

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Going Deeper”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 1, 2011

Call to Celebration

“Growing Light” by George Ella Lyon

I write this poem
out of darkness
to you
who are also in darkness
because our lives demand it.

This poem is a hand on your shoulder
a bone touch to go with you
through the hard birth of vision.
In other words, love
shapes this poem

is the fist that holds the chisel,
muscle that drags marble
and burns with the weight
of believing a face
lives in the stone
a breathing word in the body

I tell you
though the darkness
has been ours
words will give us
give our eyes, opened in promise
a growing light.

Sermon

Little children splash and play in the shallow end of the pool usually under the careful supervision of their parents. If one of them strays toward the deeper part of the pool, the lifeguard blows the whistle and orders him back. Of course, that only makes the deeper part all the more attractive, especially to little boys like me.

The Olympic size pool I remember when I was an growing up was shallow at both ends and deep in the middle. I'd walk toward the center till the water touched my chest, then my neck, then my chin, then my upper lip. The bottom dropped rapidly after that. Going deeper meant I had to be able to swim or I'd sink. I had to leave my childhood behind as the water got above my nose. I had to master my fears and plunge in ... particularly if I wanted to retrieve the plastic covered metal ring drifting down to the deepest part of the pool.

So, just how comfortable are you with going deeper?

I sense President Obama's going deeper now that his reelection campaign is ramping up. Obama has been roundly criticized for his pragmatism. The inspirational language of "change we can believe in" turned into a lack of change from the course George Bush had cut. Too often it appears that Obama's willing to sacrifice his values to get a bill passed – a risk for all pragmatists.

[In a speech on April 13th](#) at George Washington University presenting his ideas on fiscal policy, we heard a *different* message. Obama looked beyond the budget numbers to guiding principles. He said:

From our first days as a nation, we have put our faith in free markets and free enterprise as the engine of America's wealth and prosperity. More than citizens of any other country, we are rugged individualists, a self-reliant people with a healthy skepticism of too much government.

But there's always been another thread running through our history -- a belief that we're all connected, and that there are some things we can only do together, as a nation. We believe, in the words of our first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, that through government, we should do together what we cannot do as well for ourselves.

Linguistics professor George Lakoff's analysis is insightful. He wrote:

The basic idea is this: Democracy is based on empathy, that is, on citizens caring about each other and acting on that care, taking responsibility not just for themselves but for their families, communities, and their nation. The role of government is to carry out this principle in two ways: protection and empowerment. (source: Huffington Post: [Obama Returns to His Moral Vision: Democrats Read Carefully!](#))

Much is being made of the widening rift between political philosophies in this country. I think The debate just isn't going deep enough. Lakoff points out that Obama thinks systemically. He looks for and identifies the different interacting parts of the whole problem. This greatly increases the complexity of problem solving in a world ruled by sound bites. The

daunting complexity of the many interacting systems makes governing a vast federal bureaucracy next to impossible. Yet the people want the services we need a big government to provide.

The way to penetrate the morass of complexity is with guiding principles and values to measure results against.

But in a world of complexity, people still want simple answers. Many want to simplify difficult problems to good guys and bad guys. Climate change is a vivid example. Global weather is a dauntingly complex process. We can't accurately predict weather much beyond a few hours, let alone days or weeks. What we currently can do requires massive amounts of computer power.

So predicting exactly *what* will happen *when* as the result of increasing greenhouse gases in the air is impossible. Whether this summer will be hotter or cooler is hard to predict. But we can go deeper and examine the forces driving the weather. We can look at the historical record and make some educated guesses. We can carefully observe what is happening now. And with our growing awareness will come the ability to start to manage climate change – if we decide to do so as a world community.

Twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich, framed the human dilemma as having two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal might also be called an “un-reflective” life. This life is one driven day to day by compelling urges. This is a life ordered around getting by and following the herd. It is driven by the daily grind of working, eating, chasing pleasures and avoiding pain, care giving, then collapsing at the end of the day in sleep.

Tillich posited another dimension to existence, the vertical. He called it the depth dimension, concerned with meaning, value, and ultimacy. Religion primarily addresses itself to this depth dimension of existence. It asks the big questions – questions those living a horizontal life would rather avoid thinking about.

Now, I have great compassion for people who want to avoid the vertical dimension of existence. Think about your favorite situation comedy. The characters must confront conflicts and misunderstandings that are uncomfortable. The humor comes from their usually deceitful yet lame avoidance of the truth. In the horizontal world, illusions are valued for their power to enchant and their ability to control behavior.

Shakespeare of course mastered the art of penetrating the illusions of the horizontal, challenging his characters to find the vertical. Poor Hamlet gets his comfortable existence

disturbed by his father's ghost and spends the whole play resisting the call to the vertical. In his lust for power, Macbeth refuses to consider the vertical dimension and pays the ultimate price. In the *Tempest*, Prospero does open to the vertical and is transformed into greatness.

