

COMPOSING A NEW WAY
SERMON Presented by Reverend Scott Sammler-Michael
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At The
Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church

“We can never be born enough.”¹

On November 22, 1963 two events happened which would radically alter the USA. I am sure many of you remember one of these events – the Assassination of John F. Kennedy. Who can recall the other? That same day, in a helicopter Walt Disney flew over orange orchards south of Orlando, Florida, a place known as the Reedy Creek Improvement area, and cried, “There it is!” Disney thereby designated the location of America’s Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, or EPCOT. Most of us know this area as Disney World. But Disney World was built to attract people to the region and to fund EPCOT.

Disney’s real passion was to create a perfect planned community, where violence and drugs would be absent, where children would love school and be well-behaved, and everyone would live in harmony aided by the latest technology. Disney designed his Utopian dream to control those dangerous cultural forces that seemed to sully every previous attempt to compose a new way of life, free from want, greed, abuse, and unenlightened self-interest. Sadly, by the time it was ready to open in 1972, EPCOT’s edgeless vision of a controlled, cookie-cutter future had little appeal for Americans, and it bombed. Dollars trumped vision and EPCOT was transformed from the Community of Tomorrow to a land of “out-of-context” attractions, like phony “coastlines” where one could buy waterfront time shares but never own any property, and a bogus “Gay Paree” complete with a scale model replica of the Eiffel Tower.

Disney’s shattered dream morphed into an aggressive franchising behemoth whose sterile films and pasteurized versions of American history many critics argue display troubling trends in America today – that we are afraid to confront the realities of human beings living in society, we resist the hard truths about American history, and we believe we can examine our world without historical context.

It is unfair to place this all on Disney – yet he *understood* what many long for. People buy what appeals to them, what they want to hear and see, what they believe is safe for their children. EPCOT’s failure reveals both concerns and a promise. The concerns – the neglect of history, the franchising of everything, life out-of-context. The promise – the chance to start over.

When I was studying the great writers of the Enlightenment – Erasmus, Voltaire, Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, my professor told me – “What the Enlightenment understood, and what is engrained in the American ethos because we were founded on Enlightenment principles, is that we always have a second chance to get it right, a chance to start over. The USA is fundamentally about rebirth.”² As e. e. cummings says, “We can never be born enough.”

¹ e. e. cummings, from the “Introduction to The New Poems.”

² Dr Bill Ettinger, UMBC, 1990

America is not chained to history. We are not locked by the horns in millennia-long struggles like the Irish and British, the Serbs and Croats, the Arabs and the Jews. This lightness of burden provides a nimbleness that enables us to move in a different direction in an instant. When we are not careful that lightness can lead to rootlessness, but when we act with wisdom and focus we are able to turn our ship around rather quickly and sail toward justice. We are able to compose a new way and live into it.

The song we shared earlier comes from the Hebrew prophet Micah. It proclaims ending war is possible. The prophet writes – “And every one ‘neath a vine and fig tree, Shall live in peace and unafraid.” Many thoughtful and faithful people find this a noble aim, but they often add it is simpleminded to believe it could ever come to pass. Today the US is involved in two major wars, and the Israeli Government continues its attack on Gaza. The actions of governments seem to continue to make this dream of Micah a distant cry of hope. But if enough people desire to end war, do we not have the power to end it? The question is “how many is enough?” John Lennon once sang, “War is over if we want it.”³ Could not the Israelis and Palestinians benefit from a shorter memory, a breath of our American nimbleness, a chance to breathe deep and say, let us start over? Is the prophet Micah wrong?

One night in 2003 in my sister’s pub, I sat reading a book, “Readings on Nonviolence,” edited by peace activist Howard Zinn. The pub’s head chef, Kevin, came out for a break, noticed my book, and whined, “Why are you reading that?” A trifle bit irritated, I stared at him, and I noticed he was standing under a television. The TV was tuned to CNN, and there was live coverage of the Iraq War. I frowned and pointed to the screen, “Because someone has to find a way to put an end to that!”

~ Boy, I told him ...

He shrugged and said, “p-shaw, get real man. Not in this world.” And that made me feel – well – belligerent.

Here I was in a pub reading a book about the folly of violence, and I wanted to shake some sense into the best rockfish chef on the Chesapeake.

Aware of the tension between my book and my feelings, I simply murmured, “It can’t hurt to read about it.” Trust me; the last person one wants to alienate is the best chef in town. ☺

Kevin just said, “Whatever,” and went back to the kitchen. I shook it off and went back to reading.

At the end of his shift Kevin came over to me and sat down.

He said, “Man, I’m sorry for going off on you. I’ve been thinking about all this warfare, and there has to be a better way. ... Do you think I could borrow that book?”

So, of course, I gave it to him.

