

Vitality — *A Little Dab'll Do Ya*

A sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — March 19, 2006

I begin with a true story from my visit to the barber's this week. I took over the chair from an older fellow who had just received a buzz cut, just shy of a head shave. He friendly enough, so as we passed each other I said to our barber, clearly joking, "Hey, I want to look like *that!*" To which Mr. Buzz Cut replied, in the spirit of the moment, "This is the good ole 1950s look." Suddenly I found myself saying, "And I used to look like that in the '50s."

He was headed out the door and I didn't have time to add that at that time I was a young kid whose father also had a buzz cut and considered it his duty to keep his son's hair pretty darn short, too. How I remember sitting on a stool in the kitchen for regular shearings by his hand. I even got to sweep up the trimmings afterward. Maybe this scenario is familiar to a few others of you out there, on either side of the clippers.

Mr. Buzz Cut had probably never changed his hairstyle from that earlier era, but I was not destined to stay as consistent as my new barbershop friend. I was not even deep into my teens, in the 1960s, of course, when I challenged my father's authority and started growing out my hair as much as I dared, which wasn't all that much longer, really.

My ponytail era would wait until the 1970s, when I was out of my father's house, and now it's ironic that he has more hair left on top than I do. But for most of my adolescence I had to coax some sort of order out of a rather unruly clump that was mainly trying to just be anything longer than a buzz cut.

And yes, I tried Vitalis and Brylcreem—substances to be rubbed into one's locks. They promised—very memorably in Brylcreem's case—to induce, with small amounts, hair control that was otherwise unattainable. I couldn't get used to the greasy look, so my experiment was a short one, but the advertising did its work and those brand names stuck with me, all these years, until, for some odd reason, I put the jingle into a sermon title.

And in preparing for this talk, I did discover, you'll be relieved to know, that both products are still alive and well, with active and rather enticing web sites. Brylcreem's new motto seems to be "All you need is Brylcreem." It's a British company, so perhaps they're trading on the Beatle song, "All You Need is Love."

Brylcreem gets credit for the older and persistent jingle in my title, but it is really Vitalis to which I turn for relevance today. *That* company's motto goes like this: "Created to keep a man's hair in perfect balance for lasting strength"—as if you could also rub it into your biceps. And their web site seems to equate the word Vitalis with the phrase "Life for Hair."

But all this is actually relatively close to the Oxford Dictionary definition, from the Latin word, *vitalis*, meaning "the power giving continuance of life," or, more succinctly, *vita*, meaning *life*. Indeed, a written "vita" is a biographical sketch of a person's life.

Now, the web being as handy a tool as it is these days, I couldn't resist just a bit more searching for appearances of the word *vitalis*, an effort which rewarded me with such notable references as:

- *Saint Vitalis*, who was a wealthy citizen of Milan, Italy, in the 2nd century, but suffered martyrdom. Evidently he had too visibly encouraged another Christian martyr to be steadfast prior to execution, urging him not to lose faith during this final trial. Such nearby support enraged the authorities, so they added Vitalis to their list. He went on the torture rack and then got buried alive. The feast day for St. Vitalis, in case you're planning ahead, is April 28th.

[www.saintpatrickdc.org/ss/0428.htm and www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=598]

More upbeat references include:

- *Dr. Vitalis*, an acupuncturist in New Zealand [V. Skiauteris: <http://vitalis.co.nz>];

Also:

- Herod's Vitalis Spa, in Israel, from \$360/night [www.eluna.com/Travel/HerodVitalis.asp];
and
- a Venezuelan non-profit organization called Vitalis [www.vitalis.net], whose mission is "to contribute to the development of knowledge, values and behavior consistent with environmental conservation and sustainable development..."

So a *global* influence has this word *vitalis*, as it should, for it's an essential part of our world. "Vital" describes what is "absolutely necessary or important, indispensable, full of energy" [Oxford online].

And this leads me to my focus this morning: VITALITY, "the state of being strong and active, energetic." I dare to suggest that vitality is a state we all want to regularly visit, if not live in. A little dab of vitality may "do" us, here and there, but who wouldn't want to slather it on our often unruly or uninspired souls, to harness some of "the power giving continuance of life," so that we might be stronger and more energetic?

It is perfectly fine to desire vitality in abundance. This is *not* a zero-sum game, where if you have more of it someone else has to get by with less. *Au contraire*, vitality can be contagious, deliciously so. You probably know people who just seem to live out of a sense of vital abundance, and you might understandably find yourself wanting to be around them, hoping some of it will rub off, *which does happen*.

The same is true in organizational life: a group that has vitality will attract participants eager to get in on the action, sensing that something worthy is emanating from that collective effort. This year I've joined a regional UU project studying congregational growth, trying very hard to identify just what it is that makes some churches thrive with an intangible vitality. Then, hopefully, we can set about getting more of that in more settings.

