

The Eyes of History Are Upon Us
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Cohen
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, March 23, 2003

READING *A Brave and Startling Truth* by Maya Angelou

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth
And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms

When we come to it
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
And faces sooted with scorn and scrubbed clean
When battlefields and coliseums
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughter
Up with the bruised and bloody grass
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
When the pennants are waving gaily
When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of abuse

When we come to it

Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
Not the Grand Canyon
Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

SERMON

I have talked with a great number of my colleagues in getting ready for this morning's service, and most of us have agreed that this is certainly one of the most difficult Sundays of our time in ministry. This seems to be as true for people who have been ministers for decades as it is for those, like me, who are relatively new to ministry. In some ways there have been Sundays that have been more emotionally difficult, but the task of knowing what to say to you this morning is an overwhelming and intimidating one.

I know that, sitting here in this room, there are people with all manner of opinions about what is happening in the world right now. I know that some of you are deeply opposed to the war in Iraq. I know that others of you support the military action taking place. I believe that all of us share concern for those on both sides of the conflict as well as the Iraqi people and that we all hope for a greater peace throughout our entire world. But despite what we share, there is also, within this congregation, as within our country, deep disagreements about what is right in this moment of history.

Though we have, in many ways, been expecting the events of this week, it has still been a difficult, upsetting week for most. The images of battle shown on television are striking—remarkable for how much we can see as it is happening, horrifying for their level of destruction and for all they do not show, appalling in their celebration of technology while ignoring the human cost. I find myself watching probably too much of the television coverage of what is happening eight hours to our east. Part of it is that I don't want to miss any major new developments. Part of it is also the pull of the drama of it. I am sickened by my own fascination. I am deeply saddened that humanity is capable of such violence, that we have created technology that allows us to inflict such violence at great distances simply by pushing a button. I mourn the loss of life on both sides.

This week, we have seen not only the images of war, but also images of protest around the world, including the protest in Yemen in which three were killed. We have talked with our family and friends about what is happening. Some of us gathered in prayer here on Thursday night. We have each dealt with our own thoughts and feelings, our own hopes and fears during this time. And now we gather together here, in this religious community, in worship, in concern, in hope.

I titled this sermon *The Eyes of History Are Upon Us*. I believe this is true. I believe that this moment in time is a critical one, not just for our country but for the entire world. I do not know what history will say about this time, how we will be judged. That is not only because I don't know what actions we and others will take but also because the complexities and uncertainties of this time mean that trying to predict what will happen

in the next months and years is simply impossible. This feels like a time when, as Bill Sinkford wrote in the prayer from earlier this morning, the world will become either more divided or more united. It seems apparent that there is great danger for everyone in division, and perhaps great possibility and hope if we somehow build more common ground. It matters very much what we do now—as individuals, as a country, as members of the great human family.

One of the things that concerns me deeply at this time is the tendency, and I see it everywhere (including within myself), to fall into dichotomized thinking. To see the situation, our options, our choices as simple and clear, a matter of obvious right or wrong, good or evil. This predisposition always exists in the human soul and has been a part of the conversations around Iraq from the beginning, but I believe the appeal of and desire for simplicity has become much stronger since the fighting began. And I see this propensity toward either/or thinking on all sides of the issue.

It's all too easy and I think much more comfortable to see the world in dichotomies than it is to really look at the complexity of the issues. We all long for simple and clear choices here. We all wish to be on the side of the good. We all want to *know* for sure that we are right. But, in the heat of the moment, things are not clear. We look back through history and the right choices seem so obvious, both when we made them and when we did not. But I suspect that those situations did not feel as clear at the time as they look from our vantage point. History may look back at this time and make judgements about who was right, who was wrong, and perhaps what ought to have happened. But here, in the midst of it, there is little that is clear, nothing that is simple.

I certainly understand that the language of war and the language of protest is either/or language. It's hard to make a complex argument on a piece of poster board or in an eight word chant; and war is inevitably understood as the good guys verses the bad guys (with both sides thinking of themselves as the good guys). I admire those who feel strongly about this issue and are willing to put themselves on the line for their beliefs. I am glad that thousands and thousands have been willing to voice and live their convictions.

The problem is not having an opinion and vocally and visibly sharing that opinion. The freedom to do just this is part of the foundation of our country.

The thing that worries me is that there are very few voices reminding us how complicated this all actually is. I am concerned that the different sides have begun to demonize each other, each so sure that they are right and the others are wrong. No one seems to be listening to anybody else.

