

**Sermon: “A Time For Renewal”**  
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**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato**  
**January 4, 2004**

**Readings**

“Infinity Close at Hand” from *A Small Heaven* by Jane Ranney Rzepka

I was in an elevator – one of those glass elevators that zips along the outside of forty-eight floors. Looking down, one sees terraced floor after floor, blending into little horizontal stripes, finally descending into an all-too-clear view of infinity.

Nobody enjoys this, I’m convinced. Maintaining a confident, humanoid demeanor, what with all this infinity so close at hand is trying. But it’s possible.... until the elevator stops mid-floor and begins an ear-piercing bleat. Minds go blank, overcharged with the electricity born of trying not to scream.

It all turned out fine, of course; we did slide down to some appropriate notch; the bleating stopped. I’ve ridden up and down the forty-eight floors a dozen times since, and the elevator ride is simply an elevator ride. But sometimes, for a split second, as in the rest of life, I look down past my shoes and see infinity below. And I love my children and the green grass and everything else with all the intensity there is. Then the door opens in an ordinary way, and I get out.

“Beat of Life” by Arthur Graham

If none will sing of life  
 Then I will sing its praise.  
 Not in the treble voice of youth,  
 Nor on instruments of one string,  
 Nor with happy, laughing brasses,  
 Nor by cadence counting on drums  
 Would I praise life, as those  
 Who sing hymns only to the sun,  
 Forgetting nature in torment,  
 Man in agony. I would sing  
 Soft and sad, surging with emotion,  
 Remembering pain, fear and death,  
 Those swamping morasses, and  
 seed beds, too,  
 Where courage, life and growth  
 Began to bloom, and man in sweat  
 Quivered at what he saw, and  
 Spoke in verse, ballad and epic,

Recounting glory, learning self,  
 Hailing life as the deep surge to be,  
 Singing in deep voice the hymn  
 Which extols restless beings tense  
 with destiny.

**Sermon** “A Time for Renewal”

I have always appreciated the irony of the old Chinese curse: may you live in interesting times. On this first Sunday of the New Year, in the very beginning hours of 2004, it is not yet clear what the next 362 days will bring. As a fellowship, you have said goodbye to your minister of over ten years and begun a new chapter of your history, standing now on your own as an independent congregation. I am here in Michigan, packing boxes in preparation for my family’s move to the frozen North (Should I mention there is green grass outside my window? Perhaps you do, too, by now.) I am looking forward to meeting each of you in person soon and beginning to look toward the future together. As I watched the great, shiny, iridescent ball descend to the New Year’s Eve crowd on Times Square, counting down the last seconds of the old year, I found myself reflecting on the beginnings which are found in every goodbye. With the finality of every change comes a fresh, new, hope-filled start. A chance to claim the creativity and excitement that comes with turning the page on a new chapter in our lives.

Not all change is easy. There is grief in saying goodbye to relationships we cherish. There is nervousness about the uncertain nature of the future. And while there can also be relief in saying goodbye to an old year, to times of turmoil and stress, times of economic strain and unending war, times of illness and death, this does not always leave us much of an energy reserve with which to greet a new day. At the turning point of a New Year, as I send up a toast for health, peace, and happiness, I also wish for a year of renewal, not just for myself, but for all of us, and for our world.

This is not an idle wish. For it is exactly in the midst of interesting times that we most need to draw upon our strength and resilience, to rediscover our sense of humor and appreciation of joy, to proclaim our commitment to a higher purpose – none of which can easily happen when we are overtired, or stretched from living too long at our wits end. Many of us have become so used to juggling the countless demands of our lives – family, work, friends, hobbies, home chores, volunteerism, working for justice (to name only a few) – that we may no longer even notice the effort it takes to maintain the appearance of holding it all together. We are not unlike the people stuck in that forty-eight story elevator, whose “minds go blank, overcharged with the electricity born of trying not to scream,” because they feel trapped in a machine and a destiny not of their own making. Nobody enjoys this, my colleague Jane Rzepka reminds us, and yet still we step into the elevator, as though we did not know any other way to travel where we need to go. What has happened to our sense of personal choice and self-determination? What has happened to our ability to enjoy and appreciate the lives that we work so hard to shape and build?

I raise these questions, not because I think that all is gloom and doom. On the contrary, I believe that there is much that is still good and just in this world, despite the uncertainty of our times, which will continue to survive and prosper long after we are gone. I believe that even when we feel the most trapped or on the edge, that it is still possible to glimpse a bit of infinity and to remember the precious beauty and meaning of our days. I am reminded of this each time I gaze upon my two month old son. Signs of hope come to us in all shapes and sizes, if only we are open to receiving them.

