

## *What Are We Waiting For?*



Unitarian Church of Staten Island

### *Morning Celebration*

December 7, 2008

*Reflection: "Time pushes the sullen door of winter; Hinges creak and criticize. Through the solstice crack of winter flood the earth's nativities."—Leonard Mason*

### **Sharing Responsibilities**

Here we are, waiting at the crossroads of fall turning to winter, of our hearts opening like the iris that I saw during a walk in Snug Harbor—daring to open though the weather is freezing. In spite of the call to hunker down and nestle in caves of hibernation, we are drawn out of our slumbers into a place that asks much of us. It is a place that challenges us to notice what is needed in this season of waiting, in this time of cold icy ponds and frozen earth, crunching beneath our feet; in this time of concern for violence breaking out in our country and abroad.

We come to this time where we share in supporting this church and its larger purpose in this world—this church that has a wider mission and responsibility. And so in this season of generosity and good will, we bring what we have and what we can give to this church and its wider concerns.

Readings

*Shadows of Unknowing* by the Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox

*Advent Meditation* by the Rev. Frances Manly  
*Why Not A Star* by Margaret Gooding, # 621 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

### ***What Are We Waiting For?***

The Rev. Susan Karlson

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Advent comprises the four weeks leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the long awaited messiah who will ultimately usher in peace and justice for the world. Perhaps, Advent is about preparing ourselves to make justice and compassion a priority in our lives and in our actions in the world.

Unitarian Universalism has its roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions. We have expanded to include the wisdom from scriptures and other world religious traditions. Yet in a very real way, we are all waiting for new life to be born within us. Advent is a good time to examine the seeds germinating within and what we hope to bring to birth in our lives and in this congregation.

How do we do this examining? It seems wise to acknowledge that we have a plethora of seeds ready to sprout inside us. We are like seed catalogues with many varieties. Some of the seeds are of fresh new growth, of cooperation, compassion and vision, but there are also seeds waiting to germinate—seeds of stagnation and selfishness. As human beings, we can choose to nurture the one tender plant while carefully weeding the other troublesome shoots. But both varieties of seeds lie waiting within to germinate.

A story told by Unitarian Universalist minister, Richard Gilbert, in his book, *How Much Do We Deserve* illustrates this.

A father visited his son's fourth grade class where the children were learning a new game. A balloon was tied to each child's leg and the goal was to stomp everyone else's balloon while protecting your own. The last child with an intact balloon, won. Children started stomping balloons like crazy. Only a few children lacked the stomping spirit. Other kids popped those children's balloons first.

Then a class of mentally challenged children entered. Like before, balloons were tied on and the rules explained. A few of them understood that the balloons were supposed to be stomped. Slowly, more children got the idea. But there was a *definite difference*. They did not get caught up in aggressive stomping. One girl held her balloon so another boy could step on it and then he held his balloon so she could do the necessary stomping. In the end, everyone's balloon got stomped and the entire class *'cheered in unison.'* (Gilbert, 123).

In our hectic lives, particularly during this holiday season, we get caught up in the balloon stomping game—trying to get to the goal, to be the last person with an intact balloon. We have within us the seeds to be competitive, to be the last one with our balloon intact. Yet we also can cultivate the seed of cooperation and empathy where everyone wins when we work on something larger than our individual selves or our solitary group.

Several weeks ago, we had a Church Council meeting where I talked about the concept of Shared Ministry. Wise voices in that leadership group patiently explained how this church has always done shared ministry. I witnessed it this week during the set-up and the exuberance of the Jolly Holly Fair. I see it when members and friends roll up their sleeves, and work hard to make this church a vibrant place in Staten Island, standing up for what is right. This leadership group articulated that they have been waiting for their next settled minister to work with them on a shared vision. They want to move forward together on the next chapter of this congregation's epoch.

