

CONSIDER THE ARC OF YOUR PATH

— a sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — March 11, 2007 —

READING: Collaborative Process of *Life Is Not a Garden*

Elizabeth Alexander, April 2005 [adapted by JBtH]
[from www.seafarerpress.com/works/life_is_not_a_garden]

INTRO: "*Life Is Not a Garden*" [the upcoming choir presentation] was composed through a collaborative process with high school students from St. Paul, Minnesota's Community of Peace Academy, "a racially and culturally diverse community" chartered "to educate the whole person---mind, body, and will---for peace, justice, freedom, compassion, wholeness and fullness of life for all" [<http://cpa.charter.k12.mn.us/home.html>].

About this collaboration, composer Elizabeth Alexander writes:

No matter how many times it happens, I am always surprised—though not always pleased—when life suddenly veers off into an unforeseeable direction. This journey into the unexpected often occurs when creating music, as I was reminded while composing this piece.

High school chorus members at Community of Peace Academy had struggled for several weeks to come up with a concept for a new piece of music they would be premiering. The students shared many concerns about injustice, poverty, war and prejudice. They felt strongly about the importance of family, community, forgiveness and acceptance. But how could those sentiments become a meaningful and coherent song?

I finally brought the choir a draft I thought was promising, with a central theme that would tie their ideas together. Upbeat. Positive. Calypso-ish.

I said to them, "It is a garden, a menagerie. There are flowers here and weeds, each has gifts and each has needs, and a lifetime full of seeds... Inside our garden. In our menagerie. Whatever it may be, it is our family. It's the community that we call home."

A skinny young man responded, trying to be tactful. "It's not bad or anything, but it's just not what I would sing about, personally."

Another student was more direct. "The people in my life always be fighting, disrespecting—you know, judging you. But this song is like 'be happy 'cause

everything's fine.' And that's not real life."

I tried not to think about how much time I had left to compose this song. It's about the process, I told myself. If the process has integrity, then so will the finished product.

"I hear what you're saying," I said. "But if the garden metaphor won't work, what will? What is life like for you?"

From the back came an impatient reply. "It's not like anything. Life is just life."

This was not going well. After another ten minutes of faltering communication, I finally threw my hands up into the air. "Okay, I gave this my best shot, and it looks like I got it wrong. You're going to have to help me out here."

To which one girl sighed, "I don't know, but life is not a garden, sunny and bright."

"Okay," I said slowly, "So what else is life not like?"

Suddenly, miraculously, here was a question they could answer.

Two days later, I showed up with a different sketch. Blues-inflected. Latin rhythms. Edgy. As I sang through the chorus, something in the room woke up. Here was their real world, with all of its complications and confusion. On the way out, one student gave me a thumbs up. "You rock."

Still, I had my work cut out for me. "Life is Not a Garden" was significantly harder to compose than the song I'd originally envisioned. Opening with disillusionment rather than affirmation, the song journeyed through anger and betrayal, which meant that I had to pass through those places, too. As I looked for a way to keep the song from sinking into despair, I was reminded of how slim hope can sometimes seem.

By the time I had completed "Life is Not a Garden," I was completely exhausted. And grateful. By insisting that their song offer a darker, more complex view of the world, these young people took me to an emotional and creative place I would not have gone by myself. And as I watched these insightful singers learn this piece together, I was reminded again that if life is going to go veering off in unforeseeable directions, it is best to have companions on the journey.

[CHOIR SINGS:]

LIFE IS NOT A GARDEN

*Music and Poem by Elizabeth Alexander
with students from Community of Peace Academy Choir*

Chorus: Life is not a garden, sunny and bright,
Life is not an endless twinkle star night,
Life is not a mountain towering high,
With its spire climbing higher 'til it meets the sky.
Life is not a gentle flowing stream,
And no matter what the song says: Life is not a dream.

For in the world that I know, there are bitter winds that blow,
And the mountains are blocking the way I need to go.
There are storms, there is rain, there is trouble, there is pain.
There's no doubt about it: some days I could do without it.

Chorus...

For in the world where I live, there is so much to forgive,
And so many take more than they intend to give.
The unknown turns to fear, growing stronger year by year;
Then one day it's hatred. It can get so complicated.

Life is not a garden, an Eden to behold,
But that doesn't mean that everything is hard and barren and cold.
At any time or place a tiny miracle can bloom,
In a crowded city or a lonely room.
Find a place in the stillness of your heart,
A wilderness where something green can start to make a home.
Keep it safe and keep it warm,
Keep it sheltered from each passing storm.
Let its young and tender form remind you:
There is beauty, there is splendor yet unseen, deep within, still asleep,
Slender and rare, but always there.

