

Community: The Most Genuine Of Victories
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As a child, if I had answered truly the question of what I hoped to be when I grew up, I would have said a saint. Of course, a real saint would never admit to such an ambition and neither did I--even to myself--but clearly it was my heart's desire. Week after week, I trooped in and out of the little library of St. Isaac Jogues elementary school borrowing yet another life of a saint. Most of the saints whose lives I read were martyrs; those not martyred seemed to make sure that they led lives full of deprivation and suffering.

Unless we were attacked by "the godless Soviet Union" (keeping in mind I grew up during the 1950s), martyrdom wasn't a likely prospect, and the truth is I didn't really want to suffer. My chances for sainthood were, in fact, slim. But I did feel "called" to what seemed the next best thing; by the age of thirteen, I was sure that God had chosen me to be a nun. That I preferred the Dominican order to which my aunt belonged, because in my experience they had more parties and ice cream than the other nuns I knew, will give you some indication of just how far I was from sainthood.

Yet I still understood the life of the nun (or brother or priest) as a harder and thus higher calling than other ways of life. Simply put, I saw the religious life as one of giving up this world for God. The sorrows and joys of this world would fade as I came to know this other-worldly reality more fully. I would give up this world in the hopes of glimpsing and eventually attaining a better one.

I never did join the convent, but I came to understand later in my life that I *had* in some ways distanced myself from the world. My study of philosophy, for example, was largely motivated by the hope of finding a more orderly, stable world beyond this one, and it's not surprising that I felt a particular attraction to the work of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. In Plato's "Parable of the Cave" (from *Book VII* of the *Republic*), he likens the human condition to that of prisoners in a cave who know no other reality beyond the shadows they see on the wall. In the story, one prisoner is mysteriously and reluctantly dragged up the steep path that leads out of the cave into the world of the sun. At first blinded by the light, this prisoner gradually comes

to understand that this new world beyond the cave is the true one, and he returns to his former world of the cave only to try to convince the other prisoners to leave as well. This is just what Plato attempted in his own life--writing dialogues and opening a school through which he could teach others about the orderly and stable world of ideas that was more real to him than this shadowy and uncertain world in which we seem to live.

It helps me to understand Plato's passionate desire to find a stable world beyond this one when I look at the events of his early life. Plato grew up in Athens during the last part of the fifth century B.C.E. when Athens was engaged in a terrible war which it eventually lost to Sparta. Then, in his late twenties, he witnessed the newly-restored Athenian democracy put to death a man whom Plato loved and admired--Socrates. Is it any wonder Plato withdrew from public life? Is it any wonder he sought a world beyond this one--a stable world of unchanging and perfect ideas, open to anyone willing to undertake the difficult work of detaching from the body and from this world?

My own search for deliverance had less to do with death and time than with the pain I saw in human relationships. In childhood, I foolishly imagined the convent--a life devoted to God--to be free of the pain of community.

We Unitarian Universalists are sometimes dismissive of those who seek refuge in a world beyond this one--whether it's the other-world of God and heaven, or that of Plato's ideas, or some other version. But wouldn't we be more honest to admit that there is something of Plato in each of us: a desire to transcend our finite condition, to rise above errors, to escape from fragility and death, to insulate ourselves from the pain of relationships, to become self-sufficient, to become godlike?

Put another way, the question we face is the question of hope. Is human hope to be found in transcending this world or in embracing it? Is hope to be found in self-sufficiency or in relationship?

Much of Western thought has agreed with Plato by defining hope in worldviews which

insist that the essence of human persons is to be found in minds or souls separable from the material world, in worldviews which insist that human persons are essentially individual rather than relational. I believe that the fear of embracing our relational nature is akin to our fear of embracing our material nature. To be material is to be vulnerable to death; to be relational is to be vulnerable to other people. Is it surprising so much of our culture seeks hope in escaping from, rather than embracing, vulnerability? Isn't it more hopeful to believe that who we are survives death intact? That who we are is ultimately independent of others?

