

**“Promises to Keep”**  
**7 January 2007**  
**Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs**

Worship at its best is an unveiling. I think of the moment when a bride lifts back her veil as if to finally allow her beloved to see and to know her exactly as she is. Worship invites us into what anthropologist Victor Turner called “liminal time.” Worship asks us to step out of time as we usually experience it and stand instead at the threshold between the past and future, to set aside all urgency and duty, to let go of our worries and our plans and to come into the present moment.

“The Tolling of Bells” asks us to strip away the conceits of particularity, to lift back the veil of denial and so to recognize ourselves and one another in the light of our mortality. The service is particularly poignant this year as Janne and I prepare to leave for our sabbatical. It seems a bit pretentious to draw parallels between our planned departure and the finality of death. But each in its way calls us to step across the threshold. Each asks us to take stock and bow to past. Each invites us into a future likely to be quite different from what we’ve known before.

Eliot, in his “Journey of the Magi” has the King who tells the tale wonder:

*Were we led all that way for  
Birth or for Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.*

Without denying for a moment the gratitude we feel at both the privilege of your call and the gift of this long-anticipated time away, we need you to know that leaving will be bittersweet. The bonds of love for you and for this place have grown strong in us these past six and a half years. We’re going to miss you. But we also know the benefits not only to Janne and me but to the congregation as well will far outweigh the pain. And memory makes kings and queens of us,” wrote May Sarton. It’s easy to fall into the delusion that we ministers are indispensable. We’re not. The French have a saying, “the cemeteries are full of indispensable people.” It’s also easy for people to fall into a kind of low-grade idolatry, to make the mistake of equating the church with its ministers or worse yet defer to us as though the role endows us with some superhuman qualities. It doesn’t.

Jean Piaget wrote that the path to maturity begins when one first understands that he or she is not the center of the universe. He calls it “intellectual un-centering.” I don’t believe it happens all at once. In religious terms we’re talking about cultivating the awareness that there is a power in the universe far larger than ourselves, a power before which we bow down a power far beyond our knowing. Worship helps us to align our lives with that power. Scripture

suggests that such a time should be set aside each week, we call it the Sabbath. The Torah then goes further to require that very so often we should let the land lie fallow, that we should step away from our routines and obligations so as to reassess and to enrich our lives. That's what sabbaticals are for. It's also what can happen when we grieve well, when we take the time we need for love and mourning.

*Did someone say that there would be an end, an end  
Oh, an end to love and mourning?*

May Sarton asks and answers her own question:

*Dark into light, light into darkness spin.  
When all the birds have flown to some real haven,  
We who find shelter in the warmth within,  
Listen, and feel new-cherished, new-forgiven,  
As the lost human voices speak through us and  
Blend our complex love, our mourning without end.*

These threshold moments ask us to consider and renew the promises we make. Let's take a moment to re-visit the concept of covenant. The covenantal question is, what shall we promise one another and in what interest? A covenant is not a contract. It is a statement of aspiration, I hope, I plan, I intend, I vow, I promise, we promise to remember you when we're away, to hold you in our hearts even as we let go of the day-to-day compassion we always strive for here at home. Janne and I also promise to renew the vows we've made to each other, to lift back the veil, to see each other whole and Holy unencumbered by our busyness and duty knowing that the strength and health of our relationship is central to our ministry and to the well being of the church. And we promise that we'll take the risk of really letting go because we know your ministry is stronger than even you can imagine.

We make these promises in the interest of enlisting the source of love and life in renewing, encouraging and strengthening us all. May I suggest you ask yourselves what promises you might make as we stand together here at the threshold of this new and by God's grace, blessed year.

May it be so and Amen.