

## Unitarian Church of Montpelier, January 24, 2010

### “Even Here We Are at Home,” Peter Thoms

It's a privilege to be with you today, at the gracious invitation of the Worship & Arts Committee.

To illustrate the welcome challenge and opportunity of being a guest, here is a story from Allen Foley's 1971 classic, "What the Old-Timer Said." His old-timers were all Vermonters.

[Story]

Not only is the story accurate ... about yours truly, a city minister coming to the country, but it captures the challenge of setting limits.

Offering an occasional church service prompts the risky impulse to pack in as much as possible. While the impulse has been wrestled to the ground, topics were vying for attention, including: (1) the existence, history, and nature of god (show books); (2) the ever-unfolding conflict or conversation between religion and science; (3) whether human nature has ever changed; (4) whether and to what extent human societies progress over time; and (5) the legacy and value of Unitarian and Universalist thinkers, including William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, Emerson, James Luther Adams, William Jones, Forrest Church and others (show books). Perhaps another invitation will come ...

To some degree, the following remarks carry on from two recent services: in November, Deb Robinson eloquently (and coincidentally, in light of Haiti) spoke of the destructive and creative actual and metaphorical power of earthquakes. Last week, Mara sensitively wove together early days of Haiti's earthquake and the memory and continuing relevance of the life and thought of Martin Luther King.

Not long before Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, Joseph Shabalala, the founder in the 1960s of the singing group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo (and still its leader today), offered a view of the experience of South Africa's black citizens: He said, "Even here we are at home." He meant that, even amidst dire, violent, impoverished, and officially powerless conditions, blacks could be "at home" in their country.

You might ask, in 2010, what can we say about the values and meaning of being "at home"? While we all know that homes are not always places of value and meaning, for our time together, let's consider that they are places of caring, compassion, grounding, bearings, commitment, joy, humor, safety, awareness, clarity, insight, and acceptance; they are where covenants flourish. And let's ponder the prospect that these qualities may be lived beyond our own physical homes ... in our community, in other places and countries.

Naturally leading from Mara's sermon last week, when she said that justice-making is not "short term work," you may recall this powerful declaration: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." On April 4, 2008, Senator Barack Obama, speaking on the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, declared:

"Dr. King once said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice...."

Dr. King included the phrase when he spoke on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol in March, 1965, two weeks after deeply sobering events had occurred in Selma, including the murder of the Boston Unitarian minister, James Reeb. And he included it in his last sermon, at the National Cathedral, on March 31, 1968.

The origins of the phrase go back to an 1853 sermon on "Justice and the Conscience," by Theodore Parker, a radical Unitarian minister from Boston, one of whose passions was the abolition of slavery. Parker's grandfather, John Parker, commanded the Minute Men at the Battle of Lexington in 1775. Parker died at 50 on the eve of the Civil War. Here are his lyrical, striking words:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

Keeping in mind the leadings from Joseph Shabalala, Parker, and King ... I will offer a few stories and settings. The context is what it means to be "at home" and to take a part in long-term work, as described by Mara. On hearing the stories, I hope that you will recall and ponder your own paths, decisions, joys, and commitments.

Listening to the stories, our recollections will include two other powerful elements: where we are now on our path (meaning how old or young we are) and whether the circumstances of the stories and settings are ones of choice ... or not. When choice is not possible (such as with illness, loss of work, or war), the challenge of being at home, while still well worth attention and still possible, is surely more difficult.

Here are the stories.

One evening during the winter of 1960, in our college town, Martin Luther King spoke in the vestry of the First Congregational Church. After speaking, he walked down the aisle, close to where several of us were standing. The (perhaps dim) memory is that none in our class went south to do civil rights work during the following summers. In fact, several of us carefully considered joining the CIA after graduation.

On April 5<sup>th</sup> of 1968, many of us law school seniors, walked with hundreds of people on the Boston Common, on the day following Dr. King's murder. The following summer, some of us took on challenging, enlivening public interest legal work, which continued for me until 1982, when the call to divinity school came.

An aspect of that call to change course was that, in 1971, we had opened a Rhode Island Legal Services office in the 18<sup>th</sup> century home of William Ellery Channing. He was one of the early great voices of American Unitarianism; his family (I just learned yesterday) owned slaves. During his ministry, he became a renowned preacher, scholar, teacher and leader in abolitionist work. In seminary, I was fortunate to do an internship at the Arlington Street Church, the successor to the church where Channing served for 39 years.