But I am equally aware, as we make our New Year's resolutions, of just how easy it is to personalize the stress and struggle of our world, forgetting to look outside, through the elevator's glass, at the influence of the wider earth below. When we are feeling depressed, it is easy to resolve to take a more positive attitude in the year ahead. When we are feeling too disorganized, it is easy to pick up a palm pilot, or a Franklin planner, in an earnest attempt to reform. When we are feeling overworked, it easy to put pressure upon ourselves to find a new career more suited to our needs. Such resolutions work, when they remind us that there are often small, concrete things we can do which can improve our lives and our relationships with the ones we love. They don't work, however, when concrete things are not the source of our stress, but other, more nebulous things are – like the overall mood of our nation or city, or the seemingly irreversible new pace of modern living, or the apparently changing values of younger generations, or simply a general sense of constant human crisis. They don't work, when the heart of the problem is not a problem for us alone.

To survive and flourish in interesting times we must remember that we are not alone: that we are affected by what goes on around us, even if we are not consciously thinking about it all the time, even if it is not always happening right outside our doorstep. On some subtle, indefinable level of our souls, we feel the weight of living with a war that will not end, or the devastating loss of 25,000 human beings to the suddenness of an earthquake, or being a part of a society which covers its insecurity with repeated violence, even if we do not consider ourselves the type to keep up on current events. Dr. Odysseus Adamides actually created a term to define the numbing effects of carrying this weight, unnoticed, for too long. He calls it *Alexithymia* - the inability to express emotion, to have no words to describe a feeling. When *Alexithymia* reigns in our collective mood, it drains our emotions, so that not only does it dull our sadness and outrage, but it also deadens our passion and our joy. It can be seen in a pervasive lack of energy and enthusiasm for things that we used to enjoy or found a way to fit in. It can be seen in a gradual turning inward that does not seem to result in the rest or recharging for which we had hoped. To me, it is an apt term to describe the challenge that we are currently facing in these new days of the year. *Alexithymia* is not something that we cause or bring upon ourselves, but it is something that we can begin to defend ourselves against, once we recognize it and begin to give it a name. How do we help to shake off the feelings of hopelessness and malaise that linger around us? How do we learn to sing life's praises once more? What would a cure to *Alexithymia* really demand?

For one thing, I believe that it would demand a return to that forty-eight story elevator, at least for one more ride. Rzepka writes, “I’ve ridden up and down the forty-eight floors a dozen times since, and the elevator ride is simply an elevator ride. But sometimes, for a split second, as in the rest of life, I look down past my shoes and see infinity below. And I love my children and the green grass and everything else with all the intensity there is. Then the door opens in an ordinary way, and I get out.” The cure to *Alexithymia*, the start of our year of renewal, will begin when we find a way, in the ordinary course of our days, to look down past our shoes to the infinity below. It will begin when we can find a way to reclaim the infinite qualities in our finite existence, for it is these qualities which ground us in life’s promise and meaning. An infinite perspective puts the color back in a grey, subdued and mortal world, and dares us to fall in love with it again.

How does one catch a regular glimpse of infinity, without the aid of an elevator? We can begin by reclaiming our understanding of the nature of time. In the Western world, we are used to the story of how the world was created in six days, with a seventh day designated as a Sabbath day, a day of well-deserved rest. With all due respect, I believe that this understanding of Sabbath time has misled us. For one thing, it has encouraged us to think that any time for rest or reflection can only come after all of the work is done, and we human beings, perhaps being more perfectionist than not, never seem quite done with the work of the world. There is always more to do. For another, it has allowed us to think that Sabbath time is only worth taking, if we can set aside a full day for renewal. Otherwise, the benefit gained will not be worth the effort. The end result is that our Sabbaths are rarely taken, and the only time that we value in the course of our days is the time when we are in motion. But falling back in love with the world takes the kind of time that is born of being comfortable with stillness and those rare moments when we can get the elevator to stop.

Rzepka reminds us that we need not stop the elevator for long, in order to gain fresh perspective. For this reason, I prefer to cultivate Sabbath moments, rather than Sabbath days. It is not the amount of time that they last, so much as the quality of the time that they give which has meaning to me. I measure Sabbath moments, not by the hands of the clock, but by the time it takes me to brew and to savor a cup of tea, while staring quietly out my front window. I measure them by the time it takes me to lie on my back upon the green grass and follow a cloud’s path across the horizon of my sight, or by the time it takes to break bread and share an unhurried meal with the ones I love. *Alexithymia* dulls our senses and responses to the world around us. It isolates us by blurring the world at large. But Sabbath time, reclaimed, brings it back alive in small, nourishing ways. It offers us a kind of time that stands more still than others. It grounds the minutes passing by on our watches in a kind of infinite time, helping us to see the world as though it were newly created, filled with innocence and beauty, joy and contentment. A few moments spent in this infinite time can sharpen our senses, to discover and reconnect with the good that yet lies in our seasoned world, when we return

to it.

