

**Trust and Transformation**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville**  
**September 9, 2007**  
**Rev. Kerry Mueller**

**Time for All Ages**

Special thanks to Marilyn Yoder and friends this morning, who will present a Sufi story that I first heard at General Assembly several years ago, presented then by the KUUMBA players of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC.

Once upon a time, long ago and far away – or was it just yesterday and right here in our own hearts? – there was a bleak and desert land. It was dry and sandy, a harsh place, only occasionally decked out in beautiful desert flowers.

*The desert is displayed.*

High in a far off mountain, a stream started in a little spring, dancing down the mountain side and across the plains. All was well until the stream tried to cross the desert. The water simply sank into the sand and the stream was gone.

*The stream dancers come in and approach the desert. The desert cloth presents a barrier to the stream.*

The stream was determined to cross the broad desert. The stream flung itself at the desert, but each time it did so, it disappeared. That desert was a strong barrier. But the stream knew that if its destiny was to cross that desert, it would surely find a way.

*The stream tries several times to cross, but is stopped each time.*

A voice in the desert whispered to the stream. “See the wind. The wind can move easily across the desert. You can cross the desert with the wind. All you have to do is allow yourself to be absorbed and become water vapor. On the far side of the desert the wind will let you down and you will become a stream again.”

*The wind moves freely back and forth, as the desert cloth is dropped.*

The stream saw that the wind could blow freely over the sands. The stream watched the wind, and realized that the voice was right. It could allow itself to become vapor, to be carried across the desert and come down on the other side as rain. But the stream didn't like that idea, saying, "I have my own identity... I won't be the same stream that I am now."

*The stream watches the wind, longing to join its dance, but worried.*

The stream tried again to cross the desert on its own, but once again the desert stopped its flow as it sank into the sand.

*The desert cloth once again stops the stream.*

Eventually, the stream decided that it would have to trust itself to the wind and join the great water cycle. The wind lifted the stream and carried it across the desert.

*The wind lifts the smallest element of the stream, and the others follow. The desert is again dropped to the floor and the wind and water cross the desert.*

The wind transformed the stream, carried it beyond the horizon, and let it fall softly at the top of a new mountain. Then the stream began to understand who it really was, and what it meant to be a stream.

.....

## **Homily Trust and Transformation**

How good it is to see you all here this morning! How wonderful, after a summer following our separate paths, to come together again to celebrate our ingathering with the water ritual that symbolizes our reconnecting as a community. This is the day that we remind ourselves how precious and beautiful is community, how vitally important it is as we face all the ups and downs of our lives.

This time of year it seems we hardly need any reminding. History itself reminds us. We are still in the grip of a war in Iraq that seems to create nothing but suffering. This week comes September 11, a Tuesday again, just like that fateful day six years ago. Global warming – we are asked to call it “Climate Change” now, something more realistic and less benign sounding than “warming” – climate change becomes evident in the record breaking landfall of two category five hurricanes. Not to mention the commemorations of Katrina and the stories of people whose lives are still shattered two years later.

This is surely a time when we human beings, as individuals and as a nation feel a need of transformation. We are a stream longing to cross the desert, to find our way to the mountain, a lovely stream with such possibilities, yet faced with a barrier we cannot seem to cross. What will be required for us to transform ourselves and our world to a place of peace and plenty, a planet of

justice and compassion, where all creatures can live in harmony?

Jeff Tate reminded me this week that all healthy human relationships begin in the simple trust established between (usually) the mother and the infant. Babies learn at the breast that when you are hungry, someone will feed you; when you are cold or frightened, someone will hold and warm you. You can trust that the world is a rational place, that the universe generates love, that we can reach out beyond ourselves to care for others. Theologians tell us that the beginnings of trust in the divine are found here also, between mother and infant. And when a child does not learn these things in tiniest infancy, then it becomes difficult to establish normal relationships, to trust other people at all, to connect deeply and to reach out.

That basic trust is so important to us, trust that the world makes sense, trust that there is a reliable relationship between what we do and what we get, trust that somehow we can all be better off, if I can for a time look at the world through your eyes, then I can put justice and compassion high on my agenda, then I can risk taking my eyes off my immediate needs and selfish viewpoint, to take in a world of other beings, beings worthy of love and care. We need trust to transform ourselves to fly across the desert.

But so many things erode that trust.

I have two photographs on the table here. They are color copies of newspaper clippings. They have become symbolic to me of September 11 and its aftermath, even more than the iconic pictures of falling towers, or crashed airplanes, or the burning Pentagon, because these peaceful, quiet still life's embody both the failures of terrorism and the hope that we may yet heal ourselves and transform our world so that terrorism becomes unthinkable.

