

Newsletter Articles from the Minister

January 2005

Farewell, and fare thee well, 2004. I hope that your successor, 2005, will bring a larger measure of peace and joy. No doubt, there will be innumerable transitions, for better and worse, as there always seems to be. My wish is that we will make the most out of the coming year, rather than waiting for others to take the lead. I also hope that all those who are in harm's way will avoid injury or death. That people will treat one another with civility and decency. That we will open our hearts not only to cherished family and friends, but to all those who need us. That we will strike a balance between our spiritual yearnings and the call to seek justice. That we will leaven our lives with humility and humor.

One could go on, I suppose. I truly want to know that in some small ways, the world has been made better by our efforts. In fairness, that's a lot to put on one year. Still, one can hope, and dream. For, if not now, when? What are we waiting for?

February 2005

No article

March 2005

Stuff & Nonsense

Several times this past week – on the same day in fact – the sense of smell came up in different conversations. Early in the day, one person remarked how fabulous a cup of coffee smelled; later on, in a very different context, another person commented on a distasteful odor. In both instances, I was obliged to admit that I do not have a functional sense of smell.

Such was not always so. In my youth, I was keenly aware of various scents – the smell of fresh grass, gasoline, food (!), perfume, etc. I came to appreciate that every animal and every person had a distinct scent. I wouldn't go as far as to say that I could smell fear, as some claim, but I surely was aware of every natural scent as a matter of course. Which is to say, I took it for granted.

I began to lose my sense of smell in my mid twenties when my body chemistry changed seemingly abruptly; suddenly, I was allergic to (almost) everything under the sun. Ever since, I have been on a steady diet of medications. This, plus smoking, plus multiple nasal surgeries have rendered my olfactory senses insensible. One of the consequences is that ever since, I – who used to relish every meal – began to eat rather perfunctorily, savoring a morsel based more on its texture, tartness and saltiness.

Long ago, one person, curious about my condition, lifted an open bottle of chlorine right under my nose. I was curious myself – I wondered whether a powerful smell might cut through whatever was blocking my ability. So, I inhaled its fumes. I was oblivious to any smell per se, but immediately became aware of a stinging sensation. Needless to say, that experiment was never repeated.

In time, I accepted that I would never smell again.

That assumption proved unfounded. Twice (during two decades) for a few precious, fleeting seconds, I unexpectedly regained a sense of smell. I have no idea what triggered the effect. The first incident took place in a kitchen brimming with various culinary delights – a wave of smells, long forgotten, swept over me suddenly. I was in heaven. Another time, I was nibbling indifferently on a bar of chocolate when its smell penetrated my consciousness. That bar immediately attained a whole new level of chocolate-ness. In both instances, I realized what a difference a few seconds can make. Sadly, as mentioned already, those moments were fleeting, and as the smell dissipated once again, I was left to rue how much I had lost.

At least I then knew that I still had the capacity to smell. That gave me hope. Then, this past year, an extraordinary thing occurred. Following my most recent nasal surgery, I regained a sense of smell that intermittently came and went, but nonetheless lingered for about three weeks. Again, I was in heaven. I had never smelled Celeste, or Angela, the smells of our kitchen, etc. I dashed about, becoming reacquainted with the smell of grass, of rain, of mildew, of a newspaper. Sadly, within a few weeks, my ability to smell once again waned. I know that it's still there, but stubbornly dormant. Yet, hope remains

In terms of the hierarchy of the traditional five senses, smell is usually relegated to the back of the pack. And, to be honest, if I had to pick and choose one sense to lose, I would probably select smell. But smell is associated with memory as well as taste. And what an extraordinary dimension it adds to the present. So, if I cannot exactly stop and smell the roses (or other sprouting plants) perhaps you will do that for me?

April 2005

Money Matters

As of late, I have been trying to teach Celeste about money (my parents will read this, and smile). Celeste sees things on TV and in the store that she *must* have. A new doll, doll house.

To return to Celeste: I sensed an opportunity to cultivate in her a work ethic. So, when she recently wanted something, I explained how much it costs and insisted that she do her chores to earn cash. After several days of collecting a few dollars by stuffing leaves into bags, she hit on the bright idea of making her own money. So, she took one dollar, traced it on typing paper, wrote fantastic denominations on each bill, and colored them with her green crayons. Then, she cut them out, very focused, with her little scissors.

