

*"Masakhane"*  
Reverend Alison Hyder  
November 21, 2005  
The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

**Opening Words: 444 "This House" by Kenneth Patton**

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature. It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle. It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person. It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion. It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers. *It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks.* It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress. This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

**"Prayer For Trust" by Lawrence E. McGinty**

Tender men and women we are at heart,  
seeking gentleness and joy  
in those we meet and long to love.

Mistake not our harsh appearances  
for those sincere desires for comradeship  
dwelling beneath these masks of self-sufficiency.

We live and move in a world  
not always responsive to the good in us,  
and bruised feelings make us  
crouch cautiously behind aloofness.

We pray for trust  
which prompts us to love  
in spite of the apprehension of rejection.

If love warms our days,  
may we view it as a precious gift  
and a sacred remembrance.

But it can never come without trust  
for being fearful of the failure of our love,  
we recognize not the love of others  
when it bids to enter our hearts.

Oh trust! We pray for trust,  
TRUST TO LOVE  
that the gift might come  
and our hearts sing with joy!

**READING: by James Howard Kunstler: "Home from Nowhere," Atlantic Monthly, September 1996**

The buildings our predecessors constructed paid homage to history in their design, including elegant solutions to age-old problems posed by the cycles of weather and light, and they paid respect to the future in the sheer expectation that they would endure through the lifetimes of the people who built them. They therefore embodied a sense of chronological connectivity, one of the fundamental patterns of the universe: an understanding that time is a defining dimension of existence - particularly the existence of living things, such as human beings, who miraculously pass into life and then inevitably pass out of it.

Chronological connectivity lends meaning and dignity to our little lives. It charges the present with a vivid validation of our own aliveness. It puts us in touch with the ages and with the eternities, suggesting that we are part of a larger and more significant organism. It even suggests that the larger organism we are part of *cares* about us, and that, in turn, we should respect ourselves and our fellow creatures and all those who will follow us in time, as those preceding us respected those who followed them. In short, chronological connectivity puts us in touch with the holy. It is at once humbling and exhilarating. I say this as someone who has never followed any formal religious practice. Connection with the past and the future is a pathway that charms us in the direction of sanity and grace.

**SERMON: "Masakhane" - Rev. Alison Hyder**

Periodically, someone will ask me why I became a minister. Certainly this is a reasonable and perfectly appropriate question. In our culture the ministry seems foreign, if not suspect. Some people believe that ministers are holier or more spiritual than they are, and the rest just think we're more arrogant. Who said God wanted us? And what gives us the right to preach to anyone?

Well, I grew up in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, where everyone has the right and the opportunity to preach. Still, I didn't consider become a UU minister until my late twenties, and then it was hardly a spiritual compulsion. No flash of light, no angel visits, not even an important message to share. Just an idea that this might be an interesting and satisfying job for someone with my abilities. Believe me, you were not even a gleam in my eye.

All I really knew is that I'd be working with people. But there are other, much more practical ways to do that, and so I decided to become a social worker instead. It was years later before the ministry again became a consideration. By this time my social work jobs had given me more skills, and more self-confidence, and a deeper exposure to the world.

But I still had little experience of church culture. I knew little of UU history or structure. I hadn't worked on any church committees. In fact, I'd rarely attended services since I was a kid. But I did know the importance of community. And that is something my mother got in her UU congregation. Ministry seemed to facilitate relationships, and that appealed to me. And this time, as I always say, the doors just opened up before me. Mentors appeared, opportunities came my way. I was guided and provided for and sometimes stalled and frustrated until I ended up here, with you.

My first year after graduating, I couldn't find a position. I spent my year interviewing with search committees and things still didn't look good. At about the last minute I was hired as interim minister in Palmer, Massachusetts. I had never been to Provincetown and knew nothing of its historical context - just that it was a Mecca for gays and lesbians and had an active UU church. I had seen a blurb in the UU World magazine. So I asked the UU Settlement Director to give the Search Committee here my name. What the heck! Meanwhile, other congregations passed on me. I met with Search Committees, toured their towns, chatted with them over dinners, answered questions. It all seemed very positive until they called and said they'd chosen someone else. And by this time, I really wanted to be a minister. It no longer felt like a whim, but a call to serve. I was getting concerned. Then you called.

