

JANUARY'S THEME: WITNESS & RESISTANCE
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
JANUARY 5, 2014

OPENING WORDS *from 1993 Nobel lecture ~ Nelson Mandela (adapted)*

[Today we speak] of the challenge of the dichotomies of war and peace, violence and non-violence, racism and human dignity, oppression and repression and liberty and human rights, poverty and freedom from want.

When [the moment of justice] comes, we shall, together, rejoice in a common victory over racism, apartheid and white minority rule.

This reward will not be measured in money. It will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of the children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures.

Thus shall we live, because we will have created a society which recognises that all people are born equal, with each entitled in equal measure to life, liberty, prosperity, human rights and good governance.

Let the strivings of us all, prove Martin Luther King Jr. to have been correct, when he said that humanity can no longer be tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war.

Let the efforts of us all, prove that [Nelson Mandela] was not a mere dreamer.

Let a new age dawn!

STORY FOR ALL *(a story about Nelson Mandela's life, followed by a showing of this video:*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5xhWXzRFks>)

RESPONSIVE READING *The Limits of Tyrants* #579

MESSAGE *The Legacy of Nelson Mandela* ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

In a few weeks, Lori Kyle, our ministerial intern, and today's service co-leader, will be at our seminary in Chicago to take a preaching course, something that is required for her Masters of Divinity degree. She'll have the great fortune of taking that course from Rev. Bill Schultz, the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the former executive director of Amnesty International, and the current executive director of the UU Service Committee...truly a UU prophet. I envy her that.

Still, I had a great fortune too, in that, when attending the inter-denominational Pacific School of Religion, I took not one, but two, preaching courses from Rev. Mary Donovan Turner, a renowned preacher in the Disciples of Christ tradition. I loved those classes, but there was one thing I resisted...one required assignment...which was to take the lectionary text for the week and preach on it. The lectionary is a prescribed rotation of texts with the purpose of covering a good portion of the Bible every three years...pretty much fixing the theme for every Sunday in many Protestant churches. And resist the system though we tried, UU's were not given a

bye on this particular assignment.

I'm often asked how our Unitarian service topics are chosen...since we are without a central sacred text, without a common capital-T truth, without a prescribed liturgical calendar, and also without that Biblical lectionary. So, how are topics chosen?

Well, I choose the topics, mostly. I keep a file that I regularly stuff with articles, essays, blogs, news items...anything I think might be service-material. Once a year, I comb through that file, in order to put together a proposed schedule of services for the church year. I try to pay attention to world events. I listen to you and what is going on in your lives and hearts, considering what might be helpful or inspiring to you. And, certainly, a concern for the health and vitality of this congregation is always part of the mix.

Our schedule is never set in stone; as anyone on the Creative Worship Team can tell you, things move around and shift, as the year evolves. But as I went through my file in preparation for this year, I found there two or three different articles about Mandela; taking that as a sign, and knowing that his health was shaky, we slated today, in a month when we're talking about Witness and Resistance, to focus on his life. All well in advance of his death one month ago today, at the age of 95.

Now, if we were using the lectionary, today would be Epiphany Sunday, which in the Christian tradition, celebrates the revelation of God becoming human, in the form of the man Jesus...a manifestation of the divine in a person. The central story of epiphany is the arrival of the magi at the home of the Jesus child.

We arrive today to see the life of Mandela in like manner. One of our UU sources is this: the "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." Jesus was one of those people...someone who challenges us to confront structures of evil with love...and so was Mandela. Today, in our own way, we are celebrating epiphany...recognizing the ability of a person to make a huge difference in the world. This is UU epiphany Sunday, a bit by design, but also because of a confluence of seemingly unconnected circumstances...a few papers in a file, a relatively random monthly theme choice, the sad death of an extraordinary leader.

