

Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily
August 10, 2008
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

Connections

Ringling of the Chime

Prelude, Marcia Jenison

Welcome, Eric Papendorp

ERIC: Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. I'm Eric Papendorp and I serve on the board of trustees. We hope you find the service rewarding, and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, your left. Now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode." Child care for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery. After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area..

If you have a particular joy or sorrow, or something you'd like added to the Prayer of the People, please write it clearly on an index card and drop it in the basket on the table at the rear. You may sign it, or not, as you wish.

A complete list of announcements is included in our bulletin and is available on our website. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

Lighting the Chalice, Ruby Bruns

Words of Affirmation # 461, "We Must Be Saved" by Reinhold Niebuhr

For Children of All Ages "All About Litanies"

STEVE: We're going to talk about litanies this morning, but I want to say a few words first about how litanies fit in with what I'll be saying after you go downstairs.

First, a little fun—that's also reality checks. I say, Merrily—what comes to mind?
[watch] Now, I say the title of my talk today and I bet the whole congregation is going to shout the next part back at me. OK, here goes: Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily!
[listen, big gesture for response]

Suppose you were told you had to repeat something so you said "la" exactly 32 times but—no counting! Get 32 la's in there and not think about it? Let's try! Everybody, it's Christmas in August! Ready? Deck the halls with boughs of holly,/ T'is the season to be jolly,/ Don we now our gay apparel,/ Troll the ancient yuletide carol./ You all know I often play the piano, right? Well, I find it fascinating that brain scans of truck drivers and physicists, politicians and police officers all look pretty much the same. Only musicians seem to have identifiably different brain scans. What makes musicians

different? [beat] Right, practice, practice, practice! All that concentration on repeating the same things again and again actually changes our brains so much that it can be seen by researchers!

If repetition is so powerful a force, then it's easy to see why religions everywhere across thousands of years have used repetition as an element in worship. A litany, one such worship element, states some related ideas and after each one, we repeat a response. You worked on a litany last week. What was that like? Did your feelings change as you repeated your response. How? The litany you worked on responds “We will stand up.” What does that mean?

You really made this litany your own. Many of the words are yours. I watched you have some fun with it. At first some of you were ready to stand up for chocolate! Yet, I think you understood that a litany, as any element of worship, is something where we want to say something about the best part of ourselves—something we'd like others to think of first when they think of us. Your litany came out great. Jacob will lead you and all you adults may join in the action, in body or in spirit!

The Children's Litany

When someone is hurt

We will stand up.

When someone isn't listening

We will stand up.

When we are scared

We will stand up.

When we know better

We will stand up.

When the world's in trouble

We will stand up.

When justice is not served

We will stand up.

When someone disrespects nature

We will stand up.

When animals are abused

We will stand up.

When life is too much for us

We will stand up.

When life is too little for us

We will stand up.

When people are hungry or homeless

We will stand up.

When we can make a difference

We will stand up.

STEVE: Our children and youth are invited to stay with us upstairs a little longer this morning. Supporting this church isn't just for grown-ups and it is good for us grown-ups to see in front of us, a vital and growing part of what it is we support. We will now receive the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church. If you have a payment toward an annual pledge, please make sure that's indicated. As always, the Dolores Wood-Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items; the collection basket for that is by the front door.

If you wish to light a silent candle of personal joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Daidee will assist you.

Offertory, Marcia Jenison

Eternal Spirit of Life and Love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience every day. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it.

Jacob, will you please lead us all in the Litany of Thanks?

Let us express our thanks: For playgrounds, for a cat or dog, for rabbits, for horses,

We are thankful.

For playing an instrument, for a special dance, for a concert, for art, for the ballet,

We are thankful.

For baseball games, for parades and circuses,

We are thankful.

For food, our families, and for our homes,

We are thankful.

For a baby being born, for a special friend, for our lives,

We are thankful.

For an eclipse, for a sunset, for a rainbow, for peace, for love,

We are thankful.

For being all together, young and old and small and tall,

We are thankful

We are thankful.

Singing the Children Out

We have a song to sing you on your way. The words are in your Order of Worship.

"As You Go"

We hold you in our love as you go, as you go
May your hearts be at peace as you go
To nurture the spark of your precious life
We hold you in our love as you go.

