

Stubborn Ounces
The Reverend Beth Graham

UU Church of the Restoration
Philadelphia, PA
November 9, 2008

Introduction and Reading

It is just such a pleasure to be here this morning. Especially *this* morning.

One of the best aspects about my ministry, serving the larger Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, is having the opportunity to spend Sundays worshipping with – or preaching in – one of our 1047 congregations. Joining fellow-faithed folks each week is akin to connecting with distant relatives everywhere you go; there's a bit of the exotic in figuring out each new home and social structure; but there is also warm familiarity in what a given group stands for and cares about.

Annette: thank you for inviting me here today. Ione: thank you for hosting me in this service, as the Lay Leader. And Brad and Julie: thank you for being good friends who've told me, again and again over the years, what a great congregation you belong to. I worshipped here once, several years ago, with my husband Rev. Bill Schulz. It's nice to be on this side of the pulpit today.

And though it's too bad Bill couldn't join me here today, my sister J'Amy Graham Thomas is here. A member of our congregation in Gettysburg, PA, it's so nice to have her here with me in Mt. Airy.

Before moving into the reading which will anchor my sermon, I need to say some words of thanks to and about you

Poet Mary Jean Irion once wrote: "Faith is not making religious-sounding noises in the daytime. It is asking your inmost self questions at night – and then getting up and going to work."

These words are echoing in my mind this morning, as we begin our worship together, for the UU Church of Restoration has lived by this definition of faith for over 175 years. On behalf of the President of the UUA – Rev. Bill Sinkford – thank all of you.

Thank you for embodying this liberal religious faith as best you can, for so many decades. Thank you for saying loud and clear on your website that you –
Welcome persons from a wide variety of religious backgrounds who seek personal and spiritual growth.

Thank you for doing what you can, to invite people in – into your worship; into your covenant groups; into your advocacy work; into your religious education classes – and so much more.

But also, thank you for not stopping there. Thank you for reaching out to the world beyond. I'm talking about your social justice initiatives, to be sure. I'm talking about the ways that so many of you live out the values of our faith 'out there' in your work, personal and community lives.

I'm talking about your commitment to embodying a multiracial, multicultural shared ministry in the world – and about your being a Welcoming Congregation, bespeaking a pro-active commitment to justice for all – including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters. How important this work is; especially this week with the news from California and Florida, on the issue of marriage equality. Thank you.

The President also says “blessings upon you” for your impulse to be generous to the larger movement. On behalf of the Association of Congregations, thank you for:

- Contributing annually to the UUA's basic operating budget – at the suggested per adult member level, year after year. Did you know that since 1983, you have been what we call a “Fair Share” Congregation? And if you'd like to know what your aggregate giving total has been over the course of these past 25 years, ask me after church! (I'll give you a hint; it's between \$70,000 – 100,000.)
- The President thanks 10 of you for being what we call “Friends of the UUA,” which means that you make an annual pledge to the larger Association – in addition to your pledge to this church. If you'd like to know more about this giving opportunity, ask me after church. We're always looking for more Friends. (Who's not, right?)

The congregational and individual giving you partake in help us provide curriculum, justice, and ministerial resources to our congregations. Thank you for being both donors – and consumers – of these resources.

- And lastly, thank you for participating in the national Association Sunday collection in Oct 2007 and 2008. Last year you gave us over \$500. for some of our national visibility work. This year, the Association Sunday collection ends today. If you don't know what I'm talking about, please notice the envelopes on the table in the vestibule – or talk with Julie Bradburd after the service.

The funds from this year's Association Sunday will help support a variety of programs meant to strengthen Lay Theological Education and Excellence in Ministry. If you want to know more, ask me after the service.

Thank you for your instincts to reach out – and reach in. To work hard on weathering storms that hit. And to keep the flame of Unitarian Universalism burning bright in the Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia.

All of this 'giving and receiving' makes Mary Jean Irion's point, I think, about faith being the act of "getting up and going to work." Thank you.

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And now, for my "official" reading. These words are by the late Bonaro Overstreet, a Unitarian Universalist poet.

Called "Stubborn Ounces," her words provide the framing of this service. Just four sentences long, the poem seems to be describing the obligations of being a person of faith, engaged in trying to build a better world.¹

Today, I dedicate this reading to the democratic process that is foundational to this country of ours, and to all of us who engage in it again and again. And then again.

