

Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church

Austin, Texas

Text from Morning Worship, June 12, 2011

A Third Place: The 2011 Annual Amy Young Memorial Service Trip

Presented by the "Turley Trippers"

Members of the Wildflower Congregation traveled to Turley, Oklahoma, to work with the Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Ron Robinson and A Third Place, a community center created and run by Rev. Robinson.

Chalice Lighting – Lois Brown

I dare you to live on the edge
To explore the infinite complexities
and endless possibilities
inherent in the constant change that is life

Dare so greatly
that you will never be confused
with those timid souls
who know neither victory
nor defeat

Success and failure
are born of the same mother

I dare you
to have the audacity
to attempt great things,
to change the entire world

Failing will cost so little
and succeeding will be worth so much

Words and thoughts borrowed from many great thinkers on embracing failure, most specifically Olivier Serrat.

Unison Reading - # 560, *Commitment*

People say, what is the sense of our small effort.

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.

No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There's too much work to do.

DOROTHY DAY

Community Prayer and Meditation – Rev. Eliza Galaher

Prayer

Spirit of life and love--
That which resides
In sanctuaries
Gardens
And highway intersections--
That which is the very breath of life
Coursing through
The hearts and minds of children
And elders
Women and men
All kindred life--
I give thanks to you this day
For the work that has been done
And for the work
That is yet to come.
I give thanks for the work
Of the mind
The work
Of the hands
The work
Of the heart.
For therein lies
The transformation
Which we seek.
It will not come by waiting or hoping
Alone.
Change
Takes faith
And we are empowered
To make it manifest.
Change
Requires
Stepping outside
Our self-made limits
Doing the hauling
Learning the language
Practicing as partners
Both patience
And persistence.
No one is too powerless
To plant a seed.
No one is too above

Or below
Helping make
A garden grow.
So spirit of life and love
I give thanks to the children
I give thanks to the fields
I give thanks to the small patches of earth
That insist
Beauty can grow there.
It can
And it will.
And we shall be gardeners
And in the desert
Of hope
And so there shall wildflowers
Bloom.

In the spirit of the blossoming of hope, in the spirit of both patience and persistence, let us now call out the names of those we carry with us in our hearts, followed by a time of silence.

SILENCE

Homilies – The Guerilla Garden Gang

Michael Stanbury

This was my first Wildflower service trip, since this was the first year that I finally had both the ability to take a week off from work and the health insurance required should something unexpected occur. The idea of spending a week in service to others already had considerable appeal to me, but I was firmly and enthusiastically on board when Eliza suggested that we spend the week in Turley, Oklahoma with Reverend Ron Robinson. You see, I had read about Ron and the good work he is doing in his community in the spring issue of UU World. I found it to be a truly inspiring story of a man who lives his Christian faith each day in service to his hometown community, a community cast aside by the march of progress and the quest for the new and novel.

Taking a tour of the Turley area on Monday morning gave us a glimpse of what the residents faced on a daily basis. Every street seemed to have at least one abandoned and boarded-up house, marked with the dates and cryptic codes that recorded the visit of some city or county inspector. Imagine having something like that on the street where you live, day in and day out. The main drag of Peoria Avenue is dotted with a business here and another one there, but with an equal number of empty or abandoned buildings as well. Cherokee Elementary, the local school where Ron and his wife Bonnie attended as children was just closed at the end of the current school year by the Tulsa School Board, and Turley residents struggle to convince the US Postal Service to keep their small post office open, one that is open only a few hours a day as it is. There's no pizza delivery in Turley, for reasons unspoken but well known.

In the midst of all of this, Reverend Robinson, Bonnie, and their neighbors in Turley help nurture their neighborhoods with the simple beauty of seedlings. You see nature is a big part of Ron's ministry ... a resurrected gardening program at a community school, an impromptu 'guerilla garden' at a well-traveled intersection, a new community garden and orchard that is now taking shape on an abandoned hilltop block.

Our week of service was spent on a variety of projects across Turley in the hot summer sun of Oklahoma. I did a lot of shoveling, helping move a mountain of mulch to make way for a future orchard and transporting soil to newly constructed gardening beds where vegetables will soon be planted. I helped clear weeds and debris, and worked in the hard soil of a guerrilla garden that was equal parts earth and stone. Working for just a few hours at a time left me exhausted, but ready and eager to continue our work the next day.

