

## How Shall We Live?<sup>1</sup>

### Sermon Text and Lyrics from the *Missa Brevis Pro Serveto*

from the Canadian Unitarian Council's Annual Conference and Meeting

Sunday Service May 23rd, 2010

Victoria, BC

### *Missa Brevis Pro Serveto*

*Dedicated to J and MFJ Dearman*

#### **I Kyrie Eleison**

Kyrie eleison.

Latum mare, parva navis.

Kyrie eleison.

Astra distant, nox frigescit.

Kyrie eleison.

Vita brevis, spem avemus.

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

The sea is so great and my ship is so small.

Lord, have mercy.

The stars are far away, and the night is cold.

Lord, have mercy.

My life is short, and we hunger for hope.

Lord, have mercy.

Seigneur, prends pitié.

La mer est immense et mon navire petit.

Seigneur, prends pitié.

Les étoiles sont lointaines et la nuit froide.

Seigneur, prends pitié.

La vie est courte et nous sommes affamés d'espoir.

Seigneur, prends pitié.

#### **II Gloria**

Gloria.

Anima sancta, quae animas mundum,

quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentes

concelebras, per te quoniam genus omne animantum

concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis

per maria ac montis, fluviosque rapacis,

frondiferasque domos avium, camposque virentis,

gratias agimus, gratias.

Gloria.

Spirit of life, you who breathe life into the world,

you who bless the sea with ships and quicken the fruitful earth, since through you all living things are conceived

and, risen, gaze upon the light of day,

through seas and hills, through tearing floods,

through the leafy homes of birds, through lush green fields,

we give thanks.

Gloria.

Âme sainte, qui donnes vie au monde,

qui peuples la mer de navires et fais que la terre porte des fruits, puisque c'est par toi que tout ce qui vit est conçu

et, une fois né, contemple la lumière du soleil,

par les mers, les monts et les fleuves impétueux,

à travers les abris feuillus des oiseaux et par les champs verdoyants,

nous rendons grâce.

#### **III Credo**

Quid scio de mundo?

Quid piscis de aqua? Quid avis de auris?

Nil nisi tempestatem, nil nisi undas.

What do I know of the world?

What does a fish know of water?

What knows a bird of the air?

Nothing but weather, nothing but waves.

Que sais-je du monde ?

Que sait le poisson de l'eau ? Que

sait l'oiseau de l'air ?

Rien hormis le temps, rien hormis les vagues.

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<sup>1</sup> The title "How Shall We Live?" comes from the *Missa Brevis Pro Serveto* (see acknowledgements at the end of this document). Because the sermon was developed and delivered as a companion piece to the *Missa*, the texts are presented together here.

Nihil ex nihilo;  
sum terrigena, ex aura flammaque,  
ex aqua et stellis.  
Et vitam, naturae quam debeo,  
mortalis telluri reddam.

Credo in spiritum, super aquas  
spirantem.  
Credo in caritatem.  
Credo in vitam.

Nothing comes from nothing;  
I am born from the earth, from air  
and fire, from water and stars.  
And my life, which I owe to nature,  
being mortal, I shall return to the  
earth.

I believe in spirit, breathing upon  
the waters.  
I believe in lovingkindness.  
I believe in life.

Rien ne naît du néant.  
Je suis né de la terre, de l'air et du  
feu, de l'eau et des étoiles.  
Et ma vie, que je dois à la nature,  
je la rendrai à la terre.

Je crois en l'esprit, qui souffle sur  
les eaux.  
Je crois en l'amour.  
Je crois en la vie.

## **How Shall We Live, Sermon Part I**

Delivered by Rev. Karen Fraser Gitlitz

My earliest memory is of walking silently in the dark, one child within a stream of people. The line, mostly adults, moves forward slowly and deliberately. The hand holding mine is warm and solid.

We enter a larger room. The ceiling is close at first, and then it rises. It is too dark. I cannot see the roof at its highest point, but I have an impression of presence, and an unexpected shiver runs through my body. I squeeze the hand that is holding mine, and the hand squeezes back. I am safe. And I look across the darkness and see, as if in a mirror, another line of people, also processing into the sanctuary, also holding hands and carrying candles.

What do I know of the world?

I know the terror of the unknown, and the safety of being loved, and I know that they can co-exist.

