

If We Could

Alison Wohler, September 20, 2009
Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

If I Could

by Regina Belle

If I could

I'd protect you from the sadness in your eyes

Give you courage in a world of compromise

Yes, I would

If I could

I would teach you all the things I never learned

And I'd help you cross the bridges that I burned

Yes, I would

If I could I would try to shield your innocence from time

But the part of life I gave you isn't mine

I watched you grow

So I could let you go

If I could

I would help you make it through the hungry years

But I know that I can never cry your tears

But I would

If I could

If I could

In a time and place where you don't want to be

You don't have to walk along this road with me

My yesterday

Won't have to be your way

If I knew

I'd have tried to change the world I brought you to

And there isn't very much that I can do

But I would

If I could.

I used to spend a lot of time in my car, driving back and forth between Theological School in Boston and "home" in Meadville, PA. Often I would listen to the radio, particularly after dark, to pass the time and keep myself alert. One late night show I found useful for these purposes was hosted by a sultry voiced woman named Delilah,

who specialized in playing emotion-laden songs of relationships and love. There's nothing like thoughts of relationships and love to keep one awake at the wheel.

It was just about 10 years ago now when I chanced to hear the song Shannon just sang for us, "If I Could," and I almost had to pull over onto the side of the road right there on the New York Thruway, for the tears in my eyes. I went out and bought the CD right away – unfortunately I found out I really didn't like any of the other songs on the album. But this one is enough.

The things we wish we could do for our children – to make their lives less painful – bring out strong emotions in us. I would have done just about anything to have spared my children some of the things they have had to experience in their lives. I know my own mother and father, who are visiting with us this morning, feel the same way toward me and my brothers. It's a longing most of us recognize. Even if we don't have children of our own we can imagine the things our parents must have wished for us.

If we could, we would change a lot of things, and not just for our children, although it is our children, the world's children, who will benefit in the long run from any improvements to our world. Our chalice lighting words had three such wishes: If we could we would bring warmth where there is coldness. If we could we would wish courage for those who live in fear. And in a world of turmoil, we would make peace. These things for everyone, but particularly for the generations to come.

As Unitarian Universalists we are part of a long history of passionate commitment to issues of justice, equity and compassion for the world. I see the purpose of our UU religious communities as one that works simultaneously to both nurture our spirits and give us the inner conviction to help heal our broken world. What we would do in the larger context, if we could, is motivated by convictions equally as emotional and equally as recognizable as the efforts we make for our children. We are a part of an infinitely connected and interdependent web and if we could we would mend the tears, the broken strands, so incongruous to our vision of a world at peace. Every tear is like a tear in our hearts. It's interesting that the word "tear" is spelled identically to the word "tear." If we could we would mend the tears, too.

I want to look at a number of the ways in which we would like to help, if we could. And I want to also look at how we cope with the discouragement of knowing we cannot always effect the change we want.

We don't have to go far away or to a so-called third-world country to find things we would like to change or improve upon. We mentioned our families already – our children's futures. Sue Kelly's pulpit editorial this morning is about what we would do, if we could, for all of our children here at the UU Society of Amherst, not just our own. We, with the opportunities of our UU religious education program, have the power to effect great benefit upon the lives, now and in the future, of our common children and young adults. What better head start to a self-assured and compassionately led life than the values we would have our children learn and put to use on Sunday mornings. I can't

think of much in today's world that will be of more benefit to our kids than developing a passion to help, a deep respect for the variety of religious experience among peoples and a yearning for the spiritual in their own lives. The light of truth, the warmth of compassion, the fire of commitment. If we could, we would have all this happen. It takes the entire community, though, to make sure these opportunities are available in our religious education program.

Our UUSA Mission Statement reveals some of the things we would like to do with and through our congregation. "As a caring Unitarian Universalist Society we are dedicated to nurturing personal and spiritual growth, becoming a more diverse congregation, developing a visible presence in our community, and seeking to bring about positive change in the world." Our seven UU Principles, listed in the front of your hymnal, lead us in many worthwhile "if we could" directions. Think of the ethical ramifications if we were to truly live up to even our first principle, that of the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. And most of us are in some way working to reverse the damage that human activity has wrought on our Earth's environment – the home in which life sits in the balance.

The UUA advertising slogan at the top of your order of service also calls us to the things we would do if we could. It says simply, "Nurture your spirit, help heal the world." This description of our faith also helps to remind us of the dual nature of the religious work we are engaged in. Classically this is referred to as faith vs. works. Is what we believe more important, or is it how we live our lives? UUs fall heavily into the works category, but I have a strong belief, myself, that the strength to do those works can be found in the spiritual aspects of our worship and practices. Faith and works may be in necessary tension, but for me they are inseparable.

