

TOO SWIFT TO STOP, TOO SWEET TO LOSE

*A Sermon Delivered at the **first**
Service of the Living Tradition for
The 36th Annual General Assembly of
The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
Sunday, June 22, 1997, in Phoenix, Arizona
by the Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz*

One of the few decisions which is solely the President of the UUA's to make is the selection each year of the preacher at the Service of the Living Tradition. When I was President, I tried hard not to advertise this power--at least not until after each year's sermon had been delivered. Then, if the sermon was well received and I was asked who had chosen the preacher, I could allow in an offhand manner that I might have had a little something to do with it and, if the sermon was not well received, I would divert the conversation to the enormously interesting fact that when the humanist scholar Erasmus visited the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in 1518, he was astounded to be shown the milk of the Virgin still in liquid form--an observation which generally threw my questioner off the track.

Well, now I've blown President Buehrens's cover for this year at least but I know no other way to thank him publicly for his generosity in choosing his predecessor to do this duty. I am especially grateful to have been given two opportunities this morning to get it right. And if you don't like this sermon, I have a different one for you, albeit with the same title, at 11:00.

But what exactly does it mean to "get it right?" Jack Mendelsohn once observed that the reason it is so difficult to preach a successful sermon at this service is because we preachers are all tempted to pack everything we know into twenty minutes.

Now when I was entering the ministry, that would indeed have been very difficult to do because at twenty-five years of age I knew a very great deal about history and philosophy, the world and life. But over the past twenty-three years I have forgotten most of what I knew about history and philosophy and become far less certain about the world and life. Having waited a good many years for the meaning of life to manifest itself to me, I have come to acquire great respect for the old Chinese proverb, "You can stand on a hillside with your mouth wide open for a long, long time before a roast duck flies in." And I have gained considerable sympathy for the sentiments contained on a bumpersticker I saw recently, a sticker which read, "Jesus is coming. Look busy."

All of which is to say that today I probably could tell you all I know in twenty minutes but I only have fifteen left so what I want to do instead is to tell you the one most important thing I think I know about ministry.

When I was a little boy--I mean age five or six--I had a fantasy that, when I was old and sick and about to die, if I merely willed myself to live one more second and then another and then another, I might permanently stave off death. This fantasy was akin to another one of that era: that if I could be privy to every spoken conversation in human history, the secret of life would be revealed to me. A decade and a half later, having, I thought, discarded both these childish fantasies, I decided to enter the ministry. I did so because in the ministry, I presumed, I could unlock death's clasp and unravel life's mysteries.

Now anyone who takes these two goals as reasons for entering the ministry is, I'm afraid to say, bound to be disappointed. After all, when it comes to death, we ministers lose 100% of our clients. As the clergyperson said when asked where we go when we die, "Oh, I suppose to the exquisite bliss of the Lord but let's not talk about such unpleasant matters." And as to the mysteries of life, they are subject to considerable debate.

I have always loved the Sufi tale of the dervish who spent many years perfecting the words for Truth, saying them the way his tradition taught him. "YA HU," he incanted every day. 'YA HU," he said over and over again, his heart filled with purity and he knew that only the pure of heart could walk on water. But one day he heard a cry from the far river bank. "U HA," came the cry, "U HA! U HA!" The dervish scowled when he heard this chant. "That poor fellow is mispronouncing the name of Truth," he thought to himself and, borrowing a small boat, he set off across the river, rowing strenuously, to set his opposite number straight. When he arrived at the far bank, he found the derelict dervish shouting "U HA!" at the top of his lungs. "My friend," he said, "It is my duty to tell you that the correct way to speak the word of Truth is not 'U HA!' but 'YA HU.' You will never become pure of heart and walk on water if you keep on 'U HA-ing;' only if you start 'YA HU-ing.'" "Thank you," said the other dervish, and as the first master rowed back to his home, he heard a few gentle "YA HUs" emanating from the far bank. The wise dervish smiled. "Now he's got it right," he thought. But then there was a long silence until suddenly, much to his dismay, he heard once again from the far bank, "U HA! U HA!" The first dervish shook his head, thinking about the perversity of humanity and its persistence in error. But then, to his utter astonishment, he saw the dervish from the far bank, coming toward him, walking on the water. When the second dervish arrived, he looked sheepish and confused, "I'm sorry to trouble you, my friend," he said, "But I keep forgetting the name of Truth. One more time, won't you tell me?"

So death is defiant and Truth is elusive but there is one thing which every one of us can do and that is to be present at their disclosure.

The work I do brings me into contact with the very worst impulses we can imagine. When the Taleban in Afghanistan sever the hands of children accused of stealing food for their starving families or the thumbs of women caught wearing nail polish; when Chinese prison guards insert electric shock batons into the private parts of 15-year old Tibetan nuns; when torture and disfigurement and political murder run rampant--none of this polishes the luster of humanity's reputation.