Part of shared ministry is exploring what gifts you have and which you want to develop or offer. This is part of everyone's spiritual journey. Each of us can stay home and grow spiritually through reading, studying, journaling, prayer, yoga or meditation. A religious community, while composed of individuals, encourages its members to do more than deepen those solitary spiritual practices. It has a mission, an identity, a purpose. It fosters a vision of social transformation and service beyond its doors.

You come to this congregation or some other religious community, and feel inspired or passionate about something you hear, see or experience. The congregation is here to help you channel your energy and develop your gifts to share with others.

In his book, *Flying Colors*, Tim Lefens was gradually losing his eyesight. He begins to teach students at a group home who ranged in age from their teens to mid thirties. Most of them could not talk, walk or use their hands.

Many people thought these students had no gifts to share—no talent or any way to create something of beauty because of their inability to move, talk or even lift a paintbrush. But Lefens saw through their seeming limitations to their core and he devised ways they could paint by moving their wheelchairs around on a canvass, or by directing laser beams of light wherever each student wants the paint to go. Their gifts emerged through their art, representative of their feelings and their creative selves.

Later, their work was displayed in major art shows in New York City and some of them realize their dreams of living more independently. They weren't content with fulfillment of their own dreams. They wanted to share what they received with the world. Lefens and some other supporters formed an outreach organization that fosters artistic self-expression and recognition of the unique gifts of people often considered unreachable because of their inability to speak or use their limbs.

This story prompted me to ponder if we, like Tim Lefens' students, like Tim himself, could be waiting for an opportunity to share our gifts and make a difference in the world through gifts we might not even realize we possess?

Another important aspect of shared ministry is embodied in one of our Unitarian Universalist principles—the encouragement of spiritual growth in one another. In this way, we all act as ministers to foster the unseen talents waiting in each other like seeds to germinate and then broadcast them widely.

One of my colleagues, the Rev. Tess Baumberger, wrote about the long sojourn we spend just waiting. This is her poem aptly titled, *Waiting*. Listen and recognize the stirring of hope within you.

Excerpt from *Waiting* by Tess Baumberger

“Wait. It will happen.  
Your sleeping seed  
In the cool fertile dark  
Will one day split in two.  
The tiny shoot will curl out  
In the slow-motion dance  
Of new beginning...

See. It is your gift now.  
Sun and earth in you

Creating tiny seeds  
In slender shelters  
To hibernate through winter  
And yawn to life again.”

At this time of Advent, of waiting for new growth and the emergence of something sacred and holy, we wait, we watch, we listen, we sense and we see what spirals to the surface. Each of us has a different answer to the question, “What are we waiting for?”

We all play the balloon stomp game. As members of the world community, we must imagine how we can help thaw the frozen ground of despair, and curtail the parasite of violence, ecological mayhem and poverty.

We are waiting like the tender single bud of the iris that dares to brave the cold though it does not know what will be its fate. The talents and treasures we possess, curled inside like slumbering young are bound to awaken and come to life in their own time.

The time spent waiting in the grey periods of doubt and confusion; the time spent wrestling with our conscience in the dim winter solstice season is a time of preparation, a time in which our shared vision germinates. We cannot annihilate the seeds of evil, violence, oppression or greed from the outside in. As Jesus said about “the poor”, likewise these seeds are with us always. We can only bring to birth what is within us and struggle with the conflicting sides of our nature. What *are* we waiting for?

May you be aware with all your senses of the tender promise inside you. May you ponder this new growth of love and compassion like Mary waiting the birth of the baby, Jesus. May this season of waiting bring you clarity, vision and illumination.

### **Benediction**

I offer you these words of Benediction adapted from Max A. Knapp (from *Celebrating Christmas: An Anthology*, edited by Carl Seaburg): “Come then...great hearts...come dreamers and singers and poets...come builders...come healers...come those of the soil and those who command the might of machines...carry the Sacred Flame to make light the windows of the world... It is we who must be keepers of the flame...”

It is we who must carry the imperishable fire.

It is our watch now.”