

**City of Magnificent Distances,  
City of Magnificent Intentions  
January 24, 2010**

So, we *ended* the service last Sunday with Eva Andries coming up to the pulpit and handing me a bagful of wonderful cards from dozens of Wildflowers, old and young, wishing me a happy birthday. Thank you all so much for that. I commented then that I would check back in with you after I'd actually made it to the big day, and now I'm happy to say that, after continuing to receive lovely cards *and* calls throughout the week, I woke up this past Friday morning to be greeted by what Kathy Murphy *promises* is the *beginning* of my prime: 45. Here I am, alive and well and ready to start taking calcium pills.

Now, to be honest, I know 45 isn't in itself a monumental age to reach. Mostly it just makes me think about the fact that *fifty* is not far behind. But on a couple of levels, this year my

birthday seems to be tying itself into time in ways that go beyond my personal aging process. On the one hand, I'm reminded of the year in which I was born, 1965, and all that was happening in the country and in the world at that time. On the other hand, with my birthday occurring just weeks into the new year (as it does every year), I find myself reflecting on how this year of 2010 has started off thus far. Is it going to be a good year, I wonder? Is 45 going to be a good age? Personally, I feel pretty content. And congregationally, especially but not exclusively with our journey toward a home of our own seeming increasingly hopeful, my relationship to the church feels all the more warm, loving, and welcoming.

But on a local level, a national level, and a global one, I worry. The crisis in Haiti is still just dawning, while here in the U.S. the sun of justice seems to be *setting*, with the Supreme Court ruling that corporations are "people too," and so should

have unhindered license to fund political campaigns. As for goings on in Massachusetts, my father's home state and a place where I lived for six years before going to seminary, I won't speak partisanly, but let me simply say that Massachusetts seems to be not quite the place I understood it to be since the loss of Edward Kennedy.

And then there are events in Austin. This past Thursday I attended a city council public hearing, and witnessed, shall I say, *shady* attitudes and attacks of one council member toward the justice seeking work of Austin Interfaith. That may require another sermon.

These are the new-year events that have my 45-year old soul a bit concerned. And the turn of events seem particularly disorienting to me, for, only four weeks ago, in the very last week of 2009, I had given myself a little end of the year, Christmas-slash-birthday gift of going to Washington, DC, to

see the sights, take in the history, pay tribute to the war fallen, and to celebrate the good that this country has to offer. I'd been there before, to protest *against* war, and *for* the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. But never had I actually gone there to take in the city itself.

The trip was so rewarding, I was convinced it was a sign of the year to come. Maybe in the end, it will be. That would be good. But for now I seem to be stuck wondering, what do people *see* when they go to Washington, D.C.?

I knew, before going there, that the one thing *I* most wanted to see was the Vietnam War memorial. Maybe that has to do with my being born in 1965, and knowing now that while I was moving from infancy to toddlerhood to childhood, hundreds of thousands of young men were finding their lives being turned completely upside down in the jungles and rice paddies of a country that most of them had most likely never

even heard of before arriving there. Maybe it has to do with the poetic power of the memorial itself being designed by a Chinese-American woman named Maya Lin, who at the time of the design was only 21. How strange such a war memorial would be designed by a woman, especially of Asian descent, and how fitting that this woman was the same age at the time of creating the memorial that so many of the young men the memorial honors had been at the time of their death.

For these reasons, and dozens more, I wanted to walk down that slow descending path alongside the granite walls engraved with 58,000 names, and to see too my own reflection, to remind myself of the direct connection between past and present.

Of course, that is so much of what a trip to Washington, DC, does—it holds up history, holds the memory of historic events and times and, hopefully, it holds high for all to see the

ideals of democracy. Perhaps that is partly why Washington is known by some as the City of Magnificent Distances. True, its original planner, Pierre L'Enfant, referred to it as such because of the broad avenues, the circles and squares he designed into its landscape. But we can interpret the magnificent distances as also meaning the far-reaching span of democratic ideals it promotes.

But even so, we must also take into consideration, the 1842 visit of English writer Charles Dickens who wittily observed that the city might more accurately be referred to as the City of Magnificent Intentions. I believe he meant such a stab on a mostly architectural level. Still, we know what road is paved with magnificent intentions, and where, if we're not careful, it can take us.

Still again, better to equip ourselves with good intentions, and be guided by them, than to deliberately lead ourselves and

our nation toward such *undemocratic* ends as greed, inequality, poverty, ignorance, and outright despotism.

