

YUZZ – a Canvass Sermon. The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian Universalist Church West 03-05-06

Our first Reading, is actually a cartoon I found too late to copy for the cover of our order of service.

It shows a couple of people walking out of church after the service is over. Their eyes are wide, and both are wearing nothing but their underwear. One is saying to the other, "Wow, that was the most effective canvass sermon I ever heard!" (Thanks to Erik Walker Wikstrom.)

Second reading -- from ON BEYOND ZEBRA by Dr. Seuss New York: Random House, 1955.

Said Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell,
My very young friend who is learning to spell:
"The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.
"The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare.
"The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.
"I know all the twenty-six letters like that...

...through to Z is for Zebra. I know them all well."
Said Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell.
"So now I know everything anyone knows
"From beginning to end. From the start to the close.
"Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!
A letter he never had dreamed of before!
And I said, "You can stop, if you want, with the Z
"Because most people stop with the Z
"But not me!
"In the places I go there are things that I see
"That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.
"I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
"My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!

My alphabet starts with this letter called YUZZ.
It's the letter I use to spell Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz.
You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found
Once you go beyond Z and start poking around!

SERMON

Today we are here to talk about the Apes, Bears, Camels, Hares, Mice, and Rats of church plus all the other alphabet-letter animals, vegetables, and minerals that populate our church budget – from A all the way through to Z is for Zebra!

It is, after all, the Sunday before we begin our annual fund drive – the “Canvass.” Today is the Sunday when as a church we ask ourselves and each other to get ready. Get ready to make a commitment, a promise, a pledge of how much money we will give our church over the upcoming fiscal year.

Like Conrad Cornelius O’Donald O’Dell in our Dr. Seuss reading it is easy to think that because we know the alphabet of the church budget we know everything anyone knows. A is for Administrative Assistant, B is for Babies in the nursery, C is for Coffee and Candles and Choir, H is for Heat, L is for Lights, M is for Minister and Music Director, R is for Religious Education, W is for Worship... and on it goes, we know we know! Why not just ask for our money and let us go.

Ah, but what about YUZZ? What about the places we might go and the things we might see that we never could spell if we stop with the Z?

That’s what today is really all about. It’s about Yuzz. About what there is to be found when we go beyond Z and start poking around. It’s about imagination – yours, and mine. It’s about vision – yours, mine, and ours – for UUCW. It’s about what we know passionately in our hearts and minds that this church can be and that we love and want so much we’d give the very shirts off our backs – to say nothing of our pants, jackets, skirts and socks – to make it happen!

Whew!

As you’ve seen in the newsletter and in the posted minutes from your Board of Trustees we will soon be engaging in a visioning and long range planning process. The Board began this at its January meeting. We spoke about it in a very real and right-now kind of way two Sundays ago at the congregational meeting where we voted to empower the Board and Finance committee to negotiate to purchase the land next door to us. Soon members will be sought for the Long Range Planning Committee.

Adopting IMAGINE as our Canvass theme is helping us begin as well. Last Sunday, everyone here – adults and children alike -- was invited to visualize something they saw ten years into our future, and those imaginings have been posted on our marvelous, mobile Imagine Board. And there is plenty of room for more, of course.

The dictionary says that to imagine means to form a mental image of something not present to our senses. It is to form an image of perhaps even something never before wholly perceived in reality. Theologian Frederick Buechner says

"Imagining is perhaps as close as humans get to creating something out of nothing the way God is said to." I say imagination is one of the tools we use to define ourselves – a tool we use to create our lives. Imagination allows us to open ourselves to a world that is rich beyond our wildest dreams. It's a vital component of hope. When we let go of what we know and use our imaginations, we see people and the world and the gifts that life has to offer in a completely new way. Imagination is the possibility of change, the chance that things might be different.

And that reminds me of a story I read recently (on the internet – sent to me by Ann Dakin, I believe.). It's not a new story, but it is a true story. One year, in early Spring, a woman was encouraged by her adult daughter to come and visit, and the daughter promised to show her mother something truly amazing.