I went to Turley to meet a man who truly lives his faith in service and a community that comes together despite the odds to make their hometown just a little bit better each day. Though most of us don't live in the type of neighborhood that Ron and Bonnie do, I truly hope that our faith community here at Wildflower will be willing and able to go out in service to the neglected neighborhoods of Austin, in partnership with the folks who call these places home. And together we can bring forth newly sprouted seedlings of hope and renewal.

Elena Jimenez

I am an atheist and strongly against any form of religion. I would always ask my mother why we even bothered going to church. To which she would respond, "Because it is about having a supportive community in our spiritual search and to be a part of a moral community."

I never understood the importance of this till the trip. It didn't dawn on me till near the end of the trip. Looking back, I realized that a lot of what being a part of a church means is a lot more than just worshiping a god. Seeing what Rev. Ron does for a community that is broken and falling apart due to poverty showed me that you don't have to be a huge community to become a supportive and moral one. Not only that, but going out to dinner with Kelly, Melissa, Pat and Sarah showed me that being part of that kind of community might be what I need. This trip was extremely fun and hopefully I will attend next year's trip.

Elena Jimenez

6/13/11

Lois Smith

First of all, and apropos of nothing said heretofore, I think you should know that your minister, the Reverend Eliza Galaher, in an unexpected and inexplicable burst of exuberance, managed to single-handedly push my 1992 Ford F-150 pick-up, with an approximate curb weight of 2-2.5 tons, backwards up an incline, with two astonished passengers inside, myself and Vonnie, Like Eliza, I am crazy enough to think that is something to be proud of, so **ROCK ON, SISTER!!**

These are the kinds of incidental connections that make service work such an enriching experience.

So my teenaged daughter says to me, "I don't believe in God or Jesus, so why should I go to church? It's an empty exercise; it's hypocritical; what's the point?"

"Well," I say, "two reasons come to mind: first, you'll be surrounded by a community that includes many with similar doubts and concerns who will challenge and support you in ways you cannot know or expect. You will not be alone.

"And second, it is essential that those of us who make no claim to supernatural certainties do not concede the moral sphere, for by doing so we allow those with no doubts to define what is moral, what is just, what is fair. And though many of us might not have a God, we most certainly do have strongly held beliefs about what is right, and what is wrong, and much of what lies between."

So my daughter and son and I drive to Turley, and to make the time pass my daughter reads us the book, The Road, the bleak, post-apocalyptic novel by Cormac McCarthy, in which a slowly dying father and his young son struggle to survive physically and spiritually in a world in which no one can be trusted and society has collapsed.

And we arrive in Turley, a once thriving and economically diverse community that is now a ghost of its former self, with an abundance of abandoned, ransacked homes in virtually every neighborhood, and a main street in which the majority of buildings are boarded up, many with roofs that have collapsed. The school has just been closed down. People walk or wheelchair long distances without sidewalks to shop at the one grocery store that routinely sells expired packaged food. There are no health care providers or services. The nearest public photocopy machine is forty blocks away.

It is a town that has become impoverished and invisible with an impoverishment and invisibility that is spreading throughout our country.

It is an impoverishment and invisibility brought about, in part, by policies based on vigorously, not tentatively, but vigorously promoted ideas about what is moral, what is just, what is fair.

“Jeez,” my daughter says, “Turley looks just like the scenes described in The Road.” I’m thinking the same thing. How can it be, in the midst of such abundance, how can it be?

And then we meet Reverend Ron and Doctor Bonnie, two remarkable souls who could easily be living more comfortable lives but who instead have chosen to see most clearly what so many are furiously blinding themselves against: the invisible, the forgotten, the disposable. In Turley, they are building community gardens, creating a public park and orchard, providing lunches to area children. They are meticulously laying the groundwork for the establishment of a community-based health service for and by Turley residents. They are giving their neighbors access to computers and a photocopier.

Their message to us?

That any and all of their achievements can be undone.

That failure is inevitable, and must be embraced.

If that’s not a spiritual challenge, I don’t know what is. It’s a call to action that is born of very strongly held beliefs about what is moral, what is just, and what is fair.

In the novel, The Road, the young boy clings to the idea that there remain, somewhere, some people who are kind and loving, who are capable of action based on ideals beyond their own limited self-interests. He calls them “People who carry the Fire.”

In these times that can often seem so discouraging, Reverend Ron and Doctor Bonnie are definitely two who carry the fire, bringing light and warmth to a community disciplined to expect and accept nothing.

We at Wildflower also carry the fire.

May that fire motivate us to consistent, ongoing vigorous action to bring light and warmth to those invisible places on our doorstep and beyond.