

UURMAPA Theme Talk
March 1, 2016

I am so honored and humbled that this respected company would think I have something useful to say. I'm in awe of the sum total of human good that those sitting in this room have accomplished...comfort offered, wisdom proclaimed, the hundreds, nay, thousands of hours of witness for peace, justice and the healing of the earth. Even when it comes to the topic I have chosen, which is the special opportunities for ministry available in the final years of our lives, we have the guy that wrote the book sitting in this room. If you have not read Tom Owen-Towles book Homestretch: The Art of Finishing Life Well, I highly recommend it. It will delight and inform you.

I love it that this is an organization where partners get the equal place they deserve.

I have been blessed to be called to parish ministry and I have found it a fulfilling vocation for 35 years. But I have to say that the time since I graduated from parish life to what some people call retirement has been one of the happiest times of my life. I trained in Spiritual Direction in the mid-90s and I really enjoyed making that a part of my ministry, but now my main activity is to help people who are take spiritual growth and the art of living seriously. I've always enjoyed supervising interns, and, as it turns out, most of my clients are parish ministers that meet with me through Skype or Zoom. One of my best sabbaticals was being Minister in Residence at Starr King and now I am teaching at Meadville Lombard as an Affiliated Faculty member and having a ball. Sonya and I just returned from Meridian, Mississippi where I did a series of lectures on Jesus and the Buddha at an Episcopal church there which got me back in touch with my scholar side. I've picked up my guitar again. And there's more. And here's

what I'm grateful that I don't have to do anymore: worry about the church flooding, worry about how well the canvass will do this year, attend board meetings (do not ask me to serve on any boards, please. I've never liked board meetings.), argue about the budget with worry warts, try to get a staff member to do her job, and dealing with difficult members to name just a few. So I guess I was ready to leave the parish. My experience is typical. Study after study shows that a majority of old people find old age is the happiest period of their lives. (Did I say old age? I forgot. 60 is the new 30.)

John Robbins has written in *Healthy at 100*:
"It is within your grasp to realize the opportunities for beauty, love, and fulfillment that occur at every stage of life.

I have been blessed to know many men and women who, when they reach the age of fifty or sixty, begin to free themselves from cultural constraints, and to express themselves in ways they had not dared before. They become less defined by what others think of them and more by what they think of themselves. Increasingly freed from the burden of having always to fulfill other people's expectations, their lives start to reflect a new kind of willingness to be exactly who they are. They break free from histories of physical stress, neglect and abuse. They become more alive.

Instead of thinking of it as a tragedy when their bodies begin to creak and slow down, they accept the limitations that arise and see the transitions they are going thru as opportunities to ground themselves in a deeper sense of self and a greater wisdom. Their love for others and the world becomes more accepting. They increasingly let go of the minutiae and the nonessentials of life. Their perspective shifts, details soften and the larger panorama comes into focus. They are able to enjoy life more than they did when they were young because they have a deeper

understanding of it...their lives become more about meaning than about ambition, more about intimacy than about achieving. They experience the second half of their life as a time of deepening creativity and the ripening of the soul.

Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi advice is:

“Make up a bill of fare for the rest of your life. What do I have appetite for? What do I want to taste again? What do I want to enjoy for the first time? What do I not choose to stomach any longer? What would be a healthy diet for living the remainder of my days?”

I don't know if this is your experience as well, but I find that I have internalized some of our cultures negative attitudes about old age. In fact, we don't want to use the word 'old' anymore, there are so many euphemisms we use instead. In the media, in advertising, it's easy to get the impression that old age is a bad lifestyle choice which we can avoid by positive thinking, a good diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery. Helena Norberg-Hodge is a British development worker who has been working in Ladakh, which is a very remote Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist kingdom within India. When she returned from a trip to her native England of several months she was distressed, because all of her friends and colleagues in Ladakh were telling her, “My, Helena, you certainly have aged since you left us.” She wondered if she really had that many more wrinkles or grey hairs than a few months before and her chin and cheeks didn't seem to be drooping that much. Then she realized that her friends were paying her a standard compliment that they told almost everyone who returned from a journey. This was a culture where aging was seen as a great positive and people tried to look and act older than their age. But our culture sees old age as a train wreck. We see older people as not contributing and a burden to the rest of us. That has been the

attitude within our UU movement as well. But I think that's changing, and it's up to us here to stand up and be counted. I try to remember that age only matters if you are a cheese.

I'm trying not to be forced into this culture's stereotypes about what my old age should be. I'm working not to see every forgotten name as the first symptoms of Alzheimer's and not to worry so much that I can't hike or ski as fast and as long as I used to. As Dr. Bill Thomas, a pioneer in humanizing senior living facilities said, "We're lucky if we get to be old."

