

“Manifest Destiny”
26 February 2006
Unity Church–Unitarian

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CALL TO WORSHIP:

We join with the Earth,
and with each other
to bring new life to the land,
to recreate the human community,
to provide justice and peace,
to remember the children,
to remember who we are...
We join together
as many and diverse expressions
of one loving mystery
for the healing of the Earth
and the renewal of all life.

Come, let us worship together!

READING: *from East of Eden* – John Steinbeck

And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in all the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual.

READING: *from An Address to Congress, 1817* – Col. James Swan

America is a very fine country of an immense, almost of an incalculable extent [and] ... [t]he far greater portion of her domains remain still in a state of primitive nature, uncultivated and unprofitable...although a land that invites the hand of the labourer, whose industry would make her flourish with every abundance desirable by man; a land that would give support and happiness to millions and millions of families to the latest posterity.

This fit, this bounty, this felicity to the human race, rest at the disposal of the United States of America: it is a deposit from Providence confided to their hands for the benefit of mankind, and it is the duty of America to discharge this trust with care, with activity, and with integrity.

READING: *Mind Without Fear* – Rabindranath Tagore

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action —
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

SERMON: “Manifest Destiny”

In this post-modern world of ours, we have come to understand that we are shaped by our stories. We humans are meaning making creatures; and we are continuously writing and re-writing the stories of our lives as we gather our current learnings and our new awarenesses. We have the confusing and constant task of simultaneously living our lives and trying to make sense of the living. And so in our minds we are always interpreting and reinterpreting the events of our world and writing new stories about the implications of what we think we now know, and what it means about what we might become.

I believe that in large part, the foundational self-story of our nation is the same. Whether or not our personal lives reflect it, there is an underlying and unassailable belief that from the moment this land was “discovered” there lay ahead glory and greatness for those who love freedom and for those who are industrious enough or courageous enough to accept the challenge. Such narratives, for good or for ill, undeniably form us as a nation.

The concept of the United States being a country set apart for special favor and unending greatness has pervaded our national psyche for centuries. Our exceptionalism is well captured in this term *Manifest Destiny* with its unmistakable religious overtones.

Many trace the concept back to journalist, John L. O’Sullivan as he wrote in favor of annexing Texas and beyond. The final paragraph of his article the *Great Nation of Futurity*¹ reads, “This is our high destiny, and ... we must accomplish it For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen...”

In his mind, and in the mind of many at that time, God was clearly beckoning the United States to expand westward, to Texas, then Oregon, ever onward, to accomplish the spread of democracy, to provide space and resources for our burgeoning population, and to safeguard our own national security. And we know this sense of destined empire building did not stop in Oregon, regardless of which indigenous people already inhabited the desired territory. But the leaders of that time did not see these actions as unjust or greedy; they were responding to a moral ideal, a higher call.



¹ Available on line at <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=AGD1642-0006-46>.
Accessed February 24, 2006.

The picture entitled *American Progress* depicts this well — it is on the cover of your Order of Worship. Please contemplate the image as I share actual excerpts from the literature provided to market this lithograph in the 1870s. I quote:

In the foreground, the central and principal figure, a beautiful and charming Female, is floating westward through the air bearing on her forehead the "Star of Empire...." On the right of the picture is a city, steamships ... schools and churches over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air — indicative of civilization. The general tone of the picture on the left declares darkness, waste and confusion. From the city proceed the three great continental lines of railway Next to these are the transportation wagons, overland stage ... gold seekers ... pioneer emigrant and the warrior dance of the "noble red man." Fleeing from "Progress" ... are Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, ... and other game, moving ... ever Westward, the Indians with their squaws, papooses ... turn their despairing faces ... as they flee the wondrous vision. The "Star" is too much for them²

As this marketing material conveys, the Euro-Americans saw themselves advancing on Darwin's path of human evolution where only the fittest earned the right to survive. The settlers' language, clothes, religion, technology and especially their weapons made their superiority seem self-evident.

That view lasted a long time. In my youth, the images and language conveyed in our text books showed valiant settlers who braved threats to life and limb to traverse this country, to "tame the land" and live their dreams. Of necessity, we were told, there were wars with the Indians — the wild and uncivilized natives who stood in the way of the forward movement of progress. The textbooks showed lamentably common illustrations of warriors breaking into the homes of innocent settlers with tomahawks uplifted and blood thirst in their eyes.

Narratives such as these live on unless they are consciously, repeatedly, intentionally deconstructed. It is no surprise that still, today, when college students are asked to list five descriptors for the indigenous peoples of the United States, the word "savage" is still frequently included in the list.