I think the leadership of our country, and President Bush in particular, has set a polarizing tone, saying that people are either with us or against us. Leaving no room for disagreement in relationship. Leaving no room for genuine discourse. No room for learning from the positions and experiences of others. Our administration uses language that frightens me, about being confident that God is on our side. (Of course, the religious left is not immune from thinking such things, even if we generally restrain ourselves from saying it.)

The truth is that all of us are only human. *All* of us are limited in our knowledge and understanding; all of us can see only so far. Yes, we must fight for what we believe in, but we must do so with genuine humility. Each one of us must remember that we might be wrong.

This morning we welcomed twenty-three people into membership here at AUUC, people who have joined the church during the past year. I hope that you all will take the time to meet these people if you have not already, and to read the short bios put together by our Membership Committee. Months ago, knowing that we would celebrate these new members today, I had intended to talk in my sermon this morning about why I believe membership in this religious community is important. Then that idea was, as they say, overcome by events. Except that as I reflected on what I wanted to say today, I realized that my thoughts about why joining this religious community is an important and significant act fit in well with my concerns about what is happening in the world.

This is the thing. I believe that theology, that religion is a matter of life and death.

It matters what we believe. The foundational aspects of Unitarian Universalism—our belief that each and every human life is sacred and our faith that all of humanity is fundamentally one—this is a life-saving way of looking at the world. This is a perspective that celebrates life, *all* life. And it is something special. So much of religion divides people, into the saved and the damned, the chosen and those not chosen, into us and them. Those divisions have led to unspeakable evil done in the name of God. Evil based simply on the idea that we are different from one another, that some of us are better than others. Unitarian Universalism rejects this idea. Unitarian Universalism claims that, on a fundamental level, we are one, connected to each other so deeply that nothing can separate us. Think of how little of the world operates this way. Think of how little of this sentiment we have heard in recent weeks.

Religion and theology are matters of life and death because they are not only about what we believe in our hearts and minds, but because they influence how we act in the world, the choices we make, the lives we live. Though it is tempting to think of religion as a purely private affair (something we Unitarian Universalists are particularly likely to do), the truth is our fundamental beliefs and the beliefs of others have a huge impact on the world. The theology at the heart of Unitarian Universalism—this theology of unity and sanctity—if we are to take it seriously, is a significant challenge to us in our dealings with others. It reminds us not to separate ourselves from others, something I know I do all too easily and often. It reminds us that each individual human being is due respect and honor, no matter how much we disagree with her, or how much we dislike him.

But religion is not merely about what we believe and how that impacts our actions in the world. It is also how about *how* we come to those beliefs, and what *that* teaches us about how to live in the world. As Unitarian Universalists, we share some basic things with one another about the development of our faith. First, we believe that revelation is on-going. In other words, the Holy, the good is always revealing itself. We need only open our eyes. We are liberal in the classic sense; striving to be open to new insight and differing ideas. We do not believe that we have come to the end of religious knowledge

or resources, but instead, we welcome new sources of knowledge, healing, and hope. This is one of the reasons that we come together. This is why Unitarian Universalism is a communal religion.

In addition, we celebrate the diversity of belief not only in our congregations but in the wider world as well. We acknowledge and appreciate that others have windows onto truth and justice that we do not, just as we have windows that they do not. The world is richer for this variety of perspectives and we do not make it our goal to convince everyone that we have the one true way.

Finally, one of the central elements of our approach to religion is use of reason, in addition to experience and tradition, in the formation of our religious beliefs. This is not always easy. It takes hard work to make sure our faith aligns with both our mind and our heart, but I believe it leads to wholeness and integrity in our lives. What happens here on Sunday mornings fits with what happens the rest of the week. There is no part of ourselves that is not involved in the religious endeavor.

My hope is that these things are true not only for how we approach religion, but also for how we approach the moral, political, and social issues we face. In these other arenas as well I believe we are strengthened if we acknowledge that there is always more to learn, that others have insights and wisdom that we do not, just as we have insight and wisdom that they do not. As with our religious journey, the more we share these parts of ourselves with others, the deeper and richer our knowledge will be. And because we are aware of our own limitedness, we celebrate the diversity of this world which offers us so many different perspectives if we are willing to be open to them, to learn from them.

Just as reason, experience, and tradition form the basis of our religious beliefs, so, too, can they be the foundation for our moral, political, and social beliefs. This means that we each need to struggle to think through the dilemmas we face for ourselves. We must apply both our minds and our hearts to the problems of the world.