At this point in our lives the oft-quoted question of Mary Oliver becomes ever more urgent. "What will you do with your wild and precious life?" As we get older, we become more aware that this life is precious because it is limited. Each breath we breathe brings us closer to our last. And we don't know when that last breath will come. Rabbi Schacter-Shalomi says that the task of old age then is to be saved. Not in the theological sense. In the computer sense. So we ask ourselves, how do I download all our hard won wisdom and experience into the hard drive of the planet? And, for this the movement we love, the question is how can we best serve our faith in this special time of our life.

At this stage in our life journey, we ourselves have become the gift to the world, in ways *we* choose to give it. We are free, outside the political constraints of parish life to speak the unspeakable, if that serves the greater good. As the Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr points out in his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality For the Two Halves of Life*:

"You learn to positively ignore and withdraw your energy from evil and stupid things rather than fight them directly. You fight them only when you are directly called and equipped to do so...."

Ironically, we are more than ever in a position to change people, but we do not *need* to and that makes all the difference...our actions are less compulsive. We do what we are called to do, and then we try to let go of the consequences. We usually cannot do that when we are young.”

The class of retirees at the Service of the Living Tradition with me was the largest ever, and there were large numbers in the Service in the years before and after. I’ve had a lot of conversations with these folks. Some have gone on to use their years of experience by serving as interims. Some are just bone tired and need months, maybe years, to just be free of any major responsibility to play and to restore themselves. But others of us are exciting by the ways that we can minister and contribute to our faith in new ways. We’re free, employment wise and financially, to be creative, to try things, to minister from a deeper place, a more authentic place. I remember a conversation with a group of such folks at General Assembly last year. We were trying on different words for ‘retirement’ because we felt we were in some ways doing the opposite of retiring. There was a sense of empowerment and excitement among us. We are not going to be counted out. We are looking forward to being counted in in whole new ways. We have things to say, time and wisdom to give, and we feel freer than ever to tell our truths forcefully.

We are disappointed in our Association and in our movement in many ways. But it comes out of love. I myself have often mused that our free, accepting and embracing faith must be something that this world desperately needs, because it has survived many foolish things in the past several decades that should have killed it off. As a young minister I noticed a certain bitterness among some of my elder colleagues, a disappointment in our movement and its Association. It certainly came from frustrated hopes and ideals. I didn’t want that to be me at that stage of my life. But

lately I have caught myself in the middle of long rants to anyone who would listen about some frustratingly counter productive institutional and cultural habits in our movement that don't only stifle our potential to save souls and heal the world, but seems actively counter that potential. Less than two years since my retirement from the parish, I was starting to sound like one of those bitter old ministers. So I looked at the things I was saying. I think the observations are valid. But then I thought to myself that I should limit myself to just four rants. Only four. Speaking the unspeakable, after all, is a vital function of an elder. I know you're probably going to ask me what my four rants are, but in a recent conversation I realized that that they could all be included in one meta-rant. Here it is: There have been epochal changes in our society since I entered the ministry. Changes in families, in what motivates people to seek religious community, in leisure time patterns, in work hours and income distribution, and gender relations, in racial and cultural diversity and not least in technology. Right now we are in a decline in our adult membership for the first time in decades, but our decline in religious education enrollment is, or should be, truly alarming. We have a whole new Millennial generation for whom organized religion is seen as irrelevant or worse. This is a time when we need our congregations and institutions to be open, experimental and nimble. And yet our Association and other aspects of UU institutional life have made very few changes in the way we do things than when I started more than three and a half decades ago. We're stuck—and lazy.

My argument, unlike some of those bitter old ministers of my younger days, is not that we should do things like we did when I was young but that we should by God move on from doing things just like we did then. You know about those reliable rules of thumb like for instance the meeting house will feel two full and drive people away when two thirds of the seats are taken. Then it's

time to go to two services. I found that to be true, but it turns out it is not necessarily true anymore. A young colleague has told me how he thinks his overall attendance will go up by going back to one service. He's done research, and it seems that Millennials don't have the same sense of personal space that older generations have. It seems, he says, that they are quite comfortable in crowds because that denotes that this is a happening place where they want to be. It will be interesting to see how his experiment turns out. But it seems to me we need to start questioning all our assumptions and be experimental and willing to fail and learn from that. And so I want my rants to be thoughtful and contribute to a broader conversation in the service of our beloved faith. I want to choose how I can offer my critiques effectively, lovingly and where they can best be heard. And, most difficult of all, let go of the fruits of my efforts if I have done my best.

Those who study aging do not see it as one phase of life, but at least two. We have been talking about what scholars call young old age. This is a time when retired folks' life is defined by desires and interests. It's a time of increased freedom to make choices that enhance life. But as individuals' capacities diminish we move into old age proper when concerns about health, safety and frailty become more and more important. We'd best prepare for this phase of life. If we are lucky enough to survive to this stage, it is inevitable. This is the aspect of old age that is most feared in our culture, and it is full of losses and goodbyes. It is the stage that psycho-analyst Eric Erickson describes as integrity vs. despair. We either look back on our lives with a sense of satisfaction of having lived a good life, of having contributed to the well-being of others and our world, or we wrestle in the final years with a sense of disappointment, lost opportunity and regret.

