

Thanksgiving 2011

Celebrating Our Seniors/Our Elders

Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Rob Dainow came into my office, I think it was two years ago, and told me he thought it would be a good idea, and timely too, for us to recognize and celebrate the senior members of our congregation. Rob, some things take time to gestate. But I never forgot this good idea of yours, and so today, taking a cue from Hillel, the great first century rabbi, who said: “If not now, when?”—the time has come to single out and celebrate the elder and veteran members and adherents of our congregation. In looking over our UCV membership, I am deeply impressed not only with the size of our senior cohort; more important, I am sincerely impressed and deeply thankful for the richness of their lives—your lives—and for the role our senior members have played at UCV, in one way or many ways, down through the years. You know very well that without your service and devotion to this congregation, we would not be here; nor would we be as strong and visionary a religious community as we enter into our 102nd anniversary year. And for this I, and all of us here, are deeply grateful to you.

About a month ago, we did our best to compile a list of our members and adherents fast approaching, in the midst of and beyond their eighties. When that list arrived at my desk, I just about fell off my chair, though I shouldn’t have been surprised: there were 88 names listed there; and if the Talmud is right, as I quoted from it a couple of weeks ago—if one person, one soul, is comparable to an entire world, our senior members constitute a galaxy of planets—each unique, priceless—whole worlds of memory, experience, of joys and sorrows, vision and achievement. Look around this room with me for a moment; consider what I have just said. How fortunate we are that the universe has sown out into this congregation the rich fullness of the life of our

seniors/our elders like grain upon a field, like radiant blue-green boats sailing out on the river of the open cosmos—and here their boats have docked time and again, their seed taken root. From each of us here, we salute you and say welcome! Thank you, for who you are, and what you have been and will yet become! May we be worthy of you and your legacy to us!

That legacy includes the *tangible* gift of the beautiful heritage buildings in which we meet and worship; the generous giving by those members in the early 60s and beyond who helped finance, build and adorn this site; and the tangible, living gift of children and grandchildren many of whom cherish enduring connections, memories and membership here. The lasting gift of our seniors also includes those crucial, irreplaceable *intangible* things: the countless hours of deliberation, teaching, fellowship, committee work, art and music making, pledging, worshipping, connecting, pastoral care, and making merry—the sum of which created standards of moral, intellectual and spiritual excellence, as well as forging enduring networks of belonging, trust, vision, worship, education and engagement that are the hallmarks of a living religious community—networks of participation that are hugely important to the health of religion and civil society.

Given what I've just said, it's strange, difficult to get a handle on the fact that in a lot of our popular culture, media and politics the contributions of senior, elder members of society are trivialized or virtually ignored; their place in our midst is insecure; their significance as a demographic cohort often framed as a threat—they're labeled "the dependent elderly," and as "economic burdens." The poet Dylan Thomas wrote about beloved elderly aunts as "not wanted in the kitchen, or anywhere else for that matter." Maggie Kuhn, the founder of the Grey Panthers protested against negative images that depicted the old as "mindless, useless and sexless."

Almost fifty years ago, Simone de Beauvoir focused on social prejudices toward the elderly. In her path-breaking study *The Coming of Age*, she too noted public rhetoric, attitudes and practices that marginalize and cast off the elderly. “Society,” she wrote in 1967, “cares about the individual only in so far as she is profitable....It turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species. The whole question is buried in a conspiracy of silence....” The solution, she argued, is that seniors themselves must “pursue ends and goals that give our existence meaning.” “One’s life has value,” she asserted, that is unaffected by age, “one’s life has value” so long as we—across the age spectrum—“attribute value to the life of others by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion.”

Let me repeat those words: “Pursue ends and goals that give our existence meaning...Life has value so long as we “attribute value to the life of others by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion.” If ever anyone wanted proof positive that veteran members of our society are not mindless, useless or unprofitable when it comes to the true value of a meaningful life—we have only to look and listen to the seniors, the elders in this congregation.