We all know, we've all experienced, something of the pain that comes with allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to other people. But just how deeply--how frighteningly--vulnerable we are is the message contemporary classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum takes from one of the ancient Greek tragedies, Euripides' play *Hecuba*--a story, she says, which sometimes wakes her up at night (Bill Moyers, *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women About American Life Today and the Ideas Shaping Our Future*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers, Doubleday, 1989, 447). The story takes place at the end of the Trojan War. The Greeks have defeated the Trojans; they have killed the Trojan men and taken the women and children as slaves. Hecuba, once the celebrated Queen of Troy, is now a slave. Her husband and most of her children are dead. As this play begins, Hecuba's daughter Polyxena is taken from her and sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles.

In spite of these terrible losses, Hecuba remains the good person she has been and even argues that good character cannot be changed by adversity. But there is further loss to come. Hecuba's one remaining hope is that her youngest son has been kept safe by her closest friend, Polymestor, to whom her son's care had been entrusted just before the war. But when she and her captors arrive at the island where her son had been living, they discover his nearly unrecognizable body washed up on the shore. The man Hecuba thought was her dearest friend has killed her son for his money.

Now this once strong and good woman finally loses her moral center. As Nussbaum points out, "What [Hecuba now] sees is that the deepest trust was not trustworthy. What is firmest is, can be, heedlessly set aside. . . . If this best and deepest case of human social value has

proven . . . 'untrustworthy', then nothing is ever entirely deserving of my trust. It is a dislocation, a rending of the world" (*The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 408). Having lost her moral compass, Hecuba plots and carries out her revenge--murdering Polymestor's children and blinding him. When Polymestor predicts that Hecuba will turn into a dog, he is in a sense only noting what has already happened: Hecuba has ceased to be human.

What do we do with Hecuba's loss of humanity? What does she have to teach us? The lesson Martha Nussbaum draws from this story is one that sometimes wakes *me* up at night.

Now this comes about not because [Hecuba is] a bad person, but in a sense because she's a good person, because she has had deep friendships on which she's staked her moral life. So what this play says that's so disturbing is that . . . [t]o be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the condition of the ethical life: that is it based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from that fragility (Nussbaum, *World of Ideas*, 448).

This is not a lesson easy to hear. In a conversation Martha Nussbaum had with Bill Moyers, his immediate response was to invoke Victor Frankl, to argue that we can always refuse to become the beast, the non-human, others may try to make of us. But Nussbaum argues that good human character depends on the ability to trust something, and when that which we most deeply trust--that which is "the basis of [our] connectedness to the world"--becomes untrustworthy, then we may not be able to help becoming more like a beast than a human (448). Human goodness is fragile—"more like a plant than like a jewel"--in need of nurture and support.

To be *of* this world, to live *in* this world, is to live with the certainty of pain and death, and to live with the risk of losing that which makes our integrity, our moral life, possible at all. Again, is it any wonder that many philosophical worldviews and religious traditions insist that we are *not* truly of this world, but rather in exile here, and that the truly *human* quest is escape from the materiality, the finitude, of this world? Isn't it more hopeful to see ourselves essentially

as individual spirits or minds, finally not subject to the death of our bodies or the trustworthiness of other people?

If this is the case, who among us wouldn't jump at the chance to escape the pain and loss--the finitude--of human existence? Well, Odysseus, for one. Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, is fated to spend ten difficult years attempting to reach his home and his family following the victory of the Greeks in the Trojan War. But not all of Odysseus' adventures during his voyage home were difficult; among them was a very pleasant sojourn on an island with the goddess Calypso. Calypso, finding pleasure with Odysseus, offers to make him a god like herself. In the words of Martha Nussbaum ("Transcending Humanity," included in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1990, 365-391),

. . . [Calypso] offers him a bargain that no human being, it seems, could refuse. Stay with me on this island, she says, and you will avoid all the troubles that await you. And best of all, living here, "in calm possession of this domain," you will be "beyond the reach of death," both immortal and ageless (365).

Which of us would not be tempted by Calypso's offer of seemingly eternal bliss? Yet, oddly enough, Odysseus gently turns her down, eager to return to his finite human life *and* his finite human wife, Penelope.

Goddess and queen, do not make this a cause of anger with me. I know the truth of everything you say. I know that my wise Penelope, when a man looks at her, is far beneath you in form and stature; she is a mortal, you are immortal and unaging. Yet, notwithstanding, my desire and my longing day by day is still to reach my own home and to see the day of my return. And if this or that divinity should shatter my craft on the wine-dark ocean, I will bear it and keep a bold heart within me (Homer, *Odyssey*, V. 215-222, trans. W. Shewring, quoted by Nussbaum, 365).

