

PREMISES AND PROMISES

—Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove and Rollene Wells —
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Call to Worship

The original meaning of the word Worship comes from Old English and essentially means, “to shape things of worth.” I love this definition because it does not imply the worship of a deity or a person or a creed. Instead, it reminds us that what we do here each week is to hold up what we value and give it shape and form through the common and ancient traditions of ritual, word, music and quiet.

“Shaping things of worth” could also describe many things we do in our lives—our work, of course, and our community activities. But perhaps it is nowhere so clear than in the raising of our children. For what is of greater worth than these young lives?

While Jaco and I chose not to raise children, I understand deeply from my own experience how critical parents are in the shaping of their most valuable assets, their offspring. I learned this not as a mother but as a daughter. My parents, imperfect though they were, did much to shape me into the person I am today.

One of those parents, my mother Rollene Wells, shares the pulpit with me today. My father John died twenty years ago. He was a minister, and I learned a lot about my work from him. But I learned more about being human from my mother and I am delighted that she was able to travel across the continent to be here today.

She is someone who, after many great struggles, has learned daily to say “yes” to life and truth and love. Let us honor that by singing together hymn #6 – *Just As Long as I Have Breath...*

Sermon

Premises and Promises

Barbara:

My mother is a dancer. It may not be the first thing you think of when you look at her but it’s true. I remember watching my parents dance when I was a child. It was always astonishing to me how these two people (my embarrassing parents, no less) could move across a floor with such grace and style.

Dancing is both a wonderful art form and a powerful metaphor. To dance through life implies that we listen carefully to the music that is playing, follow or lead depending on circumstance, move to a familiar pattern while mixing it up, and, when we stumble, make it a part of the dance.

Today’s service reflects the ways my mother, and by way of her, I have learned the dance of life. Throughout this duet of a sermon she will share with you seven premises that have shaped her life, while I respond with my own thoughts. Though mom might have called this sermon simply, “Premises,” I chose to add “Promises” to the title because so often the choices we make about how we live our life factor into the commitments—or promises we make to each other. Many years ago my mother, alongside my father, made promises to each other and to their children that have helped us become the people we are today. I’m grateful to both of them. For now, let me invite my mother to begin this dance of sharing.

Rollene:

Thank you, Barbara. My children leave me breathless. I have three other wonderful daughters. They all have their own light, their own song, their own special beauty. I take little credit for the people they keep becoming, but I do take some.

Being a UU for about 50 years has taught me and my family that it's necessary to ask the questions even when there are no easy answers; it's okay to doubt even while living an ethical life; it's a part of being human not to understand. And in the midst of all the confusion, one can be caring, kind, intelligent, confident and even joyful and thankful.

"How do we do this?" one might ask.

Well, many years ago, I wrote down some premises upon which I built my life. In 1983 I took a poetry class and used these same premises as poetic themes for my class assignment. Then in 2008, they surfaced again for me in a writing class, writing memoirs of our spiritual journeys and *voilà*, there were my premises—still bright and shiny, having lost nothing of their luster over 35 or so years of use. Let me share them and see if they will shine for you.

First: ***Without beauty, the soul withers.*** Flowers, music, paintings, moon glow, sunrise, birds or new-fallen snow, diamonds, sand dollars—these are the sustenances beyond survival. Find some everyday, lest you wilt away your spirit. I wrote a haiku for this one, a part of which said:

*Without beauty, souls
Wither and spirits falter
Give my life beauty*

Barbara:

I love my mother's list of the Beautiful. She speaks of art and beauty found in nature (flowers, moon glow, sunrise and sand dollars) and in the human-fashioned (music and paintings). She brought all of these into my life, teaching me to stop and appreciate the many ways nature impacts the senses. She also made sure that I surrounded myself with poetry and popular songs as well as paintings and prints.

Our tastes differ (she has never learned to appreciate the Beatles and I'm less than fond of some of the nasty blues she likes), but I can see myself growing in my understanding of the way the Beautiful impacts my peace and happiness. She learned this life lesson the year I was born, when my family lived in a hideous apartment at a military fort.

I find the lesson confirmed in my new home here on Bainbridge Island, where the colors on my walls and the trees outside my window keep me centered and sane.

