

# **A Cockeyed Optimist**

## **First Unitarian of Wilmington**

### **June 14, 2009**

I'm a baby boomer who grew up with the strains of South Pacific and Sound of Music floating through my consciousness. My parents loved Broadway musicals so the original cast albums played loudly on our high fidelity record player. The words and the music seeped into my being. And it wasn't just at home; I was the student producer and sang in the chorus line for Oklahoma and other shows in high school. This music lived along side the Beatles and Janis Joplin as I was coming of age.

And the show tunes that spoke most powerfully to me were the Rodgers and Hammerstein ones. As a young adolescent, the memorable tunes for me focused on romance. "I'm as Corny as Kansas in August," "Many a New Face Will Please My Eye," and "I am 16 Going on 17" would ring through my mind and burst forth in shower. I re-enacted the famous shampooing scene from South Pacific, singing "I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair."

But many of the other emotions and themes expressed in Rodgers and Hammerstein music also spoke to me. I would always cry at the end of Sound of Music to the strains of "Climb Every Mountain." I remember welling up with tears at Girls State, the American Legion citizenship program for high school students. At the final banquet, the room was filled with hundreds of girls and women singing "You'll Never Walk Alone." I was overcome with tears, experiencing a very spiritual moment, surrounded by people affirming our connection to each other and to some unknown spiritual essence.

Spiritual moments were few and far between for me as a youth. I started questioning my Catholic faith at an early age and didn't really know about alternatives. I was under the impression you were Catholic or atheist. I chose atheist. And yet a spiritual longing in me drew me to Rodgers and Hammerstein. I desperately needed to hear that I was not alone. I wanted to believe that goodness prevails, that hope and faith really existed. Their music and lyrics filled that need in me in a way that organized religion could not until I discovered Unitarian Universalism in my late 20s.

Richard Rodgers, one of America's outstanding 20<sup>th</sup> century composers and Oscar Hammerstein, brilliant lyricist would probably not consider themselves to be ministers. But

much of their music speaks of spiritual themes. Their collaboration started with Oklahoma in the early 1940s and continued with South Pacific, Carousel, Sound of Music, The King and I, Flower Drum Song and others which did not enjoy such great popularity. Musicals prior to Oklahoma tended to be comic or operettas without much spiritual depth. Rodgers and Hammerstein tackled some tough issues without glossing over with sugar coated song and dance numbers and light hearted comedy bits. Indeed, they set a whole new tone for American musical theater, maturing it and deepening it.

South Pacific, one of their most successful shows, features lots of great entertainment along with a very real examination of racism. The show is a moral testing ground for Nellie Forbush and Lt. Joe Cable who each face a confrontation with their own racist and classist beliefs. One fails and the other succeeds in the land of Bali H'ai, the symbolic place of healing and liberation where the troubled find calm and the repressed find release. Lt. Joe Cable can't imagine breaking out of his upper crust life and expectations. He can't free himself to make a life with Liat, the young Tonkanese woman with whom he has fallen in love. Nellie Forbush, on the other hand, faces her prejudices when she discovers that her lover, a middle-aged French planter, had previously married a Tonkanese woman and had two children with her.

As Rodgers and Hammerstein were working on South Pacific in the late 1940s, their friends and promoters urged them to remove "Carefully Taught" from the show. These well meaning friends believed the song was too controversial, perhaps inflammatory. Hammerstein held firm and said it was a pivotal song. The world had just been through a horrific world war and the holocaust. Both Rodgers and Hammerstein believed that evil results from the attitudes and prejudices we are taught as children.

"Carefully Taught" has come home to me personally many times as I have confronted my own racism. I have had to work to undo, untrain and dismantle the racist messages in my being placed there by my own family and our culture as a whole. I have come to realize that this is a lifelong pursuit, as I uncover more layers of my whiteness over time. And just this week, this song again popped into my consciousness as I learned of the shooting at the US Holocaust Museum. One can only begin to wonder what that white supremacist experienced as a child that led him to a life-long obsession with hate for Jews, blacks and others. Sadly, "Carefully Taught" is not out-of-date yet. It speaks most urgently to us to our deep responsibility to address racism, Anti-Semitism, homophobia and other types of othering. As we mourn the death of the museum security guard and express our shock at this happening at a shrine intended to remind the nation

of the unthinkable consequences of hate, let us be strong in our resolve to teach our children well and to live our lives as positive role models who actively continue to learn about our own prejudices and to courageously confront those who would perpetuate hate of any kind.