The poem begins with this introduction: *To One Who Doubts the Worth of Doing Anything if You Can't Do Everything*

And here's how her poem goes:

*You say the little efforts I make
will do no good: they never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where Justice hangs in balance.
I don't think
I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.*

Welcome to this service in which we honor the human instinct to care about this world, and to build a land in which there is peace and justice for all.

Welcome to this service in which we dedicate ourselves to each other's keeping.

Welcome to this service which lands right after Election Day. May the words and music we hear and ponder remind us not only of the hard work of living and the

¹ From "Hands Laid Upon the Wind," Bonaro Overstreet.

high value of fighting for what you believe in. But also, may they prompt us to remember the utter preciousness of our days on this earth.

Meditation

Having heard aloud of some of the joys and sorrows we each carried in here today – and with the words and music of this hour filling the air, let us now move together into deeper connection, deeper reflection, for some moments of prayer.

Let us gather in a period of silence...or at least wordlessness...that we might each connect with creation's heartbeat, in our own way.

And after the silence, we will hear a spoken prayer written by Rev. Rudi Gelsey – once the minister of this church. Now retired and living in Colorado, Rudi had the remarkable privilege of being asked to offer the Invocation at a rally featuring Michelle Obama, last Monday in Littleton, CO. This is what Rudi said that day:

INVOCATION at MICHELLE OBAMA SPEECH By RUDI GELSEY²

Let us join in the Spirit of prayerful meditation.

Holy Spirit of hope and change,
Holy Spirit of love and compassion,
Holy Spirit of peace and justice,
Be with us now.

Guide us upon the sacred path, of healing our nation and the planet we inhabit,
Beyond the conventional clash of tribes, nations, religions, empires, and civilizations.
Beyond hatred and greed,
Beyond the curses of prejudice and discrimination,
Beyond intolerance and self-righteousness.

Inspire us to embrace unity with diversity, *all for one and one for all*,
Assist us in practicing the Golden Rule,
Common foundation of the world's faith traditions,
And a global ethic for the whole human family.

Dedicate us to the peaceful resolution of conflict,
To the arts of diplomacy, deep listening, and compassionate communication,
The protection and nurturance of Mother Earth,
Equal rights and equal dignity for women, and for all minorities.

Make us aware of our true nature as spiritual beings in human form,
Called to transform deception into truthfulness, illusion into awakening,

² Sent to Beth Graham by Rev. Gelsey

Selfishness into service, fear into faith.

Commit us to transmute violence into non-violence,
Swords into plowshares, oppression in liberation,
Enmity into friendship, ashes into garlands,
A world at peace, with freedom and justice for all.

Imbue our lives with the wonder of children, and the wisdom of elders,
Humility and loving-kindness, gratitude and generosity,
Caring and forgiveness, blessings and bliss.

Impart to our hearts the art of mindfulness,
The serenity of inner peace, harmony in our relations,
Sublime visions, virtues and values,
That united with the illuminated souls of the ages,
The sages, prophets, mystics, and angels of our better nature,
Embody spiritual living, under the guidance of our Higher Self.

God bless and guide Us,
The Nation, and the World.

Sermon: *Stubborn Ounces* The Reverend Beth Graham

So there's a minister, three poets, an Existentialist and two Senators...

Is this the beginning of a bad joke? No. These are the characters that collided in my brain this historic week. And they will weave themselves together in this sermon. May the result make sense, no matter whom you voted for last Tuesday.

First, the colleague: Sixteen years ago, Rev. Forrest Church, one of the ministers of All Souls UU church in New York City, published a sermon about our national Presidential elections and our leadership choices; about faith and democracy; about fear and hope; about certitude and humility.

When Forrest went to reread his sermon for *this* year's election season, he realized that it was still 'directionally correct,' as he put it. It still described much of what he believes is true in our political landscape, two Presidential Administrations later.³

I am partisan in this race. I favor one candidate above the other for a host of reasons. But I remain unsure, once the dirt is swept from the campaign floor and half the wistful promises are being forgotten, which of these two candidates is temperamentally more suited to move from the nasty business of being elected President, to fulfill the solemn oath he will take to serve all of the American people at our great hour of need.

³ *Religion and the Body Politic*, Oct 27, 2008, published on UUA.org

That's what Forrest Church said then. And when he recently shared his thoughts about finding in an old sermon current concerns and complexities, I thought of a line by Edna St. Vincent Millay that goes:

*It's not true that it's one thing after another. It's the same damn think over and over again.*⁴

In the midst of the endless punditry that we've all heard this past month about the unique and deeply disturbing challenges of these current times, about the anxieties we have about what's next for us as a country and as a world – in the midst of all of this keen public analysis and commentary – the poet scores a point, I think, in that it *is* the 'same damn thing over and over again.'