Rollene:

My 2nd premise is this: ***Without people, the heart withers.*** Your bouquet of life is your cluster of lovely ones. Enlarge your heart to hold many people. Your capacity is limited only by time and space. Your special people come in all shapes and sizes and stay different lengths of time. When you live as long as I have, many of them have died. Everyone doesn't get the privilege of a long and healthy life as I have. But those that are no longer with you, either by geography or necessity or death or divorce, are no less valuable. Their gifts to you are permanent treasures.

I wrote several poems modeled on "Spoon River Anthology" for this one. My favorite was simply titled:

Karen, Brooksie, Mary, and Barbara:

*My bouquet of lovely ones, my girls,
Four daughters, and each a work of art.
This miracle transcending all I know,
Beyond the understanding that I have.
I do not know of other miracles.
Wine from water was a simple change
Compared to watching these four as they bloomed
And turned to women, as I stood, amazed.*

Barbara:

It's pretty amazing to have your mother write such a poem for you. My sisters and I were not easy to raise, and there were times when we had to work very hard to get along. But it is oh, so true that my mother and father believed in love. I saw how much they loved each other, even when things were difficult between them. I saw how they loved each of their daughters, fully and completely.

But I think this lesson instilled itself in my soul when I was how my parents were with my friends. My friends, if they had a choice, almost always preferred being at my house than anywhere else. They tell me so to this day. "Your mom makes us feel so welcome," they tell me. "Your dad was always so interested in my life and activities." Though my life has taken a very different path than my parents, I hope that I model if ever so faintly their acceptance and love for all.

Rollene:

Premise #3 is a bit harder to wrap your mind around. It goes like this: ***Without death, there is no life.*** A rock can't die because it never lived. Don't dwell on death, but look to living.

I have felt for a long time that all religions throughout history were formed to answer four questions:

Who am I?
Why am I here?
Where did I come from?
Where do I go when I die?

UUs approach these questions differently. We tend to accept the fact that we don't know the answers to these questions and we can live with the mystery. We like to concentrate on this world and our efforts tend to go toward improving life on this earth—sort of a "heaven can wait" (if there is one) and we don't even entertain the idea of hell. And yet we behave with kindness, ethical in our striving and tolerant of others. Why behave well if you're not going to go to hell? Because it's the right thing to do.

Here is the poem I wrote about this premise.

Death
*An angry God looked down at me
And said, "Prepare to die!"
But I became diverted
When a snowflake hit my eye.*

continued...

*“Kneel,” He said, “and beg me
To forgive you for your sins.”
But with cool grass between my toes,
My knees just wouldn’t bend.*

*“You’re on your way to Hell,” He said.
But windsong hit my ears.
I couldn’t hear The Voice
Above the music of the spheres.*

Pretty UU, don’t you think?

Barbara:

Indeed it is. Unlike my mother, I had the benefit of being raised UU. I never had to unlearn the idea of an angry God because I never believed in one to begin with. But I admit that death is real for all of us, no matter what our belief (or lack thereof) in a God of Heaven or Hell.

While I don’t think my parents tried to protect me from death, I had little in the way of experience with it until my grandmother died when I was 18. I remember my mother gently pushing me toward Grandma’s coffin where she lay in state. I took one look at her and burst into sobs. It was a very real message of death’s reality, and my mother wisely chose not to spare me from it.

When, ten years later, my father died at home, I will never forget waiting for the undertaker to arrive while my mother folded clothes on the bed where my father’s body lay. It took the fear away and left me with a powerful commitment to never try to hide from death. It helped me so much in my ministry as I have been able, I hope, to help Unitarian Universalists see that dying is just a natural part of life; sad, yes, but not scary or even bad. It’s the price tag for life, and as my mother taught me, it is worth every penny.

Rollene:

Premise #4 is the one that really annoys me. It reads thus: *Without pain, we do not learn very much*. It’s nice to sit by a cool stream and watch a butterfly flutter by, but it doesn’t teach us much. Life is difficult, so...we learn a lot!

I remember when my father died. I was in Morocco. I didn’t get to his funeral. The military gave me a choice. Come home and see him while he was still alive and alert, or come to his funeral. I chose to see him alive, but it was so hard on my mother for me to not be at his funeral.

Life is difficult. I had pain in my marriage. Leave or work it out. I chose to stay. Choices. Difficult. I became an alcoholic. Quit drinking or die? Which did I want to do? Which could I do? I finally quit at 70. It was so hard.

Choices. Yes, you still have hard choices, even at 81. How I long to be a finished product, but, the older I get, the more I know that life is a journey and you’re not finished until it’s over and then the question again, “Where do I go?” That damned mystery! Even at 81.

