

Standing on the Side of Love
October 4, 2009

The other day, after meeting with my friend Lucy for a late lunch, we'd both gotten in our cars to drive off to the next parts of our days, when Lucy suddenly got back out of her car, walked across the street to mine and told me there was a Unitarian minister being interviewed on the National Public Radio program, "Fresh Air." (Unitarian Universalists on national radio being a rarity, she knew this was big.) Lucy mentioned the minister's name, Forrest Church. "Oh yes," I said. "He was a major figure among Unitarian Universalists. He died last Thursday." I thanked Lucy, said goodbye to her once more, turned on my car radio, and caught the last ten minutes of the show on my way back home.

It was ten minutes well worth hearing. Actually a replay, it was an interview "Fresh Air" host Terry Gross had done with

Church in 2008, when he had already been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and was giving, essentially, a farewell interview. In the interview, Church talked openly about both life and death, and how the two are intertwined. As I listened to Church talk about *his* life, I found myself journeying back in mine, remembering Church's father, Frank Church, a senator from Idaho, who had run against Jimmy Carter in the 1976 democratic primaries. Those were the first primaries I remember paying attention to in any depth as a child.

Now, here I was, decades later, a Unitarian Universalist minister, listening to an interview with Frank Church's son, a fellow Unitarian Universalist minister—one who had lived his life with integrity, even if stumbling at times, and who was now making peace with his pending death.

One of the last questions Terry Gross asked Forrest Church in the interview was about his drinking. Church had

been sober since 2000. As they talked about his journey from drinking to sobriety, Church said to Gross, “But you know Terry, getting sober didn’t change my beliefs. It just enabled me to *feel* what I had always thought.”

To feel what I’d always thought. I wonder if any of you, as I sometimes do, read such passages as that we shared earlier from Lao-Tse, and say to yourselves, “yes, I know *intellectually* ‘that if there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations, that if there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities,’ and so on all the way down to the beginning, where ‘there must be peace in the heart.’ But I’m just not *feeling* that peace.” I wonder if any of you ever say that—to yourselves, to your friends, or even just out into the night sky. Does it ever feel like there’s *something* preventing you from making that leap from the intellectual understanding of an idea, to the felt experience of it? Does it ever feel like

there's something keeping you caught between the two realms?

Speaking of being caught, I love how Martin Luther King, Jr. says, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." We are *caught*. Though I've read that passage dozens of times and know the word is *network*, maybe because of the words *caught* and *inescapable*, I sometimes seem to see the word *network* instead as *web*—as if we are caught, in a worst case scenario, in a spider's web like little powerless creatures, like that vision that 18th century Calvinist minister Jonathan Edwards had of a wrathful God dangling human beings like little spiders over the fires of hell. But no. That's not what King is talking about. We're caught *not* in an entrapping web, or over the fiery pits of hell for that matter; "we are caught in an inescapable network of *mutuality*." Mutuality—otherwise known as reciprocity, or mutual

dependence, or, my personal favorite theological term, *interdependence*.

My question again is, can we *feel* that mutuality, that interdependence? Yesterday, in my sermon writing wanderings, I came across an *Austin American Statesman* video clip of a woman, Gina Hinajosa, who happens to be an active leader in Austin Interfaith. In the video she was standing on the street with some other women, holding up signs that read “Moms for Health Care for All.” In the video interview, Hinojosa said she was doing this work partly because she’d found out her son’s pre-school teacher did not have health care insurance because, when one of her co-workers got cervical cancer, the insurance company covering the teachers doubled its premium. So, essentially, several people lost their health care coverage because one woman got sick. Can you *feel* how sick that is? Gina Hinojosa not only

intellectually understood the sickness of this, but she *felt* it enough to take action. Otherwise, as she dropped her son off at pre-school each day, could she have had peace in her heart?

Going back to Forrest Church's own story, and how his sobriety enabled him to finally feel what he'd always thought, I remember my early twenties, with my father having died of alcoholism and my oldest brother spending half his life addicted to heroin, I remember *thinking* about the need to quit drinking myself. But it wasn't until I actually got sober that I could *feel* sober. Make sense?

Of course, I think Forrest Church was talking well beyond the notion of sobriety when he made his statement to Terry Gross. I think he was talking about his religious beliefs, his theology, his belief in God. As quoted in the *Washington Post*, Church "defined religion, for example, as 'our human

response to the dual realities of being alive and having to die.’ He also noted,” continues the *Post* quote, “that ‘God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.’”

Though, like Church, I don’t believe in a personal, anthropomorphic God, don’t believe in an infallible, immortal guy named God, I do believe in what I call the “godness” in my own life, and appreciate Church’s definition of that godness “as that which is greater than us all but present in each.”

One might see that godness, if you will (or, if you will not, that goodness) as the summation of our first and seventh principles, the first being the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the seventh being the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

And there’s that web again, by the way. Not a spider’s web, necessarily. An interdependent web. An inescapable

network of mutuality, of interdependence, in which we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and so understand that we are, in the words of Martin Luther King, “tied to a single garment of destiny.”

What will our destiny be? What is our destination? King says that some day, “We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” But, looking at the reading, in order to do that, we must first, quote, “narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war.” To do that, in turn, we must first, in King’s words again, “evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method,” says King, “is love.”

Do you hear echoes of Lao-Tse’s teachings in King? In order for there to be justice, or peace in the world, we must begin with the foundation of love, also known as peace in the

heart. For a peaceful heart is one of the greatest symbols of love, yes?

It was out from this place of love, out from this call for justice, I'm imagining, that Forrest Church and his congregation of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, set out in 1985, to learn about a deadly disease called AIDS, and to provide services for people living with AIDS. Wrote one reporter that year, "the mobilization of All Souls was among the first religious responses to the disease." While some religious groups preached that AIDS was God's punishment for the practice of homosexuality, All Souls was thinking about, well, all souls. That is, that all souls have inherent worth and dignity, and that, if we are all indeed a part of the interdependent web of life, we had better show up for one another.

Similarly, these twenty-something years later, Unitarian Universalist Association president Peter Morales recently issued a statement regarding events in the beautiful New England state of Maine. On September 11, Morales wrote, and I quote here at some length: “The May 2009 passage of marriage equality legislation in Maine was an historic step towards justice for same-sex couples and their families. We owe tremendous thanks to the citizens of Maine, including many Unitarian Universalists, and to their elected officials who supported this legislation. But now,” Morales continues, “marriage equality is in danger in Maine. I call upon supportive Mainers to reaffirm their commitment to fairness for all families by voting against repeal of the legislation recognizing same-sex marriage.” Morales concludes, “Unitarian Universalists will stand on the side of love. I invite you to stand with us.”

Standing on the side of love, which we are called to do as Unitarian Universalists, is not just a metaphor. It is actually a public advocacy campaign sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association, promoting that first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And it is a campaign not only for marriage equality. Prompted by the July 2008 shootings at the Tennessee Valley UU Church, in which a gunman targeted the church for its liberal views, the Standing on the Side of Love campaign has as its primary goals, one, to “elevate and focus Unitarian Universalism’s voice in the public square, to influence public attitudes about the worth and dignity of all,” and two, “to mobilize quick and effective responses to incidents of exclusion, oppression, or violence based on intolerance of people’s identities.”

The campaign leads me to ask, again, how can we move from an intellectual understanding to a felt experience of

standing on the side of love? We say in our congregation's mission statement, that "we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice." So let this morning serve as a reminder to us of that commitment. Let us, whether we are showing up with Austin Interfaith at City Council meetings, or cleaning our stretch of Manchaca, or offering food to the homeless, or traveling to the Gulf Coast to rebuild battered communities, or marching in the annual pride parade, let us stand together, as Unitarian Universalists, with love in our hearts, and justice in our sights.

So may it be. Amen.

The closing hymn was sung by its composer, Carol Amy Webb at this year's General Assembly. Paula will lead us with the verses and we will join her in the chorus, which is printed on the cover of your order of service.