

Historically Speaking
South Nassau UU Congregation
A service by Laurie Stuart
December 14, 2014

CALL TO WORSHIP

This is a new day that has been given unto us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving
dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

(Duncan Littlefair, adapted)

CHALICE LIGHTING

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

Rev. Theodore Parker

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MOMENT – Celebrating Hanukkah

We have come to a time in our service where we are going to take a slight pause from celebrating the vibrant history of South Nassau UU Congregation to recognize the upcoming Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, which begins on Tuesday evening, December 16.

Hanukkah has its roots in a story from 165 years before the birth of Christ when the Jews were not allowed to read the Torah or to observe the Sabbath. Their temples were destroyed. But then Judas Maccabee, the son of a priest, led others to engage in a series of small battles that resulted in regaining their temple and the right to worship as they chose.

And so that was the first miracle of Hanukkah: that a small band of committed followers actually re-established themselves and their religious practice in the world.

The second miracle was, of course, the oil. There was only one day’s worth of oil left and it burned for eight nights.

When I started celebrating Hanukkah about eight years ago, that’s what I related to: the hope and the miracle of candles. While it is my heritage, in that my maternal grandmother fled Germany in 1938 for her and her daughters’ safety to escape persecution as a Jew, she always took more of her identity from being German rather than being Jewish. She never shared anything Jewish. Still, as a lifelong UU, I adopted the tradition of Hanukkah, began lighting candles, sitting on the couch with my husband Stephen watching them burn and contemplating the idea of hope: that one candle is enough to bless the world and we can add to it everyday.

Last year, while on internship in Port Townsend, WA, some 3,000 miles away from Stephen, I created a new tradition of singing “Light One Candle,” as the Hanukkah candles burned. Through that ritual, I came to appreciate the “resistance to oppression” factor of the story. I recognized how Hanukkah is not just a recognition of the miracles of light, a celebration of something that has come before us, but rather it is a reminder, for me, to do our part to carry the light of freedom forward.

Peter Yarrow’s song, “Light One Candle,” is a call to action. And it is a wonderful reminder that Hanukkah is a story of miracles and a call to action for justice, and for overcoming oppression.

We honor that call to justice today and we reach out in solidarity with people throughout the nation and, indeed, the world with the cry that Black Lives Matter. Indeed, in this time of Advent, the time of waiting and anticipation of a world turning toward peace and love, we light one candle that the growing awareness, of systemic racism will begin to dismantle the oppression that is experienced by people of color, particularly black men in our country.

SERMON: Telling Our Story

Over 65 years ago, an enterprising handful of church people sat in the home of A. Lowell Hallock in Baldwin, NY and decided that there was an urgent need for a Unitarian Church in Nassau County. They thought the ground was fertile for like-minded people with a ferocity for free-mind thinking. Four meetings later, on April 14, 1949, the South Nassau Unitarian Fellowship was established with \$30 in its treasury.

On December 3, 1950 the Reverend Dr. Lon Ray Call and his wife, Lucy, arrived to help establish the South Nassau Unitarian Church (SNUC). Ninety people repeated the great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

More people became involved and larger and larger rented spaces were sought. Sunday school classes were overflowing. By 1954, the Parish House, here at 228 So. Ocean Avenue was purchased. Planning for this building began in 1956 and its dedication was in 1959.

In 1959, double services were instituted. The Religious Education classes had to limit their enrollment to 20 children per each class. There was a Junior Youth Fellowship and a LRY (Liberal Religious Youth) for high schoolers. Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at one of the LRY conferences.

When Lon Ray retired in 1960, the Reverend Straughan Gettier was called. Things were active then, too, and there were unconfirmed rumors that Straughan was perhaps too close with some of the congregants and much of the congregation was relieved when he resigned in 1963.

That paved the way to the next minister the Reverend Dr. Carleton Miner Fisher in August 1963. Carlton had been President of the Universalist Church of America.