Current scholarship is closer to the truth of what occurred back then. We can now read letters from historical figures like this one from General William Sherman writing to his brother "The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next war, for the more I see of these Indians the more convinced I am that all have to be killed or maintained as a species of paupers. Their attempts at civilization are ridiculous."³

Quotes such as this (and many are readily available from this period) are unthinkable to our 2006 sensibilities. And we shudder at how accurately he foretold the future of the first nations' people. It is now believed that there were 12 million people inhabiting the area that was to become the United States. By 1900, from hostilities, loss of livelihood, and illness, the number of Native Americans had dwindled to 237,000.⁴ Hitler is said to have had spoken with great admiration for the success of the United States' methods of extermination of the Natives.⁵

All of us in this country have been shaped by our nation's stories. They are lenses through which we understand and make sense of the world, even as we decry the unspeakable injustices that occurred. We may feel mortified at the misapprehensions that allowed the settlers to disregard the humanity of the native people. If our ancestors were or are among those oppressed by American expansionism, we may feel bitter anger at the

² Available online at <http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/progress.htm>. Accessed February 24, 2006

³ Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 232-283.

⁴ History News Network, available online at <http://hnn.us/articles/7302.html>. Accessed February 24, 2006.

⁵ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 126.

irretrievable losses. As a nation and as individuals, we are inevitably bearers of both national stories and our personal stories.

I know that I certainly carry the imprint of my family history. A pivotal marker in the Mathews family lore is my father's immigration to this country in 1945. He had just been freed from a Japanese Prison Camp in the Philippines by MacArthur's troops. He had been born in Greece but happened to be doing business in Manila as a young man and got caught up in the events there; because of that, he spent three years of agonizing internment, forced labor, with very little food, and an uncertain future.

He spoke little about those experiences, except to describe the thrill he felt as whispered rumors rippled through the camp that the war was drawing to a close. And, soon those rumors turned into the glorious rumble of U. S. planes overhead. How he relished the sound of freedom approaching, and how he vowed to himself that once freed, he would come and live a life of gratitude and service in the GREAT country that had gifted his future back to him.

My father died long ago, but I cherish the sweet memories of his flag-hanging ritual every single national holiday. We would vie for the honor to be the child selected to assist him in that task! And, once hung, we would pause for a moment and appreciate the fullness of what that flag meant to my dad, and to our family. These are mighty stories. They are part of the fabric of my being.

And running in and through this patriotism wound the continuing belief that this was indeed a land of limitless opportunity, for Dad had arrived here essentially a pauper. By being creative and industrious, he worked feverishly and he rapidly "made good." He taught me, "Whatever you do, do with all your heart and then all things are possible." Dad was empirical evidence for the validity of the American Dream.

His story is not uncommon. There are many who fit into that national narrative: risk-takers, who are creative and hard-working and dedicated, are those who go on to accomplish phenomenal things by their determination and grit! Folks like that are driven to excel and (although they may say it more kindly), their motto is "**get on board or get out of my way.**"

But we can readily look around and see that the idea that anyone can accomplish whatever he or she sets her mind to is not realistic or universally true. Nonetheless, on some level, the image persists in our national consciousness.

In my father's case, it is unfair to ignore the other factors, such as: his education, the confidence and self-worth passed to him from his family, his intellect, and his optimistic personality. Helen Keller understood this when she noted, "I once believed that we were all masters of our fate — that we could mould our lives into any form we pleased... I had overcome deafness and blindness sufficiently to be happy, and I supposed that anyone could come out victorious if he threw himself valiantly into life's struggle. But as I went more and more about the country I learned that I had spoken with assurance on a subject I knew little about... I learned that the power to rise in the world is not within the reach of everyone."⁶

In stating this, Helen Keller was contributing to the deconstruction of that pervasive story. We, too, are called to be voices for counter-narratives. To be truth-tellers and speak up when we observe discrepancies between experience and detrimental cultural messages. We need to acknowledge that our own experience is contextual and particular to us, and not translatable to all persons.

But it's not easy to be that voice. On a few occasions recently, the topic of our national narrative — of our Manifest Destiny — has come up with friends and I sometimes got a response with just a hint of defensiveness. We generally don't appreciate being reminded about inherited guilt over past actions of our government. And,

⁶ Loewen, 200

besides, look at all the good that has come from these ethically dubious beginnings of our country. We still have people risking everything in order to come here — we must not be THAT bad.

But, it seems to me that just as in our personal lives our healing comes through embracing what psychologists call our “shadow side” — those things that are part and parcel of us but which we’d rather shove under some distant rug — we need to acknowledge the fullness of our nation’s stories in order to make space for healing and to avoid the hubris that permitted the past we now regret. Our current leadership does not seem to appreciate this sort of humility, and I believe our country is suffering from that arrogance.

The need for greater self-honesty as a nation is urgent, and crucial. In South Africa, they understood that even the most wrenching human tragedies could be comforted when shared in community. Brilliantly and compassionately, they created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission so the stories could be lifted up and revered as a community.

