

GA Morning Worship – text of homilies

Saturday, June 24th, 2006

The Reverend Marta I. Valentín and the Rev. Jim VanderWeele

St. Louis, Missouri

1. Resilience – the Rev. Marta I. Valentin “Miracle Flowers”

As a young girl growing up in the streets of Spanish Harlem, NYC, I was fascinated by the flowers growing upward through the cracks in the sidewalks. The prettiest little flowers, whose names I never learned, but which I called “Miracle Flowers”. I would lean over them, the hot sun on my little back, and wonder, “How the heck is that possible?”

At the time I had no idea that underneath the concrete was *some kind* of dirt, alive enough to give the flowers *some kind* of a life. Inevitably my mother would grow impatient and unable to answer my questions would move me along. But I knew she was just as fascinated. For the rest of my life, I would spot them in other places I lived and I’d say to myself, “There go those miracle flowers again reminding me that growth can happen anywhere, at anytime”. They came to be inspired omens representing possibilities, in the most inopportune places.

I’ve seen them in the worst barrios in Cuba and Mexico, and in the upscale streets of Beverly Hills and New York’s Fifth Avenue.

And I see them now in New Orleans.

My miracle flowers have made themselves known in a larger way by the springing back of the great Magnolia Trees that most people left for dead.

A positive note of the slow clean-up process is that it has given the Magnolia trees the chance to say, “I am still here. I ain’t going no where, I got a job to do in this heah town. As mean and stinky as that ol water was, and yes, it killed quite a few of my relations, it ain’t killed *me*. I’m here to bring you a smile.”

And the Magnolia trees, in their fierce determination to survive, welcomed the bright smiles of all the sunflowers that are sprouting up, like flowers through concrete, in the most unimaginable places.

The seeds were blown all over the city by the force of the winds, and nine months later their surprise began to manifest for us. An added advantage is that sunflowers de-lead the soil so they are also being planted like crazy! But for me, what I like most about the sunflowers is that what we call the seed are actually the fruit. And our fruits *will* keep bearing.

2. Resurrection

The Rev. Jim VanderWeele

Resurrection has been slow, unsteady, reluctant.
The retreat of the water revealed a ravaged city
 thousands of flooded homes,
 piles of debris,
 rusty cars awaiting removal,
 tens of thousands evacuated, gone,
 and a water system that leaks more water than it delivers.
We see a reluctant resurrection.

Months have passed as a few,
 like slowly creeping spiders,
 are reweaving a web of existence.
Their pace reminds us *resurrection* will linger for years.

* * *

We used to have our *routines*.
You know the routines of life:
 daily activities,
 familiar highways,
 the local neighborhood.

Our *routines*, the *old routines*, are gone.

We are searching for *new routines*.

First Church and Community Church greeted our resurrection with cooperation. In a town filled with Catholics, we now see “sister congregations.” We have been holding joint worship services since October. We have also explored options for our sanctuaries, each with its damage. We examined our church life, even as we held hands and joined forces. And, we are committed to sharing our faith in our hometown.

As New Orleanians, we hear a slightly paraphrased John Murray, “Give them not the hell they can see, give them hope and courage.”

Our *resurrection* means we will participate in the agonizingly slow steps of progress, in this, our wounded world. Adrienne Rich understood our plight:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save-
so much has been lost.
I must cast my lot with those who,
age after age,
perversely
with no apparent power,
reconstitute the world.

Please rise for *The Spirit of Life* in English and Spanish, as we sing it in our services.

3. Re-Imagining – The Rev. Marta I. Valentin “The Spiritual Arena”

It has been said that we cannot imagine what we have never seen before. However, we *can* take aspects of what we’ve learned to create something new. In this way we can re-imagine our world.

At First Church we are re-imagining ourselves as a truly continental UU church, because we are being brought back to life by the hands and hearts of UUs around the country. Now while that does not mean that those who volunteer, or become Partner Churches have to make a pledge, it *could* mean that by contributing to our re-creation, you have a kind of spiritual ownership

New Orleans is a city that is known as an authentic American mosaic, whose combination of cultures created a new one that is unique, yet still holds each culture in its entirety, and whose food for the soul spans across every boundary that would otherwise divide it.

Why shouldn’t First Church and UUs around the country follow this fine example where you become a part of us, yet we all maintain our own identities? We are being called to a level of spiritual generosity that has no borders.

If you are standing on the outside, you might not understand. But once you come to New Orleans and meet the people, you will understand our desire not just to survive, but to thrive. You will understand why First Church, Community Church, and North Shore want to be ingredients in the New Orleans UU gumbo. You will understand the importance of lifting up our seventh principle now more than ever.

The challenges before us cannot be surmounted without a grounding that is not physical or intellectual. We are living in a “cracked open spiritual arena”* where the questions are still the same, just more urgent.

We have all been handed an opportunity to begin again and fix those places where our own theological, philosophical or ideological levees have been breached. We are being asked not to hold back any longer for at any moment it can all be washed away.

**Anna Maria Signorelli*

4. Renewal

The Rev. Jim VanderWeele

John Welwood has explored the *personal* process of renewal.

He says many people have an inner critic, or, *a second-guesser*.

Self-assessment can be helpful,

but when self critique dominates our thinking, it interferes with our ability to grow.

Says Welwood, “*Saying yes to ourselves, letting ourselves be as we are, opening our heart to ourselves – all of this serves to kindle the inner glow of self-love, bringing healing to our core wound.*”

We are wounded churches in a wounded city.

Yet, on our holy ground, where our speech comes from our hearts, we lose access to our essence when our inner critic disguises and obfuscates our ability to see the warmth and beauty, the goodness, which lies within.

The United States is filled with Catholics and Baptists, perhaps enough of them. And if we believed as they believed, we would join them.

...*But we are here.*

Could it be possible... that there is something *wonderful*... about us?

Dear Unitarian Universalists, we not only have a *set of values*, we have *value*.

Deep within, we have value.

The two UU churches in New Orleans have recognized their individual value.

Love flows into us and through us, and our healing has begun.

From knees still bent, we give thanks to the UUs of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, truly our Saviors. We embrace the support of our Partner Congregations, for they have embraced us. We appreciate the UUA/UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Committee and their support for us as well as their assistance to Gulf Coast residents who desperately need their help. Our hearts leap out with love when we receive books, hymnals, and RE materials.

And, we are overwhelmed by your love and support for us, for your recognition of our value, the cusp of the divine reaching out to committed Unitarian Universalists. Our hope is to not only earn your support; our hope is to gain your appreciation, for who we are, and who can become.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world,” said Margaret Mead, “Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

We can do it. Yes we can.