Orison

Dona nobis pacem. Give us peace. *Dona nobis pacem.*

[process the cards and any other items given me]

Two weeks after the shootings at the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville, they will try to resume their routine. Last Sunday morning, they resanctified their space with an overflow crowd of celebrities and well-wishers. We know that the grief and pain tore far and wide through the fabric of community in Knoxville and the whole of Unitarian Universalism, as well. The healing will take a long time.

Further burden has been placed on our troops in Iraq this week as the Republic of Georgia has called its 2,000 troops in Iraq back home to deal with the Russian invasion of the disputed region of South Ossetia. More carnage is expected as 4 ½ million Georgians meet the full fury of the Russian army.

Thou who art everywhere,
Many are your names.
May thy presence be with us,
May thy wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul.
Lead us to forgive the mistakes of others
As we hope our mistakes will be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
In every moment
In every encounter
Now, and in the time to come.
Amen.

In these few moments of silence, let us hold near to our hearts all those who are suffering in this world, especially those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona nobis pacem. Give us peace. *Dona nobis pacem.*

[Gesture to pianist]

Musical response

*When our hearts are in a holy place
When our hearts are in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our hearts are in a holy place.*

Homily

Merrily, repetition: what's the point?

As part of the WOW (the Working on Worship) Group who are overseeing the services this month, I became aware that my ideas for my service seem to fall in a continuum starting with Elaine Watkins last week who talked of music as a tool to effect social change and pointing to next week when John Standridge will examine a life of God, Art, Music and Enlightenment. So, taking a cue from Elaine, I chose a soundtrack for my talk today. [cue Bolero ...] [30 secs or so, start speaking on beginning of fadeout] Most of you recognize Ravel's Bolero. I'll say more why I include it later, but, for the moment you may imagine the music continuing [music off]. Or not.

How I came to pick my topic was a direct result of how much the message reached me at General Assembly in Ft. Lauderdale that engaging children and youth as fully as possible in the life of our churches is nothing less than our continuing survival. So, I wanted to do an intergenerational service. What did I like that kids like that would also make sense in a worship setting? Flashback to me at 5 years old, shedding tears of laughter at a book where the words on one page were “and up the hill,” on the next page “and down the hill”—“and up the hill and down the hill” over and over and over as the kitty went on and on in search of the land of many mice. Aha! Of course! Children love repetition! It was an easy step to see how litanies are the way that adults continue to draw on their childhood love of repetition to effect worship. Where I ended up was no less than realizing how everything, viewed in a continuum of what came before and what comes after, is the same, similar, contrasting, or all the way to profoundly disconnected.

Merrily, repetition: a foundation for learning, an evolutionary adaptation

Repetition is, then, deeply embedded in our development back to our earliest memories. Surely that must be a necessary evolutionary adaptation. We who are alive are the luckiest of countless trillions of creatures who have come before. Given how much of life is being able to count on doing some things virtually without thought, our young who have survived are adapted to want to repeat activities until they are second nature.

Merrily, repetition: engaging worship

When ancient humans turned to ponder mysteries, they drew on everything they knew and could observe and wove it into their symbolism and ritual. Enumerating similar things as a category was a learning tool, with a tacit repetition of the underlying class. Direction—East. Direction—South. Direction—West. Direction—North. To make explicit what native American peoples or pagans or wiccans imply.

Litany begins when the words are made explicit. When the pagans say “merry meet merry part merry meet again.” When the 10 Commandments inveigh, “Thou shalt not.” When Jesus preaches from the Mount, “Blessed are the merciful; ... Blessed are the pure in heart: Blessed are the peacemakers.” When we pray each Sunday, “Dona nobis pacem. Give us peace. Dona nobis pacem.” Something about repeating a word or phrase in a changed context creates something new in our minds. Eastern religions' use mantras, like the single syllable “Om,” as a spiritual conduit to promote mindfulness or to block material distractions.

A beautiful sermon preached from this pulpit several years ago by John Buehrens, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association at the time, was titled, “On Being Otherwise.” It drew on a poem by Jane Kenyon that begins, “I got out of bed/ on two strong legs/ It might have been/ otherwise. I ate/ cereal, sweet/ milk, ripe, flawless/ peach. It might/ have been otherwise.”