But one remarkable phenomenon pulls me back from the slough of despond. Do you know what the most effective way is to put a stop to these atrocities? Military intervention? Sometimes. Economic pressure? Occasionally. But the most persistently effective way to stop people from acting like beasts is to let them know that somebody is watching.

Why is that? Why do those who seem impervious to other peoples' opinions nonetheless so often care what the world thinks? Why do even the most powerful, brutal governments try to cover up their misdeeds? Why do the world's worst dictators want to be perceived as humanitarians? Why do even madmen blush?

Well, the answer has something to do with Jean-Paul Sartre's refutation of solipsism. The philosophical problem of solipsism is simply this: How do we prove that there is anything else in the world other than ourselves? How do we know that the world and other people actually exist and are not mere figments of our imaginations?

The problem of solipsism has baffled philosophers for centuries but Sartre offered a very straightforward solution: the way we know that other people exist and are not merely the stuff of our dreams is because, when people look at us--in disapproval or anger or affection or lust--we respond to their looks. We don't ignore them or remain indifferent. We can pretend not to see but that very pretense reflects their power.

The power of other peoples' eyes is enormous--the power to shame, to embarrass, to bring to justice. It is exactly that power of witness and presence that those of us in the human rights business rely upon to call the murderers to account.

And the power of that kind of presence, the power of the Look, of other peoples' eyes, works in individual lives as well. Only it doesn't just work when it comes to shame or anger or lust. It also works, astonishingly enough, when it comes to healing.

Willa Cather said, "What is any art but a sheath in which to try to capture that shining, elusive quality which is life itself, hurrying past, too swift to stop, too sweet to lose?" That is the art of ministry too--but because life's spending is too swift to stop, our only option is to be present to its hurrying past. How we do that determines our success at this calling.

The most difficult lesson for any minister to learn is not how to talk but how to keep quiet. The most important thing for any one of us to know is that when people are in pain, they need hands as well as words, a caring presence more than a clever explanation.

Now on one level you would think this would be a relief for ministers to hear. When Senator George Norris was asked in the 1930s what Abraham Lincoln would do about the Depression the country was then experiencing, Norris replied, "Lincoln would be just like the rest of us. He wouldn't know what the hell to do." On one level it ought to be a relief that ministers are allowed as much ignorance as the next person.

But ministers are expected not only to have some special insights into life but to be able to express them with eloquence. And we have been schooled to believe that the chief form of that expression is in words when the truth is that the most profound form is often simply in a look, a touch, a quiet moment, a presence.

Do you know why ministers get paid? For the same reason rabbis do. But long, long ago rabbis did not get paid and had to work as carpenters or tent makers. One day Saul, a pillar of the synagogue, came to Rabbi Simon. "Oh, Rabbi," he said, "The most wonderful thing has happened. I have met a beautiful girl, Judith, and we want you to marry us--right away!" "But I must make a living so that I can feed and clothe my own family," said the Rabbi. "I've got six tents to finish. I can get to you three months from Monday." And so he did. One year later Saul called on Rabbi Simon again. "A wonderful thing has happened. Judith and I have had our first child. Come Rabbi, you must do the bris--right away." "But I must make a living," said the Rabbi, "and I have twelve tents to finish. I can get to you six months from Monday." And so he did. But then one day Saul came to Rabbi Simon and said, "Oh, Rabbi, the most terrible thing has happened. My wife Judith is dying. I cannot bear to lose her. Come quick, I need you. And the Rabbi said, "I am so sorry but I must make a living..." "NO," shouted Saul. "We need you now, not six months from Monday. My wife is dying! I will pay you, Rabbi, an honest living so that you can be here when we need you."

Whether it be for that prisoner in a dark cell far away or that parishioner in a hospital bed close at home, an innocent person unjustly accused, a 50-year old out of work, a young mother facing cancer, a teenager flirting with suicide, you and I are paid so that we will be here when we are needed, so that when that which is too swift to stop appears, we will be there, trembling perhaps, as confused as the next, unsure of what to say or how to go, but present nonetheless in all fragility, present to what is good and holy and desperately, achingly sweet, too sweet, too sweet to lose.

That is what these precious souls now departed whom we honor here today tried their best to do. That is what these ministers completing full-time service did so well. And that is the promise these new ministers have taken up today. Not just to be wise or quick of tongue or friendly or amusing (though, mind you, all those things be good) but most importantly to be present, authentically present, wide awake to every fluttering of the spirit.

The last word is Wendell Berry's:

Last December [he says] when my granddaughter Katie had just turned five, she stayed with me while the rest of the family was away from home. One 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 and, as we went along, Katie drove the team for the first time. She did very well and she was proud of herself and I said that I was proud of her too.