The danger of this approach is the possibility of sliding into a moral relativism in which we never have the courage of our convictions. In which we cannot fight for the good, or stand up for those values which we hold most dear.

The blessing of this way of understanding the world is that we are uniquely situated to appreciate and articulate the complexity of the world. We have been trained in our approach to religion to manage ambiguity and difference. To remain open to insight and learning from others. To guard against a kind of certainty that leaves little or no room for anyone else. These skills are so desperately needed at this difficult point in time.

One of the reasons that I believe belonging to a Unitarian Universalist church is important is because here, in this community, we get to practice all of this with one another. Certainly, anyone can come to services regularly and become a part of the community, but by signing the membership book, we commit to this approach to

religion and to life. And the more of us that join together in this visible and powerful way, the larger presence we will have in our world.

Being the voice for complexity is rarely popular. As we have seen most sharply in the past few days, people want simple answers to difficult questions; they want certainty where there is none. I believe that part of the reason Unitarian Universalism has remained such a small denomination is just for this reason—it takes hard work to be here, to struggle with these issues, to take the risk of openness and humility. But what a gift to the world we have to give.

I will tell you, I have actually had an easier time seeing the complexity of the current world situation than in articulating my own belief about what is right. Perhaps I have been just a little too well trained as a Unitarian Universalist. I have read a lot, thought a lot, talked a lot with a lot of different people, and still I feel unsettled.

I do know this. I believe that pre-emptive war is wrong. Unless we can see into the future, we are unleashing incredible power and destruction in response to something that has not happened yet and may very well not happen at all. I am deeply suspicious of most of the rhetoric from the administration about why this war is just, and frankly I simply do not believe a lot of what we have been told. I think the costs of what we are doing are going to be overwhelming, not only in casualties on both sides, but in the basic stability of the world and in our country's ability to offer moral leadership in the on-going struggle for justice and peace. I am afraid that we have set ourselves on a path of destruction that will be hard to change.

At the same time, I am extremely disappointed that no one—not the Democrats, not the United Nations, not France—offered genuine options that went beyond the either/or choice of going to war or doing next-to-nothing. The Sojourners, a Christian ministry focused on spiritual renewal and social justice, called together a religious coalition to develop an alternative to war for defeating Saddam Hussein. They put together a six stage plan that included removing Hussein and the Baath Party from power, enforcing coercive disarmament, fostering a democratic Iraq, organizing a huge humanitarian effort immediately for the people of Iraq, recommitting to the Middle East peace process, and refocusing our efforts on the struggle against terrorism. All without the major military assault that has now begun. They put together this thoughtful, comprehensive plan, but the world had already become too polarized. No one listened.

My hope would be that America, other countries, and our international organizations would take seriously the challenge of building a more just world. That we would all be more pro-active in offering assistance when it is needed, in holding leaders accountable for how they treat their people and interact with the rest of the world (this includes our own leaders, of course), and in looking beyond our own private interests to the interests of the wider world and the generations to come. This country has a tremendous amount of power, both military and otherwise. With that power comes responsibility in the world. Responsibility which, to this point, we have not always lived up to.

The only way we will even have a chance is if we are able to acknowledge just how complex this world is. In the heat of the moment, the only way through is to listen to one another, to be open to the possibility that we might not have all the answers.

I hope that here in this congregation we will continue this struggle with one another. Beginning tomorrow and then every week for five weeks, I will be holding a twenty-minute peace vigil here at the church at 7 pm each Monday night. I hope that, if you feel so moved, you will join me so together we can offer our prayers for peace. At the back of the sanctuary, you will find a poster offering our thoughts and prayers to those fighting at this time. If you know of people who are overseas, I invite you to write their names on this poster so we might hold them in our thoughts. In addition, if you have mailing addresses for friends or family overseas, I invite you to put them on the list which is next to the poster so that we might keep in touch with them.

I hope that all of you will continue wrestling with the challenges of this time, with each other and within your own hearts and minds. Share your opinions, your hopes, your concerns in whatever ways possible. Listen to others who are doing the same. Join the demonstrations. Write letters to the Congress and the administration. Write letters to the newspaper. Write letters to the troops. Meditate. Pray. Spend time in the beautiful blooming spring that surrounds us. Hug those you love. Play with your children and grandchildren if you have them. Turn off the television and read a book. Walk your dog if you've got one. Do whatever you need to do not only to confront the complexities of this world, but also to celebrate the blessings. We will only be able to work to save the world if we remember that it is worth saving.

Amen.