The second step towards renewal, towards a defense against the *Alexithymia* which preys on our exhaustion and stress, is to remember our purpose for being here, to recall why we are riding in the elevator at all. Were we put on this earth to create perfect order in it, or to be instruments of its own creative chaos and growth? Are we called to be on top of our lives, or merely to be full participants in them? I am reminded of one Unitarian Universalist mother who told her minister that her children had helped her to think of her life as a fast-growing garden. When she thought that her task was to manage the garden, to keep it perfectly weeded and trimmed, fertilized and hoed, she was quick to despair at the impossible enormity of her task. But when she thought that her task was to *tend* the garden, to watch over it with care, to nurture healthy growth when she found it and to clear a few weeds, here and there as needed, then hope began to reappear. Life became grounded once more in possibility, the kind of infinite possibility which appears when we accept that Life has a mind and a heart of its own.

It is important to claim the difference between control and cultivation. Our call to love and care for each other and our world is not a call to manage our lives, but rather a call to tend to them. It is not a call to the impossible task of fixing our world once and for all, but rather a chance to witness and to respond to the movements of growth and possibility that we find. Tending to, and not managing the world, means recognizing that while we cannot control all of the forces that would seek to lead our nation away from our hard-won liberties, we can cultivate the pockets of peace that we find and try to grow them large enough to be seen. Tending to, and not managing the people around us, means accepting that others will make different choices than we would, but that we still have the power to honestly cheer them on in their chosen dreams. Tending to, and not managing our lives, means that we need not always have the answers to all of life's problems, only that we know the importance of staying in touch with the seeds that lie beneath its ground. *Aleximythia* weighs us down when we claim too much responsibility for things that were never ours to succeed in, but it begins to lift and lighten up when we reclaim our power to nurture pockets of hope and beauty, when they appear.

The third and final step towards a cure for *Aleximythia* builds upon the first two. For once we can reclaim the timelessness of our time, then we can begin to know ourselves better and to become more comfortable within our own skin. Once we have reclaimed that grounded sense of self and reconnected with our power to love, nurture, and tend to the world from that place, then we are ready to embrace a deeper understanding of our humanity. Arthur Graham challenges us to do so with his poem, "The Beat of Life." "If none will sing of life, then I will sing its praise," he writes. "I would sing soft and sad, surging with emotion, remembering pain, fear and death, those swamping morasses, and seed beds, too, where courage, life and growth began to bloom, and man in sweat quivered at what he saw... learning self, hailing life as the deep surge to be, singing in deep voice the hymn which extols restless beings tense with destiny."

The tragedy of *Aleximythia* does not lie in its reminder to us that life is not always the picnic that we imagine it is supposed to be. Its tragedy comes, when it distracts us from finding our voice to sing of the ways in which we meet sorrow when it comes, of the ways in which we find to rise above our struggles with hard-won wisdom, of the courage that we find to reach for hope in the days of our despair. When I was in Minneapolis last year, I went to the Walker Art Center to see an exhibit of contemporary Central and South American artists, who are seeking new ways to sing the praises of this bittersweet world. One piece that struck me was simply entitled “sinners,” and it filled a whole room. In that room were rows of prayer benches in soft white light. The benches had been covered in creamy beeswax to better reveal the places where they had been worn from use. On each bench, in a different place, you could see the outline of a pair of knees, where someone had knelt to offer up their prayers and to find solace for their days.

Now, I do not believe in original sin, but I do know what it means to fall short of the mark. But the power of the sculpture, for me, was not just in the witness to the prayers of the people themselves, or in the reminder that suffering and uncertainty are all curses that we share. The power lay in the fact that the benches were now empty. The unspoken, unfinished part of the sculptor’s work lay in the untold stories of what those people did after they were finished, after they had stood up and gone back out into the world. The cure to *Aleximythia* will take root when we become grounded once more in a sense of shared destiny, of being a part of a larger, more infinite humanity, whose nature it is not only to survive, but to rise above the struggles of our day to claim the better part of our world as our own. To sing life’s praises is to sing of this journey, and to fall back in love with the melody, and the green grass, and the love of our children, and all that is precious amid the difficulties of this time.

On the eve of another difficult New Year, the poet May Sarton, once wrote:  
 “Small joys keep life alive. I give you these...  
 When the long winter lingered on  
 and all the colors stayed an ugly brown,  
 suddenly snowdrops had pushed their way through  
 and their sharp whiteness made all new....

Later in June, alive with silent fire,  
 the fireflies pulsed their firefly desire  
 and from the terrace I could watch the dance,  
 follow their bliss.  
 It happened only once...

One autumn night my cat ran to my call  
 and leapt five feet over the terrace wall.  
 A second, weightless, he flowed and did not fall,  
 that silver splendor, princely and casual.

And last I give you murmur of waves breaking,  
the sound of sleep that is a kind of waking  
as the tide rises from the distant ocean  
and all is still and yet in motion.

The small joys last and even outlast earthquake.  
I give you these for love – and for hope's sake.”

**This morning, on the cusp of a New Year, I would join in her prayer of hope. This time, above all other times, is time to reclaim both the small and the great joys of our days. May we begin it, and help one another to glimpse the larger life, which yet lies within our grasp.**