

“What Wondrous Love”
2 April 2006
Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Dottie Mathews

READING: *from Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* – Starhawk

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been – a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

READING: *from The Eros of Everyday Life* – Susan Griffin

When I was a child I was taught to memorize a map of divisions. By this geography I learned to think of myself as apart from the earth. And by the same plan the names that society gave me divided me from others. Consigned to the background by one idea, elevated to a privileged fate by another, by none of these names could I recognize myself... The separation[s]... narrowed my vision of all existence.

Yet the communion is here.... The wish for communion exists in the body. It is not for strategic reasons alone that gathering together has been at the heart of every movement for social change from the abolition movement to the union movement to the movements for women’s, gay, and civil rights. These meetings were in themselves the realization of a desire that is at the core of human imaginings, the desire to locate ourselves in community, to make of survival a shared effort, to experience a palpable reverence in our connection with each other and the earth that sustains us.

The communion is here.... Everywhere another impulse surfaces. One longs not only to help, to be of use, but to participate, to be defined by the largest arcs of meaning that connect flesh and river, sky and word, reverie and the least act of survival. What lies beyond is here, present in every moment of daily life and each meeting, resonant and calling up response. This is the only hope for the familiar world we cherish. . . . Can we rise to ourselves and see what is in the nature of the soul to see – that we exist on this common ground together?

SERMON: “What Wondrous Love”

We were driving along Summit Avenue, quietly appreciating the homes that line the street when my passenger said shyly, “I have a question for you. But please don’t laugh. Something we cannot understand is, where are all the people? We see all these beautiful, beautiful houses, and we walk the neighborhoods looking for people, but we see only one or two outside. Where is everyone?”

My timid questioner’s name is Rabiha. She is a young adult from Turkey, who is here with her father in the United States studying and teaching, working to create an Interfaith Dialogue Center. Rabiha and I drive to seminary together each week and it has been quite enlightening to hear how our world appears to her eyes.

Again and again in these conversations, she returns to her bafflement over what she sees as our society’s lack of connection and interrelatedness. “At home,” she says, “people spend time together! But here, there is no time for that.”

Rabiha tells me she's had to learn an unexpected skill since arriving in our country. She came anticipating that the nuances of our spoken language would be a challenge, but she has also needed to work at noticing the subtle signals that come over people's faces as conversations begin.

When she encounters someone and greetings are exchanged, she has grown alert to the slight shift of expression that nearly always occurs — a change in the muscles of the face that conveys to her "I don't have time now. I need to go." As Rabiha has had to tune her ear for the rhythms and phrasings of our speech, she has also grown acutely attuned to this embodied message. And, to show her respect for our culture, she practices making her own face look less expectant. She doesn't want impose and she fears her own expression might betray that she is desiring more time than her conversation partner is willing or able to give. Rabiha wants to avoid making American social blunders. And she tells me she is often lonely.

Of course, as I listen to her, I recognize the truth about which she speaks. She is choosing her words carefully because she does not want to seem as if she is criticizing her friend and driver, but I know that I must accept the indictment along with the rest of us. It has become a truism that the speed at which we live our lives has rendered us a lonely people.

It's not the sort of loneliness that merely wants to be in the presence of other warm bodies. We can always find a crowd. But it is a loneliness for those unhurried times of being fully present with another: sharing life stories, offering understanding and knowing that we're understood. A place where words bubble up in relaxed wide open spaces of caring that can be created between two or three or four open hearts.

Think of all the times we overhear (or participate in) snippets of conversation like this, [as two draw near one another] "Hey! Good to see you. I still want to have that cup of coffee together!"

Then, they've already passed, so the response comes over the shoulder, "Yeah, absolutely. I'd love to hear how things are going for you too!" And both parties keep moving to wherever it is they're headed, having only lost a few seconds in the exchange.

It's woefully commonplace. And the truth is that many of us desperately wish it were not so. Despite vows to make it different, our calendars fill up so rapidly and we keep thinking that at some point, when the dust settles, we'll find more time for cultivating relationships with others. But somehow, that dust continues to swirl, and new winds come. And, well, like my southern Momma used to say, "The hurrieder we go, the behinder we get!" And we know that the "behinder" we get, the less space we have for the very things that nourish our spirits — the acts that make our lives *feel* grounded and stable and contented. All too often, we simply don't have time for one another.

As a nation, even as we busily perpetuate this reality, we bemoan it. We listen as social commentators discuss it on NPR, graphics capture it on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*. The phenomenon has been analyzed in countless books, famously in Bowling Alone¹ about five years ago.