A number of our seniors generously responded to my invitation to offer some words of wisdom to our congregation; consider the following: Duncan Graham tells us “the question is the answer” to a life well-lived; “We don’t need to know the answer,” Duncan reminds us, “to be in awe and wonder with life and the passing of time.” Winn Peters underlines how she has “received support, love, friendship, and respect”—this place has “challenged and re-enforced” her” ideals and beliefs” and encouraged her in “thinking ‘outside the box.’” Marguerite Davidson wrote that “my little contributions of time, talents and treasures” over the years “have been my way of saying thank you.” Woody Coward tells us “that every person on earth has the

right to evolve their own belief system.” “It’s not easy,” he reminds us. “It takes a great deal of research, experience and time.” Woody, as well as many, many of our seniors, embodies a sometimes overlooked truth—and that growing into life, a long life, is not a recipe for mental stasis, or the ossification of belief. “By the time I was thirty,” he says, “I had moved completely away from fundamental Christianity...By the time I was fifty, I abandoned all organized Christian religion...It was not until I was in my seventies that I realized I was really an agnostic. And by the time I was eighty, I accepted the notion that I was an atheist;” and he credits his children for keeping his active mind in motion: “they forced me to ask the tough questions....For this I will ever be grateful.” And echoing Duncan’s words: Woody says: “the real answer may be in the striving for it.” “I suggest we take comfort in uncertainty,” Wanda Justice admonishes us. It can, she says, “nurture imagination, lead to questions, new ideas and someday, it may even lead us to a peaceful use of wisdom.”

Intergenerational inspiration works both ways, our seniors note. Where Woody credits his children, Sandor Halebsky praises his immigrant father as a “model of what a caring, sensitive, and loving human being should be.” Sandor’s father “fought to help establish the garment workers union in the 20s and early 30s,” struggled to feed and house his family during the Great Depression, and worked daily alongside his employees in a small garment shop. “He was sensitive to the needs of his sons and daughter, never one to raise his voice in anger, and was an unfailing source of strength and assistance to others. This determination to be of service was emphasized by Dorothy Goresky, who wrote: “Anything worth doing is worth doing with dedication and with devotion, but always with a mind open to questioning and re-examination.”

Compassion, friendship, service, love and endless discovery—or, as Dorothy puts it: “the never-ending search for a meaning to life” can be and are the very hallmarks of successful aging,

and each of these qualities is embodied by UCV's senior cohort. I have been deeply impressed and moved reading the archived interviews with some of our elders carried out recently by Diana Ellis and Michael Welton. Together, they are a trove of personal journeys of the mind and spirit, and of information about the history of our congregation—its strengths, challenges, achievements, and potential. Not surprisingly, the interviews are incisive, distinct and highly opinionated.

Let me cite just a couple of stories of empowerment, the kind that's crucial for moving into robust and successful elderhood. Arthur Hughes identifies deep passion for racial justice and equity as key features in his life. He was one of 500 Unitarians who marched for civil rights in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. "I can remember as though it was last night," he recalls. "Harry Belafonte, Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez with a guy named Bob Dylan,' and many, many more.... We received words of welcome from Jesse Jackson, Ralph Bunche and even Rosa Parks." "Martin Luther King's speech and the incredible euphoria of the crowd, it was infectious." On the final days, marching through "streets lined with people holding up Confederate flags, taunting with shouts of 'white niggers' and 'commie anarchists'...we carried our "large banner that read UNITARIANS FOR FREEDOM NOW!... It was tangible; it was overwhelming...and without doubt the highlight of my life." From that day to this, egalitarian humanism and passion for social justice runs through Arthur's veins.

