

Newsletter Articles from the Minister

January 2006

As you read this, I will be removed from Springfield by six time zones and several thousands of miles of land and ocean.

While I am absent, Rev. Berkley Moore -- and, if necessary, Rev. Axel Gehrmann -- have agreed to be on-call, should a need arise. So I can rest assured that you will be in very competent hands.

And yet I am one who frets about being away. Yes, I know that I am not indispensable. Yes, I know that as much as one loves his/her job, vacations are necessary evils.

In short, you might say that I have separation issues.

Some will read this and shake their head. "Martin," they will say, "for goodness sake, you're going to Spain. Enjoy it. And stop fretting."

And I will, albeit grudgingly. I will make a point to leave behind my keys and cell phone, both of which will be utterly useless.

There are of course experiences abroad that will enthrall. Having conversations in Spanish that delve a bit deeper than remedial chit chat. Visiting the Prado and the Museum of Archeology. Perhaps even the Alhambra. Gulping twelve grapes in succession as the clock in Puerta del Sol strikes midnight on New Year's Eve. Eating fried squid.

But every so often, I will beseech my brother-in-law to let me use his computer so that I may read the SJ-R and the Illinois Times on-line and then check my e-mail accounts, at ALUUC and at home.

I can only shudder to think what I will experience in a few years, when I am obliged to take a six month sabbatical.

Until Angela, Celeste & I return and can offer our wishes in person, let it suffice in writing that we wish you all a happy New Year. I'm looking forward to hearing about First Night. Oh, and did I mention that I'll be checking my e-mails?

February 2006

No article

March 2006

No article

April 2006

On Saturday, March 11, Celeste found an egg on our front lawn. She gleefully picked it up and showed it first to Angela and then to me. It was very small and slightly blue – a robin's egg, I suppose. Celeste gushed about how her teacher had set up an incubator, with chicken eggs, in her classroom. We let her bring her discovery into the house; she placed it in a doll crib, tucked under a tiny blanket.

The next evening, the sirens sang. I studied the sky from the front porch, listening for hail and gauging the force of the wind. By the time the electricity was knocked out, I had located flashlights, batteries, candles, etc., and began to explain to Celeste why we were going to move to the basement, Celeste insisted on bringing the egg along. In truth, I would not have remembered it myself.

The storm came, and then passed over us. We cautiously left the basement and sat around the kitchen table, the three of us and one egg. The room itself was illuminated by a mixture of flashlight and candlelight. At one point she positioned one flashlight so that it bathed the egg in light & warmth. But then, while I fiddled with the radio, disaster struck. Celeste had removed the egg from its crib and was cradling it in her hand. But something went wrong. She noticed that the egg now had a fatal crack, slightly seeping. In rapid succession, dread rushed over her, then grief, and finally guilt. All other fears that night were forgotten.

What to tell her? Compared to what Springfield had just suffered, this was a minute loss. Yet to a six year old girl, that egg possessed enormous significance. As you might suppose, we assured her that the crack had probably started when the egg first fell out of the tree. It may well have. At any rate, our adult explanation proved satisfactory, and she was eventually able to fall asleep, safe, sound – and exhausted.

I, on the other hand, stayed awake for quite some time. One wishes that the world was completely tidy, utterly safe, and that one's own assurances brought complete peace. But it is not to be, evidently. And so it must be that we will look for, and hopefully find, comfort from one another.

May 2006

I have just returned from several days spent in Madison, Wisconsin, where our UU District Meeting was held. I passed a few days catching up with old friends (some of whom I haven't seen in years) as well as meeting new people. Such connections and reconnections are, for me, my favorite moments at UU gatherings.

One incident from my trip is worth sharing: it occurred when I shared dinner with two Meadville/Lombard students, Bret and Elizabeth. Both recently were interviewed by the

Ministerial Fellowship Committee and received a “1,” meaning that they have been deemed acceptable as ministers without reservation by the UUA’s credentialing board. Such interviews can be harrowing and/or exhilarating -- usually both. Since the memories of my own interview remain vivid, I looked forward to hearing about their respective experiences.

Between spoonfuls of soup, I asked both students where they lived. Bret mentioned that he lived in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. I volunteered that I had two siblings living there – one sister and her husband; the other is a brother and his family. I couldn’t recall the exact name of my sister’s street, but I recollected that it was near a large Italian bakery on Roosevelt Road – Bret nodded his head and confirmed that he knew the area. My brother, I mentioned, lived on Harvey Street. At which point Bret lowered his spoon and asked, “Is your brother Brian Woulfe, who’s battling cancer?”

That question caught me off guard. Chance or coincidence? That very week, my brother had received a bone marrow transplant and had been very much on my mind. I blurted out a “Yes,” and asked how he knew my brother. To make a long story short, it turns out that my brother is his mortgage broker.