But I wrote a poem. It’s my favorite. It’s a sonnet. I don’t know how much you remember from high school English, but a sonnet is a piece of work: fourteen lines of iambic pentameter with a certain rhyme scheme. And it’s supposed to say something important! I think this was my best work!

Pain

*I know that I have suffered long enough.
I do not wish to learn another thing.
I'm tired of feeling that I must be tough.
I do not want the lessons life can bring.
But every day I feel another jolt
It's life intruding on my peaceful plan
Forgive me, God, if I choose to revolt.
I do not need your Lordly reprimand.
I want to watch a stately butterfly
With gold and yellow patterns on its wings
And graceful movement, quickly flutter by,
Reflecting beauty in the sparkling stream.
But You, perverse as always, stop my way,
Reminding me that growth is never play.*

Barbara:

Many years ago, my mother wrote me a letter. I was recently diagnosed with fibromyalgia and was feeling as if my life was caving in on me. In her letter she told me of this premise of hers that life is difficult and though I was in a tough place, there was much learning to be had if I were only to listen. I didn't want to. She was still actively drinking and I didn't want to believe that she had anything to teach me. But she did. And when she went through the incredibly hard process to get (and stay) sober, I discovered that this lesson was as true for me as it was for her. I still wish it were otherwise. But, in this as in so many other ways, Mother really does know best.

Rollene:

My 5th premise has been much acclaimed in this election cycle. It goes like this: ***Without change, life stagnates.*** Everything passes. Not one day is like another. It passes into something new. But do not grieve, for like a jewel, each day has its own beauty. It does not diminish in beauty because you no longer have it. Turn it loose; go with the flow. You have no other choice.

Barbara:

This premise was seared into my soul when, as a child, I moved five times before the end of 5th grade. However, I never did learn to turn it loose. My mother has said that little phrase over and over to me my whole life. I'm not good at it. Perhaps I never will be. But I do try.

Rollene:

And my 6th premise reads like this: ***Without truth, there is no real understanding.*** And by truth, I do not mean tell all or even much. I mean living your truth as you see it, and changing your truth as life dictates. Some truths last and some truths grow and change with your own greater knowledge and insight. There is no one in this congregation today or on this podium who has not changed a truth to another truer truth. That's what growing up and moving on is all about.

We grow; our truths grow. We change; our truths change. I was not born into Unitarianism; I found it. I grew into it. My truth changed. Define the God of your youth; define God now. He or she has changed, or maybe disappeared or been found in a new form. Whatever—our truth changes as life compels it to change.

Barbara:

Perhaps because I was raised UU and was taught early on that my religious truths could and would change as I grew, I approach this premise differently than my mother does. Maybe it is because I have always been the truth teller in my family. Truth is easy for me. I am a terrible liar and always have been. I find it so interesting that this is one of my mother's premises because truth was not always central in our family. Lying was not OK, but subtle untruths seemed to be the norm. For instance, it was not OK for me to tell the truth about mom's drinking. I did, but no one wanted to believe it even when we all knew it was true.

Yet, these last ten years of sobriety have brought truth into our family. We can and do talk about the hard things that have touched our lives. I try to remember how much it takes to tell the truth and to live the truth. Big truths are often easier than small ones, at least as I see it. But when families learn to be lovingly honest with each other, great positive change is possible. That is one truth I know for sure.

Rollene:

And to my last and most compelling premise, #7: *Without love, there is no reason*. Love is what it's all about. In spite of the risk, in spite of the pain, in spite of the fear, in spite of the hard work—it is our one necessity.

The poem I wrote about love was a page full of rhymed couplets— rhymed iambic pentameter—must complete a thought in those two lines. I'll share it with you in closing.

Love

It seems to me that love has many faces.

It shows up in the most peculiar places.

A baby's fingers curled 'round Mother's hand.

A teacher's clear and quiet reprimand.

The tiny stitches on a wedding dress

Worn only once, but treasured ne'er the less.

The coffee always in my favorite cup

No matter what the time that I get up.

The trash set on the sidewalk by a neighbor

Without my asking for such menial labor.

The risk of saying what is on my mind

And having some listen and be kind.

The fear and pain of being insecure

And then—that loving voice to reassure.

The eyes that soften when they touch my face

Remembering and promising embrace.

That kiss upon a face in death's retreat.

Hands covering a lifetime with a sheet.

The many faces that I didn't even mention

Speak, in silent voice, of love's dimension.

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