A hectic and productive 13 years followed. There were regular performances of dramas and comedies, annual arts festivals, juried art shows, concerts, plays, poetry readings and other events of artistic merit. The annual Christmas dinner-dance gala featured skits by the

"Hamsters." June saw the presentation of World Bibles to the Sunday School graduates and gifts to the teachers. Church picnics were held at different state parks. The music program flourished with a choir, a youth choir and Sunday services were often embellished by instrumental ensembles.

An active women's group started annual rummage sales. They were so successful and there were so many good items left over, that a thrift shop was opened. Several smaller groups, most notably the Unicrafters, met to make handmade items for community craft events. Purpose, camaraderie, and the exploration of spirituality and creativity were all deeply shared in those gatherings of the women.

The church and the world outside its doors was exploding with energy.

Congregational turmoil erupted during the Viet Nam War. Members supported draft counseling and some marched in Washington. Carlton ran for Congress as an anti-war candidate. Anti-war advocates spoke at the church, among them: the Berrigan Brothers (after their meeting FBI agents took name tags from the name tag rack), famous atheist Madelyn Murray O'Hare, Daniel Ellsberg (Pentagon Papers), Jimmy Breslin, Gloria Steinem and others. A 24-hour civil rights vigil was held in this room.

SNUC was at the heart of liberal power and expression. It had a unique voice and it provided a place for liberal Long Islanders to congregate, a place to argue, a place to worship and a place to form community.

When racial ferment emerged within the UU denomination, SNUC was front and center. The congregation supported the Black Affairs Council, known as BAC, by purchasing its bonds to aid their cause. It also supported the group known as BAWA, which promoted cooperative endeavors between blacks and whites. Carlton unsuccessfully ran for president of the UUA.

The Parish House was razed in December 1973. Carlton retired from the ministry in 1975.

In May 1976, the Reverend James Wentz was called. The turmoil of the outside world became the turmoil of the inside. Following a pretty much even split of the congregant, Jim's ended his ministry here in 1980. The Reverend Dr. Donald Marshall, who had held various posts in the mass communications field, became interim minister.

In January 1983, the Reverend Nannene Wright Gowdy, Assistant Minister of the First Congregational Society, Unitarian, at Jamaica Plains, Massachusetts, was chosen to be the sixth minister. She brought an intensity to connect to numerous community groups and encouraged SNUC members to volunteer at the INN, a soup kitchen in Freeport. Her ministry lasted until August 1988, when she was called to the First Church, Unitarian, in Littleton, MA.

The Reverend Marilyn Magnussen became the interim minister for the next two years before Dr. John R. Jablonski arrived in March 1991. A retired professor of biology, the story is that Dr. Jablonski took early retirement in 1993 when facing medical problems.

The Reverend Beverly Bumbaugh was the next interim. At this time, SNUC voted to become the South Nassau Unitarian Universalist Congregation. In 1995, the Reverend Richard Erhardt, a young, enthusiastic minister from the Hollis Unitarian Church, was unanimously called.

Richard served the congregation until 2003 when he left to serve a congregation in Seattle and the congregation had by two interim ministers: The Rev. Paul Ratzlaff and the Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones. Paul worked as a congregational healer and introduced Nonviolent Communication and meditation.

In 2005, the congregation welcomed the Rev. Catherine Torpey. Catherine served the congregation for nine years, during which time it settled organizationally into a phase of celebrating the arts and beauty through thoughtful worship and growing bevy of small group ministries, including yoga, meditation, improvisation, non-violent communication, drumming, choir, a prayer group, and a Jesus study group. Outreach to the community continued through the Thrift Shop, supporting the INN, the Interfaith Nutrition Network, and RE-sponsored social justice activities, most notably participation with the Midnight Run, an organization that provides services to the homeless in New York City. Catherine mentored amazing seminary students including Eve Stevens and Allison Palm.

