

#2084

TO LIVE IN THIS WORLD

A sermon by the Rev. Judith Meyer

UUA General Assembly

Service of the Living Tradition

June 22, 2006 at 8 p.m.

“In Blackwater Woods,” by Mary Oliver

*Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars*

*of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,*

*the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders*

*of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is
nameless now.*

*Every year
everything
I have ever learned*

*in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side
is salvation,*

*whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world*

*you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it*

*against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

The stark images and plain truths of this poem speak to us in words we all know; about love and loss –something we know all too well; and salvation – “whose meaning none of us will ever know.”

Mary Oliver’s words have grown iconic for us Unitarian Universalists, who turn to them to say what is so hard for us to express and so comforting for us to hear.

Yet the poem is a sad poem about autumn and death and the inevitable cycle of return to the mystery that surrounds us and takes so much – everything, really – out of us.

I discovered this poem when a young woman in my first church brought it to me. She used Mary Oliver’s words to tell me about herself.

I could tell a lot from what those words said.

Mary Oliver’s words have spoken for many of us. As we welcome her to our General Assembly, I offer my gratitude to her for her contribution to our ministry. Her voice belongs in this service, when we reflect on the meaning of leadership in our faith tradition, and what that faith asks us to do.

Whatever our role as religious professionals or volunteers, we share the challenge of trying to live true to our faith in this world.

Mary Oliver's words are a primer on this large and difficult task. They declare the three things we must be able to do: "to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

There is comfort in this instruction, these words that are so simple and yet seem to come up from somewhere deep within. That is why they speak to us as a people of faith. Loving, holding on, and letting go describe the cycle of life and attachment, nothing more or less, because that is everything there is.

We yearn to enter fully into life, yet to do so is an act of faith itself. Though we sense the risk and the uncertainty, something calls us to live as if our lives can make a difference: sometimes even a difference we cannot fully understand or express.

In the vocations belonging to people of faith –ministry, religious education, administration, music, the call articulates itself in a particular role.

But for all of us – especially committed volunteers, as many of you are, who devote hours of time to your community, who take vacation days off from your jobs to attend meetings like this one, the role is only one aspect of who we are.

Unitarian Universalism is the bond we share, the powerful presence among us; it is why we are here.

Our faith brings us together. Even though we have a hard time talking about it.

For all our love of words – beautiful words, like Mary Oliver's, our faith is beyond words in some ways, and that is its mystery as well as its salvation.

Like her words, our faith is simple, but it lives in the deep structures of our being, which is not so simple.

We struggle –I struggle –to explain who I am as a Unitarian Universalist, only to come up against that which cannot be explained: our affiliation to something beyond names, even our own names; something nameless and whole.

I grew up in this faith tradition. I had a special need to explain who I was. As the child of a Jewish Protestant intermarriage, I was consumed with the question of my religious identity. We lived in a town that was deeply polarized about religion. I resented my ambiguous heritage and the fact that my parents would not allow me to play tennis at either the Jewish or the Christian country clubs, because they were exclusive.

Instead, we went to a Unitarian Universalist church a couple of towns away, a small congregation in a humble meetinghouse on the edge of Newark, New Jersey. It was home for families like ours. There I learned why discrimination of any kind was wrong and why my parents insisted that I play tennis at the public park.

The sense of justice and common sense that church imparted to me have stayed with me all my life. The loyalty gained from the great gift of having a place to belong, just as I was, is why I became a minister.

The question of identity resolved itself, as I grew up Unitarian Universalist, and came to know what that meant for me.

But not right away.

Back in the early sixties, when my brothers and I were growing up in the First UU Church of Essex County, New Jersey, the Unitarian Universalist Association launched a clever and successful marketing campaign. Discreetly tucked into the back pages of the newspaper, a small box ad contained the single sentence, “Are you a Unitarian without knowing it?” Now if you were a teenager in the Meyer household, you found this hilarious. Everything that was good and bad about being UU somehow got summed up in this unintentional Zen koan.