Our theme is witness and resistance, not epiphany, you say? Well, Nelson Mandela's life was the epitome of witness and resistance. He first bore witness to the vast and inhumane inequalities he saw, spoke out publicly and loudly, and inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, committed himself to non-violent resistance. But faced with the military-type tactics of the South African government, he came to believe that non-violence could not prevail, and began to advocate for violent measures. That position ultimately led to a treason conviction and his imprisonment...for 27 years...held in an small isolated cell...breaking rocks...resisting a comparable break in his spirit. Over time, he resolved his heart into a firm knowing that non-violence and forgiveness are the most powerful forms of resistance.

What can we learn from his life? What is the legacy that he left for us to continue?

Witness and resistance are two ways that we can 'work for a just and sustainable world' which

is part of our purpose as a congregation, and we'll be talking more about that next week. To witness is see or experience something, and then to document or represent what we have seen, through the lens of our values and beliefs. It is most often characterized by 'speaking out' or 'speaking up' to ensure that unjust realities are exposed and acknowledged. To practice resistance to fight against, or resist, any injustice in the status quo, and in so doing, to promote the change we want to see in the world.

Certainly, Nelson Mandela lived a life of witness and resistance. But as I ponder his life and legacy, I find myself conflicted about what exactly to take away from his example...something that will lead to my own transformation, and yours... something that will inspire me to my own witness and resistance...and yours.

For indeed, our witness and resistance is needed. Although we do not live within the context of sanctioned apartheid, there are many in our community and nation, most particularly our aboriginal peoples, who live lives of a practical apartheid...consigned to lives apart, with fewer benefits than non-indigenous Canadians. And, we live in a society where a growing apartheid separates the haves and the have-nots...we live in a society where not every child is born to a loving family within a supportive community, where not every child is guaranteed healthy food to eat, or a quality education.

And yet, we are a country of great wealth and relative power. I read in these weeks the story of Mandela's trip to Canada shortly after his release from prison, a trip taken to show gratitude to Brian Mulroney and the Canadian government, who Mandela thanked for being "steadfast friends of our struggling people," by putting diplomatic and economic pressure on the South African apartheid regime. Mulroney said that he did what he did because the very notion of apartheid was anathema to him, but I suspect he also responded to pressure from Canadian civil society groups. It is possible for us to do something.

It's also possible to choose to look at Mandela's life through a cynical lens...I mean, even Mandela himself said that he was an ordinary man who became a leader because of extraordinary circumstances. Extraordinary circumstances, a perfect synchronicity of circumstances, that lining up of events that puts one in the right place at the right time...like a star leading three foreigners to a messiah...cannot be expected to be part of everyone's life. Speaking for myself...I was not born of royalty as Mandela was. I am not a leader among the oppressed, as he was. I do not have the inborn 'star quality' that he had. And frankly, I'm not sure I have a heart the size that he had...a heart big enough to forgive my jailers....a heart big enough to believe that "the oppressor must be liberated as surely as the oppressed" ...a heart big enough to insist that South Africa belongs to white Africans as well as black.

How does one get a heart like that? In his autobiography, Mandela wrote, "I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth. But a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, Henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise." And this heart...that would fight the system and stand up for his people...this heart, I can admire and understand.

But what of the heart of someone who, while in prison, asks for Afrikaans poetry to read, so that he could come to understand the minds of the architects of apartheid? What of the heart of someone who wrote to his wife from his cell in 1970, after being denied the ability to attend the funerals of his mother and his eldest son: "I feel my heart pumping hope to every part of my body, warming my blood and peppering my spirits." What of the heart of someone who walks out of prison saying, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." What of the heart of someone who invites his prison guard to his inauguration ceremony? How does one get a heart like that? A heart that pumps hope, and love, in the most challenging of circumstances?

I have no doubt that some hearts are just born good. But I also know, and deeply believe, that we can grow good hearts, and teach good hearts, better hearts. As Mandela said, "I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than the opposite." We must learn to grow hearts that pump hope...hearts that support us, encourage us, spurn us on to living lives of witness and resistance.... hearts that insist on love.