Tons of research has been done, all generally confirming what we already know: we are not happy with our accelerating pace and growing isolation. Yet, as the pressures of our daily lives mount, one of the first things we sacrifice is the "luxury" of the time we devote to creating and deepening — to enjoying — our bonds with one another. Despite our incredible wealth as a nation, many have the sense that the United States is an impoverished country.

And I think that our concurrence with that sense is part of what brings us here each week. We enter this place for so many, many reasons. But one is that we want to feel the companionship of others with whom we share

¹ Putnam, Robert D., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

this journey. We may have deep friendships here and know this to be a place of warm hugs. Or, we may know very few, but are hoping that this may truly be a place where bonds of connection can be formed. We chose to come here this morning against the other options we had. We might have reached for a transcendent moment alone in front of our meditation altar at home or by taking a walk near the river. But it's likely that we came here on this morning because we desire to receive the spiritual nourishment and feel the poignancy that comes from this communal experience.

Dr. Leon Spencer, a prominent UU lay leader tells us that *church* means a "community that has been called out ... a place where that which is holy and sacred is known, where compassion is a way of being²." Let me read his words once more: *Church* – this space we're in together – means a "community that has been called out ... [it is to be] a place where that which is holy and sacred is known, where compassion is a way of being."

Given what we've been describing about our nation's social impoverishment, this sounds awfully countercultural, doesn't it? This spiritual home represents a place called out, set apart, where we are intentionally interrupting that blur of activity, where we are deliberately slowing our pace and creating together a place of sanctity and compassion. This vision is what compels the many offerings for connectedness that are available here – the ministry teams, the Covenant Groups, the Religious Ed classes, the affinity groups, the coffee hour – all the vibrancy of this place is designed that we might grow in our rootedness together and that we might learn how, together, to open our hearts toward one another and toward the world.

But we know this does not happen on its own. As in all our intimate relationships, this comes through our agreement that we determinedly want it to be so. We covenant anew each day to create such a holy and sacred place. We allow it to emerge in the myriad ways we give and receive with one another, in the ways we offer ourselves and accept support with one another. It becomes more real each time we share a difficult conversation together with humility and a desire to genuinely learn from one another. This sort of community is a very precious gift and it can be an incalculable resource in our lives.

I was once pointed to a single magical moment in the worship service that captures the sense of this for me. It is that particular instant that settles in on us during the Silence after the Responsive Reading. I've learned to listen for it – that unadulterated moment when we are purely and simply experiencing the sacredness of *being* together. The stirring ceases, papers stop rustling, and as a gathered company, we relax into the blessed moment of our full presence with one another. When it occurs, it feels like an exquisite droplet of time, a moment laden with expectation and peace. We are here. We are together.

In times like that, we know that those "strange and foolish...walls of separation³" from our responsive reading are much more like very, very thin veils – easily moved aside if only we will.

And, after the Silence, we enter the Embracing Meditation, and we lift up the stuff of our lives – our joyfulness, of course, but also the pain and worries, sorrows from this congregation and from communities beyond. We hold people who are being asked by life to absorb great loss and limitation, grief, death, harsh diagnoses, terrible fears of what's coming next. Our communal heart breaks with and for each name and circumstance. But the funny thing about hearts is that it sometimes seems like the more they break, the softer they can become.

Alice Walker, marvelous author and activist that she is, was asked about how she envisions her own heart with all the suffering she has known, all the injustices she has seen. She said, "You know what hearts are for? Hearts are there to be broken, and I say that because that seems to be just part of what happens with hearts. I mean, mine has been broken so many times that I have lost count. But it just seems to be broken open, more

² Bowens-Wheatley, Marjorie and Nancy Palmer Jones, eds. *Soul Work* (Boston: Skinner House, 2002)

³ Singing the Living Tradition Hymnal, #662

and more and more, and it just gets bigger. In fact... my heart by now feels open like a suitcase. It feels like it has just sort of dropped open, you know, like how a big suitcase just falls open. It feels like that.”⁴

Like a big old much-traveled suitcase. Sometimes, you can catch a sense of the heart of Unity Church falling open, bigger and bigger. Each one of us adding our own ability to expand it and allow it to hold more and more, as we reach deeper into our own souls, and then push our doors wider and wider open, as we humbly seek to understand what true hospitality means within the realities of our frantic world.

As I speak about this, I am profoundly aware of the way my son and I were carried in Unity’s “big old suitcase.” Many of you know that I first started my internship here back in 2003. It was a *full speed ahead* time in my life when I was totally focused on my own plans and strategies. And then the unthinkable happened. Suddenly all the carefully lined-up pieces of my life scattered; all my urgencies faded. My thoroughly adored 23-year-old son’s cancer had returned. It had spread to new places in his body and it was more serious than the first occurrence three years before. He needed to begin treatments immediately. It was a terrible, terrible time for us.

