

**Church of the Larger Fellowship Worship Service**  
General Assembly, Salt Lake City, 2009  
Preachers: The Revs. Jane Rzepka and Bill Schulz

**Opening Words**

In this time, in this place, just once a year, live and in person, indeed, we are one.

In the words of John Updike, who died this year:

“Church services have this wonderful element: people with other things to do get up, put on good clothes, and assemble out of some vague yen toward something larger. Simply as a human gathering I find it moving, reassuring and even inspiring. A church is a little like a novel: both are saying there’s something very important about being human. I need a dose of church now and then.”

[Alvin P. Sanoff in *U.S. News & World Report*, as given to me by Wendy Kinzler from the *Readers’ Digest*, September, 1987]

**Reading**

Last December, when my granddaughter, Katie, had just turned five, she stayed with me one day while the rest of the family was away from home. In the afternoon we hitched a team of horses to the wagon and hauled a load of dirt for the barn floor. It was a cold day, but the sun was shining; we hauled our load of dirt over the tree-lined gravel lane beside the creek—a way well known to her mother and to my mother when they were children. As we went along, Katie drove the team for the first time in her life. She did very well, and she was proud of herself. She said that her mother would be proud of her, and I said that I was proud of her.

We completed our trip to the barn, unloaded our load of dirt, smoothed it over the barn floor, and wetted it down. By the time we started back up the creek road the sun had gone over the hill and the air had turned bitter. Katie sat close to me in the wagon, and we did not say anything for a long time. I did not say anything because I was afraid that Katie was not saying anything because she was cold and tired and miserable and perhaps homesick; it was impossible to hurry much, and I was unsure how I would comfort her.

But the, after a while, she said, “Wendell, isn’t it fun?”

by Wendell Berry, from his essay “Economy and Pleasure,” 1988.

**Meditation** – The Rev. Lynn Ungar

To each their own pleasure:  
backpacking above the treeline where the air starts to thin  
dancing til dawn, even after the blisters rise

movie marathons or the real thing, mile upon mile upon mile.  
You know the way the world lights up:  
The pure pleasure of the perfect chord or the perfect shot,  
the bowling strike and the baseball no-hitter,  
the hole in one and the standing O,  
the rare moments of perfection when everything aligns  
and you suddenly illuminated, incandescent with joy.  
Perhaps it matters to no one but you. Certainly your neighbors  
can't understand why you would rise at dawn  
to seek that illusive lightening. But isn't there something  
to be said for building the structure of joy?  
Aren't we all somehow blessed by those  
who choose the discipline of their peculiar pleasures?  
Doesn't that light somehow brighten us all?  
*I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.*

### **Homily – Jane Rzepka**

“Reconstitute the world”—we’ve heard that phrase a couple of times already in this service. “Reconstitute the world.” Only three words, but they are three words that go a long way toward describing religion.

I’m not sure I’ve ever preached about religion, exactly, which makes me wonder how I’ve been able to draw a paycheck as a minister for all these years. But I had a hankering to preach about religion this morning, what with our worship service placed at the beginning of a General Assembly that includes both an election and a rethinking of our principles and purposes. What a perfect time to step back and talk about what it is we Unitarian Universalists are doing—or trying to do—when we get together to gather the spirit and harvest the power.

In our anthem and in Lynn’s meditation, the poet Adrienne Rich tells us that her heart is moved by all she cannot save. And yes, as Unitarian Universalists, we feel that same pain, knowing that some people live lives of misery, devoid of respect or justice. That’s why we promote human dignity and worth ‘til we’re blue in the face. But promoting dignity and worth, as it turns out, is not enough. As part of our religion, we also recognize our ability to reconstitute the world, to know and share beauty, to promote the pleasures of living life. We do need to be able to declare, and enable others to declare, “Wendell, isn’t it fun?” Two inclinations then, two values, that we bring together in one religion: human dignity and worth and the beauty and joy—the fun—of life.

But really, what’s the big deal—are Unitarian Universalists that unique? I’m so aware that we’re sitting here in Salt Lake City, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter Day Saints are all around us, every bit as eager to claim dignity and worth, and beauty and joy, as their own values.

