

How Do You DO? 11/26/17 Stockton, IL UU Church

Text: [Hebrews 10:24](#) And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

Story:

My mother was not to be trusted when it came to things that were important to her. By the time I was 2 years old, I had learned to distrust my orange juice, because she laced it with cod liver oil. Years later, she was still at her devious shenanigans — adding extra powdered milk to our mashed potatoes, even going to far as to serve powdered milk out of rinsed out milk cartons. My middle sibling, who later became a Registered Dietitian, spotted the subterfuge with her keen palate and informed the rest of us. We might have begun a revolt or set spies on the kitchen, but there was no revolting when it came to food. Either we ate it or we didn't, and Ma let us decide. She figured that as soon as she put it on the table, her job was done. Spying was not an option either, because she had eyes in the back of her head, and she was not above putting an idle observer to work. The plain fact is that when it came to feeding her kids, my mother was a diabolical genius at sneaking vitamins and minerals into the food. She mostly got away with it, because the fare was usually pretty tasty, and it was the only choice available to us. But don't think we didn't grouse in season and out.

Funny thing, though — I nor any of my siblings have ever suffered a broken bone.

One year, when my next eldest sibling decided she was done with school, she deliberately failed some classes. I think she was in her second or third year of high school at the time. It's true that she had good cause. A teacher was sexually harassing her, and she did struggle with English, but she was brilliant in math, and it would be years before she discovered that about herself. She just wanted, and looking back, I realize now— needed — out of the vicinity of that teacher. Or, more to the point, he needed out from his job. These days, more girls and women are speaking up and speaking out, but then, sexual predators were more protected than their victims, and my sister was too shy and gentle for a confrontation, unlike the rest of us.

When my mother got wind of her plans, she announced, "If it takes until I'm 85 and you're 60 years old, you will graduate from high school. And she did, only half a year late.

My mother, brother, and this one sister were the quiet ones — introverts, probably. All the rest of us were mouthy, argumentative, and full of opinions. But we with the active mouths learned new respect for our mother when we witnessed this small example of her iron will. Do not mess with her when it comes to health and education, because she will not move; she will not compromise. Lesson learned.

SERMON:

Psalm 90: O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein we have been afflicted, and the years wherein we have seen evil. Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Well, I think we have had our work established, and it has not turned out very well for children and other living things. Certainly there are various kinds of work going on in the world. The ordinary work of getting and spending that lays waste our powers (Wordsworth) has fairly laid waste the land, water, and air — the very basis of all life. And the wasting continues apace, since there is money yet to be made. I think perhaps the writers of the 90th Psalm had another sort of work in mind — perhaps the work of mercy and justice mentioned by the prophet Micah. [Micah 6:8](#) *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And **what does the LORD require of you?** To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Another thing about my mother is that she was a non-materialist in materialist times. She did not like “stuff,” called the tchotchkes found in most homes “dust-catchers,” and she did not like to dust! When she lived alone, she had empty closets and drawers. I take after my father, the pack rat, but I must admit that I admire and aspire to mother’s ability to get along with very few things cluttering her space. How very opposite she was to the commercial values of her time, and ours. She never wanted “more.” Always less.

I’m regaling you with family stories to show how people may do good work for others and themselves with clear motives and high values, yet in strange, even underground ways,. I recommend this approach.

Unitarian Universalism is known as the faith with a social conscience, which means that our people are and have always been interested and involved in the welfare and relative happiness of others in their communities. Our people have been involved in the founding of many institutions and movements for the betterment of the world, as we see the world and its needs.

As preparation for today, I glanced again at the list of social concerns that have been adopted by our General Assemblies since 1961. I posted the link on our church’s Facebook page for your amazement. Many and far-ranging they are. A person simply could not work in each and every of these vineyards. A person would have to pick and choose those issues that could motivate one to arise in the morning with gratitude for another day of work. Something that sings in the heart as tending toward the good, necessary and timely.

Some of us do the good work in person by showing up at protests, writing to legislators, serving in soup kitchens, being mentors, counselors, teachers, health workers, volunteers of all sorts.

Some of us help in more distant ways, by sending money to good causes — JDCF, hospice, ACLU, Planned Parenthood, Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders, Salvation Army, etc. This is known as “checkbook activism,” and it has a long and cherished history among us.

When you think about it, our money is also our time — the time in the past when we worked for that money. So that, money is a kind of stored-up time — as a battery holds electrical energy, our checkbooks and bank accounts hold our stored up life’s work, and when we give from that store, we are really giving life to the cause. (I’ll remind you of this, come offering time! Are you writing your good work down on those cards?)

Some of us who live on limited incomes can only shout encouragement, and that helps, too. As John Milton put it, “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Some of us work long in places where our ideas are not particularly welcome and where we seldom if ever get any thanks. I’m thinking here of a teacher who worked within the Rockford Public School system for years as the token liberal on staff. She stayed because she knew that the kids needed a good year once in a while, and she could do that for them. Perhaps years later, her students remembered her and realized what she had done for them; perhaps not. “Integrity is doing the right thing, even if nobody is watching.” Anyway, she was not in that business for the thanks.

