

## **“Human Being”**

**a pre-sabbatical reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Sept. 28, 2008  
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio**

We stand, this morning, on the edge of the unknown. We bring, to this day, many different, even contradictory, emotions: uncertainty and relief, confusion and hope, resentment and anticipation. As we look toward the horizon of the next several months, none of us knows what to expect. Very few among us – both those who remember the days when this congregation had a part-time minister, and those who have known nothing else but a full-time minister – very few among us can imagine what life might be like, this fall and winter, at Heritage Church – with your minister on sabbatical.

For me, though I have been on staff at churches when their minister has taken a sabbatical, I – too – am facing the unknown. I’ve never done this myself; I’ve never felt the emotions I am feeling today, or those I will feel in the days and weeks to come. What will it really be like to be away from you, for the next five months? What will Heritage be like, when I return? What will I be like, when I return?

These are the questions swirling in my mind – and perhaps yours – this morning. But throughout the preparations for this day, there has been one recurrent question that I have had an answer for – yet one which, today, I have decided, I must begin to answer differently. For some time now, people have been asking me what I will do, while I am gone. I have been asked the question so many times, my answer has become somewhat rote: “Mine will be an *eclectic* sabbatical. I’m going to be visiting sites and studying up on some of our American Universalist history. I’ll be visiting and learning from a some congregations which have successfully – or not so successfully – navigated the choppy waters of growth and change that we ourselves are now experiencing. I’ll be attending some yoga retreats, and church administration seminars. I’m planning to go to Niagara Falls. I’m going on a personal growth retreat. I’m hoping to catch up on my sleep.”

All these things, I've noticed recently, involve telling someone what I'm going to do. As someone who has lived much of his life, constrained by what I imagine others' *expectations* of me are – somehow, I feel compelled to explain to people – especially those who will be paying my salary while I'm away – in other words, *you* – all the things I'll be *doing*, during the next 23 weeks.

But as the sabbatical has drawn closer, I have realized something very important: In order for the time that I am about to take off to be truly transformative – in order for my time away to serve its true purpose – I can't simply trade one set of activities, one set of duties, one to-do list, for another. Instead, I have to allow myself (or, to be brutally honest, I have to make myself) stop *doing*, and start *being*.

You have all, no doubt, heard that distinction made before – the distinction between someone who lives their life more like a human *doing*, and someone who is truly a human *being*. Most of my 50 years have involved the former – and for my time and trouble, I have much to show: accomplishments of which I am proud, career success, trips and activities, family satisfaction. Yet it is really only in those rare moments that I have given myself over to human *being*, that I have known true happiness, that I have experienced deep contentment, that I have been most fully *alive*.

I suspect, perhaps, it is the same for you.

And so as I – and we – prepare for our time of sabbatical, I am reminded of the words of that great comedienne, Lily Tomlin: “For fast-acting relief of common, everyday stress ... slow down.”

I am reminded, too, of the strikingly similar words my father said to me, with a sense of urgency and focus, one afternoon now more than twenty years ago – words that have long haunted me, both because my dad was never able to live by them, himself, and because – to date – neither have I.

I remember the afternoon well. My father had begun to slip away, in the early stages of what we later learned was Alzheimer's disease. Yet on this afternoon, he was enjoying a time of particular lucidity. Noticing this, I suddenly felt compelled to ask him if there was any piece of advice he'd like to give me, his only son.

He looked me straight in the eye, and said simply, “Slow down, Bill. Just slow down.”

It was probably the best advice anyone has ever given me. And I've done a really, really *lousy job*, of following it.

Perhaps now, finally, I will. Perhaps that, more than anything else, is why I am making myself – yes, *making* myself, for to do so goes against just about every Type-A, workaholic, human-doing cell in my body – perhaps

that is why, I am making myself, take this sabbatical. I do not want to suddenly discover that I am an old man, like my father, wishing I had taken more time, to stop and smell the roses. I do not want to, as Thoreau so incisively put it, “when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.”

So from now on, when someone asks me what I am going to do on my sabbatical, I will try to resist the urge to answer the question in the way they have posed it, in the way that I have been programmed to answer it – and instead I will say, “I’m going to practice human *being*, rather than human *doing*.” After all, isn’t that what a sabbatical is all about? Isn’t that what the ancient Hebrew concept of the sabbath, from which the word “sabbatical” is derived, is all about?

Whether it was God resting on the seventh day, or the people pausing in reverence and reflection every seventh day; whether it was the ancient farmers allowing the land to lie fallow every seventh year, or the slaves gaining their freedom every 49<sup>th</sup> year – seven times seven, also known as the “jubilee year” – the purpose is the same: after a time of doing, a time of being. For everything, there is a season.