So do I think it was fate? From the moment I considered the ministry until the summer I graduated, everything went smoothly. I got student ministries and a great internship in Northampton. I had UU mentors. My years in Divinity School at Howard University were marvelous, and I graduated third in my class. But then I hit a brick wall. Nothing happened. Except here, where Jennifer Justice announced her resignation, and you started the search process. I was still available and interested when you were ready.

Our pairing could have been just bad luck, a mismatch, another case of an inexperienced minister over her head. But it worked. *We* worked. We had similar methods and needs. Our flaws complemented each other. From the start, I felt that I understood you. Your fortitude and ideals captured my heart. I knew that we would grow together. And we had a lot of growing to do. When I arrived, the Meeting House had very little structure. The front of this building had been sinking for decades. The foundation under the foyer was being dug out in order to bolster it with long pilings into the sand. And that seemed an appropriate metaphor for the congregation. Committees had shriveled and disbanded. People were working on shifting sand, trying to hold this place together.

It was like a story that I heard recently on *The West Wing*. There is a guy stuck in a deep hole, calling for help. A doctor passes, and hearing the cries, he stops. He writes out a prescription and throws it down. A passing priest jots down a prayer for the man, and drops it in the hole. Finally, a friend passes nearby. He hears the calls, and jumps down to his friend. The first man moans, "What did you do that for? Now we're both stuck!" His friend responds, "Yes, but I've been here before, and I know how to get out!" I knew couldn't drag you out of the hole all by myself, but I hoped that by working together, I could guide you onto firmer ground. Or at least, show you how to find the footholds.

The Xhosa people of South Africa have a word for it: *Masakhane*. "We will build together." It is the only way that works. In a speech of affirmation, Nelson Mandela said, "*Masakhane*, that tradition of building one another ... is about people taking responsibility for their own upliftment and participating in the governing of their own lives. It is about empowering ourselves by creating good working relations between government and communities, for the benefit of everybody.... When we say that the best solutions to ... challenges can only be found when we work with each other, it requires a commitment of each and every one of us. Today we should all ask ourselves, what have I done to improve the surroundings in which I live? Do I litter or do I protect my surroundings? Do I spread racial hatred or do I promote peace and reconciliation? ... Do I pay my dues or do I cheat on my taxes, service fees, and licenses? Do I expect everything to be delivered to me or do I work with my local councilors to create a better life for me and my community? Cooperation between government, business, workers, and other sectors brings a lasting relationship that benefits all. ... *Masakhane!*"

The same is true here. This Meeting House works because you each agree to contribute your time and skills, your goodwill and your trust to its welfare. While the ego is fed, the satisfaction has a deeper source. It is rooted in community, in connectivity. You find value in working together. Your individual efforts sustain each other and maintain ideals that have provided hope and courage and love for generations, here, where we sit. Our ancestors brought their worries here, found understanding and strength within these painted walls. Their touch burnished the wood. This building is one symbol of the faith that they bequeathed. It is no wonder that it has engendered so much devoted care.

Architect James Howard Kunstler explains,

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*Chronological connectivity lends meaning and dignity to our little lives. It charges the present with a vivid validation of our own aliveness. It puts us in touch with the ages and with the eternities, suggesting that we are part of a larger and more significant organism. It even suggests that the larger organism we are part of cares about us, and that, in turn, we should respect ourselves and our fellow creatures and all those who will follow us in time, as those preceding us respected those who followed them. In short, chronological connectivity puts us in touch with the holy.*

We are building, not just with each other, but with those who came before us. We may not know their personalities, or even their names, but we do know that they made a difference in our lives. We reflect their efforts when we sit together in worship, serve coffee, and find money to pay the bills. But it is our common ideals that invoke the sacred and immortal presence of love. Compassion is built, moment by moment, through small acts of service and our witness to each other's pain and yearning. Purpose comes not through great fame or successes, but by our relationship to the whole.

Elliot Richardson devoted his life to public service. He was Secretary of Defense, then Attorney General under Richard Nixon. But in 1973, he resigned rather than obey orders to fire Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Later, he was elected Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General of Massachusetts. Richardson was a Unitarian Universalist who believed firmly in the importance of community institutions.