Now, I was a contemporary and colleague of that teacher, but my trajectory through teaching was very different. I interned in Special Ed, so I was assigned to do remedial reading. And as I dealt with education’s casualties, I became more and more radicalized, disappointed, and generally ticked-off, so that I finally resigned and went to theological school. I did not have my friend’s admirable perseverance or patience to work in an institution based on values opposite my own. I recognize the devotion of that teacher to a generation of children matriculating through that school. I wonder if she knew or could name what it was that sustained her, but I had to go to Meadville to discover that! Meadville/Lombard is our UU theological school in Chicago.

My colleague did not prevail over a more conservative administration. She did not change the character of the school. Many good works do not appear to “win” in the short time we have to observe them. Consider the Native Americans who protested long and faithfully against the DAPL pipeline. They were within their rights, They were within the right. Yet they were ignominiously removed from their camps by a militia sponsored by the pipeline. To persevere in the face of continued failure, or seeming failure requires faith in something more than our own efforts and in a time longer than the span of our lives.

Most of our good works we do in full knowledge of what we are doing. But there are times when we are of great benefit to others and we are not aware of what we do. I’ll give you an example from the “Old Ministers’ Stories” archives. Roy Phillips... Many of you have heard this story before. Roy was minister of the UU Church in St. Paul, MN for many years. One day a parishioner called to ask for a copy of a particular sermon he had preached recently. He thought he knew which one she meant, and he sent it to her. She called back and told him that he had sent the wrong one. She wanted the sermon where he had said so and so and so, and Roy realized, oh migod, and to quote Roy, “She heard a word I never preached!”

What that, my dears, is grace in operation — something added that was not there, was not intended, but was nevertheless received in a time of great need. This is why memorial services are such a blessing for me — because every time, I see this grace at work in addition to what I do and sometimes despite anything I do. I have sometimes wondered if I could just stand up her and recite the alphabet over and over and somehow people would rearrange the letters and hear the word they need to hear. It’s a marvelous, awful (full of awe) thing to be in the middle of that transformation. Humbling and uplifting at the same time.

I submit to you that we live now in very challenging times — when values very opposite to ours are touted every day in the media issuing, as they do, from our nation's leaders. Rapidly, the nation is becoming “no country for old men” — or women, or children, or elders, or elephants, or land, or rivers, or air. This is no time to be discouraged, to give up the good work, the work of feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, educating the young, caring for the elders, establishing equal rights for everyone, and seeing to the health of the earth. Big business, there. Lots to do. Not going to be easy. Not going to be soon. How do we do?

You are all as expert in this work as I am, and could give us helpful ideas. I have only one, and an old one at that. It is this: Harness your work to whatever serves in your personal theology/philosophy as grace — that life-giving and sustaining power that is manifestly larger than yourself. Some call it God, Spirit of Life, Nature... Bede Griffiths called it “The Mother,” Teilhard referred to “The Omega Point,” T.S. Eliot to “the still point.” What you call it is not as important as that you can conceive of it, name it, and dedicate your work to it. **Emerson: "There is a deep power in which we exist whose beatitude is accessible to us. Every moment the individual feels invaded by it is memorable. It comes to the simple and lowly, it comes in the form of serenity... when it breaks through the intellect it is genius; when it breathes through the will it is virtue, when it flows through the affections it is love."**

I say that my mother was motivated by that deep power of love that gave her to know that her children needed strong bones. I think a deep power kept my teacher friend in her classroom year after year. I know that Unitarian Universalists sense a deep power to work for the common good, which is not so common nowadays. It can be seen here whenever you are asked to give your time and energy for something that is bigger than yourselves and will outlast you. I saw it just last week when we were called to do a funeral for a friend of the church. The tables were set up, arranged and decorated; the food was hauled in; there were greeters at the doors; there were cooks in the kitchen; the visitation chairs set out; Mel sat at the piano, and all together we created a ritual of good-bye. There was so much given, it is impossible to give enough thanks to you. The work was graciously given, and I hope cheerfully and therefore easily given.

Most of us did not know the deceased, but that did not matter; the work was not for us, and yet there was benefit, because doing good does us good. It sets us on what Jack Kornfield calls “the path with a heart.” It helps us to turn our attention outward. It opens us to that source of deep power and gives us to know that this is the reason for our being in the world; this is the reason for our gathering here for lo these 100 plus years. Our faith may reliably rest in this power, which transcends all the work we do in this world. Someone else may in time notice, or be grateful, or care as much as we do, but maybe not. There are many who do not share our values or our interpretations of how the world is or should be. But something else is also at work and will not be discouraged but will persevere through years and centuries — beyond time. In this we may place our faith and our hope. — Rev. Armida Alexander

CLOSING WORDS:

Being Faithful by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

In the midst of a world marked by tragedy and beauty there must be those who bear witness against unnecessary destruction and who, with faith, stand and lead in freedom, with grace and power.

There must be those who speak honestly and do not avoid seeing what must be seen of sorrow and outrage, or tenderness, and wonder.

There must be those whose grief troubles the water while their voices sing and speak refreshed worlds.

There must be those whose exuberance rises with lovely energy that articulates earth's joys.

There must be those who are restless for respectful and loving companionship among human beings, whose presence invites people to be themselves without fear.

There must be those who gather with the congregation of remembrance and compassion draw water from old wells, and walk the simple path of love for neighbor.

And, there must be communities of people who seek to do justice love kindness and walk humbly with God, who call on the strength of soul-force to heal, transform, and bless life....

Source: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28065>