

Thoreau Woods UU Church  
Worship Service – *Honoring Our Teachers*  
August 28, 2011

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**Prelude**

**Chalice Lighting**

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

**Announcements**

**John Pepper**

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, we have an application form also on the table you can fill out and turn in when you are ready.

Please look to the back of your order of service for announcements.

Next week I'll be back and the title of my sermon is "Got Spirit?" It is about finding the spiritual side of life. Please join me if you can.

Our charity of the month is \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Today is our potluck lunch. Please stay and join us if you are able.

**Opening Words**

**John Pepper**

Please join with me now in a spirit of worship.

I set aside a time to remember

A call to remember those special people who came before us and who influenced the individuals we are today.

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A call to reflection

A call to reflect on our lives, both the purpose and meaning we search for and often find.

A call to fellowship

A call to fellowship with other like minded individuals who can assist in our growth and development and who we can assist as well.

A call to worship

A call to worship through remembering, reflecting and in fellowship with one another.

Thank you for joining with me in this most special time and place.

**Hymn**

Please join me singing Hymn No. 103 “For All the Saints.”

**Joys and Concerns**

**John Pepper**

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

**Offertory Statement**

**Offertory Music**

**Story for All Ages – “Heroes Who Help Heroes” from *Everyone a Butterfly* by Randy Hammer**

(Sing the children out.)

**Reading**

My first reading this morning is from one of my very favorite books, *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran and this reading is from the chapter titled “Teachers.”

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Then said a teacher, speak to us of teaching.

And he said:

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weights and measure, but he cannot conduct you there.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.

And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in his knowledge of God and in his understanding of the earth.

My second reading is from a collection of readings titled *Be the Change* and it is edited by Stephen Shick. This reading is titled "My Saints."

For all the saints whose perfections and imperfections have shaped my life, I give thanks. Some have traveled with me a long time and witnessed the best and the worst I have offered the world. Others have been with me only briefly.

Among those traveling companions are those who have died, but have not vanished. Sometimes they arrive unexpectedly in the middle of my busy days and ask what I'm doing and why.

In quiet moments they come to rest in the inner-most part of my soul, telling me I am not alone.

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Sometimes they arrive as ghosts of my unfinished business. Floating freely through closed doors, they unlock my certainties to remind me of what I did or failed to do for others. My saints don't perform miracles with bags of magic tricks. Rather, they are transformers who change my life.

They arrive to comfort me with love, challenge me with truth, or confront me with what needs doing. In the days ahead, I pray that I will have the courage to welcome the wisdom all my saints bring.

**Prayer**

**John Pepper**

Please close your eyes, look out the window, simply relax in whatever way you center yourself for a time of prayer and meditation.

When I think about prayer I often think about Matthew 6:6, where Jesus said about praying– “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” Abraham Heschel in his book *The Sabbath* said, “How else to express glory in the presence of eternity, if not by the silence of abstaining from noisy acts?”

So at this time I ask that you join with me by going into your own private inner places, that you mentally shut your door and that we all abstain from noisy acts and reflect for a short time on the presence of eternity.

(Pause)

Amen!

**Sermon – *Honoring our Teachers***

Good Morning! I first gave this sermon on July 21, 2002 and it was my first. Soon after I had made the decision to pursue a theology degree, I was talking about it with Tom Capo, the previous minister here, he mentioned that I should preach in one of the local churches as soon as I get the opportunity.

The evening after Tom and I spoke, I went jogging in the neighborhood and began to think about what my first sermon could be about. Most of the ideas I had that evening – I knew I wasn't ready for. What did come to me was that I could share with you who some of the special teachers in my life have been.

By teachers I mean “life” teachers – some of those people who have been the most influential in my life. I initially began to consciously think of these life teachers, not because of this sermon, but because of a book I read over now over 10 years ago. The author of the book mentioned his many mentors or teachers throughout the course of his life. So, I began to think about, and finally settled on, the people in my life who have been the most influential.

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None of these people actually taught me in school. I learned from them through their lives and how they lived their lives. After I'm through, I sincerely hope you too will reflect on who your life teachers have been – and are – and what they've taught you.

I truly believe that through the conscious practice of remembering our life teachers, and how they influenced us, we honor their memory and we give value and worth to their lives through our own.

Now I'm not going to stand up here and say I have learned perfectly all of the life lessons they shared with me – I haven't. But they and their actions are always there for me to reflect on in relationship to how I choose to live my life in the present. Sometimes just remembering them, gives me the courage or direction I need. We all have life teachers and they can act as our spiritual guides – if we just take the time to remember.

