

Sermon: *Two Who Dared*

I am so happy to see you all here this morning, here with friends and fellow travelers each of us on the amazing journey of our own unique life times. Your simple presence here this morning is enough to bring me great joy.

Let me explain that. I think if I were to ask you, what brings you here this morning, you might well say that you come here seeking community, seeking to find friendship, companionship, perhaps seeking to find truth and meaning in your lives.

I think it is profoundly important to notice that by your coming together here this morning, you may be individually seeking something, but more importantly by coming together you are creating something, you are creating the thing you are seeking. By your actions you are creating beloved community.

You have heard me say before, and you will hear me say again, that what is important in life is not the seeking of truth and meaning. What is important is the conscious decision to give meaning to our lives. And that is what gives me such great joy this morning. For by our very decision to get up this morning and to join together in this special hour we are creating something wonderful.

Our religious faith does not grant us the luxury of an absolute revealed meaning to life. The degree to which we have meaning in our lives is a function of the commitment we make to give meaning to our lives. We do not live our lives in a vacuum. We learn from each other and we learn from the stories of those who have gone before. We pick and choose among those stories for the elements that vibrate in sympathy with our own natures and our own dispositions.

Friday night, after a relaxing spaghetti dinner with friends, about 27 of us assembled in this room to hear a story. We sat here for 76 minutes watching a movie entitled "Two Who Dared." It was a story about Martha and Waitstill Sharp. It compressed seven years of their amazing lives into 76 minutes of video.

It was a story. There was a message. A story about two people who dared to give meaning to their lives by responding to the atrocities of the world with love and self-sacrifice. This is a story within a story. For you see the story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp, had been largely forgotten. The story within the story is about how and why their grandson came to bring their story back to life and hold it up before the world.

The story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp deserves to be part of the mythology that inspires our Unitarian Universalist Faith. Each of us, who watched this movie last night will have taken away our own unique impressions of these legendary figures. For those who could not attend the movie, I have a two minute clip (1:22 to 3:03)

This is the story of two unique human beings caught up in extraordinary circumstances. But, I remind you here that we are each very unique human beings and that being alive in this amazing universe is a most extraordinary circumstance.

The story opens with a bit of background on Waitstill and Martha before they met. Waitstill came from a privileged family and graduated from the Harvard Law School before he decided to become a Unitarian minister.

Martha was rejected by her mother as a child and was raised in a working class environment by her aunt and uncle. Their expectation was that Martha would enter the work force after high school to help earn income for the family. When Martha decided to accept a scholarship to university instead, her aunt and uncle threw her, with her meager belongings out of the house.

As fate would have it, Martha and Waitstill met and fell in love. But, Martha was never fully accepted by Waitstill's family who felt that he had married beneath his class.

Martha and Waitstill lived in extraordinary times to be sure. In 1933, the year that Waitstill was ordained, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated and Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany.

As we saw in that opening clip Waitstill and Martha accepted an invitation by the Unitarian Association to undertake direct action against the evil that was Nazi Germany. This, despite the fact that they would have to leave their two young children with friends. This was highly ironic, given Martha's childhood experience of rejection.

At great personal risk Waitstill and Martha worked in Prague Czechoslovakia before and after the German occupation helping prominent anti-Nazis to escape and assisting Jewish families, and children in particular, to get passage out of Czechoslovakia.

Finally they were warned that their arrest by the Nazi's was imminent and they barely escaped to return to the USA. They were at sea on September 3, 1939 when Britain and France declared war on Germany. On that very day, as the Sharps steamed toward New York, the British passenger liner Athenia was sunk by a German submarine.

Once back in the United States the Sharps were gratefully united with their two small children.

And then incredibly they were virtually ordered back to Europe, despite their protests by the Frederick May Elliot the President of the Unitarian Association. They returned to Europe using Portugal as a base of operations with France now occupied. They continued spiriting people out of Southern France and Portugal including a large group of children.

During this time, their work required them to be separated for long periods and Waitstill eventually returned to the US without Martha. Their marriage ended in divorce, shortly after the war.

Both Martha and Waitstill continued their humanitarian work. Eventually Waitstill returned to parish ministry. Martha had an unsuccessful run for congress, and served in the Truman administration. The latter years of her life were spent working for various Jewish organizations. Waitstill died in 1983 and Martha in 1999.