Now I have to tell you that Joseph Smith, a Mormon prophet, lived in my little hometown in Ohio for a time in the 1830's—his old house was right down the street from our school. Joseph Smith and I are practically on a first name basis. If you grow up in Kirtland, you know the house where Joseph and Emma lived, that he had Egyptian mummies in there, that he saw what would be the new Kirtland temple in a vision, and that they built it with stone from down the hill in the quarry. You know that Jesus Christ appeared in and around the temple dedication, along with Moses and Elijah. After school you can run your hands along the old hewn timbers in the temple. You know about the embezzling that happened over at the bank, that Joseph Smith hot-footed it out of town, and you know that once upon a time, Joseph Smith got tarred and feathered.

You also know, if you grow up in an almost completely Mormon town, that dignity and worth is a Mormon value, and that the way you achieve that sense of dignity and worth is to forsake all evil, and dedicate yourself to the gospel under divine priesthood authority. The Savior Himself is in charge of it. There is no other way.

But my family was Unitarian, and that's not the way dignity and worth happened for me at all.

When I was a little girl, I got really sick. It wasn't too unusual to get polio in those days, and that's what I got. Maybe others of you in this room of a certain age had it too, or you remember those who did.

Even though I was four years old and thought of myself as a big girl, I spent my hospital ward days in a metal crib that had tall metal bars on the sides. Everyone who approached wore a mask and gown, and so it was a world of eyes and eyebrows and muffled voices. The unit was an isolation ward, so the curtains remained drawn around my crib and the masked people mostly stayed away. If one of them showed up, even if they brought a carton of chocolate milk and a flex straw, that they were going to do something that hurt, was always part of the bargain, and there would be no crying. When there were toys from home—paper dolls, teddy bears—that's what I remember, the nurses needed to destroy them, to burn them, right after I played with them because of the germs. In that time and place, to have polio was a stern invitation to buck up.

As a Unitarian kid, before I was five, I had developed a rich interior life as an existentialist.

But then, on one ordinary day, my dad showed up at the hospital. I was going home to my brothers and sisters and to my mom and dad. Mom had packed a little bag, and they dressed me up—I can still see it—the white blouse and plaid skirt with straps, and of course the dainty white socks and shiny Mary Jane shoes. Someone opened the curtains, the side of the crib came down, and it was time to go.

It was time to walk. I remember how long the hallway looked, shiny linoleum stretching and stretching and stretching toward the double doors, to the Buick in the parking lot. The grown-ups were talking, probably making last-minute arrangements, and I was on my own beside them, step, step, step. Tap tap tap in those Mary Jane's. The walking was pretty hard work, I remember. And this is what went through my four-year-old mind: "Here I am, walking down the hall." People seem to think I'm a normal person who can just put one foot in front of the other. "Here I am, walking down the hall." "Here I am, walking down the hall."

That, my friends, is what dignity and worth looks like. At least it is for me. Head held high, believing you have what it takes to be a human being. For Unitarian Universalists it's not about forsaking evil, it's not about the Latter Day Saints' saving principles or priestly authority—that system works great for some people, but it's not our way. For us dignity and worth is about grounding and confidence and the sure knowledge that you're *somebody*. You're somebody, and you are walking down the hall. If we were in charge of the universe, everyone on this planet would know what that feels like.

When we hear during General Assembly that we are working for justice, fundamentally, that's what we're working for. Dignity. Worth. The recognition that each person is a human being. You yourself. And everyone else. Reflected in equal rights and fair wages and medical care and housing and freedom. Because our hearts are moved—so much has been destroyed. We have to cast our lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

But there's more to reconstituting the world than enabling dignity and worth. And there's more to dignity and worth than, well, dignity and worth—more than head-held-high walking down the hall. You have to have the beauty, the fun. And religion understands that. For most of us, there is something about beauty, broadly defined, that sustains us, enlivens us, that gives us joy, that helps us know who we are.

When I'm thinking along these lines, my mind always turns to this stern British matron who I met on the beach one day—she was heavy-set, properly dressed, sixty-ish. We struck up a conversation.

We talked about this and that, and before long, somehow she wandered into a saga about her dental history. So I closed the book I was reading; I could tell I was in this for the long haul.

"Bridge work," she said. I don't know what that is exactly, but she'd had a lot of it, and it kept popping out, or falling apart, or getting bent, or whatever bridge work does when it goes awry. Though I consider myself a trained professional (in listening, not dentistry), keeping on top of this conversation was getting to be pretty hard work, at least for beach duty.

