the ground / to face whatever challenges lie before you. Challenges with jobs, kids, relationships, health, and political uncertainties.

Are our principles relevant as we reach forward and consider the legacy we'll leave to those whose lives will be impacted by our choices? Perhaps this question has occurred to you because some beautiful person, one of our dozens of BUF canvassers, has reached out to you this week with a

pledge card. Not to badger you, but to invite you to join in this work we share, building relationships within and beyond these walls.

If you have not been canvassed in the last few days, then shame on us, because this is a place of inclusion. Please let Rick Steele [he stood and waved] know that you would like to share in the good work.

Our canvass, also known as the annual fund-drive, takes place every spring, and is much more fun than NPR's. Another difference is that we don't have tens of thousands of members, and about 90% of our income comes from pledges. So whatever you can contribute will make a difference.

The annual canvass embodies every aspect of our reaching in, reaching out and reaching forward.

Reaching within we do our most basic work of stewardship, which is taking care — caring for each other and our congregational health. Financially this means that we support our staff, who support our volunteers, who support each other, and our facilities, and our organizational integrity.

Reaching out we share the magic of inclusive community with others. We've been welcoming *a lot* of newcomers who are checking us out to see if BUF can help them to face their challenges, and direct their passions into something constructive. I am very *very* happy to see visitors, because I believe in Unitarian Universalism. And while I'm not going to push it on anyone, I am very excited every Sunday and at events throughout the week when I can be part of *offering* Unitarian Universalism to others.

At the same time I worry, not that Unitarian Universalism might not be the right thing for those just discovering us — that's ok — but I worry that UU *is* right for them, but if we're not at our best, there's a good chance that many newcomers' suspicions will be confirmed — that even liberal religion is a sham — and they won't be back. So in this time of heightened fear and generalized anxiety in our society at large, we need to be good to each other.

I should mention, too, that I do not hope to draw more people into BUF because they will ease our volunteer or financial gaps. Some efficiencies of scale enable us to expand and diversify our programs, but in general, congregations *of every size* and every denomination face the same challenges with finances and volunteerism.

So to you new folks: we are not going to drag you in so that you can solve *our* problems. *Nor do we promise to take on every single one of your problems.* But we do want to partner with you, share our strength with you, and experience with you the strength of our covenant.

Finally, in our canvass we reach forward: because we care deeply for the generations to come. Not just the *people* generations but for me, the next generations of rivers and trees and turtles too ... and I admit I'm getting pretty abstract, but it's important to me even to envision our *principles* in the generations to come. What will religious freedom mean, and human rights, and critical thinking, and social conscience ... what will these ideals mean as human history unfolds? I am really bummed

out that I won't be here in 50 years to find out, but I know that I can be a part of carrying forward what I value during my time on earth.

We talk a lot about reaching forward for the generations to come, but we reach forward *now* as well. Every time we sing together, and eat, share milestones, welcome babies, and remember those who have died ... in all of this I feel like I'm reaching forward/ backward/ upward/ downward/ sideward... into the web of all being. And I feel like all of *this* is reaching back to me. I hope you feel that too. And I am grateful that — however you describe it (divine, sublime, whatever) — you are willing to share and receive that experience with me and with one another.

Kay Witter wasn't into this woo-woo kind of stuff. And she would not be excited, but she would approve of all this talk about money. She was a realist. She talked unflinchingly about her own death; she was so proud of BUF that we could talk candidly and teach about money, death, sexuality, and loss, and social justice ... subjects we ignore at our own peril.

In a couple of minutes I anticipate that Marty Villa-Lovos is going to tell us that Kay was really good at “getting over it,” whatever it was. She did not dwell on hurt, she did not dwell on judgment of herself or anyone else. She did not dwell on what she couldn't have, or couldn't do. She looked straight at what she could do.

She was not unkind, not in the least. She probably only said “get over it” outright to her friends. [Dan Witter piped up from the pews at this moment: “...and her family!”] But she didn't waste time griping. You may have noticed a bit of her voice in the children's story earlier: when the grandma spoke tenderly but frankly to her granddaughter, she said, essentially, I'm not coming back, get over it, let me go. Reach forward.

Don't misunderstand. Kay would not have wanted us to get over our friendship. But I think what she'd appreciate most would be for us to take the love we've received from her ... and the love we once gave to her ... and give this now to others, so that love can be her legacy.

While most of her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren are in Minnesota, I'm pleased that Dan, and Deb and Deb's grandchildren, who are already working on filling her shoes, remain a part of the BUF community. Since Norm Witter has now moved to Minnesota, we've lost another luminous example of BUFsters who showed up as reliably as the spring rain, who laughed, and worked until the work was done. It's not every volunteer that gets a janitorial closet named after them. But I'm sure the Witters would be glad to make room for your name to go up next to theirs. Kay and Norm were great partners for each other, and they were great partners for us.

TRIBUTE

My name is Dan Witter. I am the youngest son of Kay and Norm Witter. I am one of six siblings that belong to the Witter clan. I am here with my sister, Deb Cruz, her husband, Ralph, their daughter, Amber and their grandkids Alex and Mathew.

Unfortunately, the rest of my family, including my father, couldn't be here today. Dad is resettled in Minnesota. He is reacquainting himself with family and old friends and he sends along his regards to you all, along with the regards of the rest of my family.

Mom has been on my mind a lot lately, and I've been thinking about what she might say to you all from "beyond," if she could speak. I think she would say thank you for making her part of this community. And that's where the heart of her message would come from – to continue being an open, welcoming community.

Before my parents came to BUF in 2005, many years passed since they had any kind of community to anchor them. Their lives were quietly spent at home in the evenings, my mom either knitting or reading a book and my dad watching whatever TV program he could find. Then, they'd go to bed and start the whole process over again the next day. They were missing a community that would spur them to become more than what they already were. They didn't find that community until they came here to BUF.

My parents heard about Unitarian Universalism, but they didn't know much about it. They came to BUF to learn more. In the process they found a community of amazing people here. You made room for my parents, and in the process you changed their lives forever. You gave them an extraordinary gift, and they tried to repay it in kind.

For my mom's part, she became involved in the knitter's group and the Dragonfly QUilters. .” She served on the Ministerial Relations Committee and volunteered to work in the office up until her health began to fail. For years she spearheaded the Food 4 Tots Program that raised 1,000 jars of baby food each October for the Bellingham Food Bank. She joined a women's simplicity circle that lovingly became dubbed in our house as “The Simple Sisters.” My mom also volunteered to help prepare food for a variety of events over the years. She participated in classes and evening programs.

None of this would have happened if the congregation of BUF had given my parents the cold shoulder.

My mom loved this place. It was a special place that reaffirmed so many of the things she already believed in so strongly. Thank you for allowing that to happen.

So, as I stand here today, I think my mom would ask a favor of you all: please extend the same kindness, welcome, friendship and sense of community to those who are coming through that door the first time — the same way that you extended it to my parents when they came through the door the first time. I think that is perhaps the best way you can honor my mother's memory. Thank you.

CHALICE CHOIR *An Irish Love Duet: Danny Boy/Down by the Sally-Gardens*

TRIBUTE Marty Villa-Lovos

These are excerpts from a letter that Kay Witter wrote as an assignment for an anthropology class she took in 2002, before moving to Bellingham. The topic was: "Who am I?"

I'm a 62 year old of Irish (and Scandinavian ancestry) and I'm seeking a place to quiet my soul.

I'm a wife of 44 years, a mother of 6 children, and a grandmother of 16 [more now, including great grandkids]. I hope I'm a friend.

I'm an editor with the U.S. Geological Survey. I love my job; I hate my work. Someday I hope to write something, an essay, a book, poetry, something. I feel all these words inside me that are too smothered by daily routine to escape to paper in any kind of meaningful fashion. They frustrate me. I'm retiring in less than 4 months, maybe then.

I'm an obsessive reader mostly of fiction, mostly to escape. I enjoy children's fantasy. The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter and the Redwall series, among others. I find them wonderfully written and I can enjoy them on many different levels. I also like intrigue, Robert Ludlum, Tom Clancy and Clive Cussler, mysteries and historical fiction. I have a book going all the time; if I finish one at night, I must start the next one before I go to sleep.

I love to knit and make quilts. I knit mostly fisherman-knit pattern afghans, occasionally a sweater and mittens.

I love to travel near and far. My favorite nearby places are Bodie, California (there are spirits there), and many of the coastal redwood groves because I feel a presence there also. I got to travel to England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland last fall. It was wonderful beyond my expectations. My

favorite place was the Irish countryside (around the Ring of Kerry), my favorite city was Edinburgh, Scotland, my favorite people were the Irish--they are so wonderfully irreverent.

I love the ocean and find myself drawn there to sit on the shore and let the endless motion of the waves suck out my soul, rinse it in the foam and toss it back to me all fresh and renewed. I need to go there soon.

I love rain and fog and the quiet they bring; but I do not like to be too hot or too cold.

I love to cook and bake, ordinary things like soup, stews, pies, and cookies. Comfort food, nothing fancy.

I love spring's hint of renewal as found in green buds, ladybugs and the song of a mockingbird. If I lost my hearing that's what I'd miss most.

I love fall colors and the hush of autumn, I'm amazed by sweet gum trees with leaves that range in color from bright yellow to red-black all on the same tree.

I believe there is a creative force and a destructive force in the universe. I'm just not sure that they are not one and the same. I believe in good and evil, but I believe these qualities reside in every one of us in varying degrees.

I believe that we are fellow creatures with all life on the planet and our right to existence is no greater than the rest of the planet's inhabitants. I believe we hasten our own extinction as we force other species (both plant and animal) to extinction.

I believe in a woman's right to choose and that children should be wanted, loved, and cared for.

I've become aware of my mortality but refuse to be paralyzed by that knowledge.

I am sad now from all that's happened the past year. I believe that it's a sorry commentary on man's evolution, if we can find no better way to deal with violent acts perpetrated against us than by retaliating in kind. I truly hate the term "collateral damage" to describe the innocent victims of our actions. I believe that those that commit terror should be punished but I am saddened by our war on terrorism and believe there has to be a better way. I don't know what it is. I do know that we'd better start dealing with the root causes of all the anger against us, instead of gloating about how good and noble we are.

My favorite song is Music of the Night from Phantom of the Opera. I love Christmas carols, harp or flute music, some classical music and Celtic melodies. My favorite movies are Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, A Beautiful Mind, Dr. Zhivago and the Star Wars series.

I want to learn about traditional religions because I feel there is something there for me. I need to learn how to meditate.

Kay was my confidant, my mentor. She was a bright light in my life. It was an honor to know her for the past 15 short years. She was very involved in social justice issues: Food for Tots, Green

sanctuary, Community to Community, the Food Bank, Interfaith Coalition and many others here at Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship as well as in the greater community.

When Kay was diagnosed with cancer she was aware of the consequences even before she was told she was terminal. I was with her and her family when she told the oncologist, “No more chemo, I’m done.” She was clear in her thinking, always, never looking back, always looking forward. She allowed me to be part of the end process as I had been in her life.

This congregation was a very important part of her and she came to it late in life. She and Norm had attended other churches but they didn’t seem to ignite her inquisitive mind. She found a home here and community and I’m sure she would want to say thank you.

I want to publicly thank the Witter family for allowing me to witness Kay’s extraordinary voyage into the unknown and to Deb Cruz and Dan Witter for the gifts they gave their mom.

SEND-OFF Bagpipes by Rory McLeod

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG *We Laugh, We Cry* #354

BENEDICTION #446

CIRCLE ‘ROUND