Universalist minister, Raymond Baughan, said it eloquently:

Just to believe something with one's mind is not enough. Real religion is a spiritual adventurer. It is never kept abstract in the realm of theory. It must ever get itself expressed in character and in social causes. Its principles come up out of life, not out of storybooks. And no person knows anything about it until he has experimented with it.

To make religion an escape from life, a retreat from all its problems, is to make it sentimental sham.

Keep us dissatisfied with beliefs we do not put to work, with retreats that do not bring us back to life empowered, with comfort that is not standing-ground for transforming life upon the earth.

This he wrote in 1946, in an essay called "Then It Is Real." (Undiscovered Country, p. 290.) Our mission and our principles help us realize what we would do, if we could, but the next important step is at least try to make those things happen.

There is a lot of healing to do in our world. It can boggle the mind, freeze one in immobile lethargy at the immensity of the suffering and injustice and cruelty out there – or right around the corner. If we could, we would do something about all of it. Our list of priorities is huge. There is too much to do. Where should we start? Can we really make a difference?

Our Board of Trustees met yesterday for a 6 hour retreat. We have a fantastic Board by the way. One of the traditional activities at these annual retreats is to brainstorm about goals and priorities for the Board in the coming year. I continually observe that there is never enough time to truly finish the discussion because there are so many things the Board feels passionate about doing or wants to help make happen. Even for your Board there is the reality that it will be impossible to do all their “If We Could.” Priorities have to be set, limits must be acknowledged, sometimes “if we could” becomes “we can’t, at least not right now.”

What of those times when we cannot effect the changes we want to see happen? How often do we despair and give up, too easily? There are several points I would like to make in answer to these questions.

First, our work to heal the world for our children and for children everywhere will not always be possible, but when it is we must keep trying to move forward. In a book of essays on our seven principles, Ken Collier encourages us to remember that justice will always be a goal “in [our] struggle to become deeper and more fully human. We are not just; we are becoming just.” (Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, p. 29)

Secondly, the Rev. Collier also tells us (p. 33) “Compassion really means ‘to suffer with another. It does not mean ‘to take away the suffering of another’ or ‘to make it all better. In the larger context, sometimes we can do that and sometimes we cannot.... Compassion is about going beyond the sometimes defeatist and selfish thinking that says we are so isolated from each other that no one can touch, appreciate, or commune with another.... When we begin to understand – in an existential sense – that through love we can extend ourselves beyond the boundary of [our isolation], then compassion becomes not just possible, but the first expression of both equity and justice.”

Compassion, a “suffering with,” even if we cannot make it all better, is what we can offer our children. We can be with them, with our love, and this is a great gift.

The third suggestion I would like to share with you from Ken Collier is his admonition “to begin.” (p. 105) That’s what is, actually, in our power to do – to begin. Unless we begin there is no possibility of ever approaching our goals, much less succeeding in them. We must risk the beginning, even without knowing what the end will be. Sharon Welch calls this, in a book by the same title, the ethic of risk. We have to believe that our work, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem, is worth the effort.

I think it’s wonderful, as it should be, and essential that we human beings have this capacity for positive thinking in the face of adversity. It keeps us going. I also think it is

the nature of Unitarian Universalism, dismissing as it does ideas of original sin and the depravity of the human spirit and instead putting its faith in the worth and dignity and potential of that human spirit, that allows us within the liberal religious tradition to keep forging ahead with hope and idealism in our hearts.

I want to caution us not to fall into the kind of thinking that puts more value on some kinds of socially responsible work over others. All of our “if we could” are in reality connected, just directed at different parts of the same interdependent web. They are all important and will reinforce each other, eventually. Let us not say, or even think to ourselves, that putting our efforts into our own children is any less worthy than helping children elsewhere in the world. There are many ways to begin to heal the world. I encourage them all.

The title of this sermon is “If We Could” for a reason. Because sometimes healing the world can feel like The Impossible Dream. If there were actually more things that we could for sure start and finish, I think we might have made more progress in the “healing the world” part of our mission. The problem comes when we see insurmountable problems and feel powerless. “If we could” becomes “why bother?” Or “it’s too much.”

Do you know that old saying: “I would if I could, but I can’t, so I won’t?” It is probably not a good attitude. It is not congruent with our UU principles or our conviction that it matters what we do in our lives. We must continue to hold fast to our certainty that what we do, as well as what we don’t do, makes a difference.

Our hope is that “if we could” becomes, for each and all of us, “we must.”

Nurture your spirit; help heal the world.

May it be so.