

“Elevator Speeches and Bucket Lists”

**A sermon Delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of
The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist,
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This morning I begin with a coda from last week. Amid all the programs about 9/11 last weekend, I happened upon one on Sunday night that began as a documentary about a new, probationary firefighter’s first months in his first firehouse with seasoned colleagues. It was late summer 2001.

Ladder 1, Engine 7, Battalion 1, on Duane Street in Manhattan, is a few blocks from the World Trade Center. The two French filmmakers, who had received permission to be among these men, ended up with hours of film from the morning of September 11, some of it inside the first tower that had been struck when the second plane hit. It shows the teamwork of these first responders, professionalism amid chaos, the bewilderment and horror surrounding them, the escape of thousands, and the grief that follows... all that and much more at the foot of the towers right before and following their destruction.

It echoed one of my themes from last Sunday – that we all grieve in different ways.

Later that night, I was once again comforted and touched by seeing out my window in the far distance the symbolic twin beams shining up into the night – luminous and numinous evocations of Life, Spirit, and faith.

Last week in our Homecoming, celebrating a new year, and honoring our grief and our new lives after 9/11, I focused on the bittersweet calling to be Wounded Healers – honoring our resilience and radiance ever awaiting in a fragile world.

In the haunting documentary, *Rebirth*, which followed five survivors of for nearly a decade, I take courage and hope especially from Tanya, who said, “You’re always grieving but it shouldn’t keep you from having a life of joy.”

True enough for each of us... a matter of faith development and spiritual attunement, which is after all one of the profound reasons for houses of worship and communities such as ours.

This morning I turn to two more tools for faith development, spiritual growth, and growing our souls: Elevator speeches and Bucket Lists.

Elevator Speeches

Elevator speeches – if you look it up, you find the term generally refers to a short recitation, perhaps 15 to 30 seconds, offered in the time it takes to ride down an elevator. References are generally to the business world, in which you seek to make a brief compelling statement to introduce yourself, to market a product, or convey an idea.

For faith development, then, it is a succinct statement of personal beliefs. Or as some of our denominational leaders a few years ago were suggesting, your elevator speech is how you explain Unitarian Universalism to others, e.g., in 15 to 30 seconds.

Unitarian Universalism: five hundred years of history, at least, 3000 years of historical context religiously and culturally, emergent out of the Left wing of the Protestant Reformation, famous exemplars, heresy, freedom of thought, international variety, radically different local customs, and common values, including purposes and principles we put on bookmarks, world-changing activists, and you and me... so alike yet different!

15 to 30 seconds... no problem? At least, a challenge. How do you welcome newcomers here? Or how do you explain your new faith to family, who worry about your soul, or to secular friends, who actually take a deep interest in you and are brave enough to bring up the almost forbidden topic of religion, meaning, faith, and the “deep currents of Life?”

An example, a new elevator speech of mine:

As Unitarian Universalists, we invite you and we invite each other

- to be a partner with Love and the Creativity in the world,
- to know the strength, beauty, and health within you, and
- to serve purposes larger than yourself with wonder, awe and reverence. *(47 words)*

I understand it may leave out some of your primary faith language.

I certainly can and do affirm individual freedom of belief, and might speak about

- being a partner with Life, the spirit of Life, or God, as well as Love,
- growing our souls and building the Beloved Community,
- living with compassion,
- honoring doubt, and
- thinking for oneself. *(52 words)*

In doing so, however, we also move perhaps from a short elevator ride into lengthy lobby conversation, with ever more loaded theological words and a few counter-cultural principles that challenge conformity, dogma, and the hierarchies of oppression that surround us!

So it's a challenge to welcome the stranger with a concise invitation. It's a challenge both to be deeply personal and to point to the unities and universals of human radiance in thirty seconds without some longer story telling.

But if you are sincerely asked, are you ready to introduce our faith?

How about this? "We are dreamers and doers?" Too big, too short, probably.

How about: "We honor the worth, dignity, and potential of every person to think for oneself, to live with compassion, and to make a difference in the world. And we help each other in a bold humble, caring community to do all this."

