

**IF YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE A BITE OUT OF LIFE, USE CHOPSTICKS**  
**MIKE NORTH, PRESENTER**

November 28, 2010

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga  
Daidee Springer, Worship Leader

Connections (10:45)

Ringling of the Chime (11:00)

Opening Hymn "Gather the Spirit" #347

Welcome – Board of Trustees President, Eric Papendorp

ERIC: Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. I'm Eric Papendorp and I'm President of the Congregation. 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.

I like being Board Rep when Daidee is Service Leader. Not only does it make me taller [reference to her height and her neglecting to remove the step stool], but she talks Steve into playing. Today, he chose to play some Scott Joplin—but two tunes you've probably not heard before. To start here's "Harmony Club Waltz."

Prelude        "Harmony Club Waltz"        Steve Hollingsworth

DAIDEE

Kate Hoyt will you please light our chalice?

Lighting the Chalice

*In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.*

DAIDEE: Mike North has a story for the young and the young at heart..

DAIDEE: Now let's sing our children to their classes The words are in your bulletin.

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

DAIDEE: "Women and cats will do as they please, and men and dogs should relax and get used to the idea." -- That's Robert A. Heinlein and it's one of Mike North's favorite quotes. I may never live it down that I read it on his Facebook page. I'm not into Facebook but Mike invited me to be his Friend in the midst of our email discussions about this service so what could I do but accept? Anyway, whether your into Facebook or not, do as you please or relax and get used to the idea, but please give generously.as we collect the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you're writing a check towards your pledge, please mark it as such. Thank you again for your generosity. If you wish to light a silent candle of joy, sorrow, or concern, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.

[Collection plates are passed]

Offertory      "Reflection Rag (Syncopated Musings)"      Steve Hollingsworth

DAIDEE: 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. Christina and Jesse, will you please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your bulletin.

*Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.*

Orison

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

Thursday was Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving has always been my favorite holiday. Unitarian Universalist President Peter Morales agrees with me (I'm so glad I voted for him). As he stated so well in his Thanksgiving message: Thanksgiving calls forth the essential spiritual value of gratitude. Peter's message went even deeper. It decried the "growing gap between rich and poor that harms us all". These are some excerpts. I encourage you to go online and read his message in its entirety:

"At one level, the growing gap between rich and poor is an economic and political issue. But it is also a moral and, ultimately, a religious issue. There is a temptation to see economic relationships as the result of uncontrollable forces. As a matter of fact,

allowing this widening gap between rich and poor is a choice -- a moral choice. And it is a moral choice with enormous spiritual consequences.

“Inequality breeds fear, bitterness, suspicion, crime and violence. It eats away at the dignity and self esteem of the poor while it hardens the hearts of the rich. Inequality numbs our spirits. Ultimately it dehumanizes us. Ironically, social psychology shows us that our grandmothers were right: The rich are not happier.”

Spirit which encircles us  
Many are your names.  
May we always feel your presence,  
May your wisdom guide us,  
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.  
May we have what sustains our body and soul;  
Let us forgive the mistakes of others  
As we hope our own mistakes will be forgiven  
Let us resist the temptation of the quick and easy,  
And reject all that demeans and destroys life.

Let us live purposefully and joyfully in every moment, in every encounter, now, and in the time to come.

In the next few moments of silence, let us remember those who suffer the fallout of war, let us contemplate a country that values equality in all things. And close to our hearts let us hold Tonya Howington, Martha Berry, and all those among us with silent joys, concerns, and sorrows.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Musical response

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

Introduction of Speaker:

Our speaker today is long-time friend of the church, Mike North. When asked for some biographical material, Mike came up with far more than would fit in the bulletin. Let me share some of what we didn't print.

- Mike is an Amateur student of economics, political theory and philosophy -- which he says in reality are different aspects of the same subject,
- He's an avid fan of Greek, Roman, Scottish and American history
- He enjoys the spiritually enlightening search for the perfect game of golf
- He can't imagine life without music, beer, the beauty of nature or the love one human shows another
- Like Rodney King, he often asks, "Can't we all just get along?"

And he sure comes up with intriguing sermon titles. Mike, come tell us how to take a bite out of life using chopsticks.

***If You're Going To Take A Bite Out Of Life, Use Chopsticks*** Mike North

MIKE:

I have found that speaking to this congregation is one of the most challenging speaking tasks that anyone could undertake. If you preach in a conservative protestant church, you might pick your doctrine, build a sermon to support it, and preach. Or you might pick a doctrine taught by a different denomination; build a sermon to refute it, and preach.

