

Unitarian Society of Hartford  
Sunday March 16, 2008

### **A Time Out: Our Faith in Service**

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#### **Reading:**

There is an appointed time for everything.  
And there is a time for every event under heaven—

A time to give birth and a time to die;  
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.  
A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up.  
A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance.  
A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;  
A time to hug and a time to not hug.

A time to search and a time to give up as lost;  
A time to keep and a time to throw away.  
A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;  
A time to be silent and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate;  
A time for war and a time for peace.

I have seen these tasks that God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. He has made everything appropriate in its time.

There's nothing better for us to do than to eat, drink, be cheerful and experience the good that comes from every kind of hard work, realizing that nothing lasts forever.

#### **Sermon**

UUs have a proud tradition of learned clergy and of intellectually questioning congregants.

We know that, but even we are regularly surprised when we find that some one captured by history for greatness in politics, the arts, science, or social reform was or is a UU.

For example, my favorite theoretical physicist was telling me the other day about how physics began as natural philosophy, and how Joseph Priestly, who discovered oxygen in 18th century England, was an example of someone whose work contributed to the flowering of

modern science from its roots in philosophical observation of the natural world. I had studied Joseph Priestly for other reasons.

Joseph Priestley was a natural philosopher, whose considerable scientific reputation rested on his invention of carbonated water, his writings on electricity, and his discovery of several gases, the most famous being oxygen.

What is less known about this famous chemist is that he never took a science course, and had little interest in science until well into adulthood when his friend Benjamin Franklin got to talking one day about kites and keys and lightning.

A scholar and teacher throughout his life, Priestley made significant contributions to pedagogy. He published a seminal work on English grammar, which is how I first knew of him, and contributed to theories that now govern modern histori-ography, or the study of the history of history.

He advised Thomas Jefferson on the proper structure of a university as the University of Virginia was being conceived.

He was a political theorist who published over 150 works, some of which were credited as primary sources by philosophers who birthed utilitarianism.

But during all this time, Priestly's day job was that of parish minister, in what was then called the Dissenting Church of England. And dissent he did. His theories on religious instruction were foundational in the revival of an old Transylvanian sect called Unitarians, and he was among those clergy who established the Unitarian Church in England.

Science was integral to his theology, and he consistently infused Enlightenment rationalism into Christian theism, in ways that were audacious in his day. Priestley, who believed in the free and open exchange of ideas, advocated toleration and equal rights for religious dissenters.

The controversial nature of his publications combined with his outspoken support of the French Revolution aroused suspicion, and he fled to the United States after a mob burned down his home, his laboratory, and church. Once here, he promptly founded the first congregation in the United States to name itself **unitarian**, which still thrives in Philadelphia.

We UU's are a people of such heroes. Our classrooms here are named for Priestly and others. We are a people who understand and advocate for a thinking and broad based faith modeled by ancestors and by teachers--teachers like the Buddha whose statues are in our meditation hall, and who we honor each Wednesday night in dharma and meditation practice, teachers like Jesus, whose entry into Jerusalem the week of his death, we will remember tonight at 6 pm as we celebrate a shared ritual meal on this Palm Sunday.

We honor teachers like Brother Roger who established a religious community in Taizé, France during WW II to serve people with horrific physical and spiritual needs.

We will use Taizé style music in our gathering tonight.

We UU's have a long and proud history of turning inward, hungering for things of the mind and spirit, studying and emulating the heroes and ancestors of our faith in science and in spirit.

And we have a proud history of turning outward.

We honor those perennially dissatisfied social reformers who modeled for us a faith in service.

The trick is to remember that one, inwardness, supports and completes the other, outwardness, that turning inward to intellectual pursuit or spiritual development and turning outward to give the world a helping hand in service or civic advocacy are two sides of our one religion, the one holy dance, in which we turn, then turn, then turn as we mature.

I want to tell you about an unexpected turn which happened to me on my first day tutoring at Noah Webster school last week.

Like some of you, I am time starved. I so want to simplify my life.

And so far I just don't have the courage, the discipline, the conviction, the spiritual maturity to do all of the things I know I need to do.

So, to distract myself from the spiritual adolescence

That won't let me simplify, I speeded up even more by adding weekly tutoring to my schedule.

I sat at a little desk with three small boys in turn, observing their tiny brown and white and black fingers moving from word to word on the page, listening to their little minds take flights of fancy in asides about crocodiles, the statue of liberty, and their cousins in Florida.

I sat, and observed school life bustling around me,

a slice of life I'd all but forgotten. And a miracle happened.  
For more than an hour my mind did not leave my body.

Most of the time, my mind is spinning ahead to the next thing,  
planning, obsessing, integrating, organizing,  
the spot light of cognition roaming over the eternal to do list,  
And highlighting me...me figuring out the next thing,  
me here, me there, me.  
But there I was, with Jamie and Kiandre and Will,  
As present to the eternal now in the moment as I ever am in meditation.  
It was not about me. What a surprise.

By turning outward, in service, I found a time out,  
gave my inner churning and time starved frantic life a rest,  
stepped off the hamster wheel and sat down in the lives of little boys.  
Breathing in, breathing out, not two, not separate.

There I was... doing service AND growing in spirit,  
As surely as when I am in the meditation hall.  
It was an example of what Charles Huntington spoke about in  
his testimonial recently—service IS spirit. Spirit IS service.  
That was just one of a myriad ways that we can experience both sides  
of this chosen faith of ours, at the same time,  
can establish a rainbow connection between spirituality and outreach.

One of our tasks as a religious body is to help each other to make  
this connection, first to help each other at the meeting house with  
our primary purpose of religious instruction, religious community,  
and religious experience. And secondly to help each other imagine  
and discover the self-giving service that is uniquely suited to mature  
each of us spiritually.

So, the COSJ is partnering with Noah Webster School in the coming  
year to give us a place to serve together.  
It's a fine fit for me. I'm already planning how to offer  
nonviolent communication training there.

And looking toward a spiritual reflection group in the Fall for those of us  
who life is calling to service there.  
It will not be a fit for all of us, though education and UUism do  
go hand in hand, but there is some kind of self-giving  
to which each of us is uniquely called, and we will not know the fullness  
of our faith, not come into our own as a religious body  
until each of us turns to the place just right, where we each may  
grow in service and grow in spirit.

What is life asking of you? Of us? Now is the accepted time.