The course of human existence tends to create ruts in the smooth horizontal path. Our wheels get stuck in those ruts. A chronic illness or injury, traumatic stress on a battlefield, the death of someone close to us, the loss of a job or a major failure, the loss of ability with age, all can stop us in our tracks. When we get stuck, we need to go deeper.

And for many of us, it isn't any big crisis that makes us question the horizontal dimension of existence. Just the normal course of life has natural openings for going deeper.

College is a common time the bigger questions of existence intrude. The college freshman "master of the universe" fails a class critical to his intended major. She doesn't make the cut for a team. He doesn't have the resources to pay his college bills. Youthful relationships also pose really profound questions. Do I want to spend the rest of my life in relationship with this person? Do I want him or her to be the father or mother of our children? The answers will have huge consequences.

Parents who bring their young children to our religious education program often report a common reason. Their child asks them about God. The good liberal response is something like, "Well honey, people believe different things about God. We want you to find your own answer as you grow up." The child then says something like, "But what do you believe?" The parent realizes it is time to go deeper.

Maybe because I'm now 54, I'm noticing people going through some soul searching as they reach the age of 60. Seeing the waning of one's work years and the changes that come with retirement ahead cause one to take stock. Am I on the right course with my life? How is it with my inner life? Is my work fulfilling? Are there challenges left I'd like to tackle while I still can? Is there a larger purpose gnawing at me that I have been neglecting? The call to go deeper lurks in each of these questions.

The minister at First Unitarian Society of Schenectady, the Rev. Priscilla Richter and I, have been leading a year long program for going deeper called *Wellspring* for seven participants from our two congregations. Our goal is to get the program started in each of our congregations this fall. If you'd like to find out more, we'll have a presentation about it here, Tuesday, May 31st. The four participants from our congregation will be there to share their experience.

As part of the program, the participants work with a "spiritual director." This is one of the

best parts of the program – to have someone to encourage each of us to go a little deeper without giving us any answers about what we might find. The spiritual director I selected is a fellow who is also in training to be a Jungian analyst. I jumped at the chance to work with him.

Last week, when we met, we talked about Jung's understanding of the ego and the Capital S Self. The ego is the limited personality construction that guides our lives. The Self is the much larger being, the depth dimension of human existence. The image he used I'm still pondering is this: The ego is like a cork floating on the ocean of the Self. Our lives are so often caught up in the horizontal of dealing with and trying to perfect the little cork. What we mostly miss is the vast ocean that holds the cork up. That metaphor definitely makes me want to go deeper.

The Wellspring program is just one of the ways our congregation encourages and supports going deeper. The most common way to encourage that process by “exciting the human spirit and inspiring its growth and development” is participation in our Sunday morning service. Each of our services strives to put a spotlight on the vertical dimension of existence. Through music, song, inspirational readings, stories, illustrations, sacred text, wisdom from the world's philosophic and religious traditions, and personal experience, I strive to connect with the vertical dimension in each of our lives that urges us to go deeper.

I regret the time constraints on our Sunday services that limit our ability to go deeper together. The way I've opened to the deeper parts of the Self has been through Buddhist meditation. That's why I offer meditation each Sunday morning at 9:00 to 9:45 to support people who want to go deeper that way. Once a month the Dances of Universal Peace meet here in Channing Hall to go deeper through singing sacred phrases from the world's religious traditions embodied in simple circle dances. We celebrate the doorway to depth through Earth centered rituals and holidays. Small Group Ministry is another way to go deeper through small group intimacy.

Yet this isn't a wide enough selection to appeal to everyone. One of our top priorities for our work as a threshold congregation is to expand and support the diversity of ways people can go deeper here. I've heard about congregations who provide this programming for activists who are engaged in politics and fighting systemic racism and oppression. I've heard about intentional programs for parents who want to go deeper through the challenges of parenting. I've heard about programs for inner and outer peacemaking that help us go deeper. These are some of the programs our newly redesigned Lifespan Religious Education Committee will be considering.

The most important thing I have to say about going deeper is the hardest thing for many

Unitarian Universalists to hear. It is exceedingly hard to keep going deeper by yourself. It is far, far more fruitful, productive, and successful to go deeper in relationship with others, in community. Unitarian Universalists are taking this practical truth far more seriously today and working hard to provide the support we need to be more fruitful, productive and successful as we go deeper together.

You see, most of us can figure out how to dog paddle when life throws us into the deep part of the pool. But we'll find far more happiness and satisfaction with swimming lessons and supportive coaching.

That way, we'll be able to swim in the deep water of life with grace and beauty.

Benediction

I close with Albert Schweitzer's great words:

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

May we be each other's spark to go deeper toward the end that the light within all of us grows brighter.