We UUs often speak of the interdependent web of existence and this conversation reminded me that so many connections are unexpected, not to mention, well hidden. Such connections, I have come to believe, are descriptive of relationships -- with one another, and with the universe. In this, I follow Martin Buber – who also suggested that we have the opportunity to perceive these relationships as I/Thou – transforming the mundane into the sacred. And this in turn reminds me that we are called to cherish our relationships – however fallible, however finite, however harrowing and/or exhilarating – and in so doing, to embrace the best that reality has to offer.

June 2006

On Friday, May 19, the film *The Da Vinci Code* opened in theaters across the globe. During the weeks preceding this celluloid event, many voices railed against the film's central premise, i.e., the alleged conjugal relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. I have visited various websites that unequivocally condemn the book and the film. On the eve of the film's opening, I read that it has been banned in at least one country and that in another, a group of devout Christians were threatening to commit suicide should it be shown there.

I can only imagine that such publicity has benefited those who stand to gain financially from this movie.

You may recall that I preached on the themes raised in the book back in October, 2004 (see the minister section at www.aluuc.org for a transcript of my remarks). Interest in the book has not waned either before or since. On the day the film opened, a quick read of the local paper revealed that several pastors intended to denounce the author and the film. Wary of standing in long lines, I reserved tickets in advance and went early to pick them up. Three women, carrying professionally printed signs, formed a

picket line near the theater. I chatted amiably with one. By that evening, they were gone.

Ten members & friends of ALUUC went as a group to see the film. After viewing *The Da Vinci Code*, I reflected that it was more conciliatory towards traditional Christianity than the book -- the character of Robert Langdon himself deflects some of the barbs that church groups had come to fear. There are some ugly chapters of early church history referenced in the film; no doubt some alarmists would have preferred that these had been hidden from view. Such incidents are common knowledge to anyone who has studied the development of Western religious doctrines and institutions. But does anyone read those books any more? Have we become a post-literate civilization that gleans its insights mainly from TV and films?

The reaction to the film also prompted me to reflect on the meaning of the word "heresy" - it is a Greek word that means, simply, "to choose." It has become a pejorative, commonly used to denote someone who chooses to believe something other than orthodox creed. But in its early usage, there was little stigma if any. In today's world, it could, I suppose, also refer to the choice to do something that others roundly condemn. Like going to see a film.

In the Bible, Jesus said that it is not what goes into a person that harms -- it is what comes out of that person. In that spirit, I cannot believe that choosing to view such a film is either evil or subversive. Surely one can think of many other things in our world that are far more insidious.

It is sometimes claimed that there are two main pathways of faith. There are some who must believe first in order to understand the world; others must understand the world first that they may believe. This has been a fundamental opposing divide between people of good faith throughout history. What is sometimes overlooked is that both groups are people of faith -- it is appalling that one group would abuse or harm the other. And yet, tragically enough, such has often happened. I pray that we as a whole will learn to choose otherwise some day.

July/August 2006

No article

September 2006

This summer, I have been conscientiously collecting water (and a few stones) during my travels. I have siphoned small measures of tap water from Omaha, Nebraska and from Burgos, Spain. I have also collected sea water from the northern coast of Spain near Comillas. (Due to heightened airport security, the latter samples had to be discretely brought into the USA.)

On Sunday, September 10, I will blend these waters with yours during our water communion. Together, we will fill a basin with water and stones; as we do so, we will share aloud a spiritual insight or two that was gleaned during these summer months.

As you may be aware, I will also add the few ounces of water that were saved from last year's communion. I regard those few ounces – stored in a small bottle that I keep in my office – as especially precious. That water is both a tangible and symbolic connection with the lives and stories that have been blended together these past four Autumns. Some of the people who shared their stories may be absent, but echoes of their lives – like the water they shared – remain in our midst.

I recently revisited the transcript of our Water Communion service that is on our website. I encourage you to visit there as well (see www.aluuc.org – a sermon sampler/archive may be found in the minister's section). That particular transcript (9/12/06) records some a number of insights that are intriguing, bittersweet and humbling.

When the service is ended, I will empty the contents of the basin into ALUUC's memorial garden. You are invited to join me in that ritual. Such occasions remind us that the present is precious. As is our community. Both are always changing – like the proverbial river that we cannot step into twice. My hope for this water communion is that we are ever reminded of one another's true worth.

October 2006

Often I am asked how one might describe – briefly – what it means to be a UU? I find that many people expect that a UU should be able to deliver a succinct summary of this religion. I'll generally ask that person what is their own faith tradition to give me a frame of reference (and a few moments to collect my thoughts!) before I respond. After hearing something of their background, I'll generally start off by saying that UUs do not have one set of well defined creeds. Rather, what is important to us is that we create an inviting space for people to pursue their connection with the ultimate mystery of the universe. People may call that mystery "God" or "Nature" or something quite different altogether. As a result, we find people who are open to various paths and practices; some include Buddhist meditation, some are liberal Christians, some are Agnostics, Pagans, Atheists, etc.