We completed our trip to the barn, unloaded our dirt, smoothed it over the barn floor and wetted it down. By the time we started home the sun had gone over the hill and the air had turned bitter cold. Katie sat very 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 it was impossible to hurry much and I was not sure what words I could ever use to comfort her.

But then, after awhile, Katie turned to me and she said, "Wendell, isn't it fun?"

In the end of course, no matter how sweet life be, we all will lose it but to have been present to the world, engaged and curious, faithful and glad of heart, even in the face of disappointment and misery and cold and death, is to be companion to the Radiant--every one of us; not just ministers--and to slip into Creation's hand not with terror or with fear--not with that; not with regret or rage--not with that--but with trust and calm and gratitude, loving even the depths and embracing the clean, still darkness. "Wendell, isn't it fun?"

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One of the great privileges of being President of the UUA is the opportunity it provides to preach each Sunday to a different Unitarian Universalist congregation. One of the great advantages of being President of the UUA is that you therefore have to write only about one new sermon a year and nobody knows the difference.

Given the pace of my customary sermon preparation, therefore, I was relatively confident, when President Buehrens so graciously asked me about a year ago to preach the sermon at this service, that I could get something together in ten months. Perhaps you can imagine my panic then about six months ago when I learned that there would be two services this year and, what's more, that all the newly fellowshipped ministers would be attending both. Should I repeat the same sermon at 11:00 I had preached at nine and risk you seeing all these ministers desperately shaking their watches at their ears? No, I should have to try to write two sermons, albeit under the same title, in, my God, less than a year.

Now this may actually be a little harder than it sounds. After all, it is a common observation that most ministers have only one sermon in them which they keep repeating in different permutations their entire careers. The truth is that this is the same sermon I preached at 9:00 only in different form though ministers are of course not the only people who suffer from the temptation to repeat themselves. When the great Christian philosopher C. S. Lewis was informed that his Oxford colleague, J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the famous Lord of the Rings trilogy, had produced still another story starring Frodo the Hobbit, his response was, "Sweet Jesus, not another damn elf."

But to have one grand idea, one commanding vision--that is not so bad. And to be able to put it in a single sentence--that is even better. Like the Chinese philosopher Hung Tzu-ch'eng who said, "Only those who can appreciate the least palatable of root vegetables can possibly know the meaning of life." Or the Danish novelist Isak Dinesen who asked, "What is a human being but an elaborate machine for turning red wine into urine?" Or the rabbi who, while lying on his deathbed, was asked the meaning of life, and replied, "Life is like a river" and these wise words were passed on down the row of elders until they reached the schlemiel. "But what does the rabbi mean, 'Life is like a river'?" asked the schlemiel. And this question was passed back on up the row of elders until it reached the head elder who put it to the rabbi. "I'm sorry to be bothering you," said the head elder,

"but the poor, stupid schlemiel has asked what you mean life is like a river." But the rabbi just shrugged. "So," he said, "Life is not like a river."

But we are not here this morning to discover the meaning of life as much as we are the meaning of lives--the meaning of the lives of those twenty-six cherished women and men no longer with us, of those completing full-time service and of those whose ministries are largely yet to come. What we are asking in this service here today is whether an individual life, a single ministry, can truly affect the quality of the day.

Now if we are honest, I think we have to acknowledge that there is much about the world which threatens to convince us that it cannot. There is nothing more discouraging to me in the work I do with Amnesty International than the sheer anonymity of human suffering. The Dutch author Abel Herzberg once said that six million Jews did not die in the Holocaust. First one Jew was killed and then another and then another--six million times. And the same is true of the Roma and the gays and lesbians and the disabled who perished. But much as we try to keep the human faces attached to each victim, nonetheless to sort through bones and body parts in the killing fields of Bosnia or Rwanda is to be swept up in the anonymity of suffering and to never again be able to speak blithely of human redemption.

And yet there is something else I have noticed about the work I do and that has to do with the singularity of courage. For in every situation of incomprehensible terror there are always a few people who have cast their lot with the Honorable and the Just. Such people need not be well-educated or sophisticated. Luisa had dropped out of school at age eight and never been outside her village but when the security forces came to her house and demanded that she give them the names of all the villagers who were critical of the government, she supplied them a list of twenty names, all the same--her own. And such people need not even be successful in their witness. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney describes one of the most harrowing moments in the whole history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland:

One January evening in 1976 [Heaney says] a minibus full of workers was held up by masked men and the occupants ordered at gunpoint to line up by the side of the road. Then one of the masked men said to them, "Any Catholics among you, step out here." Well, with one exception, this was a group of Protestants and the one Catholic was terrified that he was being singled out by what were obviously Protestant terrorists but the Catholic made a motion to step forward and, as he did so, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said, "No, don't move. We'll not betray you." All in vain, however, for the Catholic had already stepped out of the line-- only to be pushed aside by the gunmen as what was in truth a group IRA terrorists mowed down the Protestants remaining.