I liked what the late Dr. James Washington of Union Theological Seminary – a Baptist who served us one year as a visiting Minister – what he once said about one of his mentors. "Mrs. Grady ... taught me that true spirituality is the ability to see beyond my own prejudices and shortsightedness."

Or? "We Unitarian Universalists seek to speak and live the truth of our lives and the wisdom of the world in love."

Consider all this an introduction, and I am planning an evening workshop this fall to pursue it: Elevator speeches – our aspiration, dreams and visions, and intentions that we hope are empowering for fulfillment of our humanity.

And why? Because as Islam reminds us so wonderfully: We are forgetful. We need reminders. For Islam, forgetfulness ... forgetfulness of inner divinity and our connections with the web of life ... such *forgetfulness* is original sin, not the blasphemy of Augustine and Calvin about human depravity that infects Western culture.

Sometimes, we are stuck... or weary... or fearful... or confused... or busy with secondary things, what Dr. King called "big affairs and small trivialities", because we ignore the sources of Life and Creativity and Beauty in which we move and live and have our beings.

So, we need each other to recall ourselves to our best selves, even as we share our doubts and embrace a lively pilgrim faith.

So who are we and what might we say to curious, fellow pilgrims?

- As Unitarian Universalists, we invite you and we invite each other
- to be a partner with Love and the Creativity in the world,
 - to know the strength, beauty, and health within you, and

- to serve purposes larger than yourself with wonder, awe and reverence.

What do you believe, really? It is a hard and worthy challenge to anchor your life.

Bucket Lists

Like Elevator Speeches," the Google" does not quickly give me a definitive history of usage of the phrase Bucket Lists.

Most prominent is the film in 2007 with Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman titled "The Bucket List." Two dying men meet in a cancer ward and decide to leave so that they can fulfill some dream projects, unfulfilled life goals... "to do" items, a wish list, before they "kick the bucket."

That one of them is prodigiously rich enables them to take a vacation around the world that allows them to climb the Pyramids in Egypt, see the Taj Mahal, fly over the North Pole, ride motorcycles on the Great Wall of China, and you get the idea.

The strangers become friends, become estranged, and then reconcile. Jack Nicholson's character has on his list "to kiss the most beautiful girl in the world," and he crosses that one off when he meets a granddaughter he had never seen before because of a falling out with his daughter years before.

Critics were very mixed in their responses, and Roger Ebert, who was battling thyroid cancer and after-effects, criticized the film's portrayal of cancer sufferers, writing that *The Bucket List* "thinks dying of cancer is a laugh riot followed by a dime-store epiphany." He gave it one star.

The film, however, did well with the public, and one survey ranked it in the top ten films of the year, affirming our interest in making lists, setting goals, and achieving them.

As with the film, many who make such lists often include travel, sometimes the tourist highlights, sometimes exotic places.

One internet site helps you track your progress on the lists, share it with others, and receive feedback.

Rachel, otherwise unidentified, has many exotic locations among her 105 items, and she has checked off the three that have to do with our city – visiting the Empire State Building and Ellis Island, and climbing the Statue of Liberty, plus she has checked off her trips to the Taj Mahal, Bombay, Machu Picchu,

Stonehenge, the Himalayas, Grenada and Alhambra in Spain, Notre Dame in Paris, the Florida Everglades, the Dead Sea, the Amazon Rain Forest, and the Berlin Wall – obviously someone with time and money!

I am also pleased to report that she has married the love of her life.

I have been to a few of the places she has mentioned and am married to the love of my life, but I do not share some of the things on her list, e.g., getting my belly pierced, jumping from a cliff into deep water, or breeding Maine Coon cats, owning chickens, or petting a tiger.

A couple of her goals strike me as, well, whatever: For example, “Learning to be happy all the time.” And having “perfect skin.”

She also wants to learn how to chop vegetables very fast.... And I can see wanting to learn that... maybe to show off once at a family gathering. Once would be interesting.