I know that I am mortal. Actually, I manage to forget that fact, with some frequency. And then I remember, or am reminded, when someone dear to me dies, or when any of the smaller losses startle me awake.

In the way that the image of a house destroyed by an earthquake is disturbing, even when no-one is injured, because somehow house and home seem like they should mean safety and therefore permanence, experiences that seem to provide solid ground reveal themselves uneven and broken a moment later.

Life follows its busyness and its patterns, and then one day we are confronted by the condition of our planet, or by the immensity of suffering within one city block. We discover that our own technologies have been designed to distract us, and conceal our limitations.

These things I know in my life. And yet I am also aware that what I know was shaped by where I was born, and to whom. I am a child of my parents, my upbringing, a particular heritage of class and culture. These things had some

bearing on the experiences that were provided me, the topics that were available for conversation, and those that were not.

Some stories were more valuable than others. Some were clearly labeled myth. Others were history.

And I wonder: What makes one story 'myth' and another story 'truth'?

Sometimes, as Unitarians and Universalists, we have attempted to deal with this complex question by saying that all stories are myth. Let's look at creation stories, we might say—as I have said myself—and compare different accounts from different cultures. We might look at the images as metaphors for the human condition.

And that may be good and useful, but it does not explain how these stories function within their community – how present life is to be understood. The celtic stories of the wheel of the year for neo-pagans, or the Christian way of walking through Jesus's life over the course of the year, or the way Haida stories express the ongoing relationship of the people with the sea and the forest—each set of stories is an expression of a unique way of living in the world.

These stories mean something within their context that they lose if we try to tell them in isolation.

The late Vancouver Island poet Robin Skelton said

Everything is in the light of everything, holy.  
But do not expect a catalogue of grace,  
trees, leaves, grass, and children suddenly shouting  
Hi-Hi, loudly, running in their playground,  
for to select is always to leave out something  
quiet, unnoticed, like the snail shell lying  
under the black and rotten bit of the gatepost,  
or the swing of the signature on the paper,  
all of a movement.

It is folly to see ourselves as separate, and yet, we are not to “expect a catalogue of grace” he says, “for to select is always to leave out something quiet.”

What do I know of the world? Any path through the forest brushes by some trees and misses others by miles. Any history will reveal some truths and conceal others.

It can be enormously difficult to see my own motivations clearly. Sometimes they only reveal themselves years later.

This is equally true in the life of a country, or a religious community. In his book *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul has shown us how the nineteenth century story of the British Empire and the French as founding nations obscured the earlier experience of Europeans learning from and being enriched by First Nations wisdom and culture. The explorers and traders marrying well-placed native women were marrying up, not down, for they gained connections and learned how to survive in this country.

In the past decade, the Canadian government has acknowledged some painful parts of our past, motivations of which we are no longer proud, episodes that wounded. And yet it remains a conversation about what ‘we’ did to ‘them’. We are still missing the acknowledgement of our dependence, and the gifts that we received—and continue to receive.

It is worth slowing down, taking another look, and asking, what is missing from the story.

#### **IV Kerygma - Proclamation**

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|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Ex montibus, e silentio,          | From the mountains, out of silence,               | Du haut des montagnes, dans le silence,                |
| vox auditur, quieta et parva,     | a small still voice is heard                      | on entend une voix, calme et douce,                    |
| quae dicit per saecula,           | that proclaims through the ages,                  | qui proclame à travers les siècles                     |
| reverentia vitae,                 | "reverence for life,                              | « vénération de la vie,                                |
| libertas, ratio, et toleratio.    | freedom, reason, and tolerance".                  | liberté, raison et tolérance ».                        |
| Docet vox et scripsit manus       | The voice teaches and the hand has written        | La voix enseigne et la main a écrit                    |
| ut mundus unus, unus deus, salvus | that the world is one, and the holy is            | que le monde est un, que dieu est                      |
| omnis, omnis dignus.              | one, that all shall be saved, and all are worthy. | unique, que chacun sera sauvé et que chacun est digne. |

### **How Shall We Live, Sermon Part II** Delivered by Rev. Don Vaughn-Foerster

*From the mountains, out of silence,  
A small still voice is heard that proclaims through the ages ‘reverence for life,  
freedom, reason, and tolerance.’  
The voice teaches and the hand has written that the world is one,  
and the holy is one,  
That all shall be saved, and all are worthy.  
[Missa Brevis Pro Serveto, IV Kerygma]*