During World War II, Richardson was posted in England. On Easter Sunday, 1944, he heard a sermon by the Bishop of Exeter in the cavernous, bomb-scarred cathedral. It had a lasting impact. He recalled,

*The bishop's text was taken from the Gospel according to John: "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing may be lost." Every human undertaking, however noble, however inspired, is bound to disappoint our highest hopes. Not just the accomplishment, then, but the aim, the concept, the aspiration, is of value. The most precious of human attainments are those that, though imperfect, have stretched our capacities to their utmost limits. These are the fragments that must be gathered up and cherished. Pieces of an unimaginable whole hurled into the unknown, the thrust of their trajectories reaches out toward... God, I think.*

*Aspiring, creating, procreating - striving to be and become all we are capable of being and becoming - each of us seeks to be identified with something of enduring value. Each of us feels entitled to a measure of dignity and respect. But we are not alone: other people are also real, other people affirm the same values. To understand this fully - to grasp it not just with our intellects but with our imaginations - is to understand that we share mutual claims and obligations.*

A healthy church frees people to act, to grow and expand and take risks. It supports them in doing so, and expands and grows with them. It is not afraid. Its role is to teach us how to accept each other's weaknesses, and to celebrate our strengths. I guess, for me, a real community is a place where you go when you feel your worst, and can learn how to be your best.

When we have a good relationship with someone, we want more connection with them. We like being around them. That helps us relate to people in general. We strive for contact, and our capacity for intimacy is increased. After all, we are all connected. Our lives touch each other so that one silent cry can be felt at the furthest corner of the community, rippling out like a stone dropped into a pond. Pain and anger can create shock waves that last for years. Here above all other places we realize how interrelated we all are, caught, as Martin Luther King said, "in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." As our seventh UU principle states, the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part starts here, with us, with our children, and our outreach to the world. We take good relationships with us into all of our interactions and encounters. They increase our social competence and our confidence in all aspects of our lives. This is a religious society. The Meeting House should be a training ground, and nursery, where we nurture and practice our relationship to the world.

*In Who Dies, Stephen Levine places our struggles in a larger context. He observes,*

*In this culture, we look at life as though it were a straight line. The longer the line, the more we imagine we have lived, the wholer we suppose ourselves to be, and the less horrendous we imagine the end point. The death of the young is seen as tragic and shakes the faith of many. But in the American Indian culture one is not seen linearly, but rather as a circle, which becomes complete at about puberty with the rites of passage. From that time on, one is seen as a wholeness that continues to expand outward. But once "the hoop" has formed, any time one dies, one dies in wholeness. As the American Indian sage Crazy Horse commented, "today is a good day to die for all things of my life are present." In the American Indian Wisdom wholeness is not seen as the duration one has lived but rather the fullness with which one enters each complete moment.*

We are all whole now, and worthy of inclusion. We do not need to be perfect, or even good. This is the message that our Universalist ancestors proclaimed. God accepts and respects each one of us, just as we are. There is no need to hide our light under a bushel, or hold back our gifts, for we are each beloved of creation. We belong to life. All of our efforts affect others.

Our Universalist heritage calls us to recognize that God is Love, and we are its appointed messengers. Regardless of our faults and weaknesses, despite past mistakes - and future ones too - we are called by our living past to create lives of compassion and dignity. *Masakhane* reminds us that unless we are together, building has no purpose. If we are not working for each other and the health of the community, our work has no life. No one will care enough to sustain it.

We have chosen to trust. We have chosen to live in relationship with one another. Our Annual Meeting and the events of this year have demonstrated a commitment to direct and healthy interactions that emphasize wholeness over competition and envy in a true spirit of *Masakhane*.

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature. It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks. It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle. It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion. This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

May we always find the courage and the patience to maintain this beloved community.

#### **CLOSING WORDS from Rev. Eileen Karpeles**

Out of wood and stone,  
out of dreams and sacrifice,  
the People build a home.  
Out of the work of their hands and hearts and minds  
the People fashion a symbol and a reality.

May this house be truly a place of Meeting -  
meeting one with another  
in warmth and joy and openness;  
meeting one with another  
in courage and love and trust.