

# WHEN ALL ELSE MELTS AWAY

A Service for and with drex Andrex, by Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*

Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — March 9, 2008

## ***CALL TO WORSHIP***

Barbara ten Hove

Rebecca Parker, the president of Starr King School for the Ministry, (where Jaco studied) writes “your gifts, whatever you discover them to be, may be used to bless or curse the world. You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts? Choose to bless the world.”

Choosing to bless the world with our gifts is a powerfully religious act. We are constantly making decisions about how to spend our time, our energy and our money. Shouldn't our choices lead us toward blessings instead of curses? Can't we take the gifts we have been given and use them to create together a better world?

Such questions lie at the heart of religious life. Each Sunday, we gather in this sacred space to be reminded of the beautiful fragility of our planet earth, the wonderful and terrible ways we humans live upon it, and the importance of a religious tradition that honors the oneness of creation and the transforming power of love. Each Sunday, and every time we gather together at Paint Branch, I believe we make a choice to bless the world through our words, our actions and our commitments. This church makes a difference in so many people's lives.

One of those people is drex Andrex who, along with his wife Ann and their children have made Paint Branch their religious home for many years. Today's service reflects drex's longstanding commitment to this church and to our faith. It is also the first Sunday of the Canvass season, when we invite Paint Branchers to reflect on the many gifts we receive from this church and make a commitment to give our gifts in return. It is fitting that our service is all about giving and blessing the world. drex is one of those people who has blessed the world in more ways that I can say. And he would tell you that everyone in this room is also a blessing and a gift to the world. I agree with him.

As we enter into worship today, let us remember its ancient meaning and acknowledge the many ways we shape things of worth in worship and in our lives. It is good to be together.

***FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION*** — from *Acts of Faith* by Iyanla Vanzant

Chosen and presented by Tosha O’Neal, *worship associate*

*Some mornings we wake up feeling good, ready to go out and take on the world and “BE” a great day. But on other days we wake up to a grayness that makes the whole world seem depressing. On those dark days we need to remember: “Every day is a wonder to behold.” We must realize that the attitude with which we greet the day says a great deal about what the day will be like. We make our days pleasant or miserable. If we insist on being miserable, irritable and nasty, more than likely the day will give us exactly what we give it. When we start the day with a spirit of joy, openness, peace and love, we put the universe on alert, that we want more of the same. A day is too valuable to waste on misery and unhappiness. Misery cannot stand up to a happy face and heart.*

***HYMN #128: “For All That Is Our Life”***

***REFLECTIONS: “When All Else Melts Away”***

Barbara ten Hove

The song we just sang invites us to sing praise and thanks “for all that is our life.” The words to this hymn were written by a British Unitarian who discovered our religion during one of the most terrible times in history—World War II. I imagine this young man, like so many of his generation, might have lost all faith during that war, or turned to a religion that promised perfection—if you wait until after death for heaven. But no, young Bruce Findlow committed his life to a faith that can sing a song that gives praises not only for joy and hope, but also for “sorrow we must bear, for failures, pain and loss.” Like so many who embrace Unitarian Universalism, the Rev. Findlow trusted in the whole of life and wrote a song that touches me deeply each time I sing it.

One of the “sorrows I must bear” is that drex Andrex has cancer. But cancer does not define who he is. I think Bruce Findlow would have liked drex Andrex. They both have a way of looking at the world that sees it all—the beauty and horror, the failures and triumphs, the powerful good and the terrible sorrow that make up the whole of human living. This worldview is not, perhaps, unique to Unitarian Universalists, but I do think we have more than our share of folks who aim to live their lives fully and completely in both joy and sorrow. Perhaps this is because our religion teaches us to see life this way. My colleague Forrest Church, who is himself facing a life threatening illness, has written that “religion is the response to the dual reality of being born and having to die” ([www.forrestchurch.com](http://www.forrestchurch.com)). I agree with him. I would add that the purpose of a religious life is to become fully and completely the person we are meant to be between our birth and our death.

How does religion help us do this? By giving us a sense of purpose and meaning; by challenging us to do what is right when wrong would be easier; by helping us to see the world through the eyes of others as well as our own; and by creating a community where we can be nurtured, challenged, blessed and healed. Religion, as you have heard me say many times, can be defined as “that which binds us together.” I believe that religion is by definition a community activity. We can be powerfully spiritual alone, and spirituality matters a lot. But religion calls us into community. And it is to this community that I invite you to commit yourself as a spiritual and a religious person. And you could have no better role model than the one who asked me to create a service with him today—drex Andrex.