The first photo is of a silver tea set. It was taken in an apartment on Cedar Street, not far from the World Trade Center. The tea pot and all the lovely accouterments are set out on a table in front of a sofa, ready for afternoon tea. Can you imagine anything more peaceful, more civilized, more hospitable than sharing afternoon tea with a friend? The picture is beautiful, with soft outlines and delicate creamy colors. But if you look closely, you can see that this tea set

represents the opposite of hospitality. These silver things – sugar bowl and tea pot and creamer should be sharp and clear. Instead, everything in this picture is coated with a thick layer of dust, dust from the twin towers, dust that you know contains bits of the buildings, the airplanes, the office equipment, important documents, precious desk top photographs, and yes, the incinerated remains of human beings.

I've often quoted Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen before on the subject of hospitality:

Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

Violence, whether asymmetrical violence of terrorism or the explosive violence of war or the secret violence of torture, or the daily violence of racism or homophobia, violence is an utter antithesis of hospitality. Violence kills trust. Violence offers no dialog, no free space, no way for enemies to become friends, no space where change can take place. Violence takes place when hospitality has failed, and violence erodes the possibility of future hospitality. [It hard to imagine an open sharing when the tea set is coated with the remains your fellow citizens. It is hard to imagine the reestablishment of trust when your mind and heart are corroded by the experience of torture.] Democratic civil society depends upon trust.

[But the second picture in my 9/11 diptych symbolizes hope. Months after the attacks, after much hard and heart wrenching work of cleanup, people near the towers were allowed to return to their homes. The photographer who had captured the image of the dust-coated tea set took another picture. The owners had cleaned and polished the silver, and arranged the tea things again as they had once bet set out. In this picture they are gleaming again, ready to serve tea, ready to create a space for dialog, ready for hospitality. ]

The network of trust can be rebuilt. Hear a story of hope that came out of Katrina. I read about of Mary Gracianette, cook at a pub, who stayed in the city, who managed to feed whoever

came by. When the pub's food ran out, people appeared with supplies. She kept cooking, kept feeding people, kept them busy helping. Someone described her as "doing a loaves and fishes thing." Mary Gracianette created that place where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy." She took a step toward trust and transformation

Other small steps lure us back to trust and transformation. Right after 9/11, this congregation invited our Muslim neighbors to a pot luck dinner, a literal bit of hospitality. And in recent years, our Muslim neighbors have invited the public to an interfaith dinner, a breaking of the Ramadan fast. Our social justice committee plans to host an interfaith celebration day in January.

But beyond special events, we are all called to something greater as well. We are called to do the work of trust and transformation. Every day, every ordinary day, beyond the crisis of terrorism, beyond the chaos of hurricanes and natural disasters, every day we are called to live lives that nourish hope in the lives of people around us. We are blessed to be part of this Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville. Like the many shelters that housed thousands of people who fled before the storm, our congregations offer safe havens for the spiritually homeless. Like shelters, our congregations are places to catch our breath, to gather ourselves together, and to prepare to face the next challenges in our lives. But we are more than a temporary shelter of respite. We are a community of memory and hope.

We have resources here to share – spiritual strength, nourishing worship, opportunities for study, friends to help, sometimes practical assistance – meals or rides or advice or visits. We know we can rely on each other when we need help. The community of memory builds a community of trust.

And the community of hope nourishes a community of transformation. This is not a place

to merely feel comfortable and complacent. When we have regained a measure of spiritual health, we can find the inner strength to stretch ourselves spiritually. Here we can grapple with the deepest and biggest questions of the human spirit – unfettered by creeds or top down rules and requirements, bound only by conscience, held only to the standards of reason and tolerance, compassion and justice, the covenants we make ourselves. Here we can find the courage to try new things. Here is a chance to help others volunteering at CEO – providing food and care, what could be a more profound symbol of hospitality? Here is a chance to help educate ourselves and others about coping with the injustices against Gays and Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgender people. Here we offer comprehensive sexuality education for our young people and others in the community.

Our story this morning was a story of trust and transformation. How difficult it was for the little stream to trust itself to the wind, how reluctant it was to undergo transformation from stream to water vapor to rain and back to stream again. How fearful the stream was that it would lose its identity, that it would be an entirely different stream.

To enter the water cycle is to risk a change of identity. After flying across the desert in the arms of the wind, and falling as rain, will we be the same stream? Will we become the very essence of stream? Will we be an entirely new stream with a new identity?

Entering wholeheartedly into the life of a Unitarian Universalist congregation opens us to transformation, to growth and an evolution of our identity. Whatever our fears and hesitations, we are all invited to trust ourselves to the lure of a deep and real hospitality, to risk being transformed. Are we willing to rise above the barriers and fly with the wind? Or will we allow ourselves to be stopped in our tracks by the desert? You and I came here by many different paths. Here we are, celebrating a new church year. May we all open ourselves to this community of trust and transformation. Together, we can bless the world. Amen.

Shalom. And Blessed Be.