Merrily, repetition, variation, and change: the basis of aesthetic sense

That poem, to me, is just a reminder that somehow all the arts—not just poetry and music but also painting, sculpture, architecture and dance—all the arts balance repetition, variation, and change as the fundamental elements that are processed by our aesthetic senses. [Bolero sound up at 6:55 mark] I'd almost forgot I was preaching to a soundtrack. We're about halfway through Bolero now. I don't have to tell you how repetitive the piece is, but there's a little more going on. Of course there's a perpetual crescendo and the instrumentation is changing with each repetition. Right here, the trumpets add a little spice—punctuation if you will—that we didn't hear before. [fadeout] Of course, in studying music, one learns a whole language to describe repetition of various kinds. Ostinato, passacaglia, chaconne, ground, for instance, all have some relation to the type of work Bolero is. I must confess to finding Bolero fairly quickly tiring if heard too often. In the world of music it is the equivalent of Andy Warhol's endless Marilyn Monroe's in the world of art. I hope the earworm aspect of it will depart and give me some peace not too long into next week!

Life is not a dream

The Jane Kenyon poem I began has a seismic end, “I slept in a bed/ in a room with paintings/ on the walls, and/ planned another day/ just like this day./ But one day, I know,/ it will be otherwise.” To me that's about a 8.5 on the Richter scale. And that's the wistful and wishful aspect that repetition carries as we include it in our worship. Today we can repeat, most likely tomorrow, as well. Someday it will be otherwise. [cue Bolero at 14:00] For 14 minutes we've heard insistent repetitions of the same C-major harmony and suddenly, it's like 10 on the Richter scale, for 8 bars we are catapulted—right here—into E-major. [wait] It's just too much; we return to C-major only to careen nearly out of control to a crashing end. Finally it is otherwise.

Perhaps all those hours of practicing the piano have changed my brain too much; I hope I haven't lost you. I'm trying to close the deal here. I've had some fun with repetition, offering descriptive and comparative views, sometimes stating the obvious. At the same time, I've got multiple tigers by the tail. What to do? What really is the point? [beat] It is my deeply-held belief that many, many choices in our lives are properly viewed as preparation for otherwise moments. Let me commend you who are here today for your excellent judgment! A Unitarian Universalist church is a great place to prepare.

Perhaps only piano practice shows up in an MRI but, without a doubt, spiritual practice is busy amending neural pathways and promoting neuron growth as well because that is just how the brain works.

To repeat William James, “I will act as if what I do makes a difference.” and, on balance, I say believing makes it so. Do you not take some grim satisfaction that killer Jim Adkisson was wrestled to the ground and restrained?—especially as he apparently believed, in a place filled with soft-minded liberals, he could continue his mayhem until

the police arrived to shoot him dead? UUs really do have a history of being on the right side when otherwise arrives. Let us never forget.

But, looking forward, I repeat the words of James F. Byrnes, “Too many people are thinking of security instead of opportunity. They seem more afraid of life than death.” Now Byrnes was an interesting guy; he served in all three branches of the federal government and also was governor of South Carolina. His experience provides me a useful segue because it is when I look at what's been happening to our country, I feel most strongly that we are at an otherwise moment. We've seen family values, respect for life, and even patriotism itself co-opted by the radical right wing and our protests have seemed to vanish like rain on parched desert. Yet I see signs that some of the ditto-heads have woken up with a bad hangover and that, as we UUs speak up for our values, we will find our most receptive audience in years.

Collectively we are evolutionarily-bred to sort out differences from what is familiar. Paradoxically we now see opportunity that is doing what we have been doing. Because the world itself is different, let us do what we do with new heart. Let us do what we do because our children are watching and learning and it is they who must continue when at last we ourselves are otherwise.

I've chosen a closing song to reinforce a sense of paradox, unfamiliar words, but a clarion call to real patriotism from another era of deep division in our beloved country. The words are on the insert page of your order of worship.

When our land is illumined with liberty's smile,
If a foe from within strikes a blow at her glory,
Down, down with the traitor that tries to defile
The flag of the stars, and the page of her story!
By the millions unchained,
Who their birthright have gained
We will keep her bright blazon forever unstained;
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave,
While the land of the free is the home of the brave.

Benediction

[from UUCS Haggadah, adapted words of Rabbi Hillel the Elder]

If we are not for ourselves, who shall be for us?
If we are for ourselves only, what are we?
If not now, when?

Postlude, Marcia Jenison