For as our journeys unfold, there are many hands to hold,
And the people who love us are worth their weight in gold.
Though many tears grow from pain, some flow with joy we can't explain -
A garden it's not, but it's the only world we've got.

Life is not a garden, row after row,
But nobody can tell me that my seeds won't grow,
I plant them in my home, and I plant them in the street,
I plant them in the heart of every stranger I meet.

Life is not a garden, sunny and bright,
Life is not an endless twinkle star night,
Life is not a mountain towering high,
With its spire climbing higher 'til it meets the sky.
Life is not a gentle flowing stream -

But even though it is a mighty far cry
From the garden and the mountain and the starry sky,
I'm gonna keep working to make this world that dream.

SERMON: **CONSIDER THE ARC OF YOUR PATH** by Jaco B. ten Hove

Life may not be a garden or “a gentle flowing stream,” but the composers of this song also remind us that “as our journeys unfold, there are many hands to hold.” Any of us might consider the arc of our life’s path so far and recall the hands held that made a difference for us as our journey has unfolded.

For us here today, some of those “hands to hold” were found and cultivated among the activities of this liberal religious community, which has inspired such connections for 52 years now. I think of the strong relationships among the founding generation of Paint Branch, people whose dedication to this enterprise created the momentum that we’re adding to here in the 21st century. They had to hold each others’ hands through some trying and exciting times, much as we in the current generation of Paint Branch have had to hold onto each other after the devastating fire in the RE Building a few years back.

Besides the large, sometimes challenging *collective* dynamics of a church community, I also think of the smaller groups that orbit the heart of this institution, such as the choir, whose members have become close through their weekly preparations, regular performances, and periodic social gatherings. They sing with gusto that comes partly from talent and hard work, and partly from the relational bonds that tie them one to another.

And the Worship Associates team, which you mostly see individually, one at a time, assisting with Sunday Services—they also meet regularly to improve their abilities and collaborate on other worshipful endeavors (such as the annual auction service they will present together in a couple weeks). They hold each other’s hands quite collegially, as they stretch themselves and provide very visible leadership to this congregation, aiming its sacred arc toward a future that is richer because of their gifts and their relationships.

They are also deeply connected in creative process with me and Barbara, for which we are very grateful. They have become valued compatriots in worship and resources we honor.

And of course there are numerous other small affinity groups swirling in the Paint Branch cosmos, building interpersonal connections and encouraging the kinds of interactions that, among other good things, help match hands in need with hands that can reach out.

Any of us, in various places on the arc of our path, might be at either end of that equation at any time; over time we might even know both postures—being in need of support and

being able to provide support. That's the foundational principle of our We Care Network, augmented by a team of Pastoral Care Associates.

In these ways and more do we come to know each other and fulfill at least one of the purposes of this congregation, articulated each week on the back cover of your Sunday Bulletin: to "...create an open, *nurturing* community for ourselves and our children..."

My colleague, Jane Rzepka, offers a very complementary vision:

"I have a mental image of a huge collage made up of pictures of hands—little tiny hands, gnarled hands, hands with tattoos on them, hands showing spots or scars, trembling hands, perfectly smooth hands, big strong hands, delicate hands, even metaphorical hands, firm hand-shaking hands, good hands to hold."

She goes on to explain the spiritual significance of such an image:

"To qualify for inclusion in the collage, your hands would have no tests to pass, no theological criteria to fulfill or mandatory number of good works in their history. No one would ask if your hands voted as political liberals or conservatives, how much they dropped into the [church] coffers, or whom they loved or how. Your hand would be worthy of our display because it is your hand. Every hand a worthy hand; our theology made flesh" [from the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship's magazine *Quest*, Feb., 2007, pg. 6].

We "create an open, *nurturing* community for ourselves and our children" because to seek nurturance is to live life fully, in relationship with others, "every hand a worthy hand."

We do this because we know that besides the home and the workplace or school, we all need a third place to belong, where we can interact with a diverse set of other individuals whom we can get to know and be known by, who spice up our lives with their particular uniqueness. We create community at Paint Branch because we can find spiritual renewal here, embraced by an inspirational "living tradition" of free religion which is unavailable anywhere else.

And we create community because—much as the wise young ones collaborating with musician Elizabeth Alexander refused to invest in a song about life that was all sweetly platitudinous—we also know that, yes, "There are storms, there is rain, there is trouble, there is pain"—not to mention fear and greed, hatred and loneliness. All our individual struggles and challenges meld with the larger troubles of this war-torn, fractious time, as we seek solace and meaning. Our sails can be full of "bitter winds," with the warmth of community often an elusive breeze.

So in the face of that reality, to *help* us face that reality, it is essential that we keep alive the vision, the dream, that “there is splendor yet unseen... slender and rare, but always there.” The dream has diverse facets, yet a unifying radiance: Within the turning day or year, the turning earth or age, “at any time or place a tiny miracle can bloom.” *We are* that miracle, alone and together, blooming already and all ready to bloom.