Prompted by her husband Clive, Wanda Justice told the story of the "Bomb Ladies." It goes like this: "There was a "group of women...about half of us were from UCV...concerned about nuclear bombs and war. We...started studying, doing research, having public meetings about this issue. We [ended up being] investigated by the RCMP; we were accused of being communists, and an article in the *Vancouver Province* newspaper said: 'this group must be

communist because the women are mostly housewives and how could they know about these things?” How indeed? Imagine! How saucy! Uppity Housewives—independent, thinking, acting out. Wanda goes on to say: “all the women I met were bright, outgoing and ‘doing’ people. UCV acted as a connecting place for people and issues. No one at the church told us what to do, but the Church made it possible.” (Also, I encourage you to ask Wanda sometime about the newspaper headline that read “Unitarians bear gifts to the Greeks.” There’s another great story!)

And it’s not just outward “doing” beyond these walls which cumulatively have carried our seniors forward into empowered, productive elderhood. Jane Sutherland wrote that, among other things, “What I love is that the arts, the environment, philosophy, dreams, and play are cultivated here.” It’s a place where John Voth created and installed these beautiful copper ornaments on the Sanctuary pillars and the beautiful sculpture just to the south outside these walls; the same John Voth who wrote so movingly: “what a breath of fresh air; we had found a spiritual home” here; and “we gladly give financial support to the Unitarian Church knowing that many troubled people have found a safe place to explore new ideas.” Joyce Griffiths says: “It’s so free...I think the Humanist Group has given me a lot. It has sort of strengthened by disbelief. Kindred spirits. Shared values. People who are free thinking, caring...youth, seniors and people who like different activities...I felt right away that I belonged.”

“What a breath of fresh air.” “People who are free thinking, caring...youth and seniors.” These and similar sentiments expressed by our elders pick up Simone de Beauvoir’s critique, and point to a solution to the marginalization, of the dismissive attitudes and practices toward the elderly all-too-frequently harboured and expressed by a society obsessed with brittle, vivacious celebrity and consumerism. Penny Pearson said it like this: “My words of wisdom: be happy and

live everyday as your last because you are a long time dead.” One of our elders, who taught a children’s RE class here received this ultimate tribute from a grown man who had been a child in her RE class years ago: **“I remember you opening up the world to me.”**

To you 88+ women and men (and I do so apologize to anyone who I missed by not sending you a letter, and who’s not mentioned in our celebration brochure), we acknowledge and thank you for your contributions, your struggles and achievements in your homes, relationships, professions, the wider community, to one another, and to the life of this congregation and its members of all ages. You are well into what the psychologist Erik Erickson called the Seventh and Eighth Stages of Life where we work out the profound human goals of generativity and establishing a sense of meaning in one’s life. And from reading interview transcripts, life-reviews, your selected “words of wisdom,” and from serving with you here, I am so grateful for your lively, questing, open and generative minds, souls, and bodies.

“My aches and pains are less important than my agenda,” Maggie Kuhn wrote. You, our seniors here, have *and continue* to show us the fruits of outward empowerment for meaningful elderhood. As well, there is inner empowerment, and you have spoken and modeled that time and again for me, and us. I love your expressions of gratitude and your passion for learning. I am moved and impressed by your longing for the soul of beauty and meaning, for the setting aside of false expectations, for the ways you face up to fears, and to the “small deaths” of disease and declining mobility with grit, humour, and compassion. You said it Penny: “Live every day as your last because you are a long time dead.” And Dorothy: you said it as well: “Here there is a place with companionship while one learns and discovers endlessly, including the never-ending search for a meaning to life.” May my generation and the one immediately behind me, and may

those yet to come, pick up and continue the legacy of our elders in what will be our own distinctive ways: living every day, discovering endlessly.

A full life is the stored honey of the human soul. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that “what is happening to me happens to all fruits that grow ripe. It is the honey in my veins that makes my blood richer, and my soul quieter.” In recognition and gratitude for our seniors, our elders, we’d like to give you a gift of local, organic honey from our Oak Street Farmers’ Market:

And then closing hymn: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth