

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
COMMUNITY CHURCH**

Sunday, May 22, 2005



**SEEING HORIZONS
IN DEEP VALLEYS**

**The Rev. Dr. Randolph W.B. Becker,
Minister**

READING

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

READING

from Helen Keller

We who are bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world – the company of those who have known suffering. When it seems that our sorrow is too great to be borne, let us think of the great family of the heavy-hearted into which our grief has given us entrance, and inevitably, we will feel about us their arms, their sympathy, their understanding.

Believe, when you are most unhappy, that there is something for you to do in the world. So long as you can sweeten another's pain, life is not in vain.

SERMON

SEEING HORIZONS IN DEEP VALLEYS

Does this sound familiar to you?

For some reason – perhaps physical, mental, spiritual – you feel so bad, that you wonder if you will ever feel good again?

It feels like you have slipped or been dropped into a deep chasm of illness, so deep you fear you will ever rise up again.

Like you have been gripped by so profound a feeling of fear or despair, you doubt you will ever feel safe again.

Like your doubts have so taken over your life, you can't believe you will ever have faith in yourself, in others, in life again.

It's an all-too-familiar human pattern.

Circumstances or perceptions of circumstances make us feel like we are living deep down in a valley of pain, depression, doubt.

Living in a valley so deep and so steep, we cannot see out . . . no sky, no sun, no horizon.

For some, the times of such feelings are few and far-between, passing moments. For others, they become their unwanted too-frequent companions.

When those feelings become a lifestyle, consistently defining one's attitude toward life in general, it is time to seek and use professional assistance. There are places our lives can take us which exceed our abilities to easily understand and overcome.

But, for most of us sitting here this morning, we are recalling those moments when we felt like we were down in a valley of life with no better vision, and now can see them for what they were, moments of life, not the totality of our lives.

And what do we do with our memories of those times when wider horizons seemed to elude us?

Most of us do something simple - which is in fact nothing. We rise up out of our depths, and move on, forgetting or trying to forget how badly we felt. We hope we will never feel that way again. We engage in magical thinking which should be so foreign to those of us who value considered, thoughtful, rational living. We behave as if our thinking about what happened to us will cause it to happen again, so we move on without much consideration. We feel relieved, and refuse to look back down into that valley. We like the view from the top too much to go back.

But, life is a tricky teacher - as much as we like to pretend that we are in control of what happens to us, if we do not tend to the lessons which we need to learn, life will present us with more opportunities for our edification. Until we learn, AND REMEMBER, we will have to keep on learning, because life will continue to be defined by what we do not yet understand.

So, let's go back down, into those places, into those experiences, into those feelings, into those depths once more. Maybe going there together will make it easier to learn and remember what life is trying to show us.

So, come . . . let us descend, deeper into this thing called life. Picture yourself in a deep, steep valley. If there is any glimmer of light, it is far up, above you. From where you stand, all you can see is that valley.

What do you do?

One of the first temptations is to look for a way out. "Get me out of this place!" we cry. Not a bad idea. But how? There are many hucksters of hope who set up shop in those valleys. They come with maps which claim to show the only route out. They describe the paths which worked for others, often detailing the escape routes remembered from ancient history, mythic accounts of achievements which are sold to us as if one path fit all.

Religions often are both the warehouses and the retail outlets of these maps. One understanding

of religion is that it is that force of history which offers people known escape routes from the deep valleys of life. “Follow the directions,” they say, “and you will be OK.” In some sense, this is the magical thinking kind of religion – that if you follow what is mapped out for you, you can find the way up and out . . . and remember, there is only one route that will work the magic for you. I suspect that if you are here, listening to me, you have heard this religious sales pitch, maybe even tried it out, and you found it didn’t and couldn’t, in the long run, give you what you wanted or needed. You gave up on one kind of religion, but your life’s quest for something more than materialism assured you that there must be an alternative to simply living like pack mules following the beaten track with blinders on.

That’s because religion can also be something other than a warehouse and retail store for the maps of others. Religion can also be more of an outfitter’s shop, filled with the many tools of the trade. No promises, only tools. Here, we are a tool shop, an outfitter. And we are a tool shop, an outfitter, which offers classes on how to use those tools of life in a way that will help you do the work that is uniquely yours. A wide variety of common tools for living. Shared lessons on the use of those tools. A community of support and continuing advice. All to help each of us complete the ultimate do-it-yourself project – life. And we do our best when we remember that do-it-yourself does not mean do-it-alone or do-it-uninformed.

Common tools, shared lessons, community of support. These are the elements offered that help us to see horizons even in the deepest of valleys.

But, what common tools?

I remember many years ago. I tried to install a sink in my summer home. Since I was dealing with flexible pipe plumbing, the job seemed simple. The instructions said “tighten the faucet mounting nuts,” but when, I tried to tighten the individual faucet mountings I found it was impossible to do! I went to a neighbor for advice, and she promptly produced a strange looking device called, yes, a “faucet wrench” which did the job in seconds.

Since then, I find that in trips to home improvement stores I try to look not only at what I think I need, nor just what I want, but also what is available even when I have no plans for their use. Sometimes I see something which I realize is what I actually do need. And other times, I simply remember something for a future need.

You need to know what tools are available for you when you find yourself flung into that valley. And you realize that those tools which serve you well when you are on the uplands may not be sufficient.

So, we need to turn to all the tools, all the resources, which are available to us, becoming aware of what is available, not just for current needs and not just the familiar ones. More do-it-yourself projects have been messed up by trying to employ the wrong tools, simply because they are either familiar or available, than from anything else.

In our understanding, this calls us to being aware of the many paths of religion and spiritual understandings, not just the ones that are familiar or easily available, and more importantly not just the ones that serve our current needs or prejudices. When the times get tough, we may be able to rise above it through the resources of our own past experiences. But, we may not have the resources from our own past experience to meet future needs. By turning to the great depository of human wisdom, we equip ourselves to meet the unforeseen as well as the foreseen. And with that a caveat - when we exclude any tradition which has risen from the human experience of trial, tribulation, inspiration, and redemption, we may be short-changing our own future.

Equip your toolbox-of-life with as many tools as you can . . . who knows what will be needed in the next valley you travel?

Years ago my parents decided that, with the arrival of my younger brother, our summer home needed to be expanded. Their plans required excavation of a rear hillside. They had all kinds of implements for the task - picks, spades, shovels, wheelbarrows, pry bars - but after several weekends of work, we had made little dent into that hillside. My father decided that he would hire one of the laborers he knew from the railroad to assist us for a weekend. Pepe Domiano arrived Saturday morning and agreed, we had all the tools we needed. Then, we started to work. He just stared at us soon after starting, and then quietly offered “maybe if you did it like this, you would find it easier.” Sure enough, with Pepe’s guidance, we began to use those tools much more effectively. Some tools, which we had never even used, became invaluable to us. By the end of the weekend the excavation was completed, thanks to Pepe’s lessons to us.

As a religious tradition which focuses on process more than destination or content, our role in providing shared lessons should seem obvious. Reaching out from our individualism to community, we begin the essential transaction of religion for us – the binding of people together in common, sustaining, enhancing relationships. Shared lessons about the tools of life require two things: knowledgeable teachers and open students. And each of us will serve in both roles.

Each of us has lived out some reality which has not yet been experienced by anyone else in this community. Each of us has found some way of using the tools of life which have not been found by anyone else in this community. That may be the truest meaning of individualism – recognizing how each of us has traveled a unique path through our lives: we each bring something special to community, something we can teach to others.

At the same time, because we have traveled as individuals, accumulating our own experiences, we have not yet experienced everything, encountered everything, had to use every resource and tool at our disposal. This is our call to student-hood. The limits of our experience, which in honesty we have to admit, invite us to learn what others have to teach.

Our Covenant Groups, those small group shared-ministries to one another in our congregation, are prime examples of these shared lessons. As we provide safe, affirming opportunities, which

foster honest, open sharing. Who knows when you or I will need the wisdom and understanding of others to help us see beyond our current challenges? Who knows when you or I will be able to companion someone out of their space of crisis through our knowledge and experience? Not being able to predict either need or lesson, what we can do is make time and space in our lives to be ready to be either student or teacher. This, however, I can predict: each of us will encounter some time in our lives when such shared lessons could make all the difference!

Which means we need to remember, to honor that we are primarily a community of support! For us, the highest values of the universe are expressed in relationships. As we connect to one another, weaving a web of meaning between individual lives so that nothing is ever separate, alienated, unsupported, we replicate the physical and spiritual worlds which we perceive as an inclusive, unified reality. When, in the valleys of our lives, we cannot see the horizon, we find that we can see the horizon reflected in the eyes of others. Sometimes, that is all it takes to help us see our way up and out of our situation - to know that others can see better days, that others have been where we are, that others care about how we are doing. Looking to others when we cannot see for ourselves . . . AND being there for others when they need to see through our eyes.

All of the vaunted principles, all of the reverential worship, all of the heated discussions, all of the social witness will mean little if we are not here for each other. The spirit of our Covenant calls us to this holy work, of making sure that no one, standing in his or her valley of life, needs to feel alone. As any of the communities of barn-raisers know, you can have all of the tools in the world and know how to use them, but without the support of others, all you have is a pile of lumber and a big problem.

Ultimately, ours is a religion that will not promise you a life without any problems. We cannot guarantee that this creed or this prayer or this worship will make everything pleasant, perfect, easy. Life is not like that.

But, when your time of need comes, I hope you will see this church as a resource.

Because now is a time of need for someone, I hope you will be a resource for this kind of church, this religion of common tools, shared lessons, and community of support.