

“No One But Us”

**Celebration Sunday
16 October 2005
Unity Church-Unitarian**

Worship Leader: Denny Davidoff

Reading: Living Every Moment – Peter Fleck

What is it that so often prevents us from listening to life’s messages of meaning? I think it is our everyday worries -- unpaid bills, unfinished tasks, physical discomforts, fatigue, troubled relationships with partners, spouses, and children, with colleagues, bosses, or subordinates, fear of the future, regrets of the past. And we say to life, You have to wait, I have no time now. First let me take care of all the trouble I’m in, and then I’ll listen to you. What we forget or do not realize is that all the trouble we are in is part of life, and that in dealing with all that trouble we are living, as we should be living, every moment.

Living every moment makes sense only because our earthly life is not forever. From the moment of birth our days are counted, our lives are finite. In the psalmist’s words:

The days of our years are threescore and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away.

The psalm concludes, “So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Count your days but also let every day count.

Sermon: "No One But Us" – Denny Davidoff

Jerry and I were having a dinner party. I think it was 1994, maybe 1995. I was already the Moderator of the UUA and The Interfaith Alliance was in struggling infancy. The guest who was seated on my left was an old friend, a distinguished psychiatrist who taught at the Yale Medical School, a man of great enthusiasm and searing perceptions.

He leaned into me to ask, "How did you get this way?"

"What way?" I stammered.

"This way. The way you are. The passionate Unitarian, the founder of a national organization to fight the Christian Right." Pause. "I know your mother. How did you get this way?"

I was raised in a conservative Jewish home in an oceanside New York City town by parents who were the children of immigrants from Eastern Europe. My parents were well educated and assimilated and successful. They self-identified as New Deal liberals. They were living the great dream of America that had driven their parents to escape pogroms and the Tsar's draft, to come to seek a better life on these shores.

The theological ethos of my family was the Covenant joining the tribes of Israel with their God. We were His chosen people. The family political ethos stemmed from the Exodus story: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

"The Exodus is about a quest for freedom – the freedom to worship

God,” writes Israel Mattuck. “Yet in worshipping God we take on a responsibility. Indeed Freedom and Responsibility are intimately related. Freedom is a necessary condition of responsibility; and the assumption of responsibility gives worth and meaning to Freedom.” That was the message growing up in our house.

Mom and Dad offered my brother Jim and me material advantages and white middle class privilege. They offered us freedom to think and dream, but the offer did not cover religious community. They could not and, later on, would not be able to imagine a child of theirs who would question the very core of Jewish religious belief, the Sh'ma: “Hear O Israel, the Lord Thy God, the Lord is One.” They could not imagine, much less sanction, a child of theirs leaving the tent or the covenant.

But in my college years at Vassar, I began to do just that. Twenty years before the emergence of a vocabulary of feminist religious thought, I cringed from the patriarchy, resisted the chains of orthodoxy, peeked tentatively outside the box walls that felt so stultifying. *What was out there?*

Well, you know what was out there, awaiting my discovery at age 28, now 45 years ago. Unitarianism, just one year away from becoming Unitarian Universalism. That's what was out there! And the freedom to seek, the challenge to find authenticity and to live with authenticity was the fuel for my engine.

I was fascinated by Malcolm Gladwell's piece *On Saddleback Church in Anaheim* and its founder/pastor Rick Warren in the September 12th issue of *The New Yorker*. Gladwell wrote *The Tipping Point* which has informed a lot of my thinking about trends so I pay attention to who he chooses to write about and what he has to say. Alright, you will tell me, Saddleback with its 20,000 members, its evangelical Christian

orientation and its strictly contemporary music doesn't compute with our UU congregational experience. Folks, listen to this:

At Saddleback, members are expected to tithe, and to volunteer. Sunday-school teachers receive special training and a police background check. Recently, Warren decided that Saddleback would feed every homeless person in Orange County three meals a day for 40 days. Ninety-two hundred people volunteered. Two million pounds of food were collected, sorted, and distributed.

It may be easy to start going to Saddleback. But it is not easy to stay at Saddleback. 'Last Sunday, we took a special offering called Extend the Vision, for people to give over and above their normal offering,' Warren said. 'We decided we would not use any financial consultants, no high-powered gimmicks, no thermometer on the wall. It was just 'Folks, you know you need to give.' Sunday's offering was \$7 million in cash and \$53 million in commitments. That's one Sunday. The average commitment was \$15,000 a family. That's in addition to their tithe. When people say megachurches are shallow, I say you have no idea. These people are committed.

We had the annual canvass weekend at the Westport, Connecticut, church where the Davidoffs are members last April 8 through 10. Jerry's and my pledge card told us that our 2004-05 pledge was \$2200. We were asked to increase it by ten percent.