Such people need not be well-educated or sophisticated or even successful in their witness; they simply need to be those who, in the face of sorrow, choose honor and blessing and life.

And when they do they redeem if not humanity, then at least their generation. For, you see, you don't need an entire population to choose righteousness in order to prove that righteousness is possible; you need only one person. When Lydia Maria Child spoke forthrightly against slavery while thousands in her generation supported it, she proved that anyone of her generation could have chosen defiance. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued to preach against the Nazis when thousands of his colleagues chose collaboration, he proved that anyone in his country could have chosen that option. And when Fauziya Kaminga chose exile in the United States last year rather than allow her two daughters to return to Togo to be ritually circumcised, she proved that culture does not determine history, that anyone can be an agent of the tender. For if even only one person in a generation or a country or a culture chooses honor and blessing and life, then it means that anyone could have made that choice; it means that the Radiant had not completely died in those days; it means that Glory has not been silenced.

Now I know that you and I will probably never have to make terrible choices like these and I know that, even if I had to, I might very well opt for expediency rather than honor but I also know that almost every day in small and simple ways--from the way we teach our children to the way we treat our neighbors to the way we model our faith--you and I have the opportunity to choose the gentle or the cruel, the generous or the petty, the ennobling or the venal. The Unitarian Universalist ministry exists to teach us, to tempt us, to tease us into choosing the former.

And how do ministers do that? We do that principally by modeling it in our lives, by manifesting the spirit in our footsteps. I do not mean, God knows, that ministers must be perfect. Maybe not as dumb as the Philadelphia politician who begged off a reporter's question by saying, "Candidly I cannot answer that. The question is too suppository." Maybe smarter than that but not perfect. I like what the poet Anna Ahkmatova said about the controversial Russian journalist Ilya Ehrenburg: "You know," she told Ehrenburg, "there is a tendency to accuse you of not reversing the direction of rivers, of not changing the course of the stars, of not breaking up the moon into honeycake and feeding us the pieces. In other words, people always wanted the impossible from you and were angry when you did the possible." I don't know a single minister who can't identify with that. Ministers don't need to be perfect but they do need to be transparent.

Once there was a very pious Jewish couple who had a son named Mordechai. The parents wanted nothing more for Mordechai than that he learn the Word of God but Mordecai was bright and rambunctious, zestful and spirited, and whenever he left his parents' home to go to the synagogue to learn the Word of God, he would end up swimming in the lake and climbing in the forest. Finally in desperation his parents took him to the greatest rabbi of their day. "What shall we do?" they wailed. "Leave him with me," the rabbi said, and as soon as the parents left, the rabbi turned to the boy. "Come here," he said sternly and Mordecai, now trembling, came forward. The rabbi picked him up and held him silently against his beating heart. The next day Mardecai went to both the synagogue to learn the Word of God and the lake to swim and the forest to climb and the Word of God became one with the word of the lake and the forest which became one with the word of Mordecai. And when Mordecai grew up, he became a person to whom others came for

wisdom, to whom others came for comfort and to whom everyone came for the Word of God. "What is your secret?" people asked. And Mordecai replied, "That I learned the Word of God when the rabbi held me silently against his beating heart." Ministers need not be perfect but in their imperfections they need to be transparent and available to those who need them.

And why does it matter? No one put it better than E. B. White: "As long as there is one upright man," he said, "as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is what is left to us, in a bad time. So I shall get up on Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness."

I don't know what ministry is about if it is not about steadfastness. Steadfastness to that tradition we celebrate today: a generous faith, a bountiful God, the gladdening of hearts and the knowledge that sometimes at sunset even the mountains take wing. How do we know that an individual life, a single ministry, can affect the quality of the day? Because if we be carriers of this tradition in our generations, as the twenty-six were in theirs, we prove that such a faith is possible, that anyone may claim it, that oppression need not endure, that kindness need not be rare, and that there need be no strangers to grace.

Willa Cather said, "What is any art but a sheath in which to try to capture that shining, elusive quality which is life itself, hurrying past, too swift to stop, too sweet to lose?" Everyone and every thing that you and I hold dear will someday slip away. There is no way to prevent that; it is too swift to stop. But because what we hold dear is also so enormously sweet, it can ultimately never be denied, its presence never be ignored, its impact never be erased. It will never disappear: the commanding vision, the transforming faith, the beating heart. It will never disappear for it is simply far too sweet, too sweet, too sweet to lose.