So here we are. Through some mysterious benevolence of the heavens and the earth, you are here, I am here. It is wondrous, it is amazing that this is so. Standing

on this multicolored globe, so green with growth, so blue when looked upon from beyond the clouds, we see actual things. We feel silently in our bones (although with an uncertain clarity) the presence of that power which makes all things. Our lungs, our hearts, our minds breathe deeply of the spirit that fills that openness, which links all things to one another. And we believe in life, and we believe in that which holds and enfolds life. Yet, we know, too, that there is that of life which conditions and restrains itself and, in the end, removes life from our awareness and our awareness from life.

So, here we stand silently listening to “a small still voice” declaring what we already know in our tissues: we are free to be who we are, our minds can think and understand, and, although sometimes, hidden in our hearts, we do acknowledge and value one another. We do revere life; we do revere one another despite those breaches of respect we sometimes wreak on each other and the world. We know in our hearts that we walk on holy ground that undergirds a world that, diverse though it appears, is ultimately unified in soul and spirit. In this we find our reality – our reality which is yet our hope.

There is a poem that says all of this in another way. It was written by a member of the Colville Tribe that had to sacrifice its nomadic ways for a more confined life east of here in Washington State, just below the Canadian border. Ted Palmanteer is the poet’s name; I do not know what his tribe calls him. His poem, entitled This Is Real, goes like this:

And then there was the time I was formed,  
Shaped from a ball of mud.  
Don’t think my thoughts impossible,  
For nothing is more real –  
I did not remain a ball of mud.  
A clear, clean breath of air bought me to life.  
I relive vast happinesses when snow falls;  
Pure air rushes, gushes, makes me ring.  
I ring loud, I ring clear, and people are astonished,  
How can one so simple be so happy?  
Ah, but have I ever told you who my parents were?  
(Spirit) is my father, Nature is my mother.  
And you still wonder?  
Through, in, out of this deep knowledge,  
I live content;  
I have no worries.  
Millions of little lights are fluttering in me –  
Lights of wisdom, of love, of happiness, of completeness.  
These lights glow bright, intense, through living darkness.  
Others wonder at this. Lights? What lights?  
Friendliness, loyalty, honesty, helpfulness, and love –

These are (attributes) we all know,  
 And still we ask,  
 What are they?  
 They are simply here, they happen,  
 Out of nowhere, out of mud, perhaps.  
 But they, too, are real . . .  
 As bright and warm as lights.  
 They are why I want to live tomorrow,  
 And the next day,  
 And the next . . .  
 Forever . . .  
 Through shadowed memories, travel flickering thoughts,  
 Alighting here and there, peering into your eyes,  
 Kindling a soft glow  
 As you smile.  
 I feel your warmth,  
 I live and travel,  
 Knowing unknown knowledges,  
 Guided by little lights.  
 They mark the path toward how to live forever and forever.  
 For life is real,  
 You are real and  
 Overwhelming me to smile,  
 And still you ask,  
 Why must he smile?

Thus, though this can be a darkened world of iron sternness and steel  
 adversity, there yet are silver memories of the lights of yesterday and golden  
 promises of lights tomorrow. There still is hope emerging within our human reality.  
 We proclaim hope.

### **V Sermo**

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Quomodo vivamus?<br>Odi et amo. Atque olim amissas<br>flemus amicitias.  | How shall we live?<br>I hate and I love. And we weep for<br>friends of long ago, now lost.                 | Comment vivre ?<br>Je hais et j'aime. Et nous pleurons<br>des amitiés anciennes aujourd'hui<br>perdues.                      |
| Quod feci cum manibus<br>in vento et rapida scribere oportet<br>aqua.<br>Namque innocentes poenas habere<br>video. | The work of my hands<br>might well be writ in wind and<br>running water.<br>For I see the innocent suffer. | Ce que j'ai fait de mes mains<br>peut être écrit sur du vent et de<br>l'eau courante.<br>Car je vois les innocents souffrir. |
| Et noctis ad oras tremesco.  | And I tremble on the shores of<br>night.   | Et je tremble aux rives de la nuit.  |
| Non habet manus deus nisi nostras.   | God has no hands but ours.   | Dieu n'a d'autres mains que les<br>nôtres.   |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Non incedit pax pedibus nisi nostris.  | Peace walks on no feet but our own.  | La paix n'a d'autres jambes que les nôtres.  |
| Sim ego spes,<br>Sim ego lumen ex colle.                                       | May I be hope,<br>may I be light from a hill.                                      | Puissé-je être l'espoir,<br>puissé-je être la lumière sur la colline.                            |
| Ut sit lux nostra ubique meanti<br>similis soli,<br>ut sacellum cor bonum sit. | May our light go everywhere, like<br>the sun.<br>May our shrine be the good heart. | Que notre lumière rayonne partout,<br>comme le soleil,<br>que notre sanctuaire soit un cœur bon. |