Odysseus chooses the life of a human being rather than a god. In doing so, Nussbaum points out, he also chooses aging and death. More than that, he chooses either to suffer the pain of the death of the person he loves most--his wife Penelope--if she dies before him, or to cause her such pain if he dies first. All of us who have suffered such pain will recognize the weight of Odysseus' choice. "He is choosing," Nussbaum says, "the whole human package: mortal life, dangerous voyage, imperfect mortal aging woman. He is choosing, quite simply, what is his: his own history, the form of a human life and the possibilities of excellence, love, and achievement

that inhabit that form" (366).

Just what are "the possibilities of excellence, love, and achievement that inhabit [the human] form," that make choosing human life worthwhile? Think, Nussbaum urges, of the virtues or excellences we most value--things like courage, moderation, and justice. The very meaning of these virtues is bound up in human difficulty and limitation. In what sense could Odysseus--whose character has been so largely defined by cunning and courage--be courageous on Calypso's island where there would no longer be anything to struggle against or for? What need would there be for justice among beings who have no need of one another, what possibility for compassion? ("Transcending Humanity," 374-375).

And what about human love? What can Penelope offer Odysseus that Calypso cannot? A story, Nussbaum responds. All that can be said about Odysseus' and Calypso's lovemaking is that they take pleasure in it. But the account of Odysseus' and Penelope's lovemaking includes the stories they tell one another about their lives. Without conversation, without sharing the adventures of each other's lives, sexuality is boring (366-367).

In a segment of NPR's *Weekend Edition* (February 19, 2000), reporter Frank Brown visited a center in California where Dr. Rachel Remen works with cancer patients to help them face their disease. Remen described a woman who had a mastectomy for cancer, and was terribly afraid afterwards to let her husband see the scar. When he finally caught a glimpse of it accidentally, his wife was astonished to discover that it strengthened rather than weakened his desire for her. Brown ended his report in this way: "The erotic body, the sensual body, the *real* body is a scarred body--a body which, by betraying its flaws and its frailties, also reveals its spirit."

Surely Odysseus would have understood Brown's conclusion. Penelope's aging body was no match for Calypso's, and yet Odysseus ultimately prefers Penelope who, with all of her flaws and frailties, also has a spirit, a story, a reality, the goddess Calypso could never match.

A variation on Odysseus' choice of human life over the life of a god can be found in

the 1987 film, *Wings of Desire*. German filmmaker Wim Wenders gives us a glimpse of what a life not *of* or *in* this world might look like. The central characters in *Wings of Desire* are not gods, but angels--pure spirits who do not know pain or loss or death. Here would seem to be the ideal life.

Wenders' portrayal of such a life seems more accurate to me than the angels of popular culture, such as those of the television show, *Touched by an Angel*. Wenders' angels do seem to care about us humans, but it would be more accurate to say that they *watch* us rather than *watch out* for us. Their job is to "preserve, collect, testify to" human existence. They wander through the world (in the film it's the city of Berlin, but it might just as easily be anywhere), into and out of houses and apartments, buses and cars, circuses and film sets, libraries and laundromats. They hear the inner voices of the men and women they encounter; at times the cacophony of these voices is overwhelming. But they cannot *touch* us--literally or metaphorically--a gap made wrenchingly clear when one of the angels is unable to stop a man intent on suicide.

Most of Wenders' film is in black-and-white. From the point of view of the angels, the world can *only* be in black-and-white. Having to preserve and testify to as much of human life as possible, while remaining outside of human experience, means never experiencing this world fully. Ironically, because living in eternity would seem to suggest having all the time in the world, it's as if the angels don't have time to experience the world in color. And that's exactly the point: they don't literally *have* time; they don't *live in* time. Eternity is, in fact, a very limiting perspective. This film suggests that eternity offers, not the "big picture" of the world, but no real picture at all.

Here is the way one of the angels, Damiel, expresses his sense of his limitations:

It's great to live by the spirit, to testify day by day for eternity only to the spiritual side of people. But sometimes I get fed up with my spiritual existence. Instead of forever hovering above, I'd like to feel there's some weight to me to end my eternity and bind me to earth. At each step, each gust of wind, I'd like to be able to say "Now," "now and now," and no longer say "since always" and "forever." . . .

