

Living Above

Sermon by Rev. Kent C. Matthies

All of us have dreams and goals for living a better life. When we encounter loneliness, sadness or anger, we wish for connections, joy and peace. When we pour the waters of our lives together, we rise to a higher level. In community we can surprise ourselves and each other by improving our ways and rising above. (September 8, 2002)

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Water Ceremony

The energy and enthusiasm we feel for our religious community today is high. The spirit and energy are tangible in this house of worship as we come together for our ingathering. We are grateful for this opportunity to see each other's faces, hear the sounds of each other's voices, to embrace one another. We are nourished by this opportunity to connect and reconnect around the stories of our summers and our lives. As our waters flow together we see the beauty and feel the grace of this our river.

Living Above (sermon)

One of the many important aspects of the religious community is that it allows and hopefully encourages us to reflect on our lives. Healthy religion lifts up the many blessings in our lives. We have so much for which to be grateful. Our introspections also bring us to realize how at times we are imperfect, incomplete, and fragile. We see gaps between the goals and dreams for our lives, and the reality of how we live. Many of us can identify with the desire to feel a sense of being connected and belonging, but at times we feel isolated and lonely. We often wish for a sense of joy and freedom, yet we can feel sad and trapped in the ways of our living. We wish for health, but we are hit by illness and pain. We try to call up some courage, and at times we fall flat with fear. At times we desire to contribute in efforts to make the world a better place, and we can get stuck in our own selfishness.

As members of communities, we also see that our ideals are often left only partially realized. We wish for peace and justice, while often witnessing violence and lack of fairness. There is more than enough food while many go hungry. We cherish democracy but the playing field is often tilted quite a bit to the advantage of certain individuals and groups.

So even in the midst of the great and many blessings of our lives, we can see incongruities between our dreams and our realities. We are part of this human enterprise, looking to connect with our ground of being, and we are not a completed project. It is important to accept ourselves for who we are. But religious community also calls us to work for balance and to also try to improve ourselves and our communities. We come together in this sanctuary because in our efforts to realize our greatest potential, we know that we can't do it alone. We acknowledge that if we stay alone and isolated we will eventually dry up and evaporate. There is only so much pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps that we can do. We need to connect our spirits in order to flow like a river and lift us up to higher heights.

One of the beautiful aspects of our Unitarian Universalism is our historic understanding that religious expression and inspiration come from a wide variety of sources. We can look to Jesus for guidance. We can look to Amos and Ezekiel for inspiration. We can look to Mohammed, Mother Theresa, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hahn.

But we can also look to creativity and artistic expression. In our reading this morning Miles Davis told his players to play their best music and then to take it up another level and play even better. The musical production and spiritual exuberance of Miles Davis came out of a long line of rich musical tradition. Many were saddened this week by the death of Lionel Hampton. Mr. Hampton was one of the first musicians to play the vibraphone in jazz, on groundbreaking recordings with Louis Armstrong, Benny Carter and Benny Goodman. Hampton's sophisticated performances set the parameters for virtually every vibraphonist since.

Mr. Hampton was often frenetic on stage: with his mouth agape, mallets flying, and sweat pouring off his brow. Even in his late eighties he was known for not wanting to leave the stage. Hampton said that playing music was the closest thing to being with God that he ever experienced. Of course in order to succeed Hampton had to overcome many societal barriers. In the face of racism he played and lived above his circumstances, bringing joy to millions. No matter what stood in his way, he truly lived to play.

We all face personal and societal barriers to realizing our greatest potential. When we come to this religious community we know that we each have an inner light. This community encourages and inspires us to rise

above and to play our greatest music with zest--to live our greatest lives without wanting to leave the stage.

After intense lobbying from his wife, internationally renowned violinist, Itzhak Perlman, finally gave in a couple of years ago and began teaching at a summer camp for youth. At first Perlman was hesitant to use his time instructing children the violin. He now finds joy in the effort. The kids seem to appreciate his approach to music and to life. Sixteen-year-old Maya Shankar is currently recovering from an injury. She was greatly relieved when Perlman honestly told of his own early feelings of terror, competitiveness, and jealousy. Perlman said that in his youth he “would worry: Oh this person has learned many concertos so much faster than I have....There’s no way I’m going to get anywhere in music.” The youth at the camp said that knowing someone as successful as Perlman had these concerns helped them to feel calmer in their own lives. Maya Shankar said, Then he told us, “You have your own inner clock and it ticks at a certain rate, and you’re going to get certain places at times different than everyone else, but that doesn’t make you any less of a musician.” Perlman said, ”When somebody is talented, they contain a certain kind of magic, and that magic is very precious, because it is on a very precarious ground. It’s like a very fine leaf that if you shake too much it breaks. You have to let the branch grow until it becomes strong enough that if you shake it, it won’t break.”

This religious community is a kind of camp for how we live life. We are all instructors and we are all students. Some days we feel more shaky and vulnerable than others. This can be a place where we comfort each other when we are afflicted and maybe afflict each other when we are a bit too comfortable. All of us have talents that are precious and ultimately they are somewhat precarious. This can continue to be a place where we can grow until we become strong enough that we won’t break when we are shaken.

This summer at General Assembly in Quebec City I met somebody who has inspired me to try and live above. Darihun Kriam is a female Unitarian from the Kazi Hills of India. All on it’s own the history of Unitarianism in the Kazi Hills of India is a fascinating story. In the 1800’s British and Welsh missionaries had brought Calvinistic Christianity to India. This fire and brimstone religion did not resonate strongly with many of the Hindus. In the late 1800’s a Kazi minister named Hajon Kissor Sing

invented Unitarianism all on his own. He and his people had never heard about the extremely similar religious developments in America and Europe. Based in a theology of universal love Sing founded liberal religious communities.

Two years ago, at the age of 25, Darihun took major steps towards realizing her greatest potential. When Darihun was in her teens she used to visit her aging grandmother in a neighboring community in the Khazi Hills. Her grandmother was a member of a small Unitarian church group with a very low average level of education. When Darihun would visit she would attend the religious activities throughout the weekend with her grandmother. Because Darihun attended college and now teaches grades K-9 in a public school, she was always asked to talk and preach when she attended her grandmother's congregation. Although she said she was very nervous, she wanted to help and would respond to whatever the congregation requested. Eventually she found herself visiting sick and elderly members of the congregation during her visits to see her grandmother. Now Darihun is the first female lay leader to serve as an organizing minister for five different Unitarian congregations in the Kazi Hills.

Traveling on crowded public buses, Darihun leaves her home at 9 a.m. on Saturday morning and works the entire weekend with different congregations. When she comes back into town on Monday morning she goes directly to her paying job of teaching. With all of the obstacles in her life Darihun is living as if she were following the instructions of Miles Davis. She has worked hard to play, or to live her best and then she has lived higher. By bringing hope, courage, and love to people, Darihun is not only living higher for herself. She is not only living higher for women in the Kazi Hills. She is living higher for countless sisters and brothers around the world.

There are moments when I think that challenges of ministry seem too great. In those fearful moments I can think about the efforts and perseverance of people like Darihun. In those times I get a little more strength and a little more courage.

In this religious community we can look to each other for ways to play higher. When we are too dependent someone might inspire us to independence. When we are too alone someone might pull us into the flock

for our own good. With all of the paradoxes and ambiguities of life we can help each other to identify and work for the common good.

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