Remember the words of our sixteenth president, which we recited together earlier: “Our reliance is in our love for liberty; our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit,” Mr. Lincoln says, “and we have planted the seeds of despotism at our own doors.”

Ah, Mr. Lincoln. I was caught by surprise when, ascending the steps of the Abraham Lincoln memorial, and entering the space that holds his gracious lanky marble figure, I felt tears welling up and a lump in my throat that seemed to want release of a bittersweet, grieving love for such a figure. The humility of his eyes, his deeply carved cheeks, the tousled hair—not just a figurehead, but a soul. The day before I had stood outside Ford’s theater, and then walked into the

boarding house across the street, where Lincoln had been rushed after being shot. The real man hadn't spanned nineteen feet like the statue. But still, the room where he died seemed so small, so like a cell, for a man of such soulful height.

But, my tears may have been for more than just Mr. Lincoln. For the Lincoln memorial holds memories of other great figures and events, as well. I think of the span of the national mall that the memorial looks out onto, and the AIDS quilt that has filled it like a mournful, colorful, defiantly gorgeous garden. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King, standing on those steps before thousands, proclaiming his glorious dream. I think of Marian Anderson, being denied by the Daughters of the Revolution the right to sing to an integrated audience in Constitution Hall in 1939 and, with the help of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, singing instead before a crowd of

75,000 on the steps of the memorial and sharing the beauty of her contralto voice with millions of people across the radio waves.

I could have stayed on those steps for hours, soaking in the history, as well as the faces of all the people of all different races and nationalities sharing that space and that history with me. But like a good tourist, I moved on. On to a memorial I admittedly had not even been aware of, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. Actually, I had even intended to pass it by on my cherry blossom tree lined walk to the Jefferson Memorial. But the granite megaliths caught my eye, and in I went to take in the four outdoor gallery rooms, the bronze sculptures, and, most poignantly for me, the poetic and prophetic words of President Roosevelt, carved into the walls. I read, among other passages, "I never forget that I live in a house owned by all the American people and that I have been

given their trust." I read, "We must scrupulously guard the civil rights and civil liberties of all citizens, whatever their background. We must remember that any oppression, any injustice, any hatred, is a wedge designed to attack our civilization." I read, "More than an end to war, we want an end to the beginnings of all wars." And, as is quoted on the cover of this morning's order of service, I read, "the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough to those who have too little."

Writing those words out and saying them aloud, I am shot back to this moment, these beginning days of this year, some 67 years after they were first said, and I think, we need to read these words together. Let's do that. Turn to the cover of your orders of service, and let's say together: "the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of

those who have much; it is whether we provide enough to those who have too little.” How are we doing on our test of progress? We call ourselves progressive. How much progress are we making?

Now, speaking of progress, as your tour guide of my trip to D.C., I’ve hardly gotten you half way through my first day there, and I spent three and a half days, wandering the city’s museums and memorials. I wish I could at least take us all to All Souls Unitarian Church, as I took myself on my second full day there, to lay my eyes upon the prophetic church in Washington that lives its values of being a deliberately inclusive religious community, as we intend to do.

But the hour is coming to a close, and I need us here, now, to reflect on at least these few snap shots, these few sound bites, of what Washington has to teach us. As a religious people, I invite us to remember, here and now, the

words of Unitarian thinker, if not Unitarian church goer, Thomas Jefferson, that “all men [and women] shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion.” And so, paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, I invite us to ask ourselves, as a community of souls, “Do we have faith that right makes might, and, in that faith, do we dare, to the end, do our duty as we understand it?”

I won't go so far as to share with you this morning the dystopian horrors captured and recorded in the American Holocaust Museum, my last stop on my first full day of sight-seeing. I won't use it as a prop for fear mongering as a means of convincing you all to hurry up and get the kind of religion that reaches magnificent distances, for the end is near.

But in honor of the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King and in honor of standing on the steps where he preached his dream, I share with you his words from another time, that

“change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.” And I share with you the words of that tall, lanky, humble leader, Abraham Lincoln, who said to the citizens of this country, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

In this spirit, may we continue to commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice. As long as we do so, I fully believe that 45 for me, and 2010 for all of us, will be a year well lived.

Amen.

In the spirit of the prophetic words, work, and lives of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and the prophet who was not a president, but a King, I invite us now to give as generously as we are able, as we offer up this special offering for the people of Haiti. All proceeds will go to the joint UUSC/UUA Haiti Earthquake relief fund. To show my support for this effort, I offer my check, written to Wildflower Church with UUSC in the memo line, of \$100. I invite you to give in ample measure, whatever that might be for you. The offering will now be given and received.