

Willing to be Changed by what We've Started

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April 18th 2010

On the first Sunday of December, 2005, The Rev Dr. James Forbes, then Senior Minister of the famed Riverside Church of New York, came here to Unity Church to re-dedicate this Sanctuary. He came to help us mark a century of love and service here on Ramsey Hill and to charge us for the years to come. On the Friday night before that Centennial Sunday Jim spoke to a gathering of leaders both from our church and from a diverse array of neighbor congregations. That night he told this story.

Through the late 1990's three friends came together every month or so to reflect on their lives and keep each other true. In addition of Jim Forbes there was the great preacher and pastor Gardner Taylor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn and a young professor by the name of Cornell West. One afternoon, Jim recalled, Cornell came in troubled and downcast. "What troubles you," they asked him. "I'm thinking of leaving Harvard but I'm worried that I'll be seen as lacking in commitment." Taylor, a giant of the Civil Rights movement, then already well into his 80's said, "People will say what they say. People will think what they think." In the end your career is not what matters. What matters is your Project, the change you're in the world to help to bring about. If leaving Harvard serves your Project then go. But what really matters is your Project.

Taylor wasn't talking about Cornell West's next book. He wasn't talking about the next academic appointment. He wasn't talking about any particular accomplishment. He was using the word "Project" to point toward true vocation. He used the word to call his young colleague to lift his eyes up to the hills and by doing so be strengthened. Jim Forbes then asked us, "What is your Project friends?" I ask myself that question every day. What really matters? What is the change that you and I are in the world to bring about?

Some years ago my mother-in-law told me she thought I should carve out time to write. I told her about a book I have in mind, a biography of William Channing Gannett with an emphasis on the three years he spent down in Port Royal during the Civil War. She said; that sounds very interesting but it's not the book I have in mind. What do you think I should write about? I asked her. I've been watching you for twenty years, she replied. I think you know how to give away power. Do you know how rare that is? I think you should write about that. I was humbled and I was deeply touched.

I've always been drawn to the image of the lonely prophet, that singular person, tortured by the troubles of the world who refuses to be meek, who says "I am to cry out loud, like a hungry lamb, cry loud enough to waken wolves in the night. No one can be allowed to sleep." Early in my ministry I relished what was then called, the prophetic role. I loved to

represent the congregation at demonstration and to testify to liberal values in the public square. I even volunteered for a few boutique arrests. The sense of righteousness appealed to me. It fed my ego. But it also often seemed to undermine the collective efforts of the church to be a force for social change.

In 1886 shortly after his serving here at Unity, William Channing Gannett wrote one of the great hymns of the liberal tradition, "The Morning Hangs a Signal, a hymn that we still sing today. The second verse of the hymn reads, *"Above the generations the lonely prophets rise, while truth flings dawn and daystar within their glowing eyes; and other eyes beholding are kindled from that light; And dawn before the morning when prophets love proclaim."* There's nothing inherently wrong with ministers who step into that traditional prophetic role unless by doing so they further the complacency of congregants who are glad to delegate such obligations to their ministers.

In last week's sermon, Lissa quoted Emerson who claimed that "all history is biography." Emerson, who, having been a miserable failure as a Unitarian minister became the most influential popular philosopher of the latter half of the 19th century, believed fervently that revelation was readily available to individuals. He held that the Holy speaks primarily through particular persons. In the Divinity School address, Emerson told the graduating seniors at Harvard, *"...to go alone. To refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil...You yourself a newborn Bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity and acquaint men first hand with Deity."*

Most members of the Transcendentalist movement he helped to foster largely shared his individualistic, iconoclastic worldview. Transcendentalism and has been condemned by social critics for the role it has played in the atomization of American culture. Though Emerson has become a model sacred in the imagination of present day Unitarian Universalists there are others we should turn to if we seek a balanced portrait of our heritage. Twenty years after Emerson delivered his Divinity School Address, Henry Whitney Bellows, Lincoln's chaplain who, for 42 years the minister of All Souls Church in New York, addressed the distinguish alumnae of that same school. His address entitled *"The Suspense of Faith"* refutes Emerson's position by asserting that human nature moves back and forth between two alternating poles *"the motion that sends us away from God, to learn our freedom; and the motion that draws us back to God, to receive the inspiration, nurture, and endowment, we have become strong enough to hold."* Bellows claimed that the Holy speaks less through individuals than it does through communities. If to Emerson "all history is biography" to Bellows all biography is history.

We know the kind of difference a single prophet's voice can make. But a lonely prophet's power pales when compared with the enduring strength of a prophetic community. In the end effective leadership gives away its power. Lao Tse, the Chinese Emperor's librarian who some said was the wisest sage ancient China produced was fond of saying that *"the best of leaders is but a shadowy presence. When the work is done the people will say, 'We did it ourselves.'"*

We meet this Sunday in the midst of a series of congregational conversations about the future of our beloved church. We're growing and we know that we will soon need to make a significant investment in our church facilities. Before we even start to think about the details we want to embody our core values in the way we make our plans. We want to use this opportunity to build our capacity to be a genuinely prophetic community. We want to create the kind of open space in which democracy can flourish. We do this not for the sake of democracy itself but because we know we need to learn to listen not only to our chosen leaders but to everyone who cares enough to speak. It is for us an article of faith, that just as many hands can make light work, many voices can bring us ever closer to becoming the community we long to be.

Alone, none of us can possibly create the path from here to there. But walking together in courage and kindness and love I tell you we are sure to find our way. Archibald Macleish ends his great poem "Geography of This Time" with these words:

What is required of us, Companions, is the recognition

Of the frontiers across this history, and to take heart: to cross over—

To persist and to cross over and survive but to survive

To cross over.

And so we have opened "the door to creativity. We express ourselves. We inform one another and become an educated public that responds..." It is our birthright. It is our privilege. It is our obligation. May you and I, may we be willing to be changed by what we've started.

May it be so and amen.

Readings

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The Necessity

Alice Fogel

It isn't true about the lambs.
They are not meek.
They are curious and wild,
full of the passion of spring.
They are loveable,

and they are not silent when hungry.

Tonight the last of the triplet lambs
is piercing the quiet with its need.
Its siblings are stronger
and will not let it eat.

I am its keeper, the farmer, its mother.
I will go down in the dark,
in the cold barn,
and hold it in my arms.

But it will not lie still—it is not meek.

Drink, little one. Take what I can give you.
Tonight the whole world prowls
the perimeter of your life.

Your anger keeps you alive—
it's your only chance.
So I know what I must do
after I have fed you.

I will shape my mouth to the shape
of the sharpest words—
even those bred in silence.

I will impale with words every ear
pressed upon the open air.
I will not be meek.

You remind me of the necessity
of having more hope than fear,
and of sounding out terrible names.

I am to cry out loud
like a hungry lamb, cry loud
enough to waken wolves in the night.

No one can be allowed to sleep.

From The Open Space of Democracy

Terry Tempest Williams

When we commit to a particular place, a certain element of choice is removed. We are free to dig in, and allow ourselves to be mentored by the life around us. We begin to see the world as whole instead of fractured. Long-term strategies replace short-term gains. Routine opens the door to creativity. We express ourselves. We inform one another and become an educated public that responds...

Consider this: The poet Walt Whitman waits for his president each morning, as Mr. Lincoln rides his horse to the White House, flanked by military escorts. The president passes by the white-bearded fellow who stands affectionately in Lafayette

Square every day to pay his respects. The two tip hats and exchange bows, a poet and a president broken open by war.

Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice,

Be not dishearten'd, affection shall solve the problem

of freedom yet,

Those who love each other shall become invincible.