Now here are some of my life teachers. They are quite a cast of characters and I love each and every one of them. Their memories live on in me, and in many other people every day, and after this sermon, a little bit of them, I hope, will live on through you. Their stories are in no special order, but it is the order I remember them in some of my daily meditations, which is the way that I connect with the truths that they've shared with me.

The first teacher I'll share with you was the mother of one of my dear friend in Houston. Mrs. Cochrane was well over 80 when I met her in the late 80s. She was old and frail but her mind was in impeccable condition. She was very well read, extremely intelligent, and above all compassionate. I hadn't known her long when I realized that for me she embodied wisdom.

It seemed that every new or liberal thought I had wasn't new at all to her. She had been there with those same thoughts and ideas long before me. Coming from what I considered a very conservative background, I had never met anyone so liberal from her generation. This fact gave me hope.

At that particular time in my life the AIDS crisis was in full swing and many of my close friends were dying all around me. I was deeply distressed by what I felt was a very conservative, and less than compassionate government and community embodied by an older generation. Her presence, compassion, and wisdom proved to me that there really aren't any generation gaps only understanding and communication gaps. We can all relate to one another, we just have to make the effort.

Just knowing her encouraged me to have faith in people. What really gives me hope is I see that same wisdom here. Mrs. Cochrane was a very special person and I'm very thankful that I had the opportunity to know her.

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I knew my maternal grandmother for much longer. We called her Mama Baird and No, I'm not secretly an heir to the Mrs. Baird's bread fortune. One of the things I remember her often saying was "if you can't say something nice about someone, just don't say anything at all" and that was exactly how she lived each and every day of her life. A lot of people say things like that but then they don't practice what they preach. She did. What a wonderful gift to me to have been in the presence of someone who was able to live what she believed.

She was also one of 14 children. Because her family was so large, we always had great family reunions. She wasn't the oldest or the youngest of her siblings, she was somewhere in the middle but it was obvious she was a strong loving force within the family. In my mind, she was the peacemaker in the family.

As you can imagine in a family of 14, conflicts often develop between one another. Some of these surfaced when the family homestead was sold.

As I remember it, some brothers and sisters owed other brothers and sisters money and they blocked the sale of the property until the debts had been settled. Mama Baird didn't owe anyone anything, but she used some of her share to pay off debts incurred by others. She took less for herself so that others could have more and she did this from a genuine concern and love for her other brothers and sisters.

Another much earlier time I was told she helped one of her younger sisters get a divorce when that sister had made an obvious mistake. A friend recently shared with me how difficult her divorce had been in the mid 70s. Given that the divorce I'm talking about was almost eighty years ago, that had to be a very difficult issue for them both to deal with.

Mama Baird had the courage and the love necessary to help a sister in need. She always gave of herself and expected nothing in return. What she got in return was the love and respect of each of her family members.

Late in life Mama Baird had cataract surgery, which was major surgery almost 40 years ago, not at all like it is now. Shortly afterwards, probably due to the trauma of being temporarily blind, she had a nervous breakdown.

I remember holding her hand in the hospital and feeling helpless but trying to coax her out of what seemed to be utter paralysis. She quietly but firmly asked me to stop pushing and just to be with her and that is what I did. I hope I was able to give back some of the strength she had given to all of us. Even then she taught me that sometimes just being present is enough.

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Thankfully she recovered from the nervous breakdown and lived many more years. Fortunately for us, she resumed sharing her love with all of her family.

On the other side of my family, my paternal grandfather, Granddaddy, was a man of tremendous integrity. He was always steadfast in his beliefs but at the same time never seemed in any way self-righteous. I'm told he served on the local draft board. Can you imagine a more awful job than having the responsibility of sending someone's son off to war and this was around the time of the Viet Nam War? I can't. I've been told Mothers would come to him and ask for special consideration for their sons. Somehow he was able to remain impartial and fair at the same time. I don't know how he did it, but I hope if I ever have the need to make similar difficult decisions I'll be able to make them with the same integrity he displayed.

On a separate issue, my mother once asked him why he was so adamantly opposed to drinking alcohol. Granddaddy's simple and direct response to her was that he had to be because he loved it so much. He was honest and he was a man of great integrity.

His wife, Grandmother, was the strongest willed person I have ever known. She got her way, or tried to, every chance she could. Because of this, she would often say things that hurt her family, including me.