The poet May Sarton wrote about it this way:

*Help us to be the always hopeful
Gardeners of the spirit
Who know that without darkness
Nothing comes to birth
As without light
Nothing flowers.*

But we are also fragile creatures. Resilient in our vibrant imperfection, yes, but we can only do so much alone, by ourselves. Another great poet, Mary Oliver, has asked a relevant, abiding question:

“What will you do with your one wild and precious life?”

As you consider the arc of your personal path, as it points you toward your future, you may well honor a deep urge to join together with many other hands, to help keep all our dreams alive as we support and strengthen *this* one wild and precious church community. Doing so—sustaining a diverse and openhearted congregation like Paint Branch—is a challenge in its own right, of course. But in that challenge lies the seed of a power that is only possible in collaboration.

It is the strength of mutuality toward common purpose, tested by regular interactions with a broad sampling of human contact, and held by a strong religious heritage that describes a collective arc toward the common good. It is the power of leaving a legacy of value through an institution, which is a vehicle, a carrier of values into a future that will see ALL individuals come and go. It is the strength of numbers that compound the interesting storylines of our lives, so that we are enriched, encouraged, and nurtured in ways we might have never dreamed possible by ourselves.

Those who practice a solitary religion cannot touch this power. Their hands may indeed shape things of worth, but without regular contact with other hands—in group worship, in religious community, in relationship, seeking the fulfillment a noble group purpose—their dreams are also solitary and untempered by any guiding heritage. It is in the collaboration

with others that mutual nurturing emerges so beautifully, if still imperfectly. And I believe that those who practice a solitary religion cannot touch this power.

I emphasize this because there are some contentious angles to one of the most persistent discussions of our age, often oversimplified as “the individual vs. community,” which is a pertinent aspect to the consideration of the arc of one’s path. How much of where you are headed will be a solo journey and how much will be in communion with others?

Roots of this deeply relevant discussion go back into our religious heritage. The 19th century Unitarian side of our movement, while promoting many a cause for the common good, is ironically also quite the formative fount for an uncompromisingly individualistic attitude that too easily eschews the messiness of religious collaboration.

By the late 1880s a certain phrase had come to epitomize a strong Unitarian platform: “salvation by character” [a now infamous phrase primarily attributed to Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke’s sermon, “Five Points of the New Theology,” found in his *Vexed Questions in Theology*, 1886]. This notion was a distinct departure from orthodox Christianity, which offers salvation through creedal doctrines that require atonement for sin and promise attainment of heaven in the next life.

In contrast, “salvation by character” was a big part of the helpful Unitarian innovation, stressing instead our human character and moral uprightness as the locus of ultimate satisfaction and meaning *in this life*. It was, indeed, a significant and welcome shift in theology, but from our perspective today, we might perceive a theological pendulum that, in fierce rejection of “salvation by creeds,” swung so far in the other direction that an appropriate emphasis on “deeds, not creeds” has propelled us into potentially extreme realms of individualism.

The very influential mid-20th century religious educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs, reflected on what she called “This unfortunate pattern”:

“(C)haracter has come to be thought of as something self-contained, achievable singly, apart from the nature of the society in which the individual lives... (W)e need to turn (our) attention to the ‘togetherness’ that is involved in worthwhile living... (W)e need to realize that life never ceases to be a giving and a receiving.

If our long-time goal is the salvation of a world community rather than merely the salvation of a few select individuals within this universal community, (then) our concept of individual responsibility is changed... ” [Fahs, *Today’s Children and Yesterday’s Heritage*, Beacon Press, 1952, pg. 151-2].

She said this as I was being born. How much our American and Unitarian “concept of individual responsibility” has changed since then is debatable, but Sophie Fahs’s trail-blazing work as curriculum editor for the Unitarian Association put such holistic philosophy into practice with little Unitarians of the Baby Boom, like me.

However, I came of age digesting an almost palpable tension between Sunday School lessons that taught me to see myself in greater contexts and a Unitarian congregational culture still inspired by uncompromisingly individualist ministers.

As an idealistic youth I became a leader in various youth groups—in high school and numerous UU settings—most of which were ambitiously exciting in their scope. We were after something a lot bigger than ourselves. After all, the new and stunning image of the Earth from space suddenly informed our visions for a more equitable and fulfilling society!

At the same time, I was, myself, rather uncompromisingly individualistic. My 20s were a tumultuous and at times even dangerous struggle to reconcile that inner tension between my inbred individualism and my willing commitment to the value of community.