Clearly, given trends across the American religious landscape, some other spiritual institutions do *not* have enough *vitalis*, "the power giving continuance of life," and lots of formerly vital churches are closing their doors for lack of support. As a parallel, on an individual level, personal lethargy and dispiritedness can plague one mightily, sapping energy, lowering the quality of life, with renewed vigor only a vague and distant hope.

Vitality can be an elusive quality, and there is no obvious, reliable gauge. How would you assess your own degree of vitality? I know I have moments of feeling vital and valuable, but plenty of other times I'm discouraged and disheartened. And looking into the history of this relatively vital congregation, one can see chapters of greater and lesser vitality.

It is a curious thing, vitality—but undeniably desirable. And I think I’m beginning to get a grip on a few elements that can improve the odds for more of it, in *both* individuals and congregations. So here’s a five-part prescription for increased vitality. (Call me “Dr. Vitality.”) See if you can leave here focused on at least a couple of these elements, so that you can step right away into more vitality for your life, individually and in community.

Two of these elements came together very notably last night in this very space, at what has become one of the annual highlights of our congregational year, the Canvass Concert. Available and on display were two pieces of the Paint Branch culture that help keep it so vital: **music** and **humor**.

For those who missed it, we enjoyed a running skit that featured a certain “Wise Witch of the West…ern Part of Prince Georges County,” who granted a series of wishes that helped seekers find fulfillment in church community. And around the sketches our homegrown music talent was again outstanding. Especially in such a line-up together, the music and fun created a real sense of “the power giving continuance of life.” We have a habit of doing this here at Paint Branch.

Now, I’m sure you often come to this venue for the important messages preached from up here, but our services *really* pivot on inspirational music and at least a dash of humor every now and then. (How often do you see a church order of service with a musical tribute to Brylcreem?) Music gets into our hearts in powerful ways, and working our smile muscles is among the best exercises we can do for improving the vitality of our lives.

I do that exercise regimen many evenings when I assume the position in front of either (or both) “America’s Funniest Home Videos” and “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?”—two TV programs that reliably increase the personal vitality of my life by building up my smile muscles.

And when I’m feeling a bit down, I grab my guitar and revisit some of the wonderful, empowering, uplifting songs that have been written over the years, or I just run up and down a simple blues bass line, or I invent new chords that sound intriguing. There are lots of recorded tunes that also lift my spirits, but live music—*making* music—is a whole ‘nother thing, adding a dimension of power that deepens beyond mere listening.

I play and practice in our living room by myself a fair amount, but when I can join in with others and make music *together*, it elevates to a vital level and breathes enormous life into my soul. Often I'll bring my bag o'harmonicas with me, just in case I run into other musicians where that will fit. Sometimes it doesn't, but sometimes it does, gloriously.

I think I'm still feeding off of energy generated 35 years ago around a campfire under huge redwoods in Big Sur, CA. I was touring the country with some friends in a VW van and one evening I spontaneously hooked up with another camper and his guitar. All I had was a D harmonica, but he was good enough to keep playing lots of great songs in that key and we soared to music-making heights together, entralling a gathered crowd of campground denizens. D has been my favorite, most vital key ever since.

You probably know the medicinal value of both music and humor in your life—"indispensable," even. And any thriving congregation will cultivate a goodly dose of both, too. Together or alone, melodies and smiles will breathe vital energy into almost anything or anyone.

And speaking of breath, my third element of vitality includes that—breathing, which is a prime spiritual discipline for me—and points to an even bigger "b" word: **balance**. Especially at this time of the spring Equinox, we are fundamentally conscious of the strength and renewal that comes from being well balanced.

If you're at all like me, however, you can probably name various pieces of your life that are currently *imbalanced*, out of whack. I try to use this lens to see what steps might help me get to a less stressful place of more equilibrium. My breathing exercises—noticing inhales and exhailes—are a model of life-giving balance for me, which I can ride into greater awareness of how to re-balance other aspects of my life.

An ongoing challenge I have is to balance my inner and outer lives. I can get very preoccupied with external activities and lose track of my interior dimension. So I have small exercises that I try to incorporate into my day to remind me to listen inside more.

For instance, I have trained myself so that whenever the phone rings, I now almost involuntarily take a big deep breath before answering. That triggers awareness of a bigger context and helps me transition more smoothly into whatever will come from

the next encounter with an external voice. I recommend this easy practice. In fact, add deep breaths when- and wherever you can during your day; I predict it will smooth out some rough edges.