After finishing divinity school, I had the privilege of working with the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry, at First Church in Roxbury, a Boston neighborhood. First Church is a large, 1804, white clapboard church. Urban Ministry youth programs, even within earshot of occasional gunfire and shaken deeply by the violent deaths of young men, was a sanctuary, a home to many young men and women from Roxbury and Dorchester. The Urban Ministry flourishes today. Rev. William Sinkford, recently retired as president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, serves UUUM as a minister.

Another story

Two years ago this week, 12 American visitors – including four Catholic and one Protestant doctor – volunteered in the 10<sup>th</sup> annual surgical camp at St. Mary's Hospital, in Khammam, four hours east of Hyderabad in southeast India. George Longstreth, an old high school friend who, years before, worked as a volunteer surgeon in rural Haiti, co-founded the project, with two groups. One is Friends of Christ (FOCI) in India, based at a UCC church in Connecticut, where George is a member. The other is the Christian Services Unit in Khammam, whose founding and guiding force in Azariah Korabandi, a truly remarkable humanitarian. Azariah is a committed and deeply inspiring servant of the Church of South India.. (It would be possible to give two sermons on Azariah ...!)

When George extended the invitation to take part in the medical trip, curiosity bested wisdom. I'd followed with deep admiration the careers of five college friends who had become surgeons. During the ten-day camp, we did 145 operations, for patients from seven to seventy, all of whom had virtually no financial resources. The operations included hernias and hydroceles, thyroids, finger separations, skin grafts, cysts of all kinds, locations, and severity, and mastectomies. How I felt "at home" in the OR, lending a hand (actually, two) standing between the surgeon and Sr. Debra, the spirited, capable Indian OR nurse, remains something of a mystery.

The most memorable observation of the camp came from the gruff, kind, highly skilled, 70-year old surgeon, Joe Bardenheier. Joe was Jesuit-trained (from grammar through medical school) and had served in Vietnam. As a long, complicated operation ended, he said, "If anyone who knows the human body well doesn't believe in God, they're stubborn." As we all laughed, I humbly and respectfully said nothing.

I'll never forget many of the patients and their families who were served by the 2008 FOCI/ St. Mary's Hospital medical camp. Today, George and others are returning from India after working on this year's medical trip to Khammam.

Last January, when I took part, as a patient, in emergency, Sunday evening surgery at Central Vermont Medical Center, the contrasts in the Indian and American experiences, apart from the high skills of both sets of doctors, were striking.

Another setting

We are surely all aware of the challenges, losses, and stakes of war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the context of being "at home" wherever we are and whatever we may be doing, it is useful to hold two things in mind: the military, political, and diplomatic aspects of those wars and the work of the Central Asia Institute, which, with extraordinary leadership from Greg Mortenson, has built 131 schools in rural areas of both countries.

Across the world from where he lived in Montana, Mortenson, who works closely with many villagers in both countries and has consulted with the highest American military officers and diplomats there, has forged the reality of being "at home" ... and established educational homes for the young, mostly girls. For a compelling look at Mortenson's perspective and work, you can find a Bill Moyers, PBS interview with him from January 15<sup>th</sup>.

The last story is brief and has two parts, which I trust can be held in creative tension. The first is to recall that, on every September 11th at the State House, many people from other countries are sworn in as American citizens, confirming what for them is their new home. The second comes from the January 9<sup>th</sup> Times Argus, which carried the story of the migrant worker who had died on a Vermont farm. We are hoping to speak soon with Gustavo Teran. He lives in Montpelier and is active in the effort to better the lives of over 2,000 migrant workers in Vermont. Those efforts are intended to bring qualities of "home" to those who have traveled so far at great risk, and who contribute so much to Vermont.

As this time together closes ... here is a realization: As one who typically prefers, in the words of lawyer-poet, Wallace Stevens, the "blessed rage for order," and who has sought ever-elusive balance on life's paths, it's become clear that we can be well off balance and still be "at home."

We conclude with three religious voices.

Vincent Silliman said in our responsive reading: "Let religion be to us life and joy. Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and right."

Here is the last paragraph of Dr. King's Memphis speech on April 3, 1968, the evening before he died (the original is on a CD at the library): [To read without seeking to

emulate Dr. King's profoundly moving delivery, but to honor the power and meaning of the words]

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Referring to being “at home,” the most telling of those words for me are, “I may not get there with you.”

And with Benedictine monks, as interpreted by John McQuiston [holding up the slender book with this title], know that, “Always We Begin Again.”

And now let us lift every voice and sing ... hymn number 149.

**Benediction** R. Niebuhr, #461, “We Must Be Saved”

You are invited to see an Ethan Hubbard photograph in the vestry – for another view of being at home.

Let us go and live in peace.