On another list, much shorter, another list-maker, Marjorie, indicates she has completed several items, among them:

“Do Something Different with my Hair”

“Smash a television”

“Go fruit golfing” – which I can only imagine what that is. Fruit Golfing?

“Swim in a Pool Filled with Pudding.”

Each of us is quite different. One other internet bucket list-maker has his top 100 goals, probably more than half seem like travel, a fair amount accomplished.

I like his goal # 30, not yet achieved: “Donate more than \$1,000 to an important cause,” and I hope that he makes that a repeat item.

Number 39 is intriguing: “Go for at least one month without internet”

One website, according to the *NY Times*, has lists from over 1.2 million individuals, and the number one goal for three years? Losing weight. (43Things.com)

Much is involved in such lists, including possibly procrastination from living your life, but there can be values’ clarification, embracing mortality, escaping mortality, and potentially escapism, e.g., with the notion of being “happy all the time” (for that seems to deny fear, loneliness, confusion, doubt, and other matters that go with this gift of life.)

How goes it with your “bucket list”? Or perhaps, you have a serenity of spirit given the gratitude you feel for this gift of Life. Or both.

For me, I have some writing goals, and a few places that would be nice to visit... nice, but not necessities.... And there are some things we can do here as a congregation to fulfill our potentials and our Mission if we dare to do so, dare to be a caring, spiritual community that welcomes each to the service of all.

Again, I'll schedule a session or two when we can together work on Bucket Lists, as well as on Elevator Speeches – some time to explore these useful tools for identifying core values and essential deeds, which are the action steps that put faith into action.

A couple of stories about Elevator Speeches and Bucket Lists: The first is more of a 2-minute version of an elevator speech. Every couple of years, I return to a parable, as told by a colleague, the Rev. Harry Scholefield when he received the Distinguished Service Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association. In his closing comments upon receiving this great honor in 1990, he summarized the saving grace of our path of spiritual freedom.

Sometimes it seems to me that what we are all about as Unitarian Universalists can be summed up in just three words. The first word is ACT. Don't just stand there. ACT!

The other two words come to me through a Quaker friend. She went one Sabbath day to an old New Jersey meetinghouse. It turned out to be what the Quakers call a "gathered meeting," a meeting where no one speaks and the silence grows deeper and deeper. Fifteen minutes, a half hour, three quarters of an hour went by and nothing was said. The only sound in the meetinghouse was the ticking of an old grandfather's clock. As the meeting was about to close, a woman rose and said, "I've been sitting here trying to understand what the clock is saying to us. Now I think I've got it. It's saying, 'Think. Thank.' 'Think. Thank.' 'Think. Thank.'"

[Harry Scholefield then continued,] I feel that I am an old grandfather's clock that has been ticking away in our ministry for fifty-two years. And what I hear myself saying to you now in celebration of this occasion is,

Think. Thank. Act!
Think. Thank. Act!
Think. Thank. Act!

And thinking about Bucket Lists, I return again to a brief *New York Times* report a few years ago, which was titled [by the *Christian Century* magazine] "Values Clarification".

For several years after 30 year-old Ann Nelson died on 9/11 in the World Trade Center, her laptop computer remained untouched back home in North Dakota. Her parents weren't computer literate, for one thing, and it was just too painful for them to deal with the laptop. But eventually her mother learned to operate the computer and found a file labeled "Top 100," which contained a list of Ann's goals. Among them: be a good friend, keep in touch with the people I love and that love me ... appreciate money but don't worship it...(make a quilt, never be ashamed of who I am)...."

And what might be among your life's goals, and how goes it for you? The film "The Bucket List" which begins with global travels "sends its two wanderers to the people [family members], not the places, who matter." (*USA Today*, 7/7/2008)

People... Be a good friend... Keep in touch.... This bucket list contains a very specific Elevator Affirmation: Caring counts ultimately.

Our values, vision, deep faith... and our deeds, our choices.

Our values, vision, and deep faith either help change the world for the better through our choices and our everyday actions. Or not... And each of us can bless the world and each other.

As Mary Oliver, the poet and our good witness to Life, says,

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?

Love yourself. Then, forget it. Then, love the world.