Like me, are you sometimes caught up short by the tragic irony of life – that all its challenges and all its potential are right there in bold relief before us, year in and year out?

To keep from slipping into cynicism that St. Vincent Millay's clever quip could easily inspire this political season, I have needed a good dose of the no-nonsense engagement in life that yet another writer describes. I'm referring to Bonaro Overstreet – today's second poet, who authored the reading I shared earlier.

Bonaro was not yet 70 years old when the my family moved into her neighborhood. A published writer and popular psychologist, she was also the wife of the philosopher Harry Overstreet, who was then in his 90s – some 20 years her senior.

My parents told us kids – there were 4 of us – that the Overstreets were somewhat famous American intellectuals. They were even Unitarians, we were told. And given that the only UUs we knew were people from our church, this should have been a very cool thing.

But her religious inclinations didn't impress me. I was about 10 when we became her neighbor, and she intimidated the daylights out of me. Harry was dying; Bonaro always seemed so stern and gruff; visiting with them gave me the creeps.

But one day, I opened one of her volumes inscribed to my mom, and I fell in love, then and there, with the power of well-crafted words.

Hear her words again, the ones which I shared earlier.

*You say the little efforts I make
will do no good: they never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where Justice hangs in balance.*

⁴ As quoted at GA at UUMA 50 year sermon – as quoted by Rev. Khoren Arisian; June 25, 2008.

*I don't think
I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.*

Why these words moved me so back then, is that they gave voice to the lessons I was learning in the UU church of my childhood. I was being taught to hone that instinct to care about creation, and to work for a time in which peace and justice might tip the scales of the world, even against all odds.

But as a kid in the 1960s and as a teenager in the 1970s, the world's injustices seemed so obvious. "Do good" efforts often seemed so naïve and fruitless. For my pragmatic mind, so much of our church's work seemed so...well...Sisyphean.

You know the story – the myth about the King of Corinth, who tricked the gods and his own people one too many times. As punishment, the deities sentenced him to the fate of rolling an immense boulder up to the top of a mountain, at which point the stone would roll – of its own weight – back to the bottom of the hill. Again and again this would happen. Forever. In the story, the gods had thought that there could be no more dreadful punishment, no more hopeless labor, than rolling the stone up the mountain. Day in and day out.

It doesn't take much imagination to picture being Sisyphus – and his never-ending journey up the hill – muscles rippling; sweat flowing. It is heart-pounding, back-breaking, eternal work. But is it futile? Bonaro would say no. And so would Albert Camus.

Enter the Existentialist into the mix. It turns out that the 20th century French philosopher made two observations about the myth of King Sisyphus.

First, Camus pointed out that Sisyphus **does** make progress. His daily efforts end at a higher place than whence they began. Camus imagined him pausing each sojourn up, for that quick instant before the rock rolls back down the slope. What does he see? The view is different than that from the bottom of the hill. And from where he was yesterday.

Camus wondered: what new perspective is Sisyphus given? And might it help restore him – or prepare his mind and heart for the work ahead?

Camus connected us modern mortals to Sisyphus by saying that the work of the world *is* endless. But at each day's end, we are at a different point than the day before. Take time to notice. Take time to notice, said Camus.

The second point he made was about Sisyphus's walk back down to the bottom of the hill, following the trajectory of the rolling boulder. More than 50 years ago,

Camus wrote:⁵

*...I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, **that** is the hour of consciousness...*

Camus went on to say that “in each of those moments when Sisyphus leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the plain,” it is then that he is “superior to his fate.” Why? Because he is aware of the task before him.

The task is the task. Sisyphus’s awareness of it is what gives him power over it.

Camus was suggesting to us that it is our knowledge that our work will never be completed – our consciousness of the tough climb we have ahead – it is this awareness of the task before us that makes us fully human.

So, back to my mix of characters, jockeying for a place within me this week...

As I watched Senator McCain offer his gracious concession speech on Tuesday night, articulating unequivocally that we – this country – need to pull together behind and beside our new President, to begin to tackle the hard work before us...

And when I heard President-Elect Obama say, soon thereafter, in his speech to the country and the world, that our work has just begun – that we must all roll up our sleeves and figure out the solutions together..