Well, it was a long drive from the coast in California where the mother lived to the mountain home of her daughter, but the mother decided to go anyway. By the time she arrived, though, she was exhausted, and all she wanted was to hug her grandchildren and rest. The idea of going out, even for something truly amazing, was not at all appealing. But the daughter said, "It will be all right, Mom, I promise. And you'll never forgive yourself if you miss this...." So off they drove until they came to a gravel road. They parked near a small church, and near a sign that read "Garden behind the church."

They parked and each took a child's hand, and began walking down the winding path behind the church. As they turned a corner on the path, the mother looked up, and she gasped.

There in front of her was a glorious sight. It looked as though someone had taken a great vat of gold and poured it down over the mountain peak and slopes. The flowers were planted in majestic, swirling patterns -- great ribbons and swaths of deep orange, white, lemon yellow, salmon pink, saffron, and butter yellow. Each different-colored variety was planted as a group so that it swirled and flowed like its own river with its own unique hue. There were five acres of daffodils.

A hand-painted sign not far from the path read, "Answers to the Questions I Know You Are Asking".

"50,000 bulbs," read the first line.

The second line read, "One at a time, by one woman. Two hands, two feet, and very little brain."

And on the third line it said, "Began in 1958."

In sharing this story, the mother wrote, "For me that moment was a life-changing experience. I thought of this woman whom I had never met, who, (so many)

years before, had begun -- one bulb at a time -- to bring her vision of beauty and joy to an obscure mountain top. This unknown woman had forever changed the world in which she lived. She had created something of magnificent beauty, and inspiration." *(Story from Jaroldeen Asplund Edwards, found on the Internet and adapted slightly)*

What would it take to imagine such a thing? To keep planting, one bulb at a time, until the vision becomes a swirling glory of living color right before our eyes? What would it take to forever change the world in which we live?

I believe this is what we – as the church – need to be about. Not daffodils, necessarily, but world change. It's what Yuzz means.

Here is our church mission statement:

The mission of Unitarian Universalist Church West is to be a creative, nurturing, and challenging diverse Unitarian Universalist community that provides a place for seeking religious values while respecting individual religious choice; that enables spiritual, intellectual, ethical and emotional growth for all ages, that communicates our Unitarian Universalist values to the larger community and acts on those values for the betterment of humanity and the earth.

How we live out this mission often takes us back to our usual alphabet: A is for air conditioning and B is for building, so that people can have a physical place to which they might come to seek their religious values. C is for curriculum, which we use to teach our values and help people grow in all those ways. E is for Earth Ministry, the social action subcommittee formerly known as "Green Sanctuary" which helps us act on our value of interdependence with the earth.

Don't get me wrong, our "usual" is not a bad alphabet. Indeed, we have a very exciting alphabet happening around here. Dozens of ways to seek religiously and spiritually, like worship and music, UUnity Circles, and adult enrichment classes. Even more opportunities to engage and act and be challenged, like the upcoming Peace Conference and Cultural Competence workshops, working to become a Welcoming Congregation, the forums on water conservation issues and the Healing Racism class. Increasing diversity across the spectrums of age, class, theology and sexual orientation, thanks to West of 50 and East of 36 and Interweave and offerings like the Mindfulness Meditation series.

Doing more with our current alphabet would definitely be satisfying. Indeed, it is what we have budgeted for in the upcoming fiscal year. It is why we have a goal of raising \$355,000 in pledges from our members and friends. It is why we are asking everyone to consider giving three percent of their gross income to the church, or perhaps more, if they can.

It's not that Yuzz, that "out beyond Z" letter, is absent from our budget for fiscal year 2006-07. It's particularly there in the funds that are being sought to pay for

some really good help with our long range planning process. It's also there in the possibility that we might actually be able to buy the land next door. But at this point, Yuzz is more "in process" than it is tied down and ready to be tithed toward. We're right at the glorious beginning, standing before the blank canvas upon which a million possibilities might be painted.

Our visioning process will invite us to speak passionately what we believe our church is here for.