Of course, in real life, the relationship between being, and doing, is hardly as cut-and-dried, hardly as black-and-white, and never as simple, as it is in scripture. One cannot fully separate the two. When we are *doing*, we are still being. And even when we are *being* – when even the most enlightened, most Buddha-like among us is in the deepest of transcendental reveries – he or she is still doing something, as well.

To sit, is to do. To breathe, is to do.

I think, therefore I am. I momentarily let go of all thought – and I still am.

There’s a scene in the Oscar-nominated movie “Being There,” in which the placid, child-like, but ultimately wise-beyond-measure Chance the Gardner – played absolutely brilliantly by the legendary Peter Sellers – has just been banished from his own, personal version of the Garden of Eden – the home where he has been completely cared for and sheltered, and the garden which he has tended faithfully for as long as his simple mind can remember.

As the jazz-funk beat of Deodato’s interpretation of “Also Sprach Zarathustra” plays in the background, Chance wanders out into the rough streets of downtown Washington, D.C. Wearing an outdated suit and bowler hat, carrying an umbrella and a suitcase, he innocently approaches a gang of young street thugs. “Excuse me,” he says to them. “Could you please tell me where I can find a garden to work in? There is much to be done during the winter. I should start the seeds for the spring, and work the soil.”

I simply love that scene. I could go on and on about the movie itself – its imagery and its message – but for now will limit myself to the idea that this winter, something very important will be happening, both for me, and for you. Seeds have been planted – and now, the mysterious process that is the unfolding of a lifeless but potential-filled seed, into a *living thing*, will start to take place. Yes, the soil must be worked. There remain some things to be *done*, in this time of sabbatical – but let us agree not to overwork or over-water the soil. Let us make sure not to over-do it. Let us leave the space, for the miracles of nature and human nature, to simply *be*.

That is the beauty of Chance the Gardner. He brings to life Jesus' admonition to see things through the eyes of a child. He lives out the Buddha's call for non-attachment. He is like the water, like the Tao, of Lao Tzu. He is man who, as the Anusara lineage of yoga teaches, fully and comfortably flows with the divine currents of Grace.

In short, he is the very embodiment of human *being* – and as such, any human *doing* in which he engages is effortless – care-less in the sense that it is care-free – and completely unmotivated by greed or grasping, need or narcissism.

Thus, Chance is equally unfazed by news of his benefactor's death, as he is by meeting the President of the United States. He is no more curious about his ability to walk on water, than he is about the ability of a seed to transform itself into a flower.

It is no coincidence that the movie's title, "Being There," is the literal translation of the German word *dasein*, a word used extensively by the existential philosopher Heidegger, to describe the *essential nature* of the individual human being. In other words, what defines us, what makes us who we are, as unique, separate people – is the very fact of our "being there."

For the next 23 weeks, I will seek to "be there." I hope that you will, too – and by that, I mean each of you, as an individual – *and* this beloved congregation, as a community. I know that you will have much to "do." There is a consultation coming up, and some important work embracing the Pledge for Living in the Spirit of Community. There are budgets to prepare, decisions to make, contracts to enter into. There are worship services to plan, potlucks to cook for, adult education classes to lead or attend, and Chalice Circles to facilitate or participate in. There will be Christmas Eve, and a New Year; there will be turmoil and crisis in the world, and a very, very important election.

I invite you to give yourselves fully to all these things – but also, give yourself *permission* to sometimes step out of doing mode, and into being

mode. I invite you to do this, as if your life depended on it – for in truth, it *does*.

I want to wrap up our time together this morning – and our time together, until next spring – if you’ll indulge me, by dusting off two personal favorites from my UU past, by way of closing. The first I’ll offer are the words that served as the traditional, spoken benediction used by my very first Unitarian Universalist minister, at my very first Unitarian Universalist church, in Greenville, South Carolina. It is my parting message to you.

And as he passed from this life, the Buddha said:

“Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within yourself, as to the only light.”

### **Choral Benediction**

To conclude the service, I have asked the choir to sing what was the traditional, choral benediction, during my time as the Associate Minister at the UU Church in Columbus, Ohio – an arrangement from our hymnal titled, “Voice Still and Small”...

*[CHOIR sings]*

### **Benediction**

Please rise, and join hands....

May the Spirit of Life,  
That each of us possesses,  
Flow from one to the other.  
May it stay with us,  
And bring us peace and harmony,  
Until we meet again.

**Postlude**

*(Matt)*