

A SERMON FOR THE INSTALLATION OF THE REVEREND MEG A. RILEY

*Church of the Larger Fellowship ~ General Assembly June 23, 2011, Charlotte, North Carolina
Prepared with love by Reverend Nathan C. Walker of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia*

Watch the video of this sermon (11:40 – 27:00)
and the entire worship service at:

<http://www.uua.org/ga/2011/worship/184480.shtml>

Hello all you beautiful people. You should know something about my preaching philosophy before we begin. It's simple: Nate, no one is listening to you. I mean it. My sermons are not designed to be heard. They are invitations to listen to that which is within and beyond. Let us begin.

My parents had a vision – to transform 40 acres of desert in Northern Nevada into a lush alfalfa farm. They could not do it alone, so they solicited all the help they could get, including me, their eldest son. I was eight years old when driving a beat-up Ford while my dad stood in the bed of the pickup and threw fence posts into the drought stricken sand. We cultivated the soil and constructed huge pipes on wheels to spread the water from one side of the farm to the next and back again. Eventually the dream came true: the 40 acres of desert was transformed into a lush sea of green. I was taught early that it is possible to reap what you sow, a metaphor found in many sacred texts.

Although my folks were not religious they were devotional. Every Sunday we went horseback riding in the Sierra Nevadas. I never explicitly asked them but always suspected they were the founders of the Equestrian religion. After setting up camp, we would sit around the fire and tell stories; my mom and brother would pull out their guitars and we'd sing songs; my dad would recite poetry; we'd sit in silence and make wishes upon falling stars. Surrounded by the beauty of Lake Tahoe, the material, the tangible, the natural became a catalyst for our reflections on the nonmaterial aspects of life.

But there came a time when not even nature could address social questions. At the age of fifteen, my dad found a love letter in my pants pocket written to... my boyfriend. It was 1991. I had started my first year of high school, where my classmates were preoccupied with the rodeo and where their trucks were armed with gun racks. In response to my coming out, my grandmother grabbed my hand and said, "I hear there's a lesbian up at the Unitarian fellowship." And off we went to meet the lesbian.

I have a confession to make. I don't ever actually meeting the lesbian. I do remember that this little fellowship of a dozen people met in a trailer in Reno, Nevada. Having built a new sanctuary next to that same trailer, the UU Fellowship of Northern Nevada is now over 200 members strong. I found something remarkable that day: community. It was a community of people who renounced fanaticism, they proclaimed reason, they promoted religious freedom, and cultivated humanity.

I am aware that this small gaggle of UUs and a lesbian drew from content developed by the Church of the Larger Fellowship. I remember asking, what's a Church in a Box? We'd open the materials and a man would read. It was so simple: we sat around a chalice, told stories, sang songs, sat in silence and expressed our hopes and dreams. I look back on those simple exchanges and wonder if this small group of people felt like they were planting seeds in a drought stricken land. Little did they know what they would reap: how the very act of planting the fellowship saved my life. Literally.

In my nightstand laid a knife, a note, and a calendar. I was counting down the days with the intent to take my own life. Unbeknownst to my grandmother there were only two days left on the countdown before that fateful Sunday morning. A small group gathered and provided for me an oasis in the desert of despair. I was hungry for belonging and they fed me hospitality. I was thirsty for self-worth and they offered me a cup of acceptance. I was a stranger and they welcomed me. Together, we knew freedom.

In this point in time, the Church of the Larger Fellowship was aware that printed material was the most efficient way to disseminate the saving message of Unitarian Universalism. The founders of this local fellowship knew that the most accessible place to advertise their location was in, you might remember this, a phone book. So my grandmother, she used the Yellow Pages to find the address. She gave me a folded map and we drove nearly an hour to gather in fellowship.

Today, the CLF is exploring innovative methods to serve dispersed people throughout the globe. Think for a moment the kinds of tools we now have our disposal to achieve this goal. Looking back on how technology has changed in the last ten years, imagine what's to come in the next ten years. As a rookie minister in an age of technology it's only right for me to acknowledge the speed by which our world has changed.

