

GROWING THE SPIRIT: Part 2

Rev. Clare Petersberger

Bill Sinkford followed Van Jones' inspiring words with the observation

"Van, you may have struck a chord here. The 2008 General Assembly has received its charge."

Not as many people chose to associate at this year's General Assembly. While there were over 7,000 delegates in Portland, the year before, there were only 4,000 of us in Fort Lauderdale.

Perhaps the heat in Florida in late June did not sound inviting.

Perhaps people stayed away to protest having to show government issued identification to get into workshops and worship services held in the Convention Center.

But as it turned out, one only had to show ID if one walked through the security gate.

If, in deference to the heat, one chose to ride the bus to the Convention Center from one's hotel---one discovered that the bus was waved into the security perimeter, no questions asked, no ID necessary.

Frankly, it made no sense.

But it's a shame more did not attend because it was an inspiring General Assembly the words and music of which continue to echo in these uncertain times.

The first program I attended was A Ministry Of Love In A Fearful Time.

The Reverend Forrest Church, (whom I had first heard 24 years ago as a seminary student) began by painting a portrait of America in 1933.

It was the Depression.

And Franklin Roosevelt, in his first inaugural address, told Americans, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," and listed "freedom from fear" as one of the four great freedoms.

We've been hearing that line quoted frequently in recent weeks in light of the plunging global economic markets.

But Forrest addressed fear as a spiritual, not an economic or political issue.

He said, "We can eliminate a world of trouble from ourselves just by closing our hearts. But the trouble from which we are liberating ourselves is necessary trouble. Take no risks, and we still run the danger of living a sorry life."

And even if we submit completely to fear, we will still die: "Fear protects us not from death, but from life and from love."

Knowing that Forrest is living with terminal cancer enriched his message.

Freedom from fear was the subject of many of the lectures at General Assembly.

The Reverend Dr. Walter Brueggaman was the theme speaker for Ministry Days.

He spoke about the Biblical narratives of kings who resisted people's quest for freedom through the Exodus.

This made people fear their kings.

He spoke about the courage inherent in the Biblical narratives of prophets like Jeremiah who advocated for love, justice, and righteousness.

This made all people valued members of the community.

He asked us, "Which narrative guides your life and your ministry?"

Fear or the freedom of an open heart?

A similar question was raised by The Reverend Christine Robinson in her Berry Street Lecture.

She began by describing the journey to Mars at Disneyland.

She said the imagineers at Disneyland are trained to create experiences that move the heart, and bring meaning to human life.

She asked, "Isn't that what we clergy are supposed to be doing?"

How might WE become better imagineers of the soul with our limited special effects of candles, flowers, singing, laughter, tears, and silence?

Christine believes the answer lies in exploring religious language and talking about spiritual disciplines.

“Why is it,” Christine wondered, “that we have a specific curriculum to teach our children about sex, but we haven’t intentionally created one about spirituality?”

She then offered ways we might go about embarking on as intense and meaningful a journey as the one to Mars...only with the goal of growing in spirit, free of dogma, and enriched by spirituality.

Freedom from fear as a prerequisite to growing the spirit was also the subject of lectures about our national life and America’s place in the world.

Representative Debbie Wasserman of Florida spoke about how the Patriot Act passed unanimously because of fear.

After the fact, people began to realize that the myth that one can promote freedom OR security but not BOTH is false.

Warrantless searches, detention, and torture have nothing to do with our security.

But even seven years after 9/11, efforts to rewrite the Patriot’s Act to balance civil liberties and security have not all been successful.

She reminded us that “Rights given up easily take a long time to restore.”

The Reverend Bill Schulz, former President of the UUA and former Executive Director of Amnesty International defended the military option in extreme situations in a spirited debate with Charlie Clemens, the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, who is a pacifist.

The debate came down to the different views of human nature the two men hold.

In his Starr King Lecture, Eboo Patel gave us all hope by sharing stories from the Interfaith Youth Corps he is building to get young people to act on the values of hospitality and justice taught by all the world’s religions.

As we heard in the DVD, freedom from fear and growing the spirit through a green economy is also at the heart of the work of Van Jones.

Growing the spirit was at the heart of worship services beginning with one in which colleagues celebrating their 25th and 50th years in the ministry are

elected by their peers to reflect on all the changes they've seen in our shared ministry over the years.

The music is moving and inspiring as is hearing 4,000 Unitarian Universalists really SING!

Meals with colleagues I see only at this annual meeting and a dinner with members from the church which ordained me were all a real blessing.

So, too, was comparing notes with Mona and planning which of us would attend workshops dealing with nuts and bolts like Membership and Public Witness for congregations to maximize our ability to bring back as much good news as possible from the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Next year, GA is in Salt Lake City from June 24th through the 28th and I hope you will consider attending.

Before then, the Unitarian Universalist Association has asked us to be part of Association Sunday.

Today's special collection will be used to bring theological education for lay people to our Districts---so that you don't have to go to seminary or to General Assembly to learn from scholars like Walter Brueggemann; or to hear Unitarian Universalist theologians like Forrest Church and Christine Robinson; or to be challenged by what the principle of the interdependent web of all existence means for our collective lives by activists like Van Jones.

I know that we live in uncertain economic times.

And as a congregation we have at least three fundraisers in the next six weeks.

You should not feel you have to give to all of them.

Part of the purpose of our church is to provide opportunities for people to give to that which they find worthy of their faithful love.

All contributions and gifts are a blessing in the sense of connecting your own mysterious life with the mysterious lives of others at the same time.

"We are expected, we are called, to be about the work of blessing..."

This is how we grow our spirits and make the world less fearful and more loving.