Now, a few decades later, I might see my entry into the ministry as a giant step toward that reconciliation. My career, writ large—the arc of my path—is an effort to pull the pendulum back a bit toward a center point—of individual identity, yes, certainly, but with an inherent connectedness that does imply a degree of responsibility to the greater good, the whole, the commons. It’s what I call a “BothAnd-ian” dynamic. We are *both* individuals, responsible for the arc of our own paths, very creative in that pursuit, *and* we are also ultimately accountable to our place in the greater good, the whole, the commons—“to the ‘togetherness’ that is involved in worthwhile living.”

My esteemed colleague Dick Gilbert adds punctuation to this sentiment:

“We are derivative creatures. We individuals were not in the beginning. We are precipitated out of that ‘web of existence of which we are a part.’ We didn’t make it; it made us. It preceded us in every respect. We didn’t create our family; it created us. We didn’t create our religious faith or our congregation; we joined what was already there. We are not only individuals, we are members. Without the cosmic context, without the human milieu, we are nothing” [from “Growing People of Prophetic Fire,” Fahs Lecture at UUA General Assembly, 2006].

Our “human milieu” is the canvas on which we mix the living colors of individual personalities into a portrait of our shared time in history. Or it’s the tapestry that we weave

together out of all our individual threads. Pick your metaphor; the meaning is the same: we are cosmically co-mingled or “we are nothing.” To me, this says that even we if try to stand alone, apart, we will fail, because we are inherently social creatures. And our UU principles declare our interconnectedness.

Meanwhile, the saying goes that “Many hands make light work,” and this is another truism about community. When organized well, with clarity of vision and purpose, a group can pull together and accomplish a lot more than can any individuals by themselves—and, by sharing tasks, hopefully without anyone burning out.

And one of the concerted contributions such a determined group can make, more so usually than any—or at least most—individuals by themselves, is toward the goal of social justice. When the arc of your path intersects meaningfully with those of many others toward a common goal of social justice that reflects your religious values—well, that is where the power of a group can make direct impact toward a better world.

Life may not be “a gentle flowing stream,” indeed, but like those young people who helped write the choir’s song, we’re “gonna keep working to make this world that dream.” Action that embodies principles—even just *support* for action that embodies principles—makes us contributors toward the dream. And being a part of a group taking action together, well, that’s movin’ and shakin’ that matters.

Ours is a complex and demanding world that confounds us regularly, and we might get lulled into complacency or escapism, or become morally immobile because of the strains of daily living. All the more reason to find some important principles and try to live them out, each step a worthy step, joining with other worthy hands to make a difference. Our action pulls us along, as described by one wag [Henry Munroe]:

*“We live ourselves into religious thinking
more than we think ourselves into religious living.”*

Thinking alone, while often good internal exercise, doesn’t always get us anywhere. But *living out* even one principle in even one specific way—especially in concert with others—that automatically *moves* us into action toward the dream, which provides satisfaction and meaning magnified. What one religious principle most informs the arc of your path—not in theory alone, but in actually shaping your journey so far?

Admittedly, as you may well know from first hand experience, joining with other worthy hands in the project of principled congregational life is a challenge. It can at times be distressing to be an active, vibrantly imperfect individual in a liberal religious community

with other similarly inclined people, some of whom may not be completely aligned with one's own compelling vision (or with one's own ego). Collaboration does require compromise and patience, alas, but I still think it's the best game in town. It's where I find realistic hope for a future that models peace locally to improve the odds for it globally.

So our salvation may well be by "character," but it's nothing less than the character of the whole. It's why we unite here to "create an open, *nurturing* community for ourselves and our children." Because it matters. And speaking of canvasses, this weekend launches our annual effort at what is sometimes called the "every member canvass," where Paint Branchers are called upon to pledge a piece of their personal treasure toward the good of this particular whole, this particular "*nurturing* community for ourselves and our children"—which matters.

*"For as our journeys unfold, there are many hands to hold.
And the people who love us are worth their weight in gold"* [from *Life is Not a Garden*].

I urge you to generously prioritize this ambitious group effort at "meaning magnified." Consider how the arc of your path has found you connected here—perhaps for a long time or just recently, perhaps intentionally or maybe surprisingly. Breathe in the power associated with such a local dream, of which we are the current caretakers, carrying forth a vision of community begun over 50 years ago.

It matters that we support this institutional embodiment of important religious principles; it matters that this congregation thrive in a world that radically needs more of what we're building here. Because, hey, our lives are short, so what we build has to outlive us and carry our values into the future! As one song reminds us:

*"Eternity is hard to ken, and harder still is this:
A human life when truly seen is briefer than a kiss"* [Hymn #324].

Our individual lives, our free spirits lead us onward and are the raw material we get to work with, but the greater project of meaning is what we do together, as the arcs of all our paths merge here to strengthen Paint Branch and Unitarian Universalism. Let us go forth with vigor and hope.

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