When I carefully explained that as lovely as her currency was, it was highly unlikely to be accepted as legal tender, she burst into tears and ran to her room.

As a parent, of course I want the best for Celeste. What parent wouldn't? But I have learned that simply giving a person too much too soon exacts a very high price in terms of character. I want her to learn discipline - and of course, not just the price of things, but also their value. I will resume the lesson tomorrow.

I will do so because it's a crucial lesson. Money does matter. One might well ask, can money and spirituality mix? I believe so; if one has sufficient discipline, generosity and compassion. It is also important that it be raised for a good cause & by ethical means. If these conditions are met, the health of the institution and the individual members will blossom.

I am aware that several persons I especially admire, Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer had to engage in frequent and creative fundraising to support their endeavors. As a settled minister, I am aware that a church is not a business but that it has to be aware of the bottom line. That said, the bottom line should never undercut its religious values or mission. In a perfect world, one supports the other.

Somewhere along the way, I learned the mantra, "Spend some, save some, lend some, give some." In my case, I've taken to heart three out of the four. So I too am a work in progress. As is our congregation. I will be generous in my time and resources, as are you. Together, I hope that our collective generosity will strengthen us as individuals and as a beacon of liberal religion in our community.

May 2005

During this past year, we have seen ALUUC grow in terms of actual members and, more importantly, in terms of overall participation. This is a thriving community. More and more I count my blessings.

Given that the current liturgical year is drawing to a close, I would like to offer several projections of what lies ahead for us.

In the coming year, I sense that the need for "process" will be emphasized again and again. Given our congregational size and complexity, it is imperative that we move further in this direction. We will almost certainly wrestle with what "good process" looks like, and then wrestle with committing ourselves to following it, collectively and as individuals. As with so many other things in life, we will need to communicate with clarity, respect and honesty.

I also anticipate that we will have many opportunities to publicly witness to our faith within the larger community. Concerns abound in terms of economic justice, the War, Marriage Equality, Environmental issues, etc. – we would do well to remember that no one person (or group) can possibly dedicate themselves fully to them all. As ours is a

relatively small faith community, it is essential that we partner with other extant groups. If together we pool our resources, we will undoubtedly achieve a more positive impact.

So much for peering ahead. Meanwhile, summer is already upon our doorstep.

Once upon a time, UU churches shut down during the summer months, as clergy & laity either went on vacation or attended to seasonal chores. Perhaps past generations found that formal worship paled in comparison to the sun, which radiated its warmth and light far and wide. Now, of course, our congregations typically remain open throughout the entire year. Among other things, this offers us some rich opportunities. We will feature a diverse array of speakers this summer, who will offer their unique stories, perspectives and concerns. They will no doubt also present different individual styles, in terms of public speaking and leading worship. I will go on record and admit that I enjoy such diversity and look forward to learning many new things.

May this season be one of rest, good health, active spirituality and growth for us all.

June 2005

Come the middle of June, Angela & Celeste will be leaving for two months, to visit with her family in Madrid.

Two months can be a very long time. Exactly two years ago, they also went overseas with the dual purpose of seeing family, but also so that Angela could finalize the paperwork for her residency status with INS/Homeland Security. When she arrived, we discovered, to our mutual horror, that she was caught in a bureaucratic debacle between the one Department & the State Department. It took two months to untangle the matter – much of the wait was due to her paperwork being shuttled between Chicago, Rome & finally Madrid.

Those two months were oppressive as we did not know when or even if there would be a happy resolution; INS had initially indicated that they could not return to our new home in Springfield until 2006. Fortunately, Sen. Dick Durbin's office proved effective in advocating for their prompt return, for we remain grateful.

In the two months that will pass between the time Angela & Celeste leave and return, much of the summer will be gone. This time, though, those many weeks will be more bearable as Angela's residency status was finally resolved last autumn. There will be no uncertainty gnawing at our hearts.