Our long range planning process will put legs under that passion, and equip it with arms, tools, maps and a memory that will keep us on track.

You might wonder what are some of the possibilities that I see – and in a moment I'd like to name some of them. But as I do, and as you hear them, I want you to have one very big question in your mind: is it world-changing?

Because no matter what our mission statement says, the purpose of our church is nothing less than to transform the world.

Let's think about that. What does this church do? People who feel exiled from the faith in which they grew up, people who left because they could not find food for mind and soul there, can find and have found a place here where they can to explore their spirituality without feeling dishonest. They can find and have found a place here to learn, to journey, to quest for what both their intellect and intuition tell them is true and right, without having to affirm creeds that are no longer true or right for them. This is life-changing.

Imagine, too, the children in this church – yours and mine and everyone's -- growing up equipped to respect and honor that there are many ways to be religious or spiritual in the world. That there are many cultures and ideas to learn from. They are growing up grounded in principles of compassion and understanding which will help them make moral decisions and take moral action as they go through life. This will change them and our future.

Remember: in our church, we strive to accept people where they are. We stand with and care for those who are young, who are old, who are in the middle, who are searching, who are in crisis. People whose joys overflow, people who have cause to mourn. People who are in the midst of life transition, or are navigating times of confusion. In our ministry to and with one another, we help each other change.

And when we change, our families change. Our friendships change. Our work relationships change. And changed relationships and families change the community. And a changed community can change the world.

Milwaukee philanthropist Marty Stein believed this. He believed that the world could be changed if we began with one person at a time.

Marty died last week at the age of 68, losing a long fight with cancer. He began his career as a pharmacist and a businessman about the same time that our church got started, right at the beginning of the 1960s. He made a great deal of money, but as a deeply religious Jew he believed in practicing his religion every day in his relationships with people, and that led him to both give generously to many different needs in our community, and to use his influence to get others to support them as well.

As our own Amy Silvers wrote in Marty's obituary in the Journal-Sentinel, "his advocacy came to include everything from big bucks to the big picture, with a special emphasis on efforts to combat poverty and hunger. He also worked to tear down traditional lines of race and religion, saying that they had no place in an all-too-fragmented world."

I only met Marty once – he was chair of the Capital Campaign for the non-profit organization my husband directs – and he invited us to be his guests at a Passover Seder dinner two years ago. I think he was surprised to find a non-Jew – especially the minister of a church -- who could understand some of the Hebrew and who knew the ritual and the story. It was not a small gathering, but we all were made to feel like honored guests, and I know that made a big difference to me as a newcomer in town. It was a privilege to experience firsthand what others have said about him that he was the kind of person who saw every person as a gift, and called us all to be better, to make a difference and to make the world a better place... (from obituary)

World change. That's the standard I want you to hold on to as I share with you some of what I see when I hold our church in the kaleidoscope of my imagination.

I imagine our congregation hosting evening worship services – lively services with compelling music, images, ritual, and spoken words that invite people into a different kind of transcendence than the bright lights of Sunday morning. That might invite more young adult participation in our congregational life. I imagine services of healing, rhythm, chanting, walking the labyrinth; worship that seeks to bypass our ever-quick intellects and reaches instead for our bodies and our hearts.

I imagine events to bring together families of all descriptions – time to learn and play together, to sing and share a meal, to learn our values and practice our rituals across the generations. I imagine a program of spiritual deepening – ways for adults to learn and practice spiritual disciplines. I imagine more children served by our religious education program than ever before, and more youth in our youth groups. I imagine a deeper engagement by our youth with a broader spectrum of our adults and vice versa.

I imagine increased staff to help us manage our building, to help us communicate effectively with one another and with our wider community. I imagine more ministers here – an internship program, or even specialized ministries of

compassion and action. And I imagine ample office space for all our staff. Offices that uphold their dignity and give them room to be truly professional, offices that encourage our collaborative approach.

I imagine funds being raised to transform our space in this building, and perhaps the property next door, too. A Capital Campaign to allow us to house our dreams, to give them room to grow. I imagine outdoor spaces where we can gather as a group for meaning and fellowship.