Jungian therapist Helen Luke describes this time as a journey into simplicity. We want to be able to identify more and more with all of those things that never die. Ram Das describes it as living less from the ego and more from the perspective of the soul and the spirit. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno wrote that faith equals trust in an underlying life force that is so strong that it even includes death. If we meet this stage of life successfully we will have a deep appreciation of the small pleasures of life. Things will mean so much less and enjoying others will mean so much more. We will have a sense of how we are part of something much larger than our individual lives—our faith movement, our family, a greater humanity, the interdependent web of all. As he was about to be burned at the stake for heresy Renaissance scientist Giordano Bruni said, “We cannot fall out of the universe.” We have a deeper identity with the web, with the universe and we be grateful for the part our individual lives have had.

It is in this stage in life that the spiritual practices we have cultivated become especially important. The more skills we have learned about living in the present moment, penetrating our fears, and cultivating compassion the more we are able to accept and even welcome this time. All the great contemplative traditions of humanity have claimed that a joy, a deep sense of wellbeing, beyond outer conditions, is our birthright as human beings. But in order to experience and stabilize this state of being we need to cease identifying with smaller selves and live more and more from wisdom and compassion, to recognize that our illusion of separateness is the source of our suffering. The Christian mystic Elizabeth of the Trinity said, “In the evening of life, love alone remains.”

Most of you don't know that Marni Harmony and I have died together. In my 50th year I attended a week long retreat with Zen

master Joan Halifax Roshi for professionals called Being With Dying. Marni was there too. I thought we would be learning skills to deal with parishioners, patients and clients who were dying, but we were confronted from the first moments of the retreat with our own inevitable death. It was very difficult at first. Very heavy. Until toward the end when I felt as light and as free as at any time in my life. Since then, I can honestly say that, even though I hope for many more years and there are many things I still want to do and accomplish and many people I wish to continue to love and love better, I feel I could be content with my life if I died tomorrow. I can't know for sure, of course, but I think when the moment comes, I will be ready to go in peace. As a final activity, we were asked to write our death poem, in the Japanese tradition. Here is what I wrote:

I have loved and been loved.
I have always sought the light.
May my forgetfulness blow away with my ashes.

I have found myself lately more and more interested in what may happen after death, questions of heaven, reincarnation and so on. I've been studying the Tibetan death yoga traditions and doing some Tibetan practices of late. I really don't think it is because I want Arvid Straube to go on living after my death. Mark Twain said:

"I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born and suffered not the slightest inconvenience from it."

Even the Tibetan view is that if you are aware enough at the moment of death you are not reborn as a separate self in a world full of suffering, and to recognize our oneness with the ground of our being is the best possible outcome. Walt Whitman said,

“ What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes outward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.”

Perhaps the last act of ministry we can do is to die well. The British historian Arnold Toynbee has said that death is Un-American. He’s right. We have such an un-natural and unhealthy attitude toward death. There is so much unnecessary suffering in our culture because of the fear of death, the denial of death. As Buddhist teacher Stephen Levine, in his book, *Who Dies* (no question mark) put it, “Death is not the enemy. The “enemy” is ignorance and lovelessness.” Yet we fight death as if it were the enemy, even if we are almost certain the fight is futile. I’m so glad that the book and TV special *Being Mortal* is garnering so much attention and discussion. Almost everyone, when asked, wants to die at home surrounded by the people they love. Most people in our society die in a hospital, full of tubes and drugs, surrounded by noise, strangers and frantic energy. So I really think it is an act of ministry to plan well for our deaths and to give an example to the world of dying well.

For a long time, I had a ceramic Mexican Day of the Dead skull on my altar of sacred reminders. I think it is always good to remember the motto that medieval monks said when they passed each other in the cloisters, “Memento mori”, “Remember death.” And that

means always to take care of any unfinished business which would have us leave the world with pain and regret. Who do I need to forgive? Of whom do I need to ask forgiveness? What regrets do I need to let go of? What words of love and thanks have yet to be spoken? What memories shared? What songs sung? What farewells said? Death is largely a threat only to those who have not lived their life. What unfinished business do you have?

Remember that at the end of your days the question will be not how much you have but how much you have given; not how much you have won, but how much you have loved.

There is a chant said at the end of the day at a Zen retreat that I would like to leave you with.

Let me respectfully remind you that life and death are of ultimate concern. Time passes swiftly by and opportunity is lost. Wake up. Wake up! Do not squander your precious life.

At this stage of life whatever spiritual practices we have cultivated in our lives become especially important.