Our faith was apparently so obscure and difficult to define, not to mention weak, that one could have it without knowing it. How can you have a faith without knowing it?

The ad was slightly subversive, which we also liked. It spoke to the crypto religious liberals in our community, still making their way to the traditional houses of worship, but harboring secret yearnings, yet to be declared, to be one of us. But even more compelling was the idea that being a Unitarian Universalist was something that you just were –a natural state, with an

intuitive sense of truth, like a Transcendentalist –that came before names or words.

To be a Unitarian Universalist was to be who you were, thinking for yourself, and living in this world. You didn't even have to know it.

Nearly fifty years have gone by since that provocative question first appeared in the newspaper.

We haven't fully answered it yet.

I think that's all right.

For in that question dwell all the meanings of our faith, the faith beyond the words and behind the declarations; the faith we live.

The faith we live we call Unitarian Universalist, two names that try to hold so much –the one and the all.

That's a big job, even for two long words. If that were not enough, we try to define ourselves, and it's a worthy effort, but how can we ever truly speak of the one and the all, of the nameless, of the "meaning none of us will ever know?"

Aren't we just about trying to live in this world, this world with its "fires and black rivers," a world suffocating from a cloak of pollution, a world slashed and burned by people with competing ideas of salvation –as if they could know what it meant; aren't we just trying to live as people who believe that what we can *do* can still make a difference?

"Every year," Mary Oliver writes, "everything I have learned in my lifetime leads back to this:" loss and salvation, an endless cycle in which everything returns to its source. There is only one way to live in this world and that is to love, hold on, and let go. Though what we hold will one day be gone from us, the fact of loss can never cancel the faith of love.

What other way is there to say that our faith stands for this simple truth, and for all that we can do if we are true to it?

And that our faith calls us, as leaders, to build institutions and communities where everyone can live by this truth, and where we leave our mark in the way they live on after us?

A long time ago, a small church in New Jersey welcomed my family and gave us a religious home. There I grew up, slowly learning that this community was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life.

Since then there have been other churches for me and for my family. This summer we will finish the work of leaving my parents' ashes in the memorial garden of their last church. They are gone and we will let them go.

Though sad, this final gesture is also an affirmation of the way in which the cycles of our lives do merge with the institutions we build and the faith we hold.

Once again the church has helped me live in this world. My parents would be amused to know that I found a way, one more time, to turn them into sermon illustrations, something my entire family has had to endure ever since I started preaching.

To live in this world as a Unitarian Universalist is to learn what our faith asks us to do.

When I was a young child, I had a morbid fear of a nuclear attack –and with good reason, it turns out. But I had only the child's resources to deter my fears. I told myself that as long as we were sitting in the sanctuary of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County, New Jersey, we were safe.

The big one wouldn't fall on our heads.

I look back on that young child now and see how I knew a certain kind of truth.

We expect our church to be safe.

I often stayed in the sanctuary during services so I could listen to the sermons of our minister, Neal Ferris. I still remember the title of the first one I heard: "Are you Still Afraid of the Dark?" I was.

It was good to feel safe there.

But I learned, as all Unitarian Universalists do, that we are the ones who make the church safe; we are the ones who grow up to realize that the world needs us like we need the church and the church has given us our faith so we can do something with it.

What will we do with our faith?

Mary Oliver has written that none of us will ever know the meaning of salvation. And even if we thought we did, it isn't what we need to live in this world.

To live in this world – as each of us already knows, or we wouldn't be here tonight – is to answer the call to make a difference with our lives, to apply ourselves to the work we do, and to offer it to the mystery that surrounds us.

That is what we do with our faith.

Live in this world knowing that we will lose each other, loving despite the hard bargain it makes of us.

Do what we can to make the world a place where this truth can be safely lived, measuring our faith by the difference we have made.

Build communities to continue after we are gone, where we are remembered by lives of good works and care; worlds we have made so that others might live.

So be it.