In the past year, I have seen how many of us have uncertainty gnawing in our lives. Some have been unsettled by the status of their jobs; others by the threat of losing medical benefits; others have been obliged to uproot themselves and find a new home; still others have had to cope with the severe illness of friends or family members; some indeed have had to cope with death.

I am also mindful that those who will be heading off to college in the fall are likely to experience such pangs as they begin to appreciate the thresholds that are quickly approaching. Two months can be a very short time.

We all recognize that people's lives can change in an instant; what was secure may be suddenly up in the air. Whatever may come, I trust that we will continue to walk together in good fellowship and lend one another our mutual support.

July 2005

unknown

August 2005

Testing One's Wings

Whereas quite a few old churches are adorned with somber stone gargoyles perched aloft prominent vantage points, several small, energetic birds decided to roost above the main door of ALUUC several months ago. Some have suggested that these birds are finches, others are persuaded that they are swallows. In any event, about two weeks ago, four small nestlings poked their heads out and began to peer intently at passersby. I have followed their progress from day to day and was delighted yesterday to see two of these young birds fly out of their nest, perhaps for the first time. It was a short flight, only as far as the first light fixture. They were soon back in the comfort and safety of their nest. But that was an important leap for them.

In a similar way, I am pleased to see some of our newer members beginning to test their wings. It's not always easy to break into a large group. Sometimes, even in as welcoming a group as ALUUC, the process can even be intimidating. Some people are naturally more reserved; others might be interested in joining a group or activity but haven't sorted out all the right connections. We who have been engaged here longer have the opportunity to serve as mentors and guides.

And this is important, for several reasons. One is that we need to be aware that there are many demands on our present volunteers. Some studies suggest that 20% of church members perform 80% of the work. If new hands are not recruited, the myriad tasks become an ever increasing burden on those people. But it is also important that our new members develop a deeper sense of belonging to this congregation. This is not a service industry in the sense that people come merely to be provided with various goods and services. It is, above all, a religious community that ought to cultivate a strong sense of community – with shared mission and values. The more that people give, they more they receive.

I trust that there will be ample opportunities for all to flex our wings during the new liturgical year. In time, perhaps, we will all learn to soar effortlessly. And that will be a marvel to behold.

September 2005

This year will see a convergence of celebration and painful remembrance on Sunday, September 11th. On that date, we begin the liturgical year with our annual water & stone communion, a ritual wherein we celebrate community by sharing a few poignant moments experienced during the summer. But I also recognize that the shadow cast four years ago will be on many people's minds. It will certainly be on mine.

While I was not directly touched by a loss, I knew people who were. One friend, a minister, lost his wife. A man I knew in Park Forest lost his son. One of my cousins lost many of her work associates.

I know too that certain memories will remain etched deeply for me: the vigils; the proliferation of flags; the desire to donate money to any firefighter taking a collection; hearing the strains of "the Star spangled Banner" played by a British military band; the uncanny collective silence while driving; sobs and outbursts of obscenities I overheard; a photograph of one family in particular.

I distinctly remember how grateful I felt that Celeste was too young to understand the horrors of that day.

I sincerely hope that those responsible will eventually be brought to justice. Likewise, I hope that our nation's political and religious leaders will promote a saner world.

9/11 will remain, I expect, a definitive date in our personal histories. How much like a life time ago it seems at times.

October 2005

I recently attended a UU minister's retreat at the Dominican Retreat Center in Racine, Wisconsin. One of the attractions of that location is their book store, which is well stocked with books, cds, and posters. On two separate occasions, I've seen customers bring handfuls of acquisitions to the counter, credit card in hand. To their dismay, the Dominican nun in charge of the bookstore has explained that they don't accept credit cards. But, before the customer's smile can collapse, the good sister will begin explaining their rather unique policy. No checks, not enough cash on hand? No problem. While they do not take credit cards, they will write up an itemized statement for the customer to take back home. All they ask is that the customer send a check in the mail. Inevitably, most customers (who regard themselves as worldly -- which is to say, to be suspicious of human nature) will ask how well that system works. After all, this is a high test of character and trust. The response is astonishing: according to the sister, they have never been disappointed.