If you preach in a liberal Christian church, you might pick a social topic, build a sermon to inspire the members to action, and preach.

If you preach in an orthodox church, you might draw on an authoritative source and educate your congregation accordingly, or remind them of the importance of the institution itself.

I don't mean to cast aspersions on any faith. I appreciate the role every denomination of every faith plays in the life of its members and in its community. But this congregation is different than any I have experienced. Ideas matter here. Sources are not limited to texts approved by an eldership or bishopric. Because everything is fair game, the challenge to offer something helpful, interesting or inspiring is greater than ever. Why? You're here because you choose to be, not because you're afraid of going to Hell if you aren't.

Given that, I have decided that I will neither draw upon an esoteric source nor delve into an intellectual discourse. Instead, I'll talk to you about a topic with which I'm very familiar: my recent observations on life and the lessons that I've drawn from those observations.

For the first time in my life, my birthday was not turning out to be a good day. I was told at work that if things didn't turn around within two weeks, the doors would close and I would be out of work for the first time in my life. My son and daughter-in-law were struggling. My granddaughter was having a difficult time adjusting to her first year in school. And no matter how hard I worked or what I did, it was the clichéd one step forward and two steps back.

The one thing I was looking forward to all day was my traditional birthday dinner of meatloaf. And this wasn't going to be just any meatloaf – Tonya was treating me to dinner at Foodworks, where meatloaf lovers from across the globe flock for the best meatloaf and grilled red cabbage the palate has ever savored. OK, maybe I carried that

one a little too far. But everyone I know who loves meatloaf and has had Foodworks meatloaf agrees that it is the best in the city.

We arrived, and after being seated, catching our breath, and beginning to share with one another the events of the day, our server asked about drinks and appetizers. Drinks were ordered, an appetizer not necessary, and we already knew what we were ordering for dinner.

The server was not happy to tell us that meatloaf and grilled red cabbage was temporarily off the menu, and I was not happy to hear it. Tonya was heartbroken for my sake, and I was heartbroken for my sake. I looked at her and said, "What a perfectly rotten ending to a perfectly rotten day."

But something in her expression made me want to salvage something from this horrible day for her sake, and I did. I decided that something on that menu had to be worth our time and her money, so I ordered the Pork Chop and Boiled Cabbage.

It was delightful. In fact, I was surprised at how delicious the dinner was.

And most importantly, I learned a lesson. Just because you don't get what you want doesn't mean that what's in store isn't just as good, or maybe better. Thinking about that one simple lesson suddenly changed my perspective on the whole day. Might I lose my job? Yes, but what if the next opportunity is even better? What if my granddaughter is struggling in school? My experience in the school system has taught me that public schools are oriented toward achieving the best outcome for the most students, which means the most gifted and the most challenged are often left to do the best they can. So her difficulties opened a door for me to spend time with her that I might not have realized I could (or should) if the report cards were perfect. My son and daughter-in-law are struggling, but those circumstances have given me the chance to share experiences with both of them that I wouldn't have had everything been just perfect. Things haven't been exactly as I would have planned, but now that I look back, things are just as I would have them.

That brings me to my next point. I've shared this with some of you in private conversations, but it's a point worth discussing amongst us all. I talked to a friend a few months ago, and he said, "If I had it to do all over again..."

We all know where that was going. But I'm going to say that if any of us had it to do over again, we wouldn't do ourselves any favors by doing it differently. If we did it differently, we would come to the same point in our lives and the only difference would be that we would exchange one set of regrets for a different set of regrets.

As it is, every one of us who we are precisely because of the choices we've made. The good ones and the bad ones have helped to mold us into the people we are today, each one of us a unique product of DNA and experience so that no one who has ever lived or who will ever live can or will have exactly the same experience any one of us has had.

No matter how many chances we are given, we will never get it right. There are too many variables -- too many other people whose actions can affect our plans. Too many events over which we have no control. Too many events over which we have control, but

because of weaknesses or lapses, we handle wrongly.

We will make mistakes. The only thing – the only thing – that matters is that we do the best we can with what we have. Make that effort. Sacrifice. Love. Give more than you take. And then savor the sweet flavor of being alive. Don't let regret suck the life from you.