**How Shall We Live, Part III**  
Delivered by Rev. Karen Fraser Gitlitz

How shall we live?

Robin Skelton said "Everything is in the light of everything, holy."

While this may be true, it isn't necessarily easy to live out. No doubt there are some enlightened ones among us, who inhabit this connectedness day to day, but as for me, I cannot manage to contemplate our connection to everything AND do the dishes. Not without dropping a plate or two along the way.

While I have moments of insight and expanded consciousness, most of the time, I live out our connection to the holiness of everything in the particulars, in specific relationships—with the friend who lost his job, or the woman on the bus who wasn't able to finish her laundry, with family near or far, with communities of vocation and affection. Real places, real situations.

In this day to day living, we hold the strands of the web of life in our hands and we are human. Sometimes we get angry and break strands. We feel remorse, or not. We forgive, or not. We come together. We separate. We nurture. We argue. We laugh. We pray.

This isn't about perfection. It's about awareness, and responsibility.

When I was sitting in a workshop on cross-cultural communication, the only representative of my demographic in the small group, we got to talking about jokes. One of my companions made an offhand comment about jokes he would or would not tell in the presence of a 'white person' and of course as he intended, I was totally curious, pressing him to tell it to me, convinced that I would find it funny because of course I can laugh at myself, can't I?

And he told the joke, and everyone laughed right away, except me. Not because I didn't find it funny, but because I actually couldn't figure out what the funny part

was. I didn't normally see the world—and myself—that way. It took me a couple of moments just to get it.

It is not easy, picking up a strand of the web of life that we have ignored or neglected, in our personal lives or in our culture. There will be uncomfortable moments.

But the skills are no different from any other slightly uncomfortable growth process. Spiritual maturity starts with ourselves.

Unitarian Universalist Chaplain Kate Braestrup, in her book *Here If You Need Me* tells the story of the span of time following the tragic death of her husband Drew, a police officer, who had been planning to go into the ministry. Instead, her own journey following his death led her to go into the ministry, an unexpected change in vocation.

When Braestrup was asked if she felt grateful for her tragedy, because it brought about this change in direction, she -- and we -- recoil from such a suggestion.

There is no way to reconcile the horrible fact of her husband's tragic death with her changed life path. In an effort to make meaning, it can be easy to press too hard to tie everything neatly into cause and effect. Spiritual maturity calls us to honour the depth of these two experiences, and feel them each fully for what they are, to let them sit inside ourselves, side by side, accepting that they are both true.

I believe that those of us who call ourselves Unitarian Universalists sideline ourselves when we avoid religious language, just because we aren't happy with how some folks have used it.

So I'll take the risk and say that I believe what we are talking about, and singing about, here today is salvation: what it is, and how we go about finding it.

Salvation is what we are talking about when we emphasize that we are people of this world, when we say that it is what we do in this life that matters.

It has nothing to do with whether we are atheist, theist, polytheist, or agnostic; or whether we lean toward science, humanism, mysticism or all of the above as sources for our religious understanding—well, almost nothing.

Salvation is what we are talking about when we ask what is the purpose of life, and what makes a life well lived. For some religious traditions, this has to do with what happens after we die. For most of us, I suspect, it gets worked out here, with these hands and these hearts.

In the language of Boards and businesses, salvation has to do with ends (where “ends” are the purpose of the organization, and “means” the ways of getting things done.)

In preparation for Nanaimo Fellowship’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this spring, the congregation’s Archivist pulled out lots of old reports. In one binder there was a report by longtime member Olive Lionel, from the mid-80s when she was program committee chair. This is what she wrote:

If we have no fellowship we become a philosophical society, attending a lecture every two weeks. If we do not consider social action we turn inward and selfish. If we neglect to consider the benefits of culture which our community has to offer we stop growing in another direction.