One of the ways that we grow hearts of love is by learning from example...examples set by people such as Mandela. From his life, we can learn many heart-growing lessons: that it is possible for one person to change the world; that it's important to stand up for what we believe in; that there's little that can't be overcome with hard work, sacrifice, and patience; that our greatest glory is found in rising from a fall; that our hearts were made to love, not hate.

We also grow hearts by practicing. The heart is a muscle, after all. Somehow that's what I imagine Mandela was doing in prison...practicing, exercising his heart of compassion. Somewhere in his studies of non-violence, somewhere in his experience of resistance, somewhere in his interactions with others, he had learned that freedom from inequality, freedom from oppression, freedom from discrimination, had to first be won in his own heart. And isn't this a brilliant form of witness and resistance? To live and to lead with just such a heart?

We'll never know exactly what led to the growth and development of the heart of the man who would come out of 27 years in prison to become the first black president of South Africa. I expect that it was, as he said, a steady accumulation of lessons and insights; any one of which could have been a pivotal life-changing one. And without any one of them, he may not have become the person he was.

We grow hearts by practicing. And we continue to practice fueled by hope. In their book "Active Hope", Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone speak of the phenomena of discontinuous change. They write that not all change can be experienced in an incremental and steady way, and that some change is sudden and unpredictable. Some change happens when an unseen threshold is passed that suddenly tips the balance. That tipping may be triggered by the smallest of actions...one tiny step. We can't predict when it will happen... when all the right

circumstances will come together so that something great happens. We just have to keep making choices that take us toward that for which we dream, because to make a choice toward despair will surely NOT get us there. Better to disconnect our impetus for taking action from a need to see results, and to instead rely on trust...a trust that we're moving in the right direction, even if we can't see change happening.

We grow hearts by practicing...by keeping on keeping on. You see, I believe that growing hearts of love, growing souls of compassion, is how the sparks of divinity that lie within each of us...each and every one of us...is how those sparks light up! Practicing witness and resistance, in our own country, in our own community, in both tiny and grand ways, can lead to these star moments, these personal epiphanies... everyday experiences of recognizing the holy in ourselves and in everyone around us...no matter the colour of their skin, no matter their religion, no matter their education, no matter their class, no matter their language.

I leave you with a little story that illustrates what the African concept of ubuntu, something that must have been a part of Mandela's life:

As the story goes, an anthropologist proposed a game to the kids in an African tribe. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told the kids that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run, they all took each other's hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When he asked them why they had done that, as one of them could have had all the fruits for himself, they said: "UBUNTU, how could one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?"

'UBUNTU' in the African culture means: "I am because we are."

I am because we are. You are because I am, because we are. No one is free unless everyone is free. And whenever we can stand against a culture, a regime, that would tell us otherwise...then we are witnesses for love, then we are practicing resistance in the name of freedom. Then we are carrying on the legacy left to us by Nelson Mandela.

May it be so.

READING *Reflections on Working Toward Peace ~Nelson Mandela*

I was not born with a hunger to be free. I was born [] free to run in the fields near my mother's hut, free to swim in the clear stream that ran through my village, free to roast mealies under the stars and ride the broad backs of slow-moving bulls. []

It was only when [] I discovered as a young man that my freedom had already been taken from me, that I began to hunger for it. At first, as a student, I wanted freedom only for myself, the transitory freedoms of being able to stay out at night, read what I pleased, and go where I chose. Later, [] I yearned for the basic and honorable freedoms of achieving my potential, or earning my keep, of marrying and having a family-the freedom not to be obstructed in a lawful life.

But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters were not free. I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like I did. []

It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am no more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. []

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. [] I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. [] The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended. *(pause)*

***CLOSING WORDS**

~ Nelson Mandela (adapted)

We have walked that long road to freedom.

And we have discovered that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. We can take a moment to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds us, to look back on the distance we have come. But we can only rest for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and we dare not linger, for our long walk is not ended.

Go forth and grow your hearts. Go forth and bear witness to a world that shall be!
Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME