

“Our Lengthened Shadows”
10 October 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs
Worship Associate: Beverly Heydinger

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Leadership — is it the power to orchestrate and control or is it the gift of insight and empowerment? Lao Tzu said, “Good leadership consists of doing less and being more....” Come, let us worship together.

READING: *quotation from Rob Harvey, a corporate officer with Herman Miller, Inc.*

Leadership always comes back to the issue of character, of deep foundational values. In the current reformation this country is experiencing, and the instability we are feeling, you cannot lead by forcing compliance. It simply doesn’t work. The rate of change is too high to be managed from the top down. In order to lead, one must engage followers. You will not find followers without caring, connecting and creating. Would you follow someone who did not care about you, connect with you, or did not wish to create a new reality? Mere compliance today is a recipe for disaster. As leaders, or would-be leaders, we must be vulnerable. None of us has arrived. We must recognize our own voyage. We can only lead effectively by enabling others to maximize their contribution. We are all on the journey together, accomplishing things that none of us could accomplish alone.

READING: *You See I Want A Lot – Ranier Maria Rilke (translated by Robert Bly)*

You see, I want a lot.
Perhaps I want everything:
the darkness that comes with every infinite fall
and the shivering blaze of every step up.

So many live on and want nothing,
and are raised to the rank of prince
by the slippery ease of their light judgments.

But what you love to see are faces
that do work and feel thirst.

You love most of all those who need you
as they need a crowbar or a hoe.

You have not grown old, and it is not too late
to delve into your increasing depths
where life calmly gives out its own secret.

SERMON: “Our Lengthened Shadows” – Rob Eller-Isaacs

I’m tired of waiting for the Rapture. I don’t expect a revolution any time soon. Most of all I am sick to death of being driven by that inner voice that says: “Step up to the plate. You may just be the one. You

may just be the leader we need most, the one we have been waiting for.” We don’t need another hero. What we need is a new understanding of leadership.

In anticipation of this morning I turned toward an honorable but somehow surprising source. Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance,” is seen by scholars as the sine-qua-non of the gospel of individualism. The fierce individualism offered up as an ideal by our 19th century forbearers has been under attack these last fifty years or so. Its detractors would have us believe that Emerson and other radical individualists chose to ignore racism, class struggle, and the oppression of women – realities which then, as now, eroded the well-being and undermined the potential of the vast majority of human beings.

But listen to what Emerson actually says. I quote him in the original, aware that the use of the generic “man” is not our modern practice. Any student of Emerson will assure us he meant the term to be inclusive. Emerson writes:

There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground that is given to him to till. The power that resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what it is that he can do.

To paraphrase, the power that resides in you is new in nature. This is a basic tenet of our free faith. When we dedicate ourselves to babies born to this community we say, “Each child is born one more redeemer.” We do not say each child has the potential to be the hero we’ve been waiting for. We assert instead an inherent and universal quality of being which is in and of itself redemptive. This theological assumption roots out and negates the doctrine of original sin. We believe each child is born already whole and holy, even you, even those with whom we think we have the least in common are made in the image of God.

A theology, which proclaims the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, implies a new understanding of leadership. Most of us are steeped in images of leadership born on the battlefield. Leaders rush to the fore risking life and limb to inspire others to do likewise. Leaders are strong, stoic, lonely, people who work themselves to exhaustion, yea even unto death in support of whatever cause they serve. Leaders are born not made, the adage goes, and most of us are not born leaders.

Nonsense. The kind of leadership we need now is universal. Its sacrament is education. Its possibilities are endless. The old paradigm in which a select few, uniquely trained, uniquely chosen, lead the mass of men and women to some promised land has been discredited. Emerson was right. The power, which resides in us, is new in nature. What has been need not still be, but we will need to learn a very different way to lead in this new dispensation.

Former Medtronic CEO Bill George has worked to foster a new understanding of leadership in corporate life. This excerpt is taken from his book Authentic Leadership:

Not long ago I was meeting with a group of high-talent, young executives at Medtronic. We were discussing career development when one of the group asked me to list the most important characteristics one has to have to be a leader at Medtronic. I said, “I can summarize it in a single word: authenticity. After years of studying leaders and their traits, I believe that leadership begins and ends with authenticity. It’s being yourself; being the person you were created to be....Authentic leaders are not born that way....Authentic leaders use their natural abilities but

they also recognize their shortcomings and work hard to overcome them. They lead with purpose, meaning and value. They build enduring relationships with people. In Wonderland, Alice comes to a fork in the road where she sees a cat in a tree. Alice asks the cat, "Which road should I take?" "Do you know where you want to go?" inquires the cat. "No", says Alice. To which the cat replies, "Then any road will get you there."

Vision, courage and a forceful sense of direction will always be aspects of good leadership. But the new paradigm calls for a new starting place. The locus of authority has changed. We used to imagine we could rely on either state or church to provide "the vision thing." But trust in government and, to a larger extent, trust in traditional religion has broken down and I for one tend not to mourn its passing.

Good churches and good governments will lead by serving human need and will provide widespread opportunity for people to express their opinions and so to be involved in shaping both policy and direction. I want leadership to grow from education, self-reflection, and from the conversations born of real relationships. In the new paradigm there will be no followers. Or, better put, we will move through the world assuming that everyone we meet has the capacity to lead and is due the respect and attention such capacity deserves.

Here at Unity Church, in an institution grown from Emerson's good gospel we're working hard to embody new ways to lead. Our shared ministry says yes to differing leadership styles. Our religious education program enshrines that commitment in recognizing the diverse ways in which children learn and by offering a curriculum embedded in an understanding of multiple intelligences. This coming Saturday we invite any one of you who want to learn a different way to lead, a way that isn't lonely, a way that isn't exhausting, a way that requires a different kind of courage to join us in a celebration of leadership. Laura Schlatter, our membership coordinator says:

This day-long event is designed to support and nurture all of you who are current or potential leaders within our community. Leadership is universal and can be manifested in many different ways -- whether as chair of the Board of Trustees, as an usher offering to help seat people, or as a teacher of our children and youth. For more information about and to register for this exciting day, please stop by the Celebration of Leadership table in the purple hallway downstairs after the service.

I don't usually use the pulpit as so direct a prod to encourage deeper involvement in the church. But this service grew out of a comment I made at a meeting of the Worship Associates. We were discussing the series of services on the "Dimensions of Leadership" which is currently underway. I mentioned that, "We tell the church staff their primary job is encouraging people to see themselves as leaders." That struck a note with some of the Associates and soon became this morning's topic.

We know that there are things to be done in the life of the church. We're always asking. We're always inviting you to take part in the detailed compassion of church life. Won't you join us next Saturday to explore your own capacities for leadership? Won't you come downstairs for coffee hour, stroll through our church school wonderland and while you're there sign up to staff the science room or the kinesthetic workshop. We need musicians and dramatists. We need guides for all of those little redeemers. Its going to be crowded down there but go down anyway, just this once. We're pretty sure you'll be inspired and encouraged by the many ways we're working to help our children come to recognize themselves as leaders.

In closing, let me turn again to Emerson who understood the ways by which the purposes and principles we value most survive. In "Self-Reliance," our great philosopher wrote this:

Every true man is a cause, a country and an age;

requires infinite spaces and numbers and time
fully to accomplish his design....A man Caesar is
born and for ages after we have a Roman Empire.
Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and
cleave to his genius that he is confounded with
virtue and the possible of man. An institution is the
lengthened shadow of one man.

Why not make this place your lengthened shadow. Why not recognize that the power that resides in
you is new in nature. Each and all of us are called. Each and all of us are chosen. Each and all of us are
needed. Each and all of us have the capacity to lead.

You see, I want a lot.
Perhaps I want everything:
the darkness that comes with every infinite fall
and the shivering blaze of every step up.

So many live on and want nothing,
and are raised to the rank of prince
by the slippery ease of their light judgments.

But what you love to see are faces
that do work and feel thirst.

You love most of all those who need you
As they need a crowbar or a hoe.

You have not grown old, and it is not too late
To delve into your increasing depths
Where life calmly gives out its own secret.

So may this be a place where your gifts are recognized and may we reaffirm this morning what we have
always known — there is no power in heaven or on earth, no principle, no doctrine, no plan, which can
replace authentic, fully realized human beings. As being fully human is our birthright, may it also be
our obligation.

May it be so and Amen.