I remember meeting drex at the very first board retreat Jaco and I attended in the fall of 1999. He intrigued me immediately, with a very unusual way of looking at issues so that I would never know exactly where he was going with something until we got there. But when we did, more often than not, I was challenged, engaged, and yes, I would say blessed by drex’s unusual perspective.

It was this quirky way of looking at the world that called me to invite him to be a Worship Associate during the second year of that program. A few people I talked to thought I was, well, not crazy, but perhaps slightly misguided in wanting drex to do this job. I was told that he wouldn’t do it, that he was a painter not a writer or speaker, that there were others with more

obvious skill than he. But I knew that what I wanted from Drex were exactly those things that made him a less than obvious choice. And when he, reluctantly at first, said yes, I was delighted.

Drex never let me down. He was a fabulous Worship Associate who brought wit and energy and an off center view of the world to his work. A service he and I did together was one of the most moving worship services I have ever been a part of. It was Veteran's Day, and I chose to talk about my father and his view of war as a veteran, judge advocate general, and peace activist. Drex was right there with me, and the words he wrote about *his* father and what he learned from him about war and peace resonated deeply with all who were here. That was one of the few Sundays when—after David played a powerful postlude of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” that would break your heart—not a sound filled the room. It was as if no one could breathe. That service would have been far weaker without the moving contributions of Drex—this quirky, creative, sometimes difficult but always honest man. I will never forget it.

I tell you these things about Drex because it might help you to understand that when he asked us to do a service about some things that matter deeply to him, and to do it now, before this damnable illness takes him from us, I could only say, “Of course.” But it's also important for you to realize that the things I say about Drex, while unique to him, are not so different from what I might say about any of you in this room. What Drex and Jaco and I talked about in preparation for this service was simply this: Who are you—who are you and you and you and yes, me – when all else melts away? What lies at the core of each of us that is crucial to our very being? When each of us looks at our life, and faces the dual reality that we have been born and that someday we must die, what kind of life do we want to fill that in between time?

This is where religious community becomes so important. In a moment, you will hear Drex give you some of his thoughts on what really matters when all else melts away. As he shares what is most important to him, I invite you to reflect on what matters most to you. I also invite you to reflect on the role that your religious life plays in determining what really matters. It is clear to me that for Drex, this congregation, which has been a part of his life for decades, has been a critical element in helping him stay focused on what really matters. I think I can speak for Drex in assuring you that one of the things that he surely does not wish to melt away is this church, and all it offers us.

For over 50 years, Paint Branch has been a home for people like the Andrexes, for people like you and me—spiritual seekers who know that our quest for truth needs to be forged in the crucible of community; justice workers who need others to hold them up when the work gets too hard; families who need a place where their children can grow surrounded by love; artists who find in this gorgeous church with these creative people a place to bring eyes, ears, hands and hearts; and people who seek to build a better world, one small community at a time.

This place, Paint Branch UU Church, is, as I have said before, vibrantly imperfect. There is a lot we do well and much we could do better. But make no mistake. This place matters. It matters a lot.

Thank you, drex, for being who you are so fully and completely. Like everyone in this room, you are a blessing to the world.

**SONG:** “Life Anew” (by C. R. Gearheart, adapt. by drex)

Sung by Jaco B. ten Hove, *co-minister & guitarist*

**ANDREX REFLECTION:** “What is Important for Living”

I taught Religious Education here at Paint Branch when Marj Donn was the Director of Religious Education, way back when. The curriculum I had was “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and the class age was middle school. We actually changed the name of the course to “Why do good AND bad things happen?” to try to avoid the overly negative connotation. But you can’t fool middle schoolers, and they went right to the heart of “Why do BAD things happen to GOOD people?”

They wanted to know. I wanted to know, too! We learned lots of stuff, not the least of which was that the teacher, ME, doesn’t necessarily know the answers. We also learned that things aren’t always fair, that there is sometimes no apparent cause and effect, that understanding why things happen isn’t easy. We learned that sometimes it doesn’t matter why things happen, only that you have to figure out what to do about it.

So here we are, some 25 years later, and I still don't know why bad things happen to good people, I just know that they do happen.