Catherine announced that she was leaving the congregation in March, and the Board of Trustees made the hard decision to move the congregation in a fiscally responsible direction in the hiring of a ½-time interim minister in preparation of calling a part-time minister in 2016. Transitional Minister Laurie Stuart, that's me, was hired and met with the board at its August meeting at the Imperial Diner.

So that's the timeline. The congregation began in 1949 with liberals seeking liberals. It grew and flourished through the '60s and the 70s. Cruised through the '80s and the '90s, took off again from the mid 90s to the mid 2000s and, in some sense, before settled into a graceful and cohesive mature age.

In its ebbs and flows, it has always held onto the spirit of free-will thinking. It has always held to its original mission to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

In one sense, and really in every sense, our institutions, indeed, this institution follows larger cyclical patterns.

Gilbert R. Rendle in his book "Behavioral Covenants in Congregations," of which there are three copies in the minister's office, (there's undoubtedly a story about there) cites the work of historians William Strauss and Neil Howe who tell our national story in terms of the cycle of generations. According to their description, we are now in the third phase of a recurring pattern of four cycles. The four cycles include a "high", an "awakening, an "unraveling, and a "crisis."

A high begins when society perceives that the basic issues of a prior crisis have been resolved. The "American High" was the consolidation of our nation following World War II and, as identified by Strauss and Howe, lasted from 1946 to 1964.

An awakening begins when events trigger a revolution in the culture and the awakening is designed to compensate or correct what is felt to be missing in the high. Strauss and Howe identify our most recent awakening as the “Consciousness Revolution” of 1964 to 1984.

An unraveling is the phase that consolidates and formalizes the new direction uncovered by the awakening, and it stands in contrast, or as the polar opposite, of the high. According to Strauss and Howe, the current unraveling that we are experiencing began in 1984 and they have given it the name “Culture Wars.”

Interestingly enough, this congregation’s history follows that same pattern, that same cycle of 22 years. In its nearly 66 years, it has experienced a high, an awakening and an unraveling.

These cycles have roots in generational changes. In this most recent cycle, Strauss and Howe say “The emerging Boomer agenda was a deliberate antithesis to everything the prototypical GI male has stressed during the high: spiritualism over science, gratification over patience, fractiousness over conformity, rage over friendliness, negativism over positivism – and especially self over community. (*Rendel: Page 16*)

The individual was liberated as the civic habits were weakened. “The individual no longer serves the needs of society; rather, an obliging society has trained individuals to be both aware of and responsive to their own sense of community.” (*Rendel: Page 17*)

In a definitive article that has helped to shape much of the dialogue about the current state of public life, Robert Putnam, Dillon Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University notes “striking evidence . . . that the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades.” (*Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” Journal of Democracy 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 65.*)

“In an article called “Bowling Alone,” he writes that while the number of people bowling has increased, the number of leagues has decreased. Similarly the number of people who participate in religious congregations, civic organizations and fraternal organizations have decreased as well. (*Rendel, page 18*)

A recent story on NPR told of a gym that used to have a basketball court where groups of people played together. Now that space holds elliptical machines and treadmills. In popularity of card games, bridge has been replaced with poker.

This is the landscape now of the South Nassau UU Congregation. While in 1949, the founders saw the landscape as a “powerful magnet, bringing together the adherents, staunch advocates and believers of the ‘free mind principle.’ (*snuuc.org, accessed 12/12*) now in the dawn of 2015, the landscape is one of individualism and a decline in religious and civic organizations as a whole.

We need to know our history; we need to know the larger context. And we need to understand our mission going forward.

Yours is an amazing history. It has legacy. It is a legacy. It is a legacy that follows larger societal trends: a high, an awakening, a plateau and a decline, an unraveling. The next step in the societal trend is a crisis. And from where I stand, as demonstrations, some of them violent, have been happening all week, the crisis is in full force.