Not that I want to beget a child or plant a tree right away, but it would be quite something to come home after a long day, like Philip Marlowe, and feed the cat. To have

a fever, to have blackened fingers from the newspaper, to be excited not only by the mind but, at last, by a meal, the curve of a neck, by an ear. To lie! Through the teeth! To feel your skeleton moving along as you walk. Finally to suspect, instead of forever knowing all. To be able to say "Ah" and "Oh" and "Hey" instead of "Yes" and "Amen."

Here we are envying angels, while some angels are envying *us* the concreteness, the weight, the "now," the color of human existence. Just as in the *Odyssey*, what we humans have that gods and angels do not is a *story*. It's not accidental that the library in *Wings of Desire* is packed with angels; it's the one place we see lots of them--leaning over people's shoulders, sitting on the ledges. Angels are as hungry for stories as we are, but we have the advantage of being able to create stories, to live stories, while angels can only observe them.

Like Odysseus, what persuades Damiel to choose human existence is his love for a human woman. But *Wings of Desire* offers a further insight. What *enables* Damiel to take the risk of being human is not romantic love but the promise of friendship. Peter Falk has a wonderful role in this film as himself, having come to Berlin to film (what else?) a detective story. One evening, at an outdoor coffee stand, Falk detects Damiel's presence and begins talking to him--to the amusement of the coffee vendor and his other patrons. Falk tells Damiel "how good it is to be here" and offers his hand in friendship. The suggestion is that Damiel--and we--cannot become truly human until we are offered and accept another's hand in friendship. (A false friend could destroy Hecuba's humanity only because a true friend is essential to it.) Only later do we learn that Falk is himself a former angel--a "fallen" angel--one who took the plunge into human existence thirty years earlier. "There's a lot of us," he tells Damiel after Damiel too has taken the plunge. "You're not the only one."

Becoming human is literally a plunge in this film; Damiel falls out of the sky to the ground with, oddly enough, a suit of armor. On the surface, the armor is something like a dowry; selling it gives him money to make a start in life. But of course, more deeply, giving up the armor is a concrete way for Damiel to realize the enormity of what he has done; as a human being, he will no longer be protected from the losses and pains of human life as he was as an angel. Will the risk be worth it? Part of the risk is that we cannot know for sure--an uncertainty every parent faces in bringing a child into this world. But we do know that without the risk, the joy of discovering and creating the stories of our lives is not possible either. In human life, there

is risk and loss and death, but in human life there is also hope--the hope of achievement, virtue, love, and friendship. No wonder Odysseus and Daniel choose human life; no wonder *we* must.

Odysseus and Daniel ultimately find more hope in human relationships than in the self-sufficient life of gods or angels. Specifically they embrace their humanity by risking intimacy in the relationships of family and friendship. We can all attest to the courage intimacy demands. But is intimacy in love and friendship enough? Or is there reason to become an integral part of something larger than our *personal* networks? What, if any, is the hope to be found in community? More to the point for us, what hope do religious communities, such as our Unitarian Universalist congregations, have to offer that love and friendship do not?

Oddly enough, I'd like to suggest that one answer is *strangers*.

There is, as many of you know, a growing movement in many religious associations, including Unitarian Universalism, to pay renewed attention to our need to know and be known, to support and be supported, to love and be loved. Many people are pointing out that intimacy is among the major reasons people visit religious congregations, and we fail if we offer them only committee work. My own congregation, like many others, forms "covenant groups"--small, intentional groups which meet at least once a month--precisely to address this need for intimacy. I think this is an essential and wonderful project.

And I am nervous when I hear people say that what they seek in their religious communities is "family." Small groups within a congregation may come to feel like "families," but congregations *as congregations* cannot and should not be "families"; to seek to shape congregations in this way is necessarily to make strangers unwelcome. We human beings do need intimacy, but we also need what Parker J. Palmer calls "the company of strangers." A religious community ought to be a place to which we welcome strangers, in which we are eager to learn from strangers, and in which we learn to live peacefully and justly with those who are very different from ourselves.