Is it any wonder that Sisyphus and the rock; that Bonarao and the scales of justice; that Edna St. Vincent Millay and the “same damn thing over and over again” and that Forrest Church’s sermon about faith and democracy all came tumbling together into my mind?

This week, I’ve been thinking about how it is our knowledge that life is **not** perfect; our knowledge of the **immensity** of the task to help make our country and the world more whole; our knowledge that the efforts **may** never be fully completed in our lifetime – it is this triumvirate that makes us **people**.

And what makes us – as Unitarian Universalists, people of faith – is our engagement in life’s work while **NOT** doubting “the worth of doing anything if you can’t do everything,” as Bonaro put it.

We have been created as conscious beings. To borrow from the Book of Genesis, we eat from the tree of knowledge and see the world’s nakedness. We can’t not see its barest and harshest truths. This is part of the deal of being

⁵ Translation by Justin O’Brien, 1955.

people.

But what Bonaro Overstreet says is that part of the deal of being people **of faith**, is that we still use our minds and hearts, our hands and bodies, our love and sweat to move the world toward more justice for all.

We do this again and again. Knowing – seeing – how hard is the task before us. We all know that Jan 20, 2009 looms large, before us.

And as Forrest Church first wrote when Bill Clinton was running against the first President Bush – and then rewrote ever so slightly last month as Barack Obama and John McCain campaigned fiercely to succeed the second President Bush – in that sermon my friend Forrest says:⁶

Our next president will face a challenge...greater than any we have faced in recent decades. He must rise to the occasion and we must rise with him. If he fails to rise, it is our responsibility to present not a partisan but a patriotic demand that he and the congress put aside their base-pleasing talking points and act on behalf of all the American people, first by making the hard decisions that will right our economy. And second, by conducting our foreign policy in a way that will make our nation and our allies once again proud of America at its best.

It is daunting work that lies in front of our President-Elect – and in front of us all.

How will our President keep his spirits up? Only he knows what blend of family and faith -- friends and advisors – mentors and leaders – it takes to keep him believing in tomorrow.

But let us give thanks that his beliefs are so strong. And that he has a chance of inspiring us.

Meanwhile, what will keep our spirits up?

Forrest Church says:

I want my president to inspire hope...I want him to give me faith. And I certainly want him to encourage me to open my heart to love.

And that, friends, is where our church – this church – meets the body politic.

How will we not succumb to the world's anxieties? Opening our hearts to love. Out there. And in here.

Our faith communities – like this one – where new friends enter the fold each week...

⁶ *Op cit.*

Our faith communities – like this one – where people find a religious home and are encouraged to turn towards and develop the sources of their spiritual strength – be it God, nature, fellow humans, or scriptural wisdom, to name but some of the anchors we hold onto...

Our faith communities – like this one – where we weave together stories of memory and hope and all that rests in between...

these places live out the truth that we are better together. And that we are better out there, in the world, for our being together. Here, we nurture our spirits, so that out there, we can help heal the world.

This life we are living...together...this is it. This is it. Here we give thanks for companionship along the way.

Here we give thanks for the ways we inspire one another to choose “which side shall feel the stubborn ounces” of our weight.

We give thanks here that we have here and that that can make such a difference, as we strain against the weight of life’s heaviest burdens, and also celebrate together life’s greatest splendors.

Blessings upon the power of here. Now. You. Us.

In closing, Maya Angelou⁷ wrote a powerful poem right around the same time that Forrest Church first wrote that election sermon I referenced. In 1993, for the Clinton Inauguration, Angelou spoke for the nation when she boomed out words of hope.

Let’s hear my final muse for today’s sermon, the third poet. Because history sometimes repeats itself, as St. Vincent Millay reminded us – and because sometimes history is shattered into a new day, a new way – these words are for us. Now.

*... Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out and
Into your sister’s eyes
And into your brother’s face,
Your Country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope
Good Morning.*

⁷ *The Inaugural Poem: On the Pulse of Morning*, 1993

A minister, three poets, an Existentialist and our next President are thrashing around inside me today, as you can tell. Thank you for your patience in listening to the words they have birthed.

May these wise ones help us make all that we feel this morning – this **good** morning – our faith-filled pledge for tomorrow.

Amen.

Closing Words⁸

Go out into the world now in peace.

Have courage.

Hold onto what is good.

Return to no person evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted.

Support the weak.

Help the suffering.

Honor all beings.

Again, again,

And then again.

⁸ Adapted, from Christian Scriptures; Thessalonians I and II.