And I also remember that “Carefully Taught” was not the only song in South Pacific. Another powerful song was “A Cockeyed Optimist” expressing an irrepressible belief in a good outcome for the world against all odds. I’ve often wondered what does cockeyed mean, anyway? A quick look at some definitions come up with an interesting collection of words: of course, a squinting eye, something crooked, awry or tilted to one side, over time morphing into foolish, ridiculous, absurd, incongruous, inviting ridicule, slightly crazy or very drunk. And what about the word, optimist? It means the tendency to expect the best possible outcome or to dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation. Optimist derives from optimum which many of us would say means “the best” but its original meaning in New Latin is “greatest good.” Not simply the best outcome, after all, best is rather subjective, but the ethical value of greatest good is embedded in this word.

Our Universalist ancestors developed their theology based, in part, on the strong belief that good would ultimately triumph over evil or said another way, that goodness pervades reality. After all, these are the folks who believed in a loving God who would eventually send everyone to heaven and, more importantly, that our primary focus during our lives should be the creation of heaven here on earth, not being overly concerned about the next life. These were people working toward the greatest good as their embodied spiritual practice, exemplified by Clara Barton offering aid to all in disasters, not just the privileged few.

And our Universalist forbears were considered cockeyed optimists-- unrealistic, foolish and slightly crazy according to other people in the community. We come from a long proud line of cockeyed optimists who don’t believe “that we’re done and we might as well be dead.” Ours is a faith of optimism, a concern and commitment to the greatest good.

The song “A Cockeyed Optimist” has always been a hymn of hope for me, an affirmation of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, that goodness pervades the world. Hammerstein even shared a source for hope when he wrote “I hear the human race is falling on its face and hasn’t very far to go, but every whippoorwill is selling me a bill and telling me it just ain’t so.” Every whippoorwill, every bird, every aspect of creation cries out Yes!, cries out its beauty and cries out its place in our interconnected, interdependent world. The universe is a place that bends toward beauty and gladness. We just need to be aware of its wonder and beauty as a source of

hope in the midst of the complex reality of our day-to-day lives. My personal theology has undergone much transformation over time. I would best describe it now as panentheism, a belief that the whole cosmos is sacred and that there is something beyond our human comprehension as well that draws us toward the good. This is a faith that hears that singing whippoorwill as a messenger of life, of Yes!, of hope.

And so with a heart full of hope, I have joined the ranks of the cockeyed optimists, the slightly crazy ones who believe in seemingly impossible positive outcomes. And my life is filled with impossible things happening. Here's one for you. Years ago I attended a Saint Lawrence District Assembly and sat across the dining table from a Toronto Unitarian Universalist. We commiserated about our mutually disagreeable climates and that when you live quite a distance from the congregation, the winter months surely curtail your involvement. He was telling me passionately about some satellite congregations in the suburbs and outskirts of Toronto that had been started by the downtown congregation. Sound familiar here? The big downtown church was actively spinning off more congregations. He just looked at me and said, "Why don't you start a church?" I felt as if I had been struck by lightning. I couldn't sleep a wink that night. All night long, I kept thinking, "we're going to start a church." I didn't even know who we were but the mantra kept playing in my head. But the next day, I talked with the District Executive, a person I had never met before and she noncommittally said she'd be in touch.

Little did I know that two ministers, Carl and Maureen Thitchener were having some similar ideas about starting a new congregation south of Rochester, New York. The District Executive did some match making and the rest is history. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua is now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year of being chartered as congregation in the Unitarian Universalist Association. But, back to that "we," the "we" that was going to start a church. Yes, the major leadership we turned out to be the Thitcheners and myself, gathering the souls who would become this congregation and getting things underway. And there was the "we" of some neighboring congregations who offered various kinds of support to our fledgling effort.