At the end of last summer, in August, I shared the sorrow with you all that I had cancer and things had taken a turn for the worse. I think I'm pretty good people, and I think cancer is a pretty bad thing.

I don't know why it happened, but I quickly discovered that it didn't matter. Playing the victim, wallowing in self-pity, or luxuriating in self indulgence would lead to my personal psychological destruction. And my **LIFE** and my soul would be wasted. **ALL** my **LIFE** and my soul, wasted.

What mattered is what I did with my life, starting now. Address the disease and determine the best course of action, even faced with the prospect that none existed. Accept not knowing.

But it also meant learning to live my **LIFE**. It is time to face loss and mortality, it is time to call on my gifts and make deep moral decisions without knowing the answers, and it is time to figure out **WHAT IS IMPORTANT**. Then, having learned what is important, decide how to live my **LIFE**. It is, after all, **MY LIFE**.

But in this I am no different from any of you. We are all mortal, we all have this challenge about how to live our lives, how to make decisions without knowing answers or consequences. That is in fact why we are here, why we are building this community, why we seek, why we are dedicating our time and energy to this time and space, here and now.

**So I ask myself, "What is really important? What gifts do I have? How should I use them? What *can* I do?"**

To start, an act of faith is required. Accept that the universe is good. **LIFE** is good, and it is my charge to add to the goodness with the way I live, every day, starting now. There is no "proof" that **LIFE** and the universe are good (but we do have our observations and intuitions).

Now then, what is really important for me is deceptively simple. I must live honestly, motivated by my soul. Because life really is too short for any pretense. Say it with me, as a Paint Branch songwriter of some renown has said: “**LIFE** is too short to fold underwear!” Say it again: “**LIFE** is too short to fold underwear.” But not too short to have some fun.

I have been given wondrous beautiful powerful gifts, and I must use and share these gifts while living my **LIFE**. I don’t know why I have received them, but I do know that I will use them every day while crafting my **LIFE**. I will hone them every day as I create beauty and expression to add to the universe.

I have been blessed with an insight into “how things work,” an intuition for science. I can do the math. (Handy when we are surrounded by such a cool universe.) I have been given Painter’s Eyes that allow me to see the universe with a wondrous clarity, which in turn allows me—nay drives me to craft images of the universe. Together with the insights about how things work, and its calculus, I can create some pretty wondrous images, pictures and stories for your inspection, consumption, and enjoyment

And I have been given the ability to **LOVE**. I think we all have. It helps to inform all of our actions, allows us to give and receive our gifts.

I *must use* my gifts to live, must share their fruits. I must **LOVE** life, **LOVE** myself, **LOVE** all of us. **LOVE** must inform my actions, how I use my gifts. **Love** must inform the artifacts I create with my gifts. I must seek **BALANCE** and **PEACE**.

I have lost a lot. I can no longer be as effective as I once was. I can’t work, I can’t drive much, I can’t drink Belgian Ale, I can’t have sex. I lose half of every day or more to the disease. I suffer continuous pain and am under a regimen of drug therapy to control it. It messes with me, causes hallucinations, uses my energy. I don’t like any of this, but these are the accommodations that I must make to live as well as I am able. Dwelling on loss does not help me live well. Coping with it does. I still have capability, I still have my gifts, I still have my will, I still can contribute, I still can do many things. And I will. I will create spaces of thought and beauty. I hope you will visit and enjoy them.

I thank you all now for allowing me the opportunity to share with you here, today what I think is important, pieces of my story. As I go into each day, I think of the worth and dignity of every person, and I realize this applies to me to. And having inherent worth and dignity brings an obligation to live up to this standard, each of us. And I think of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and know that every day this informs my actions.

And finally, thank you all for building this community to allow this exploration, to provide the crucible for the creation and sharing of this story.

Namaste. Drex

**CHOIR:** “Be Still, Look Up and Listen” (by M. Patterson)

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**HYMN #346** “Come Sing a Song with Me” (a request from drex)

**CLOSING WORDS:**

Sing a song of love.

Take a walk in the rain.

Be still, look up and listen.

Live your life as if it matters because it does.

Come into community.

Make a commitment to others.

Share your gifts.

Bless the world with your Spirit.

The Spirit of Life that lives in each and all.

**RESPONSE #123:** “Spirit of Life”

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