The crisis at SNUUC has not been and will not be nearly as intense. There is legacy here. There is soul, which tempers the intensity of unraveling. If one remains true to one's mission and values, remains in covenant with others, I believe that it limits just how far the pendulum can swing. So in this landscape, what is the next high on the horizon? How will you use your legacy? What do you want to be going forward? How will you respond to the crisis in the nation?

Interesting enough, what I have noticed in my time here is that you use your great legacy as a way to wound yourself in the present moment. "We used to be vibrant. We used to have a large RE program. We used to have large fairs." We used to, use we used to, we used to. The underlying message is that where you are right now is simply not good enough.

The old days were better. And maybe they were. More people were more involved. People gathered for the good of the order of the congregation, they showed up in droves. And that's not how it is anymore. That's not how it is in most of our civic and religious organizations.

But this is where we are. This is where we find ourselves. We are part of great cycle. We are in the midst of an unraveling and after the crisis, there will be a new high. It started way before this congregation and will continue way beyond.

So let us sit for a moment and lament. Repeat after me: We used to have a 3-day Holiday Fair. Look around and say, "This sanctuary used to be packed on a Sunday morning." Feel the loss of that. Really wallow in it. Look at your neighbor and shake your head "no." Feel the loss.

And now take a deep breath.

Appreciate this sanctuary;

Look at all the symbols in the lighted logo of this congregation.

Appreciate that you are debt free.

Take another deep breath and let your pride expand with this litany of accomplishments.

Here is your legacy:

We built this congregation from a group of 13 committed people.

One of our ministers ran for Congress.

Another minister ran for president of the UUA.

Eleanor Roosevelt came to a LYR retreat

We argued and were relevant during the Viet Nam War

Now we provide small group ministry for many more than our numbers

We serve the community of Freeport with a Thrift Store

We serve lunch at the INN on Mondays

We take care of each other

We had a Holiday Fair last week that was lovely.

Our History Night event was warm and fun
We are preparing for the next phrase of our life as a congregation.
As our community awakens to systemic racism and economic inequities
Volatile climate change, we are here.
We are a haven and a sanctuary for liberal thought and social justice.
We are here
today, and it is enough.
It is a blessing that the South Nassau UU Congregation exists today.
It is a blessing that we will use to bless the world.
We are together to manifest that blessing, and bring that blessing into our aching world.

We are the ones we have been waiting for. Our legacy bolsters us. Our legacy is a new beginning. At this time of advent, the waiting of good things to come; at this time of Hanukkah, the miracle of the candles and the spirit of a small band that took back the temple; in solidarity for those protesting in the streets and as allies of those who are in mortal danger because of the color of their skins, we are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the ones who have come after. We are here. We are here.

Blessed be and amen for that.

CLOSING WORDS: Prayer of Comfort and Challenge by Rosemary Bray McNatt

In this time of challenge, I offer this prayer of comfort and challenge:

Gracious spirit of all our lives, God of many names and many voices
And one abundant love:

At this time of holy unrest, give us the peace that comes
When we know why we struggle and what we struggle for.

Spirit of life in all its fullness, renew us and remind us that we who have answered your call
Were never promised ease, or wealth, or appreciation.
Help us to remember that honor and praise are yours, not ours.
Remind us that we serve the great cause of justice, not ourselves.

Give us, we pray, a true joy in the community we form each time we gather
To pray, to march, to interrupt ordinary time to create sacred time, a time to help others awaken
to what is so very wrong in our world.

Help us to be kind, even to those with whom we struggle. Help us to be, in the raising of our
voices and the marching of our feet, agents of a radical love that holds us all.

Finally, help us to be grateful, grateful to live in these times when great works of justice await
our hands and hearts and minds and spirit. Prepare us so that we might do all that is in our power
to change this world, so that the whole creation might see Beloved Community, not tomorrow,
but today. We ask these things in the name of all that is holy. Amen.

BENEDICTION AND EXTINGUISHING OF CHALICE

As we extinguish this flame we give thanks to all those who have come before us, who have passed on this flame as we carry it forward in the days ahead. Until we are together again.