We have not engaged in that depth of honesty in our country. But we do need healing; we are a troubled nation in so many ways. If our leadership can’t or won’t do this, we must be voices that encourage opening up our stories to allow room for our nation’s shadow side to see the light of day. W. E. B. Dubois remarked, “One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over.... The **difficulty**, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.”⁷

In our own desire for truth-telling, we may fancy that if we had been there when these things were happening, we would have stood up and would have been a voice of resistance, that we would have recognized that these people were flesh and blood — people of dignity and worth — and that neither they nor their resources were expendable or inexhaustible.

Perhaps; but in a great new book called Faith Without Certainty Paul Rasor writes that while our theologies and religious principles often provide the justification for social reform, “liberals have tended to avoid reform that is too radical. Put more starkly, liberals have historically resisted advocating any [type] of reform or justice that would require them to give up their own privilege.”⁸ Often, in fact, we are so accustomed to our own place of privilege that we don’t notice it anymore. It’s not privilege — it’s just how things are!

Some of us nod with unhappy but honest recognition at these indictments. We cannot undo the past, but we wonder how can we authentically live out our faith today? How do we use the privilege that comes with our ethnicity, or wealth, or roles in society for the good? This question brings to mind a heartfelt conversation I had with a friend of mine from seminary last week; she gave me her permission to share it with you.

A short while ago, Joan and her husband were excited to be working on plans for a complete remodeling of their kitchen — choosing colors, appliances, countertops. They drafted some ideas and agreed to finish up after she got back from a global immersion course she was taking. She spent two weeks in Guatemala, working with and learning from the residents there. She experienced their utter lack of life’s most basic needs. (This is a country where fully 76% of the indigenous people live in abject poverty.) Her taste of life in dirt huts transformed Joan, and she returned to the Twin Cities carrying a weighty mix of theological zeal and troubling questions — precisely what this seminary trip is designed to do.

She looked at the plans and paint samples awaiting her on the kitchen table, and she realized her heart had totally gone out of the project. Months later, those samples are still waiting as she wonders if she can go ahead — knowing what she now knows. She acknowledges that she might proceed; her husband (who did not have the benefit of this experience) is eager for the new kitchen they dreamed together. He asks, “Will continuing

⁷ Loewen, 18

⁸ Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), xii.

with the inconvenience of an outdated kitchen change the conditions for those people of Central America?" She shrugs and toys with the idea of donating the money to a social agency instead.

But, which one? And where does it end? If having a new kitchen isn't appropriate, what else should she give up? Their second car? The bedroom TV? And if it DOES fit within her ethical framework to enjoy with gratitude this new kitchen, where does that line get drawn? How much is OK to have or want for ourselves? How do we keep ourselves grounded and connected to our beliefs and values so that we are not re-enacting the misguided mentality that has driven our country's insatiable expansionist attitudes?

Each of us needs to determine how our faith is lived out. Many of us see ourselves as being among the resisters against the dominant discourses that oppress others in our society and around the world. We believe we would act to prevent the sort of atrocities we've been discussing. But our hallowed Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams, provides a reality check for us. The depths of this great man's faith emerged out of the arduous work he did in Germany during and after World War II. Later, back in the States, when people would tell him that they would have helped had they been there, he would ask, and "... what in your past performance would constitute a pattern or framework of resistance?"⁹

In other words, he asks us to reflect on what it is that we are doing today that makes us know that we would not simply stand with the rationalizing, silent many who allowed Nazism, who allowed the Native culture to be decimated. What today evidences our own "pattern or framework" of resistance to the incredible number of injustices that surround us?

If we as individuals — if we as Unitarian Universalists — have such a thing as a destiny that is manifest for us today, it seems that it is to be faith-filled and conscious people. Faith, to me, is the persistent, tenacious grip on the belief, that we can make a difference; faith is living mindfully and not reflexively; faith evidences intentionality in our decisions regarding our choices in life and the impact of those choices on the lives and livelihoods of others. Faith demands that we will not be guilty of discounting the value of others' lives because they cannot speak intelligently, or because they struggle with addictions, or are suffering with crushing life problems about which we know nothing. Faith requires the humble awareness that our experiences are not representative of all people.

Now, I imagine that some of you may be hoping that next I will offer a list of ethical guidelines on how one actually lives this faith-filled life. But, you see, that's work only you can do. It is in that grappling with our own higher calling that each one of us discovers and refines our own values and convictions. Through that holy wrestling, our spiritual life burrows deeper within us and extends out in wider and wider compassion toward others.

That sort of faith brings with it the courage to face our own stories squarely, to appreciate the complex messiness there, and to believe with all our heart that together we can write a more humane and compassionate story for our tomorrows.

⁹ George K. Beach, Ed. *The Essential James Luther Adams*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 127.