A year ago, I myself was one of those customers caught unprepared -- no checkbook, not enough cash. I was one of the people who asked how well the system worked, and I too was surprised by the response given. I was touched by their act of trust. And I

made sure, as soon as I arrived home, that I would repay that trust by sending them a check. Immediately.

Would that we all might encounter such little acts of trust in our lives. Perhaps, you might think, that such trust is possible given the special nature of the center and most of its clients -- after all, the center is run by religious women, and most of their guests are connected with religious organizations. In the real world, of course, are many people on the prowl, who would gladly take advantage of another's kindness. Some might do this as a matter of course, in their interpersonal relationships or perhaps in business. But if some do regard trust as a weakness, it is refreshing to realize that there is an occasional oasis of faith in human nature such as one might find in Racine. May we all carry that same spirit with us.

November 2005

An elderly neighbor of mine held a substantial sale today; she is giving up her house and moving into a retirement home. A stream of strangers rummaged through her dwindling possessions, handling one item after another and asking "how much?"

That scene reminded me of the time, two years ago, when Angela & I were house hunting here in Springfield; we were shown one home that belonged to another elderly widow. She and her late husband had built their house themselves after WWII. But she too was being forced by circumstances to give up that home. As the realtor led us through the house, she followed, like a frail shadow, sharing bittersweet details about the life she had known there.

I can think of several persons in our own congregation who have likewise had to surrender their homes and move forward into the unknown.

In the news of late one sees many people on the move, refugees from one enormous hurricane after another. Many of us are equally aware of the rising tide of homeless people in our midst, some of whom do have jobs but cannot afford a place to stay. It is evident that many individuals, agencies and corporations are anxious to help, and have been generous in their responses when a severe crisis occurs. But how well do we as a society and as individuals respond to calamities that are less dramatic?

There is a popular saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." If true, then surely it also takes a village to care for the infirm, the widowed, the orphaned and the aged.

I read recently that the price of heating fuel is expected to shoot up soon. Which begs the question: how will those on fixed incomes manage?

Angela has ruefully remarked to me that this is a harsh country to live in if you're old and poor. Of course, there are poor people throughout the world, and the measure of poverty is relative. And yet, some countries do seem to extend more assistance, and compassion, to their old, infirm and poor.

Could our village do more?

December 2005

Another (Gregorian) calendar year is winding down. I ask myself, what shall I remember most about this year now ending? As if on cue, a wisp of poetry comes to mind: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." A quick Google search reveals that T. S. Eliot's "The Love Long of J. Alfred Prufrock" is evidently floating through my stream of sub-consciousness.

(Note: ever since I was a teenager I have loved that poem while at the same time resenting that its author penned it in 1915, when he was only 22. In my college years I had committed most of Prufrock to memory.) The lines that I am drawn towards tonight are:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reserve.

For I have known them all
already, known them all: Have
known the evenings, mornings,
afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;

I could, I suppose, measure out this waning year in terms of "coffee spoons." Or cigarettes, perhaps (and yes, I am stopping that). Not to mention, mileage (personal/professional), invoices, meetings, laughs, dreams, etc. But that is certainly not my first impulse. When I reflect upon the year twenty-oh-five, my thoughts turn first and foremost to the various rites of passage in which I've participated. Those funeral services and memorial services I conducted remain vivid. On the happier side of the balance sheet were several dedication ceremonies and quite a few weddings. These were as much rites as passage for me as they were for the main participants.

And then there have been the many diverse roles I've enjoyed: this year has been especially memorable for its opportunities to flesh out the following: a minister (preacher-priest-pastor-prophet), a husband, a father, a friend, a neighbor, a skirmisher, a son, a sibling, a patient, a colleague, an executor, a consumer, a salesman, a tour guide, a volunteer, a teacher, a student, a writer, an artist - and occasionally, someone who does the occasional odd job around the house.

As I ponder the significance of various events and roles, I consider myself fortunate that I have kept a "spiritual practice", i.e. labyrinth walking. This monthly exercise allows me

to reflect on what has been and to project that which is to come. Somewhere, somehow, I become better grounded in the present. Thus, unlike poor Prufrock, I may cheerfully assert that it has been worthwhile, and that the song I hear is not only sung for me, but also occasionally sung by me as well.