One of the most powerful sermons I ever heard had to do with the value of strangers. It

was given by the Reverend Terry Sweetser at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis, my home church. On the Sunday before Thanksgiving one year, Reverend Sweetser told us-- children and adults, gathered together for an intergenerational service--the familiar story of the Pilgrims coming to the New World in search of religious freedom. But he emphasized a dimension of the story unfamiliar to me. Not all of the 102 passengers who sailed on the *Mayflower* were Pilgrims; in fact, only 41 of the 102 belonged to that group. In order to fill the ship and to bring people with skills the Pilgrims themselves didn't have, the Pilgrims had to offer passage to other men and women who had their own reasons for wanting to leave England. The Pilgrims called these 61 people "Strangers."

Relations between the Pilgrims and the Strangers were not easy. When the *Mayflower* landed far north of the Virginia territory for which it had been headed, some of the Strangers argued that they were now freed from any original agreements, and could strike out on their own. Out of this problem came the *Mayflower Compact*, an agreement to "covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation . . ."

The *Mayflower Compact*, signed by a majority of men on board, suggests that both the Pilgrims and the Strangers recognized that their chances of success, and even of survival, were better if they worked together than if they went their separate ways. In fact, it was in large part due to the skills of the Strangers that some of this combined group survived their first terrible winter in the New World.

At the end of this sermon, Rev. Sweetser acknowledged that parents are right to teach their children to be wary of strangers. But he cautioned us against taking and teaching our wariness too far. Some strangers are potential friends. And sometimes strangers even save our lives.

We need intimate relationships, but we need other kinds of relationships just as much. We need strangers, people whose value is more in their difference from us than their likeness to us, people who will shake us up and make us look at the world differently.

In this light, our religious communities are vital. In our congregations at their best, strangers are viewed not as threats, but as having "inherent worth and dignity" in themselves, as being indispensable parts of the "interdependent web" to which we all belong. Our principles don't tell us that only our friends have inherent value; we insist everyone does. Our principles call us to practice what William Schulz calls "the fragile art of hospitality."

All of this sounds so good in our principles, but is so difficult to live out. Out of his own experience of community, Parker Palmer discovered this timeless truth: "Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives! And when that person moves away, someone else arises to take his or her place!" (*The Company of Strangers*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992, 124). I suspect most of us have discovered this truth for ourselves. If that person is part of our congregation, do we leave? If we do, we're likely to find his or her double in the next congregation we try. Do we try to make the person our friend, and despair when we fail? Or do we accept the fact that this person may always be a trial, and ask what we have to learn from him or her? Palmer reminds us that the person who most troubles us is likely to be the person who draws out what we least like about ourselves (125), an experience from which we can learn and grow if we have the courage to face it.

I used to teach at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, a college run by a Benedictine Abbey of monks. Like Kathleen Norris, whose book, *The Cloister Walk*, recounts her time living and working among the monks of Saint John's, I have been moved by their stories of, and their hopes for, their community. The monks and nuns I have come to know as an adult are a far cry from the stereotyped images I had of them as a child. They do not idealize their communities; their communities offer no escape from the risks of genuinely human life. One monk described to Kathleen Norris some of the difficult differences among them, and ended with, "But our biggest problem is that each man here had a mother who fried potatoes in a different way" (Riverhead Books, 1996, 21). One of my friends from St. John's Abbey told my congregation a great story about a monk who was so angry and impatient at having to move to the nursing care wing of the Abbey that, when his bed was not made as quickly as he wanted, he called 911! Monks are obviously no easier to live with than Unitarian Universalists. And just like Unitarian Universalists, monks do not choose community expecting an easy harmony. As

another monk told Norris, "The basis of community is not that we have all our personal needs met here, or that we find all our best friends in the monastery. What we have to struggle for, and to preserve, is a shared vision of the *why*, why we live together" (22).

For this monk, the answer to his question *why* has to do with the reign of God. We are likely to use different language, but I suspect our answer is not so different. Monasteries and religious communities exist because we need alternatives to the larger culture in which we live; we need to know, we need to *live*, an alternative vision. Our families and friendships provide one kind of alternative vision, but intimacy is not the only alternative vision we need. We need just as much a vision of how to live well with strangers--with lots of people we can never know intimately, and some we'd never want to. We need a community which is excited about, rather than scared by, the possibilities that strangers bring, a community that takes seriously the inherent value of each person and the fact that we are all in this interdependent web together.