But then she revived my attention by saying, “It’s the snorkeling that does it. My dentist told me that I have to give it up.” Her face changed then, and her voice, and she looked at me and said, “*But it is my fondest pleasure.*”

With that, she stripped down to her swim suit, put on her white bathing cap, carefully fastening the strap under her chin, grabbed her snorkel and fins, and headed out to the glories of the coral and parrot fish and conchs. Near as I could tell, she had instantaneously morphed from this stern matron into the zestiest person alive—it was as though she were Wendell Berry’s little granddaughter on the farm jubilantly shouting, “Wendell, isn’t it fun?!”

There she was, heading for the water, head held high, having some fun. There she was, heading for the water—grounded, confident. There she was, headed for the water, immersed in the pleasure and the beauty of it all.

Friends, there we have it, dignity and worth and the affirmation of living in the world’s beauty. The Rev. Patrick O’Neill looks at it this way. He says:

“Don’t talk to me about how we all become worthy and dignified *after* we accept Jesus Christ into our lives, or *after* we confess our sins and imperfections...; I don’t come to church to hear about all the ways in which our imperfect humanity should be condemned; I come to church for affirmation. I come to church in praise of the gift of life.... This is the starting point in the Liberal Church, and it is the point to which we must ever call ourselves if our mission is to be true.”

Isn’t that our religion? Whatever it is that opens us up to our own human worth and the majesty around us? Isn’t that our religion? Dignity for everyone and the chance to know a larger beauty? Isn’t that religion? Whatever it is that propels us to reconstitute the world?

May we live our religion, in all that is our lives.

### **Reading** – “About Bread and Roses,” by Bill Schulz

In January of 1912 one out of every three workers at the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, MA, died before the age of twenty-five. One out of every three! American Woolen was one of the largest textile mills in America employing some 40,000 people, more than half of them girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. For the previous seven years wages and living standards had been in steady decline until by 1912 wages stood at an average of \$8.76 cents for a full week. Few workers could afford more than bread, molasses and beans for their diet. Finally, spurred on by the International Workers of the World, the famous Wobblies, the workers struck. It was the first case of mass picketing in New England. It was the first strike by a largely foreign-born workforce in the country. And perhaps most significantly it was the first strike led by women. The reaction of the authorities to the strike was harsh and severe. Children

as young as ten were beaten in the streets. And as the police billy clubs and fire hoses rained down upon them, the women chanted “We want bread but we want roses too!” James Oppenheim turned that cry into a famous poem and over the years that phrase—“bread and roses!”--was adopted by others, beginning first with the Irish Labour Party, until today it stands for the importance of both beauty and justice to full realization of the human calling.

### **Homily – Bill Schulz**

According to Order No. 5 from the State Religious Affairs Bureau of China issued in August of 2007, any Tibetan Buddhist lama, that is, a priest or a monk, who is intending to be reincarnated after death must complete an application and submit it to four government agencies for prior approval. Should any lama appear in reincarnated form without government permission, he would immediately be arrested. You got to love the Chinese government, don't you?

Now I don't know a lot about Buddhist notions of reincarnation though I do know that after a lama has died, the way he knows he is destined to return to life is that he becomes a spectator of what one scholar has called “a panorama of gorgeous hallucinatory visions... , like a wonder-struck child watching moving pictures on a screen.” Sort of, I guess, like many of us felt watching Walt Disney's “Fantasia” stoned forty years ago.

But for the bad lamas who are just going to stay dead, the pictures they see are more like bad horror flicks. The way to tell, in other words, whether you are going to live again or stay dead is by how much beauty you contemplate.

Now I don't know much about beauty either. Indeed, I know so little about art that sometimes when I visit a modern art gallery, I feel so confused and disoriented that I remind myself of Charlie Brown to whom Lucy once said, “Charlie Brown, in the Great Cruise Ship of Life, some people place their deck chairs to the fore and look at what's coming and others place theirs to the aft and look at what's past. In the Great Cruise Ship of Life, which way is your deck chair facing?” And Charlie Brown replied, “In the Great Cruise Ship of Life, I'm one of those who can't get my deck chair unfolded.”

But let me tell you why beauty interests me.

There is a smell to refugee camps which, once you have inhaled it, you never forget—a smell of goat dung and human waste; of sweat and tears and unstaunched menstrual blood; but also a smell of desperation that gives way to sagging shoulders and the decay of the human soul.