At the heart of being religious, I'll add, is that we seek and we question. One essential question must be, how does one's understanding of that mystery affect your behavior in this life? For, in truth, if we do have an article of faith, it is that the truest expression of a person's faith may be found not in any profession but in their deeds.

I would suggest that among the important "virtues" which may be considered essential to a person of good faith are Mindfulness, Discipline, and Compassion. No doubt there are others. On the other hand, I suspect that people of good faith throughout the world integrate these aspects into their lives. If we are to shape a religious life lived well, I

would recommend that we in turn learn to exercise discipline in our thoughts and actions; that we cultivate a mindfulness of how those thoughts and actions impact upon ourselves and others, and finally, that we be intentional in guiding those same thoughts and deeds by compassion.

November 2006

Human nature does seem to include the impulse to seek insights into one's own true nature. Perhaps people instinctively sense what Socrates stated so long ago, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Why is that? No doubt some recognize that knowledge is power. Perhaps others are motivated by curiosity about their destiny. Many would agree with Soren Kierkegaard, who once said, "every person is sent to earth with sealed orders."

What might our own "sealed orders" reveal? Regardless of one's motives, I agree that self understanding – and probing – are vital to a life well lived. There are many paths to pursue these goals. As a youth, I learned about endomorph v. ectomorph, Maslov's pyramid, Rorschach tests and color tests. Later, one college friend extolled the virtues of hand writing analysis while another was equally engrossed with astrology. Each offered its own insights, some valuable – others less so.

Today, of course, the seeker may also choose from a multitude of self help guides, Life Coaches and Spiritual Directors. Not to mention ministers who occasionally act as advisors/counselors. During one's years of seminary "formation," every future minister is required to have sessions of psychotherapy and to take various personality tests, e.g., the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (MBTI), which is based upon a test developed by followers of Carl Jung.

In fact, I was required to take the MBTI twice, once in 1990 and again in 1997. I found these examinations beneficial. I have recently revisited the MBTI, which is incorporated into this autumn's adult enrichment class, "Discovering Your Spiritual Type." The full test is fairly extensive (we are using an abridged version for the class) and it yields sixteen possible general types. What I have discovered about myself is that I continue to change – as I age and as my circumstances change. Whereas, for example, the first MBTI indicated that my primary characteristics were Introversive, Intuitiveness, Thinking and Judging, the second test suggested that Feeling had supplanted Thinking. In my most recent test, I exhibit the traits of an Extrovert. At first, I was surprised by that shift, but upon reflection, it makes sense, given the public dimension of my career. The more things change, the more things stay the same.

One thing that I have long believed is that there is an interdependence between various aspects of my life. Many years ago, I learned a refrain that I recently discovered is attributed to a man named Frank Outlaw:

Watch your thoughts, they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

Which is very similar to: *Sow a thought, and you reap an act; Sow an act, and you reap a habit; Sow a habit, and you reap a character; Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.*

This quatrain is attributed to Charles Reade. No doubt such wisdom is to be found from many sources. I think that the mentors in my life have believed this notion and have instilled the same in me. So now it is my opportunity to pass the same onto you. Do you want to know your destiny? Seek and you shall find, as outlined above.

December 2006

Peace On Earth

A year ago, various spokespersons decried the “War against Christmas.” I find myself wondering whether we will hear such rhetorical posturing again this season. The cynic in me says that we will indeed, especially if certain people believe that it will help rally their faithful to their popular wedge issues. No doubt there will be much money to be made in their fabricated appeals.

I am heartened though that many orthodox pastors have begun to distance themselves from what is sometimes dubbed the “far right agenda.” These pastors recognize that the Jesus whose birth is celebrated on December 25th had far different concerns.

That particular Galilean was most vocal about bringing his generation into what we would now call “right relationship” with the Divine and with one’s fellow humans. My reading of the gospels is that the affairs of the earthly powers did not seem to concern him. Rather, he encouraged his listeners to devote themselves to God and to reach out to the outcasts of society. His principal goal, I think, was to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

Many a generation has been quick to invoke the name of God to sanction their most unholy practices. War is a classic example. The Crusades were launched with the cry, “Deus vult” (God wills it). In more recent conflicts, nations have sent soldiers marching off to war accompanied by religious symbols and/or similar slogans. I am reminded that during the First World War, German soldiers wore belt buckles with the words “God is With Us” stamped thereupon. But they were by no means unique.

Abraham Lincoln once deftly pointed out that in times of strife, we must not persuade ourselves that God is on our side; rather, we should seek to discern whether we are on the side of God. Unfortunately, his words carry about as much weight these days as those of Jesus.

I think that it is horribly tragic that so much bloodshed across the earth is aggressively encouraged by some spokespersons who claim to be religious. One wishes that they had studied more the simple holy message of the one called the "Prince of Peace."

Maybe next year?