But what a risk! In a world in which we can be betrayed, as Hecuba was, by our closest friends, isn't it folly to open ourselves to strangers? I cannot help but wonder if, in our century, some of the survivors of concentration camps might feel a particular sympathy for Hecuba--they who saw the almost total breakdown of human morality and decency. It is interesting to note that not until Elie Wiesel's fourth novel, *The Town Beyond the Wall* (trans. Stephen Becker, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), does his main character, Michael--like Wiesel, a concentration camp survivor--open himself once again to the risk of relationship.

Michael's experience in the camps has left him without family or friends, and without any hope for meaning in human life. In the exchange of life stories with a Spaniard named Pedro, who has also experienced profound loss, Michael begins to understand his own past and feels the need to return to his hometown, even though this town is now behind the Iron Curtain and Michael would be imprisoned if caught there. But more than that, Michael rediscovers the joy of friendship. Before they part, Pedro says to Michael, "From now on you can say 'I am Pedro,' and I, 'I am Michael'" (123).

The worst happens to Michael: he is imprisoned, tortured, and virtually alone. His

cellmate is a young man--a stranger--so overwhelmed by his own suffering that he has sought escape from the world by completely withdrawing from it, by retreating to some psychic space seemingly oblivious to anyone or anything. Michael was once a stranger locked in his own suffering, and Pedro reached out to him. Just as Pedro had brought Michael back to a truly human life--a life of relationship--so Michael decides to try to do the same for this young man. He tells this stranger that someday,

"You'll tell me your name and you'll ask me, 'Who are you?' and I'll answer 'I'm Pedro.' And that will be a proof that man survives, that he passes himself along. Later, in another prison, someone will ask your name and you'll say, 'I'm Michael.' And then you will know the taste of the most genuine of victories" (178).

What Michael is doing is truly astonishing. Given his own horrible past and now desolate future, who would blame Michael if he envied his cellmate his mental escape from the prison cell? Yet instead of desiring such an escape for himself, Michael instead reaches out in the hope of drawing this young man back into human life. We do not learn whether Michael succeeds. But we do know that he *tries*, that Michael--once a stranger himself--offers community to another stranger in turn. We do know that Michael, unlike Hecuba, has found his humanity again and therein has found meaning and hope.

In a world of greater and greater mistrust, our world is desperate for the hope that is community--the hope that it is possible not just to tolerate, but to benefit from, to live fuller lives because of, "the company of strangers." It may be that the greatest contribution our religious communities can make to the larger world is not our social justice projects--important as those are--but our modeling for the larger world an alternative reality to the mistrust, inequality, and narrow self-interest that is rampant there. "The way to change the world," contemporary Unitarian Universalist activist Betty Reid Soskin tells us, "is to be what we want to see" (quoted by Rebecca Parker, "What They Dreamed Be Ours To Do," *Fulfilling the Promise* packet, UUA, 1998, "Reflections on Covenant" section, 11). What hope we might offer to the world the closer our congregations come to living out our principles; the closer we come to being communities of genuine respect, genuine democracy, genuine celebration of difference.

We live in a world as frightened of community as it is of death. The truth is, we human

beings are understandably frightened of the vulnerable, finite creatures we truly are. We seek escape from vulnerability and death by redefining ourselves in our philosophies and religions, or by hiding behind material wealth and power at the expense of others.

We Unitarian Universalists--who lay claim to a religious worldview that takes *this* world to be our home, that takes *this* finite life to be our life--have a tremendous contribution to make to our frightened world if only we will. We could help to show the world that the joys of embracing our finite lives are worth the risks and losses, that being limited human beings is a much richer prospect than being angels or even gods. We could help to show the world that it's possible for human beings to live together justly and peacefully. We could help to work toward a world in which good people like Hecuba need never find themselves without someone--perhaps a stranger--to trust. What we have to offer the world is the possibility of genuine hope--hope in the world we have, hope in the finite interdependent creatures we are, hope in our relationships of love and friendship, hope in the communities we create not only with one another but with the strangers with whom we are lucky enough to be in company.

"Some luck," says Garrison Keillor, "lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known" (*Lake Wobegon Days*, Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985, 337). It's taken me most of my life to become smart enough to know how lucky I am to be a human being. Now I'm beginning to know how lucky I am to be risking community with you--you who are friends and you who are strangers. May we--like Pedro to Michael, and Michael to the young man--pass the hope of community on to others. Then we too shall "know the taste of the most genuine of victories."