I imagine, at my core, an inner gyroscope that I keep spinning through intentional deep breathing. I also try to balance my sedentary tendencies with activity, my alone time with socializing, my ice cream with salads, etc. And balance on a larger scale is the order of the whole universe, so our personal efforts at balance align us with a cosmic unity.

In our congregational life, balance appears, say, as a nice mix of “all ages” co-mingling across the generations. And balance shows up in how well we manage our volunteer corps. If there are too few volunteers to cover all the bases, we have a weak organization with lots of important things falling through cracks. But if people put out too much effort *without* being spiritually and socially fed enough, we have burn out, and lots of important things will still fall through cracks.

A church with vitality will wisely encourage its people to try to balance opportunities for service with ways to be spiritually and socially fed, so that its members will want to prioritize more church activities in their lives and hearts because they feel fulfilled by this rich balance.

I said we *try*, at least, to achieve various balances in our worlds, and that leads me to a fourth element of vitality: **intention**.

With healthy intention as a companion on our journeys, alone and together, we also vitalize our lives. Our choices, our plans, our ambitions all matter. Paint Branch, for instance, is a lot more than a social club; our intention is to be a strong liberal religious presence in this area, a thriving, vital presence that matters. We have a Plan, with an exciting imagined future in front of us.

And are you, personally, just a leaf blown about by the winds of chance? Or do you aim yourself at goals with conscious intent? Are you feeling victimized by fate, or do you see paths beyond misfortune and steer directly in those directions?

My experience of vital people and groups is that they are intentional, not haphazard; focused, not fuzzy; more eager than passive.

We live in a complicated, demanding time that calls us out from many angles, into many activities. Do you respond to whatever makes the latest, loudest, most seductive claim on your attention, or are you active in value-laden efforts that seek to satisfy deeper wishes for yourself and your family?

We bring intention from our personal lives into this congregational community, which orients not around any particular theological content but around the liberal religious process of walking together down a path of spiritual authenticity.

At Paint Branch, as in many UU congregations, we can effectively embrace a diversity of postures because of one thing: vision...and patience—*two* things: vision and patience. We forge together a vision of being a strong, vibrant community of creativity, freedom, love and justice, and we hold that intention up to encourage us patiently forward, especially whenever the going gets tough.

The prime example of this, of course, is our still-recent trial by fire, when we were forced to renovate a charred and smoky building next door and couldn't use it for 14 long months. But we patiently held onto our vision. The dedicated intention that illuminated our collective life during that episode was indeed vital.

So, to summarize: vitality grows with intention and balance, music and humor, which I think is true in both individual lives and in communities. And there are certainly other attributes that can contribute to vitality, so I invite you to add to my list.

But I will end with one more biggie, something that almost never fails to strengthen us and build energy, one-on-one and all together. It's an easy posture that we know well enough, but can always get better at: **appreciation**. *Appreciation is to humans what the sun is for plants.* [Frank Iversen]. It's that important.

I have become convinced that appreciation is a key to a life of vitality. I believe that at any moment in any setting we can find *something* to appreciate. Look around you right now, for instance, and just notice quickly something or someone that you appreciate... Don't have to look too far, do you? And articulating our appreciation automatically increases vitality, so find someone in coffee hour and tell them what you just noticed, or ask someone what they appreciate, and then just feel the vitality meter peak.

If increased vitality is our goal, finding things to appreciate will move us along in powerful ways. Someone [Anon.] once said, “Appreciation is the strongest emotion we have for attracting what we want.” Think about that. I’m still digesting the implications of this statement: “Appreciation is the strongest emotion we have for attracting what we want.” And it’s so easy to do!

But it’s about more than gratitude, which is powerful medicine itself, to be sure. But appreciation invites a trusting relationship to grow. Vital communities are grounded in strong, trusting relationships. Appreciation is contagious, and so is vitality. And a little dab just ain’t enough for the beauty we’re after.

So let’s bring ever greater intention, balance, music and humor into our lives, alone and together. Then, fertilized by appreciation, we can bless the world with our love. “Give us eyes that see, a heart that loves, and hands that are willing to serve” [from children’s Flaming Chalice dedication].

For the world awaits our liberating ministry. This congregation has a call to be a presence not only in our personal lives, but also in the culture of “the west...ern part of Prince Georges County” and beyond.

One way this call has emerged in recent days, when hate and oppression are so evident in so many quarters, is for us to actively stand on the side of love.

And happily, our friend Jason Shelton, minister of music at the UU congregation in Nashville TN, wrote an inspirational song about just that: “Standing on the Side of Love.”

[#1014 from *Singing the Journey* hymnal supplement, performed with congregation joining the chorus:]

We are standing on the side of love:
Hands joined together as hearts beat as one,
Emboldened by faith we dare to proclaim
We are standing on the side of love.

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