I was eight years old when the neighboring farms all shared one party line and therefore my technological training consisted of mastering the art of lifting the receiver without the other farmers knowing of my eavesdropping. I am a part of the last generation who learned how to type on a typewriter; the last generation who had a handwritten pen pal; the last generation that listened to records, 8-tracks and tapes; who rented movies from stores and watched them on VCRs; the last generation who wrote checks.

Today, eight-year-olds are learning to read and type by sending text messages; they have video pals from across the world and use translating software to communicate; they eavesdrop by leaving their iTouch on record while they leave the room giggling. Today, we are trained to download music and movies, to instantly get everything we want, and to swipe cards rather than exchange green paper. When we want to find directions we use our phones to show us the most efficient route based on a Global Positioning System and when we do arrive we broadcast it to the world. Our world is changing and change is inevitable. But what else is change? Could it be an invitation for us to transform?

I'm reminded of words of Huston Smith, a scholar of comparative religions, who said, "The century's [technological] advances must be matched by comparable advances in human relations."

This is the primary question that CLF is now poised to ask: how will we use technology to cultivate humanity? How will we use the tools of our time to be the religion of our time? How will we reach those wandering in the deserts of despair? How will we overcome the boundaries of time and place to achieve things we could not do otherwise?

Take for instance a love story. The story of a bride and groom whose mothers were ill and unable to attend their wedding. This couple gathered with a few friends in the historic chapel of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. With a laptop we Skyped in one mother from the Ukraine and the other from Los Angeles. From across the wall of the world each mother witnessed the wedding from their hospital beds. After the ceremony we cuddled around the laptop screens to take a photo of the uniting families. Thanks to technology we were able to achieve something that would not otherwise been possible.

And so, members of the great Church of the Larger Fellowship. The quest has begun. What stakes will you make? How will you collectively master these two goals: the art of being a religion of our time and the art of being human. Keep using technology effectively but always remember that it's not about the gadgets – it's about connecting, it's about creating opportunities for intimacy, it's about cultivating humanity. In an age of technological advancements, there must be, there must be comparable advances in human relations.

All we gotta do is create a safe place, whether real or virtual, where people can gather: where people are known, where they know they matter, where they know belong. All it takes is an invitation to gather and something magical will happen. When gathering, our living tradition will teach them how to, as Maya Angelou says, “scribe [their worth] into the image of their most private needs and [together they will] sculpt [their dignity] into the image of their most public selves.

They will do so when they gather in trailers, at kitchen tables, in internet cafes and prison cells. They will do this whether they are online or off to serve our country. Let us never forget that no matter how fast technology may evolve one thing will always remain constant: people will gather. They will gather, time and time again to celebrate, to mourn, to tell stories, to sing songs, to sit in silence, and to make meaning of their lives.

And so dear members of the fantastic Church of the Larger Fellowship, continue to serve dispersed people throughout the globe. Continue to create ways to gather where there is no such opportunity. Continue to use technology to cultivate humanity.

And Meg, we all know that you are the right person at the right time to make this vision a reality. We are so proud you are our minister. You know it's not about the gadgets. It is all about connection, the human connection. It's about being a religion of our time for the people of our time. And just you wait, the people, the people will come. Soon enough some grandmother from some remote corner of the world will come and ask, “Are you the lesbian of the larger fellowship?”

In that remarkable moment you will realize something important: that grandmother is not alone. At her side is a child – a child who has long since mastered the art of despair. You'll then reach out, kindle a flame, tell stories, sit in silence, and cast a thousand wishes into the sunrise. Together, you'll look out into the landscape of that once drought-stricken desert to bask in abundance. And together you will know freedom.

Blessings on your ministry, Meg. Blessings on your ministry together.

Reverend Nate Walker is proud to serve as the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. He is the co-editor of the book, “Whose God Rules?” (Palgrave Macmillan December 6, 2011) with foreword by former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair and chapters by Alan Dershowitz, Martha Nussbaum, Kent Greenawalt, William Schultz, and other dignitaries. More at www.WhoseGodRules.com. Reverend Nate is currently an advanced doctoral student in Law, Education and Religion at Columbia University where he received his Master of Education and Master of Arts degrees. He also graduated from Union Theological Seminary with a Master of Divinity degree.