I imagine that everyone in the church will have a small group to which they can belong, a group like our UUnity Circles, for conversation and encouragement and spiritual questing. I imagine growth in our music ministry – five choirs! Perhaps a house band or an a capella quartet or a hip hop quintet or a world music group – music to enrich our worship, yes, but music also as a spiritual path in itself, and as a vehicle for community outreach and social justice work.

I imagine our congregation giving ten percent of our budget to organizations beyond our walls, putting our money where our values lie, and using our influence to help others do the same. I imagine us having such a spirit of abundance and generosity and passion for what we do here that nearly all of us will give four or five percent of our income to the church – and make bequests to our Endowment Fund as well.

I imagine an ever-deepening ministry of compassion and support, with well-trained lay chaplains listening to others, caring for others, helping them through the chances and changes of life.

I imagine us working with the other area UU congregations to share opportunities for public ministry and social action of many kinds, and to become better known in the wider community.

I imagine a growing ministry with multiracial families, a Welcoming Congregation engaged with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning teenagers as well as adults, exciting social justice projects that work toward changing the very shape and structure of society. I have a vision of our faith community as a place where even more lives are forever changed.

Now, let me ask you: Was there anything truly Yuzz-like in what I just said? Anything that made you gasp, as though you'd just glimpsed five acres of blooming daffodils? Nearly every single one of those imaginings is something one of you has discussed with me or that I have brought up to one or more of you during the two and a half years that I have been your minister. It all rises perfectly out of the amazing and lovely energy that is already so joyfully and passionately present here.

It's an energy that has a history, too. About forty-five years ago, a brave group of folks from the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee decided that it was time for a "branch church" in the western suburbs. They decided that there was both room out here for what Unitarianism had to offer, and that the suburbs needed what we had to offer. They gathered on Sundays in rented spaces for a while, and conducted their worship services themselves, with the sermon piped in via speakerphone from the downtown church. When I look at the beauty of our surroundings here, and see all of you here on Sundays, and in the many smaller gatherings of committees, groups, classes and teams where we encounter one another, I always want to gasp with amazement at the commitment to our faith that kept this church going back in the speakerphone days. And I am equally impressed by the commitments so many of you have made that makes this church such a vibrant, interesting, compassionate place.

But now I must ask you to make another commitment. In their book *Money and the Soul of the World*, Robert Sardello and Randolph Severson say that money is imagination's way of acting in the world... (p.29). That's the commitment that I hope you are now ready for -- to come to church next Saturday night or on any of the following three Sundays and make your pledge of financial support to our church. Because without money, we cannot take action on any of our imaginings for our church -- not even our most mundane ones.

I cannot tell you how much you should pledge to support our congregation. I can tell you that over the past year, my husband and I gave a bit more than three percent of our income to the church -- and while we haven't yet discussed how much to pledge this year, I am sure it will be even more.

One way you might decide how much to pledge is to imagine an amount that will bring a big, sincere smile to your face when you think about our church, what it means to you, and what you hope for its future.

Because that's what it takes to get out beyond Zebra and into the realm of Yuzz -- a sincere smile, a lot of good planning, and a leap of faith. Marty Stein once, when asked to open a non-profit Board meeting with a prayer, invited everyone there to simply recite the alphabet with him. He said that God knew better than any of them how to shape the letters into the words that would be the best prayer for their work.

We don't have to believe in the same God Marty did -- or in any god at all -- to understand what he meant by this -- simply that sometimes, to get to the heart of our passion, to the far horizons of our vision, to the depths of our desire to make the world a better place, we have to let go of what we know, and enter the realm where mystery abides -- the realm of imagination.

May we imagine together a congregation where every stranger is welcomed and every member knows that their gifts are valued. May we imagine together a

congregation where every member might be transformed, so that the world might be a better place. May we imagine together a congregation full of power, full of surprises, full of beauty.

A congregation whose alphabet begins with Yuzz.

Amen.