I believe in the idea of “feeling guilty.” That is what happens when you make a mistake that hurts others. Feeling guilty leads you to right to your wrongs. But don't ever let anyone, least of all yourself, make you live with guilt. Feeling guilty leads to reconciliation and healing. Living with guilt destroys us and those around us.

Traditional Christianity fosters the notion that if there is no eternity, no life to come, then there is no point to life on this earth. In fact, Paul of Tarsus wrote, “that if there is no resurrection, and if our only hope for Christ is in this life, then we of all people are most miserable.”

I have thought about that quite a bit over the past few years. I do believe there is something special about the human spirit – something that transcends this plane of existence. I believe there is another existence to which we pass. But I don't know that, I can't prove it, I can't describe it or explain it – I just believe it. I feel it innately.

But whether it is so, or not, I have learned that this life is amazing. This world is amazing. All you have to do is open your eyes and experience it.

You can pass through life focused on your work, your finances, your plans and your future. You can focus on the daily requirements of life to the extent that you cease to live and begin to merely exist. But it doesn't have to be that way, and you don't have to have lots of time or money or the ability to travel. If you let it, life will come to you. It will come in the form of the interesting people you meet. It will come in the everyday acts of nature that unfold before your eyes. It will come in music you hear and the food you eat.

Life wants to be experienced. Oblige it.

My last observation is another that pertains to food. Maybe not food specifically, but to the act of eating.

Tonya and I had worked a long and hard day on the farm, and on the back to Chattanooga, I had a serious craving for Chinese food, which is actually very low on my list of preferences. There is a Chinese restaurant in Trenton called the Asian Garden. We stopped in, and loaded our plates with all of the traditional buffet stuff.

Tonya came to the table with a pair of chopsticks, and dropped a pair of chopsticks on my side of the table. I asked her why she brought me chopsticks, and she said, “I thought if you were eating Chinese food you would want Chinese utensils.”

I had never eaten with chopsticks before. In fact, I had only recently learned to like Chinese food. But I was happy to learn something new, and I gave it a try. I looked at the directions on the wrapper, and watched Tonya for a moment, and then I gave it a try.

At first it was impossible. But I realized something very quickly. The harder I tried to squeeze, the more difficult it was get anything between the sticks. So I tried picking up the food more gently, and lo and behold, I had a pea between my chopsticks! At that point I knew the secret. The lighter the pressure, the softer the touch, the more control you have.

I looked at Tonya, and I told her that there was a life lesson in that that I would take to heart and never forget. How much easier and more pleasant relationships would be if we used the chopstick approach? Less pressure, more patience, a softer touch? How much more enjoyable would be the tasks we undertake if instead of rushing and trying to force something to happen we took our time, used our tools patiently and thought it through step by step?

The expression “taking a bite out of” something has always implied subduing or conquering, something, using it to satisfy your appetite. It would suggest though, that if you’re going to take a bite out of life, don’t use your fingers, and don’t just shovel it in. Use chopsticks.

DAIDEE : Thank you, Mike [plus some ad lib appreciation not that cannot be transcribed ]Now please rise as you're willing and able, in body or in spirit to blend your voices in hymn #6, **Just As Long As I Have Breath.**

Kate Hoyt, will you please extinguish our chalice while we blend our voices in the unison reading. The words are in your program

*We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.*

BENEDICTION: Mike North

Postlude “When the Long Road Ends” written by Paul Thon, performed by Christina Bjorling & Jesse Blue

Notes on the Music [these were included in the Order of Service]: Scott Joplin (1868-1917) in his heyday was almost synonymous with Ragtime. In Europe, classical composers like Debussy (in "Golliwogg's Cakewalk") embraced the style with gusto. In America, however, it remained scandalous in many circles until at least the 1960's. Here it was a style associated with bordellos and brothels, as the tango was in Argentina.

Joplin's early employment was in such places and, indeed, where he contracted syphilis that, inadequately treated, took his life in his 49th year. The two

selections are little-known bookends to Joplin's career. The waltz (1896) isn't particularly raggy and very naive harmonically. "Reflection Rag" (1917) is rather subdued but shows full command of rhythm and harmony that made his rags famous.

Paul Thorn composed the song Mike North asked Jesse and Christina to sing as the postlude. Thorn is the Son of a Church of God minister. In his past he was a professional boxer, a factory worker, and a skydiver. Now he's a talented and acclaimed songwriter. Despite his past, or more likely because of it, he says he's more a lover than a fighter. Thorn stands on the side of love.