When I visited the enormous Kalma Refugee Camp in southern Darfur a few years ago, 90,000 teeming people who had been burned out of their villages, their menfolk murdered, many of the women raped and battered, I was struck of course by a thousand things. But what really took my breath away was this: a young woman who

amid the utter squalor and degradation, her clothes, such as they were, tattered and falling off her, but who wore around her neck a lovely piece of jewelry—just glass no doubt but a turquoise-colored glass that sparkled constantly in the relentless sun.

At first I thought it was a religious symbol and I asked our Arabic-speaking translator to ask her what it was. “She says ‘It is me.’” he told me. At first I didn’t understand and thought she had said simply “It is mine” and he had mistranslated. “What did she say?” I asked. “Did she say it is hers?” “No,” he said definitively, “She said, ‘It is me.’” And suddenly I understood.

“Give us both bread *and* roses,” chanted the women on the picket lines. Yes, we want restoration of the 54-hour week. Yes, we need more than \$8.76 a week to feed our families. We want bread, in other words, of course. We have to be able to live. But we want to live with at least a shade of dignity too. We want to know that we are more than mere beasts of burden. We want to see ourselves as human beings. We want roses too.

This piece of jewelry, this small, sparkling piece of glass around my neck: “This is me!” This is how I know that, though I am mere brute flesh, bone, water, swollen tongue, excrement-stained thighs, my most private parts exposed for all to see, that though I am brute flesh right now in this horrific camp, I am not *just* that. I retain a tiny hint of my humanity. I require bread to live, yes. So do the cows, goats, sheep, pigs—bless them all. But none of them decorate themselves with turquoise glass; only humans do that. Only humans look on a sparkling piece of glass and call it beautiful. And I am a human being! Still. And I demand roses too.

The reason refugee camps are such frightening places is not just because they strip us of our clothes and take away our food and deprive us of our shelter. The reason is because there is barely a whisper in them that we are more than a body—that we have needs of the spirit too.

I don’t think it is only striking textile workers or starving refugees who feel that way. I think on some level it is true of every one of us. As human beings, we need more than the base necessities of life, critical as those are, and that need for more than bread is what reminds us—and reminds those who would harm us—that at least until we lie crumbled in the dust we have some value beyond the price that our organs will draw on the open market.

But not everyone of course has access to the world’s beauty. Too much ugliness can obstruct the workings of an amazing grace. That’s the connection between beauty and justice.

Lucious pears, endless seas, jazz by Duke Ellington, paintings by O’Keefe: these are precious gifts the world presents to me. But how can I savor such gifts if I lack the money to buy the pears or the time to visit the sea? The rich and the poor see Paris from two different angles: the rich walk over the Pont Neuf and the poor sleep under it. It’s the same Paris with its same presentations of grace but from under the bridge they’re a lot

harder to see. If I find a poem beautiful, I want more and more people to be literate so they can read it. If I find a painting breathtaking, I want more and more people to have the wherewithal to pay the museum fees. Beauty inspires us to do justice so that more and more people can know beauty

I sit on the deck of my home in Gloucester looking out at the ocean. When it's warm, I see the sunbathers frolicking on the beach. When it's cold, I see the great blue herons dipping into the marsh. I hear the children laughing behind me in the street; I see our elderly neighbors walking hand in hand down the hill. I think of those I love and those who have loved me and I think to myself, "This is the way the world should be." And though I know that only a very few people will ever have similar good fortune, I resolve to do all I can to see that more and more of them have access to a similarly transforming grace.

So as you look on beauty, wherever it may be, give thanks for it for without it you quite literally would not know that you were human and would not be inspired to be the best that you can be. Without it, you would have one less reason to care about justice and one less window through which to glimpse a glimmer of a large and abundant grace.

The great social activist Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Workers Movement was once speaking with a woman who was obviously mentally disturbed, incoherent, distracted. The psychologist Robert Coles, then a graduate student with the Movement, tried to interrupt them but they ignored him. Coles tried again and was similarly rebuffed. And then Dorothy Day turned to Robert Coles and she said, "Yes, Robert, what is it? Did you wish to speak with *one of us*?" "Did you wish to speak with *one of us*?" Beauty and justice. That's the magic combination that lies at the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,  
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand workshops gray,  
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,  
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread *and* Roses!

### **Closing Words**

Bread and roses. Beauty and justice. May the light of our values be in us and shining through us in all of our days.