Religious life sits at the nexus of many activities. We are not a music group or a social action group or a social group, but we do all of these things.

At our best, we are a community of faith that brings our values and principles into all we do as human beings – singers, activists, artists, seekers. We are a community of faith struggling with one of the great questions of our time and culture, the balancing of the needs and desires of the individual and the group.

Knowing that salvation, healing, the flourishing of life in all its forms is our end, how do we organize ourselves? How do we reach out in ways that will release the ties that have scarred us, and prevent us from living freely and fully?

Well, we can look at our history with compassionate honesty. We can see ourselves as a country with multiple origins; as a religious movement shaped by Anglo-Irish-Scottish immigrants, by American religious ferment, by the Universalist message that all are loved, all are saved, spreading word of mouth through the Maritimes, by Icelandic Lutherans on the prairies, searching for a religious community that expressed their values.

We can learn to accept—dare I say love—who we are right now. The people we are, the size we are.

And then, perhaps, we can say thank you.

After observing the holiness of everything, and it’s intimate relations, Robin Skelton says “Therefore, be thankful when you thank.”

We can cultivate the good heart. Why? Because it will grow love, by which I mean loving-kindness, or compassion, rather than infatuation.

Sometimes it seems that we look at our hodge-podge history, and our dependence on outside support as if it were an embarrassment, and not a strength. We try to string together the moments that we are most proud of, missing the elements that could help us build bridges with other communities. Unadmitted, unexpressed, we become quiet, as if ashamed, as if we weren't a 'real religion' struggling with the deep questions of life.

As if we were at sea, and the waves too big and we with no hand to hold on to. In such times, it is easy to withdraw in hurt, in overwork.

But when a boat is at sea in the middle of the storm, when there is no-where to go for shelter, no help at hand, sometimes the skipper will toss a sea anchor over the side. With no hope of finding bottom, the sea anchor is fabric, sort of like a parachute in the water. It uses the water itself as a break, to slow down the movement of the boat, and keep it oriented at a safe angle to the waves.

It is religious community that can provide a sea anchor. One person in a room of 50 will remind us to respond with compassion—and that is all it takes, in an environment that wants to hear that message, even when we are all in the same boat, fearful of being hurt again. It is our religious community that helps us live faithfully, that reminds us of purpose, of ends, of healing, wholeness, salvation.

When I asked the Unitarian Church of Vancouver if they would ordain me, I told them "this church saves lives." I believe this, with all my heart, because it happened to me. Yes, there has also been conflict and bitterness and all the challenges of living in community. That is true.

We talk sometimes of spiritual growth, and leadership training, and community building as if they were separate things. When viewed from the standpoint of ultimate ends, they are not.

We save lives by loving people as they are. By sharing our lives with them, whether or not they share our exact beliefs, whether or not they are behind our particular initiative or project.

I did not come to Unitarian Universalism to learn how to run good meetings, or acquire leadership skills or balance books. And yet I find that good leadership requires the ability to forgive, myself and others, and conversations about finances are actually conversations about theology—what I believe about the human condition, especially groups of humans, and where it is that I find hope.

We do this by seeing what is good in them, showing them that we believe there is good in ourselves, and they can too. Not that we are perfect, or they are perfect, but that every now and then, we remember that it is our hands that must do the living,

our hearts that must cultivate loving kindness. This is our good news. This is the salvation we can find here, on this earth.

Amen. Blessed be.

### **VI Sanctus**

Sancta terra et pax beata.

Holy the earth and blessed is our peace.

Sainte terre et paix bienheureuse.

### **VII Benedictus**

Benedicite.

Speak blessing.

Bénédicté.

Benedicta quae manibus adhibet misericordiam.

Blessed is she whose hands bear lovingkindness.

Bénié soit celle dont les mains offrent la miséricorde.

Benedictus qui venit in pace.

Blessed is he who walks in peace.

Béni soit celui qui s'avance en paix.

Benedicti sitis.

Blessed be.

Soyez bénis.

Ite, missa est.

Go your ways.

Allez, la messe est dite.

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### **For more information on the *Missa Brevis Pro Serveto***

Contact Kristina Stevens, [kristinastevens@shaw.ca](mailto:kristinastevens@shaw.ca)

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