She often said exactly what was on her mind, no matter the consequences and I didn't get along with her for a long time and didn't want to be around her. She would tell me I was so skinny I was going to dry up and blow away. The way she said the word skinny was worse than any other name she could have called me.

I was skinny and I had a bad enough self image without having my own grandmother reinforce it for me by being so mean and cruel. She hurt my feelings more times with that one word than I can remember. I remember not ever wanting to go back to see her but my mother would always say that Grandmother didn't mean what she said. The only choice I had was to stand up to her and in the process I learned to stand up for myself.

One lesson we all need to learn is how to stand up for ourselves and she inadvertently taught this very important lesson to me.

Once she visited one of the area churches in our community. I don't remember what the particular occasion was but during the service, she didn't like one of the songs, so she didn't sing along. The minister stopped the song in mid verse. He said that there was only one bird in all of God's creation that didn't sing, and that was the buzzard, and then according to my Grandmother, he looked directly at her. Grandmother was incensed, but more importantly, he didn't in the least bit intimidate her. Needless to say, she didn't sing along when they resumed the song.

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As I grew up, we actually became very good friends and I truly miss her. I didn't like everything about Grandmother but she did teach me how to stand up for myself and she showed me how not to be intimidated by others.

One of my Mother's aunts, Aunt Rona, was almost like another grandparent for me. The earliest memory I have of her was of her telling me to stand up straight and be proud. She was able to say it in a way that was very caring. She always tried to teach me to be proud of who I was and to show it both to myself and the world around me.

It's hard to explain exactly what else she did or said that conveyed this message to me, but I imagine it was mostly in the way she lived her own life and how she demonstrated that same self confidence in her own being.

She wasn't well off by any means but she took great pride in everything she owned. She kept her car in excellent condition, she kept her very modest house in top shape both inside and out, her yard always looked beautiful and most of what would have normally been flowerbeds were vegetable beds instead. She was very practical.

Her best friend was Beatrice. From all I remember they were always good friends and always lived near each other. I used to go and stay weeks during the summer with Aunt Rona in the country. Mostly all I remember us doing was working in both hers and Beatrice's yard, putting up vegetables with both of them, going to see all her old friends and some of our old family members, and helping her help all of her much older neighbors.

Aunt Rona was always in some way helping someone else, either by giving them something she'd grown or by doing something for them. That's just who she was.

Once she was really proud because she was able to get some farm fresh milk for me to drink. I'm not sure why that was so important to her. She couldn't wait for me to try it and see how wonderful it was. If you all don't know or don't remember, fresh milk is nothing like the pasteurized homogenized milk we buy every day, and all I can say is thank God for technology in this case.

When she wasn't looking I held my nose and drank it down just for her. It's amazing what you will do for someone you love and I loved her and the time I spent with her. She helped lay a strong foundation of pride and self-confidence in me and because of that I will always be very grateful.

Everyone needs someone who loves him or her unconditionally. My mother's father, Daddy John, was that person for me. I was named after him and I always believed, partly because of that, that I was in some way

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even more special to him. As I look back from an adult's perspective, I imagine all of his grandchildren felt exactly the same way I did, and I believe we all were right. I'm sure we were all equally special to him and his love for each of us was always more than evident. He had a lot of love to go around and he gave it freely and abundantly.

But he had many other wonderful qualities, besides his capacity to love. I know this may sound odd, but one of his admirable qualities was that he knew his limitations and wasn't in any way threatened or diminished by them. When he was a young man he assembled Model Ts and Model As. I'm told he was a master mechanic. Later in life he would tinker with his cars but he'd always say they'd gotten too complicated for him. He knew his limits and that was okay with him. He simply loved life and he accepted it as it was and did the best he could.

As I mentioned earlier, late in life Mama Baird, became very ill. She had always done all the cooking, cleaning and had even laid out Daddy John's clothes for him each and every day. She worked in the home. He worked outside the home. That's just the way it was. After she became ill, he took over. He cooked, he cleaned (he did refuse to dust), he did everything and he took wonderful care of Mama Baird. We were all amazed by what he was able to do and did so willingly. He had no limitations when it came to taking care of the most important person in his life. As she got better, he slowly turned things back over to her and all was as it was before. His love for her was truly amazing.

Daddy John was not a religious person in any way. I don't remember him ever going to church. However, an event in his life helped solidify my own personal religious beliefs. I was 19 and he was dying from lung cancer. I recall an argument within my family about whether or not he was "saved." My mother was indignant and said if he wasn't saved no one was, because he was the best man she had ever known. I believe she was right because he lived and exemplified God's love right here on Earth. I thank God that I had the opportunity to know Daddy John.