Such news can bring us to our knees. Not pleading for favors or attempts at celestial arm-twisting, but in the excruciating awareness that the weight of life feels far too great to bear. Our well-honed self-sufficiency suddenly seems wholly inadequate to keep us upright. Despite the cultural messages that tell us that we should be able to weather life’s tragedies alone — tell us to endure, to keep a stiff upper lip and carry on — I am here to tell you without shame that during this time, my upper lip could not always remain stiff. I deeply needed to know that you and others were with us. It was a great comfort to me when I would hear that Tim had been named in the Embracing Meditation, that your caring was being sent to us over the miles. You were doing what communities are intended to do. You couldn’t change our situation, but you helped carry us through.

Outside the Oncology unit at the Medical Center in Wisconsin, these words are engraved: "*The power of COMMUNITY is that the need of one becomes the need of many and the courage of one becomes the strength of all.*" Every time we entered that building, I lingered there at my stone reminder that no matter how cruel the day, we were not alone.

One day, back home after a particularly difficult chemo session, Tim was downstairs curled up and miserable on the couch. The doorbell rang and it was one of my colleagues from seminary, carrying a large box, a gift from my UTS compatriots. Students, faculty, staff had all joined together to make Tim a beautiful (and wacky) quilt. I’m told that while it was being made, the pieces remained out on a table near the cafeteria so as folks walked by, they could sign it or draw a picture, write a prayer or an inspirational thought. Many just placed their hands on it to put their compassion into the patches and strips. It was an incredible gift of love.

And that day, as I took that quilt downstairs and gently covered my fitfully dozing son, I felt all the hands of all the communities surrounding, covering Tim with their energy and their hope. And once again I knew that no matter what came, *we were not alone*.

That quilt symbolized so much during Tim’s journey back to health. Neither he nor I will ever forget it. And when I returned here to Unity Church last year, I was so glad to learn that we too have quilts. They were lovingly made by some members for the ministers and pastoral care providers to bring to folks who are suffering. One of them is hanging here by the pulpit. It is beautiful. This one even has the hands right on it!

⁴ McLeod, Melvin, *A Wind Through the Heart*, Shambala Sun Magazine, Jan 97. Available online at http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2049&Itemid=243

Sometimes when lives feel as if they are crumbling, something like this can hold the remembrance of the loving hands of this community supporting these aching homes and hearts. Some may consider it a small gesture, but it can be significant beyond words.

It holds our communal commitment that if the person is unable to muster the physical or emotional strength to come and be among us, we want them to know that our spirits go there with them.

If the best they can do on a Sunday is to find an inconspicuous place in the back and allow the tears to fall, we want them to know we welcome them and will sit silently with their tears.

Other Sundays, they may actually be able to participate and be available to receive the tenderness flowing from the loving eyes and voices of others. I think of Charlie and Jen Vanek after the news of Aaron's recurrence, how they graciously stood in the Parish Hall and welcomed us into the depth of their pain and the fervency of their hopes. It must have been exhausting for them but I'd wager that they also drew comfort and vitality from the power that comes from being held in a community such as this.

What we share here is quite an extraordinary gift in this lonely world. There are so many who are without connection and who have no idea how to find it. This is one of the mighty reasons we need to let others know about this faith of ours. It is a saving faith. It has saved me in my lowest hours, and it has saved countless others. The connections we make here are the stuff of survival. Here we learn over and over that together we are able to do what none of us can do alone. The "big old suitcase" of this church's heart is big enough and soft enough to hold our tears and our silence and our pain.

Together, we are community and so, when we feel overwhelmed, there are others whose assurances can keep us from giving up. When our throats are too tight to let the music out, others can pick up the song for us. When the crush of life buckles our knees, we know we have a place that can help carry us through, and a community that will be there to help us heal after the jagged edge of the crisis has passed.

It is a beautiful and uncommon truth for us to acknowledge as we sit here today that we do need one another. We know we are all in this together and there are those among us who are right now experiencing the kind of pain I have been describing. And there are others of us being called to respond. Called to be the soft hearts, the strength-bearers, the hope-holders. If we genuinely desire this to be a "community that has been called out" for all those who come, then we can each accept being both the needed and the one in need. Together, it is in our power to make this a sacred and holy place where compassion truly is our way of being together.

And maybe, as you leave today, or the next time you pass by the hanging quilt you'll want to put your own hand out to infuse it with some of your hope and your strength to be stored there for the next one of us who will inevitably need it. So that whatever comes, we may each know beyond any doubt: we are not alone.

Amen.