But, another very important "we" participated in our success as a new congregation. They were the Chalice Lighters, people who were willing to support congregational growth through occasional calls for contributions. The hundreds of people across the district gave generously and regularly and they were collectively a big we. Chalice Lighter grants allowed us, over the years, to hire half time ministers, a half time religious education directors and a music director. Chalice Lighter grants helped us with our dream of having our own building instead of

renting. Chalice Lighters funding helped us become a vital, vibrant congregation. And Chalice Lighters is partly the reason I stand before you today as a ministerial candidate and intern minister. The Chalice Lighter program supported the new congregation where I first heard my call to serve as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Applying for Chalice Lighter grants made me more aware of the wider Unitarian Universalist movement and the many, many more folks out there who were cockeyed optimists, people who believed they could change the world for the better, for the greatest good.

And so fast forward through my years in Canandaigua and then on to seminary and chaplaincy training and my internship with the Unitarian Universalists of Central Delaware, the newest congregation in the Unitarian Universalist Association as of April 19, 2009. There are multiple layers of “we” involved in this new Dover congregation as well. Forward thinking members of First U realized the potential and promise of a Unitarian Universalist presence in the state capital, another step toward a world made fair, just and more loving, starting in our own backyard. Dover-based First U members were recruited to start gathering souls and organizing this new spiritual venture. And gather they did, bringing together many souls yearning for a liberal religious home in Dover. Those souls needed to be organized and formed into a congregation.

Along with support of the “we” of First U and other sponsoring congregations, once again a larger “we” was called upon to help the new Dover congregation get off the ground. Chalice Lighter grants funded a New Congregation Organizer and some initial marketing efforts to publicize the arrival of this new congregation to the wider community. Chalice Lighter grants also helped to fund hiring me as an intern minister. The original plan was to hire a half-time minister but when I was recruited, I offered to work three-quarter time for the congregation and one-quarter time in supervision to make this ministry into a full-time internship. The Chalice Lighter grant actually facilitated a full-time ministry in Dover this year, getting them off to a strong start, moving through the important milestones of creating by-laws, electing their first board of trustees, achieving incorporation, celebrating Charter Sunday and receiving membership in the Unitarian Universalist Association. And, more importantly, UUCD is learning how to be a congregation. Professional ministry provides community building expertise and vital guidance for the new governance structure. We are building a strong foundation upon which will be built a congregational home where souls are transformed and dreams of justice and love come true. What was once a dream, a maybe, a possibility has turned into reality through the hard work of

the “we” and the generous Chalice Lighter donations of the larger “we” in the Joseph Priestley District. And another unexpected bonus benefit has been to contribute significantly to the continuing formation of a new Unitarian Universalist minister. I am eternally grateful for this opportunity to serve and grow into a minister with such a wonderful new congregation.

That’s a lot of bang for the buck, considering Chalice Lighters are asked to give a minimum of twenty dollars three times a year in the fall, winter and spring. In the past 21 years, Chalice Lighters has funded grants to 49 societies totaling over 1.7 million dollars. My head swims with all the wonderful things that have been achieved with this vital funding. This is living proof that “you’ll never walk alone.” This is a testament to cockeyed optimists who give funding for projects in congregations that they may never even visit but nonetheless they give because they believe in the cause of strengthening our congregations, spreading the good news about Unitarian Universalism and ultimately making the world more livable, more sustainable, more just, more loving, more like heaven on earth. Thank you to each of you who are in the ranks of these cockeyed optimists. May more of your fellow First Uers join you today in signing up to be a Chalice Lighter.

Building the world we dream about takes our commitment, our energy, our love and, yes, our money. I take heart from one of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s most inspirational and spiritually realistic songs, Climb Every Mountain. This song does not say that every mountain will be conquered because our life challenges are never that simple. It speaks of striving for the good, the true, the right path and the righteous action. It speaks of intention and hard work. “A dream that will need all the love you can give, every day of your life for as long as you live.” This is no simple prayer-petitioning answer to life. It is an affirmation of the simple human striving we are each called to every day, to act for the greatest good for yourself and others, to co-create our dream of a world made fair. May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

Please rise in Body/Spirit as you are comfortable to sing Climb Every Mountain.