One of my best friends died of complications due to AIDS in Houston early in 1991. Darrell was an incredible friend and an amazing person. I never knew him when he didn't have AIDS. He once told me that in some ways coming down with AIDS had been a good thing in his life. Yes, I said he thought catching AIDS had been a positive force in his life. Not that he was glad that he had it, but it caused him to stop and truly see what was important in his life – family, friends and making a difference and unfortunately he had been neglecting all of them. He knew that before the diagnosis he had been very shallow and superficial and he decided to change. It was truly a wake up call.

Darrell proved that we do have a choice in how we deal with adversity and he chose the higher road. After his wake up call he got involved in the community in a big way. He and a group of his friends began the

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Houston Cattle Baron's Ball. Each year that event raises over a million dollars for the American Cancer Society and it is still going strong because of his inspired leadership. His determination showed me that each of us can make a difference if we only try.

Over the years I've been involved in several organizations, including the American Cancer Society, in large part because he showed me how to get involved. His philosophy was to do what you are good at and don't be afraid to try something new.

I learned so many lessons from Darrell and I remember him and those lessons often. Another lesson involved his blood T-cell count, which was in the single digits. When T-cell counts get that low, it means that you have little or no ability to fight disease. Anyway, he was mostly healthy and looked good but he constantly worried about the low T-cell numbers. He finally realized that there was absolutely nothing he could do about the T-cells and that worrying over them was useless and a waste of time and energy and so he stopped.

It proved to be a tremendous weight off of his mind. What this proved to me was that the quality of the life we live is vastly more important than the qualifying numbers we associate with it whether those numbers relate to our age, our weight, our income or any of the other truly meaningless numbers in our lives that we have little or no control over. I know I often worry about things I simply can't control. When I catch myself doing this, I think of Darrell, and I let go the best I can.

On the other hand, he did do the things he could to make his life and health better. He ate well, he exercised, he rested and he made himself get up and go even when it took an extra effort, which it often did. He never gave up. I hope I never do either and with his memory I know I'll have a little extra ammunition to keep me going.

The last teacher I'm going to share with you was one of my Dad's aunts. Aunt Clemmie lived with her best friend Jo-ne. Jo-ne was Native American and she and Aunt Clemmie took care of several of Jo-ne's grandchildren. I never knew exactly why Jo-ne was taking care of all of these children or what happened to their parents, only that both Aunt Clemmie and Jo-ne loved and took care of these kids to the best of their abilities.

It always impressed me that they were so willing to take on these responsibilities and there never seemed to be any hint of resentment. Loving and taking care of those kids were the only things that mattered.

Aunt Clemmie also had very different and wonderful perspectives on life. On one occasion she taught me a lesson that I've never forgotten and that I recall most each and every week. I was in college and it was a dreary rainy weekend. I called Aunt Clemmie, who at that time lived about 40 miles north of Baton Rouge.

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I asked how she was doing and she said she was just enjoying the beautiful day. I said that was odd and that it was raining here in Baton Rouge. She said it was raining there as well and she just loved the rain.

It made me realize that we can choose to see the clouds as dreary or beautiful, it's all up to us. I never experience a rainstorm or see a cloud that I don't think about Aunt Clemmie. Because of her influence, instead of trying to look beyond the cloud I hope I always try to look for the beauty within whatever cloud, real or metaphorical, that appears in my life.

Aunt Clemmie was a very special person with very special insights and I'm glad I had an opportunity to get to know her just a little.

So there they are, some of my teachers. They've shown me wisdom, selflessness, integrity, how to stand up for myself, how not to be intimidated, they've reminded me to be proud of myself, that I'm loved, they've demonstrated determination, and hope and many many more lessons too numerous to go into further.

We've all had people like these in our lives. Learn from them, grow because of their support, give back to the world some of what they've given to you and especially remember them.

Remembering them is the challenge; because only through remembering them will we truly learn, and more importantly, experience the lessons they were able to share with each of us.

Through us they will live on.

Namaste!

**Sermon Response**

**Closing Hymn**

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 290 "Bring, O Past, Your Honor" and remain standing for the Benediction.

**Benediction No. 680**

**John Pepper**

Because of those who came before, we are;

In spite of their failings, we believe;

Because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,

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We, too, dream.

Let us go remembering to praise,

To live in the moment,

To love mightily,

To bow to the mystery.

Amen and Namaste!

**Closing Hymn**

No. 413 “Go Now in Peace”

**Extinguish the Chalice**

**Postlude**