

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Lucille Clifton offers us this beautiful image of a woman climbing a rope; moving from one notch to the next in her life clearly takes strength and courage...moving forward is always a struggle.

That is made clear in the poem, the course of climbing is slow and measured, there is time to reflect, yet again, on the questions that have always nagged and weighed her down.

Her most essential question is repeated, as a constant refrain , a daily hum; "Maybe I should have wanted less."

Not a question at all really, more of a statement...a mulling over... a pondering.. Maybe I should have wanted less. Maybe I should have wanted less.

There comes a time, in our lives, in our religious community, in our country, when this question becomes a plague on our energy, a barrier to our resolve.

Maybe I should have wanted less, maybe we should have wanted less, maybe we should settle for less.

This is an historic weekend in America. And in progressive religion in America. It is the 47th anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

It is the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the failing of the levees in New Orleans.

It is the next weekend in the debate on the building of a mosque and Muslim religious center at Ground Zero in NYC.

Our faith, Unitarian Universalism, has never separated itself into a comfortable liberal religious corner...it has always stepped forward into engagement with the issues of freedom of religion, freedom of speech, inclusion of all people regardless of race, ethnicity or religion...or sexual orientation, or gender difference.

Our faith has always called us to step forward. To be bold in living our values and principles. To speak on behalf of those who are silenced.

Unitarianism was formed from religious debate- from a challenge to religious intolerance in 15th century Transylvania in what is now Romania.

Universalists were actively engaged in the anti-slavery movement of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The struggle for women's right to vote was led by Unitarian and Universalist women. Susan B. Anthony was not a tea party-ist... she was a Unitarian.

How does UUCR live this proud legacy today? How do we discern our task as faithful UUs? What moral and ethical action are we called to live out in 21st century Montgomery County?

The civil rights movement and the UU Church of Rockville are approximately the same age. In May 1954, the Supreme Court under the leadership of Chief Justice Earl Warren held that racial discrimination in public education was no longer justified. They wrote, "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate, but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

On June 28, 1956, the then-named Unitarian Church of Montgomery County held its first board meeting. The founding of our congregation happened in concert with the emergence of the civil rights movement. Thus the mission of this church was clarified and defined, in part, by the issues of its day.

As a congregation we were inspired by the great leaders and movements of the day. We climbed with the inspiration of A. Powell Davies, the ministers at All Souls Unitarian in DC and Martin Luther King, Jr. and never did we ask "Maybe we should have wanted less."

We took our place alongside those who believed we could make a difference, we sang with pride, "We Shall Overcome" and we believed that hand in hand, we would change the course of history.

And to a certain degree, we have.

Religion and politics continue to be mixed in American life and rhetoric...for better or for worse...the voice of religion holds a place in the public square. It's rather amazing really, the power that religion can bring to bear.

The *New York Times* this morning characterized the Glen Beck rally as "seizing on history." The *Washington Post* writes of "a religious brand of patriotism." Glen Beck says "America begins to turn back to God." He also calls President Obama a racist.

This is America, the land of free speech and free assembly. All voices have the right to speak out.

The question is...will we?

This is a moment of opportunity for Unitarian Universalism across our land.

From Arizona to California to NYC to Washington, DC. to Montgomery County, MD.

From immigration debates, to marriage equality to the building of mosques, to the proliferation of hate speech, to co-optation of the civil rights movement...

This is a moment of opportunity for our faith...a faith grounded in free thought, in religious pluralism, in affirmation of the power and beauty of human difference, in the fight for equal rights for all people...in the fight for jobs.

History has moved always with two parallel lines...one, a line of hate and oppression and violence and the other a line of resistance and peace and love.

Unitarian Universalism has always tried to be on the side of love.

Writing this week about his father's dream for America, Martin Luther King III wrote: "Too many believe that his dream was limited to achieving racial equality. Certainly he sought that objective, but his vision was about more than expanding rights for a single race. He hoped that even in the direst circumstances, we could overcome our differences and replace bitter conflicts with greater understanding, reconciliation and cooperation.

My father championed free speech. He would be the first to say that those participating in Beck's rally have the right to express their views.

But his dream rejected hateful rhetoric and all forms of bigotry or discrimination, whether directed at race, faith, nationality, sexual orientation or political beliefs. He envisioned a world where all people would recognize one another as sisters and brothers in the human family. Throughout his life he advocated compassion for the poor, nonviolence, respect for the dignity of all people and peace for humanity."

This is a moment for our faith to partner with other inclusive, faithful people to engage in acts of solidarity and humanity, acts of healing rather than acts of hate or fear.

This is a moment for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville to put aside the nagging question : "maybe we should want less" and boldly keep climbing toward a better and more abundant life for all people.

We have so many resources to draw upon.

*We have our liberal faith tradition...we remember those who died to make us free.

* We have a healthy, vibrant congregation of nearly 400 members.

*We have money to give away.

*We have this amazing sacred space.

*We have beautiful, underused grounds.

*We have children and youth and elders and adults of all ages.

*We have gifts and talents in abundance.

*We have school teachers, research scientists, policy makers, organizers, artists, writers, world travelers, multi-racial families, engineers, architects, foreign service officers, police women, firemen, doctors, nurses, child care and hospice workers.

*We live in a county rich in diversities.

*We have love as the spirit of this church...service as its law.

How do we overcome obstacles?...one step, one hand over hand... one act of kindness, one generous gift, one new idea, one small group at a time.

How do we overcome obstacles?...by joining hands across religious boundaries, by joining hands with strangers, by joining hands in the work of love and justice.

Change and growth happens from the inside out. It's not one moment...its an accumulation of moments...

Growth happens out of mistakes, missteps...failures.

We have been growing and changing as a congregation...

We have done much good work on rebuilding a strong foundation...

Where do we go from here?

Clifton ends her poem: "Maybe I should have wanted less. The woman passes the notch in the rope marked sixty. I rise toward it, struggling. Hand over hungry hand."

I want us to be hungry for the next phase of our life as a congregation. To be a liberal church means to be open to new insight, new truth, new ways of being...no matter how much trouble and anguish is in the world, no matter our moments of despair, our faith teaches us of the good, of the good in each person and the good in the common pursuit of liberty and justice for all.

As we go into this year of my sabbatical (December to May), I ask you to be ever more faithful, ever more involved, ever more creative and passionate about our shared ministry.

Join me in analyzing what obstacles we face...what strengths we have at hand and what difference we can make in our community.

Let us join together in hopeful hunger to fulfill the promise of the founders of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville to be a church home, yes, and to be a beacon for love and justice in our community.

So May It Be/Amen