The theme our Canvass Committee chose is "Connect!" Connect congregant to congregant, congregant to ministers, congregation to community, congregation to the wider UU movement.

I was reminded of Marge Piercy's poem, *The Seven of Pentacles*:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving

*Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in,
a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us
interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.*

So between church on April 3 and church on April 10, after I had attended the canvasser training to learn how to turn on other people, Jerry and I sat down to figure out our pledge. Having received our completed tax forms from the accountant, we studied our retirement finances. We wished, again, that the Dow Jones performance was better, steadier, less dicey. We wondered nervously, again, if this would be the year one or both of us would become ill and expensively dependent. We fretted about Jerry's soaring prescription medication costs and the fact of their not being covered by an insurance plan. We pondered arthritic plagued life without Bextra, as we had done before about Vioxx. (Bextra dropped out of our lives. Now we ponder life without Celebrex.) We monitored the level and quality of our church activity. We wished the Sunday worship reached us at a deeper level. We reminded each other about our love of Unitarian Universalism and all it has meant to us. And then we decided and filled out the card.

For all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise. For all life is a gift which we are called to use, to build the common good...

This pledging process doesn't happen once a year for the Davidoffs. On October 7, while chairing the Church of the Larger Fellowship Board, we were asked to decide how much to pledge to support the work of the CLF. How much money can we put to the effort of growing a church without walls, more and more a cyber church,

serving isolated Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in every state in the Union, as well as 51 other countries?

Two weekends from now, we will be at the President's Council meeting in Boston where we will be asked to think about contributing to a new capital campaign for Unitarian Universalism. One week later, I will be given a pledge card at the Meadville Lombard Theological School board meeting and we will figure out how much to pledge to support theological education and the training of new ministers to serve our movement. In December, a letter will come to remind us its time for our annual check to Friends of the UUA, money that goes directly into the UUA's operating budget. Before we go to the General Assembly in St. Louis in June, we will determine the size of our contribution to the Living Tradition Fund, the collection at the annual Service of the Living Tradition which honors our ministers. And well before GA, another Spring canvass at the church in Westport will have taken place.

Jerry and I gave away a little over 11 percent of our 2004 income — some years we do even better — and well over half of what we give goes to keeping Unitarian Universalism alive.

For me, Annie Dillard says it all: There is no one but us.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead — as if innocence had ever been — and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak and

involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.

So when the poignant pleas come in from Save the Children and Planned Parenthood and National Public Radio, from the Southern Poverty Law Center and ACLU, and Vassar College and Yale Law School, from Habitat for Humanity and the United Negro College Fund and Amnesty International, we swallow hard and wish we had the unlimited resources of Melinda and Bill Gates. And we remember, with some sadness, that there are just 175,000 adult Unitarian Universalists who can be reached because the UUA WORLD magazine has addresses from the member congregations. That's the sum total of people we can find to ask to keep our faith movement alive and vital and useful and effective with their pledges and their money. *There is no one but us.*

Faith of the free, in thy dear name, the costly heritage we claim.

The late Peter Fleck, in the title essay of his book, *The Blessings of Imperfection*, wrote: "Well, let's be frank and admit that the church has its aggravations. The eternal and oh-so-necessary concern about finances, the annually recurring problems of balancing a budget, of finding money for repainting the vestibule, repairing the boiler and tuning the organ, the ongoing criticism of the minister's sermons, which are too liberal for some and too orthodox for others, too pedantic for some and too colloquial for others, the endless committee meetings about the Sunday School curriculum and the propriety of social action, the persistent shortage of tenors in the choir. Who wants it? Who needs it?"

"The answer," Fleck tells us, "to this question is that we ... want it, because we need it. The answer is that the church..., in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better... than no church."

We Unitarian Universalists hold dear the first principle in the UUA Bylaws: recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Many of us harbor the notion that none of us are really free while others are oppressed. We are aware of our privilege as educated Americans living in the most robust economy in the world. Even in a seeming recession that has lowered the value of our stocks and threatened our job security, and increased the price of a gallon of gasoline for our guzzling cars, our economy is robust beyond the imagination of the people we think of as our religious family – Unitarians in Transylvania or in the Khasi Hills of northeastern India, Universalists in the Philippines. Our lives, the largesse we take for granted, the technology and books and food and medicine and shelter, even the indoor plumbing we deeply believe we are entitled to, are beyond their imagination.

Friends, if we are to live the lives of faithful Unitarian Universalists, perhaps we must do more, give more, and be more, person by person, congregation by congregation. There is no one but us. There is no one but us. *There never has been. . .*