It still amazes me. So long as we have a chance to pause, step back and consider a new way, to compose ways of being focused on honoring life, resisting greed, warfare, domination and death, there is hope. This hope is the seed of what many religious leaders call “The Beloved Community.” The Beloved Community is described by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. like this: “our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and

³ John Lennon

our nation....”⁴ It is a vision of total relatedness. This implies a true integration of all peoples based on love and the knowledge that we are all in this together.

In our tradition the Universalist Hosea Ballou helps define the Beloved Community, writing about our interconnectedness and the need to emphasize God’s love. Ballou’s “Treatise on Atonement,” written in 1805, proclaims Universal Salvation, the idea that all people will be *saved*. Ballou asserts Jesus did not die for our sins – a loving God would never slaughter his only son. Ballou also claimed that it was not God that needed to have His love restored for us because of the Fall of Adam. Indeed, Ballou claimed the opposite – Humankind needed its love for God restored. We struggle in this trying world – many of us in confusion, poverty, warfare, pain and misery – we seek answers, but those answers do not always come. We suffer, and know not why. Yet many religious leaders tell us that even with our incomplete knowledge, our experiences of sorrow and disappointment, we risk burning forever in torment for “sins” committed during our brief span here on earth. Ballou believed the idea of Hell was the projection of our most base human inclinations onto the mind and will of God. He found this concept of Hell offensive. *Humans* want one another to suffer for what they have done, but God wants us to learn, transform, live in peace, and be reunited with our inherent divinity. Ballou’s theology of God’s love and promise was labeled “The Most Prominent Heresy of Our Times.”

Ballou believed that one need not be a Christian to be saved or to be good and blessed. And many liberal Christians agree. In exploring hostility and forgiveness, Paul Tillich reveals that, “we have hostility towards those who reject us. Often, when God does not seem to answer our prayers, we feel rejected, and we become angry with God for the “rejection.” That is why we need to be reconciled to God. We need to be created anew by being re-united with the ultimate source of our being.”⁵ Paul Tillich describes what he calls the New Being. The New Being is what we can become if we are freed to live into our most authentic selves. The New Being requires three things. First is reconciliation with God. Whatever it is we find to be at the center of our being, that which gives us life and breath and faith, we must be reconciled to that source when we feel it has rejected us.

Reconciliation, the restoration of our love for ourselves, for life or for God, leads us to reunion. What was separated is reunited – that from which we grew distant – our love, our dreams, our very life, the sources of our power and solace – with these we are reunited. Reunion with one’s self also requires reunion with others. “Nothing is more passionately demanded than social healing. The New Being lives within history” and between human beings.⁶ Reunion is the sacred call to restore relations between people and groups of people, between nations, and between us and our planet.

And it is in Church that this reunion of human to human to nature is most pronounced, intentional, confessed and realized. This is what we mean when we say that ours is a life-saving faith. Here we carve out time to court reunion and seek reconciliation.

Here we do the hard work of restoring relationships, restoring communities – part and parcel of the healing of souls. Here we call ourselves to claim our power to lovingly demand and materialize justice. Here we save the world one soul, one relationship at a time.

⁴ from *A Testament of Hope*, p 252

⁵ Adapted from “The New Being,” Paul Tillich, *Bison*, Lincoln, NE, 2005, pages 10-25.

⁶ *Ibid*, p 18.

Reconciliation and Reunion. The last component of Tillich's New Being is a word we don't use a lot in Unitarian Universalist Churches. This is also our theme for the month of April -

Resurrection. Resurrection here does not mean the rising from the dead or fantastical images of corpses, graves and stones rolled from tombs. Resurrection is a metaphor, like the Phoenix rising from the ashes. It is the New Being born out of the toil and struggle of the old; The New You that you find when you compose a healthier, stronger, more authentic way of living in the world. Resurrection is the materialization of your integrity and potential. Every moment we have the chance to create ourselves anew. Every day we can be born into a version of ourselves that we never believed possible. "Resurrection happens *now*, or it does not happen at all"⁷ – within history, nature, community, and nurtured in church.

"We can never be born enough." Reverend Rob Hardies, Senior Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church, in Washington, DC, once wrote: "I don't know anyone who doesn't yearn for something more. I don't know anyone who doesn't say, I wish I could love better, love bigger." ... "Isn't life always calling us to rebirth?" "When a loved one dies and we find the strength to go on, we are born again, ... When we come out of the closet and find the strength to be openly gay or lesbian, we are born again.... With each rebirth, that transforming love takes hold of our heart, our battered old heart, and stretches it further than we thought it could stretch."⁸

Our hearts are more resilient than we ever imagined. They long for us to be born again, and again, and again ...

We have this power. Where there is hope there is life. Our breath and our presence here are signs of hope for lives of deeper meaning and a world of greater justice. Be born again into the life you need to live, the life the world needs you to live. Compose for yourself a New Way, a New Being, Because you can never be born enough.

⁷ Ibid, p24.

⁸ From Rob Hardies Sunday Worship at the UUA GA June, 2005, in Fort Worth, TX.