By any measure this is an inspiring story of dedication to Unitarian Universalist principles and self-sacrifice. It is an American story and I hasten to point out that there are no shortage of Canadian Unitarian Universalist heroes. I was raised at a time when the Unitarian Service Committee, 56 Sparks Street and Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova were known to every Canadian. Since my return to Canada I have become aware of the work of Fred and Bonnie Cappuccino and their foundation Child Haven. I am sure there are many more inspiring Canadian UU stories that need to be told. But Canadians with few exceptions resist the temptation to create legends around out of the lives of real human beings.

I am able to tell the story of Waitstill and Martha because someone else took the time and the energy to raise up their story. This is the story within the story. The life of Waitstill and Martha Sharp may well have been forgotten but for the work their Grandson who to write a high school paper about his grandparents. This project inspired him to take the project further and leaders of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee saw this as an inspiring story that would help them to connect with people who might be sympathetic to their cause. The movement to tell this story has grown dramatically and now there is a small industry promoting this film and the story of Martha and Waitstill.

It is interesting that I received an email from Dr. Susan Subak who is an authority on humanitarian efforts in Europe Associated with the second world war. She apparently sent an email to everyone who was arranging a showing of this film to advise that, and I quote: "Martha Sharp was, in my mind, a dedicated volunteer, but the summary numbers and period clips offered in the film conflates the achievements of many (unnamed) people who worked in Europe during the war. In the case of the Unitarian Service Committee, the person with the most effective, far-reaching refugee rescue program was another Unitarian minister named Charles Joy."

I am afraid that Dr. Subak is missing the point. The story of Waitstill and Martha is an inspiring story of two people who at great personal risk and sacrifice determined to give their lives meaning by engaging with the world in a particularly inspiring way.

The historical details, the actual number of individuals rescued etc. are important from a historian's perspective but like all great inspiring stories the historical accuracy is not the point of the story. Stories like those of Waitstill and Martha Sharp, Doctor Lotta Hitschmanova and Fred and Bonny Cappuccino can inspire individuals like you and me to engage our world in the spirit of Unitarian Universalism.

We are each living the adventure of a finite life time in this incredible and extraordinary universe. It is a profound and rare gift to actualize those two great truths.

First you are a unique individual living a lifetime that is your own unique adventure. Despite speculation to the contrary, you have the inexplicable gift of free will. You are responsible for giving meaning to your life. It is pointless to search for meaning out there somewhere. You are the only agent that will determine what your life means to you.

Second, you live in extraordinary circumstances. It is an incredibly important and rare quality to be able to sense how extraordinary your circumstances are. This is an improbable universe. And whether you believe that the incredibly unique circumstances that make life and human consciousness, let alone your unique personality and character are the result of pure chance or not, If you think seriously about it, you must be boggled by the improbability of it all.

Now add to this the fact that you live in one of the most favored countries in the world at a time in history when science and technology have put incredible tools into our hands. We are not all destined to be Martha Sharps or Lotta Hitschmanovas or Bonny Cappuccinos. But we all have incredible gifts and live in extraordinary times.

Many of us long to see the message of Unitarian Universalism at work in Halifax. We look around and see a desperate need for people of good will to bring about change. Every day's newspaper brings us new stories of suffering within our community. The story behind the suicide of Rehtaeh Parsons is a heart wrenching example of the brokenness of our community and the challenges that face our youth. The ongoing struggle for survival by our indigenous peoples, the short term sacrifice of our environment at the altar of economic expediency... We live in extraordinary times. There are no shortages or challenges.

There is work to be done. We should have no problem giving meaning to our lives.

The challenges we face are the same challenges that Waitstill and Martha Sharp faced. They are challenges to come become fully human to realize that our lives can have meaning only if we realize we are in charge. Challenges of overcome inertia, challenges to put the common good ahead of our own selfish desires.

The story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp Is a Unitarian Universalist myth in the best sense of that word. Waitstill and Martha Sharp are in the process of becoming legendary figures. Their story should be an inspiration to us all.

I hope that this story will be a source of personal inspiration for you this morning. I hope you will leave here this morning with the realization that by participating in this very special community that we call the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax you are creating meaning in your life. I hope that you will leave here with a sense that you are unique and that each new day is an opportunity to actualize that unique and special person that you are. And I hope that you will leave here this morning with the realization that you are a part of an extraordinary experience and an extraordinary time in history.

May you be inspired by the realization of your own potential to build beloved community.

May it be so. Amen