A SPIRITUAL RETROSPECTIVE
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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One hears quite a bit these days about the Rapture, the apocalyptic event in which all who are saved will, in the middle of whatever they are doing, suddenly be taken heavenward, leaving their clothes, personal effects and vehicles behind. A couple of weeks ago, Garrison Keillor, in his weekly radio show, *Prairie Home Companion*, dealt with the subject.

A child is wandering, looking mournfully and frantically around. A man sees her. "Where's your family?"

"I don't know. They just went away and left me behind."

"Suddenly they were just gone?"

"Yes."

"Are you thinking the same thing I'm thinking?"

She whispers, "Yes—I think they've been raptured!"

So he says, "Well, let's go straight to the top. Just a sec," and he dials the White House. He gets President Bush. "Calling from Boise, Mr. President. Has the Rapture taken place yet?

The president answers, "Well, according to the intelligence that's been provided to me, there is no sign of any rapture-related activity though of course we are keeping a close eye on prophecies as they are being fulfilled and as the signs of the Last Days accumulate and—"

The man hangs up. He decides to try a few more people who probably would not be here if the rapture had happened: the LDS church president, Billy Graham, the pope. They're all still here. So he says, "OK, I'll make one more call."

He dials (617) 742-2100. He hears, "Thank you for calling the Unitarian Universalist Association. Nobody is here to take your call so please leave a message and we will return your call as soon as possible. If you're signing up for the committee on housing and urban ministry, press ----- (A trumpet blares in the distance) Oh my gosh. All my clothes just fell off and I'm going up into the air------!" (dial tone)

In amazement, he turns on the radio and hears, "Meanwhile, in Boston, hundreds of men and women who were protesting the war in Iraq suddenly disappeared, according to eyewitnesses, leaving their clothing lying in the street, all of which was made from natural materials by native people and had political slogans written on it."

Shaking his head, the man muses, "The Unitarians have been raptured. Why? They don't want salvation, they want closure. If a Unitarian ascends to heaven and no one is around to see it, did it actually happen?"

As a matter of fact, we Unitarian Universalists would love to have closure—theological closure, the certainty that we know the name and the nature and the history and the intent of God: the Universe, the Mystery that has caused human beings to be religious, in all times and all places.

But, you know, we never will have that closure—which is why the idea of the UUs achieving ultimate salvation, leaving everyone else behind, makes us laugh. We are

a *religious* tradition—we are a *spiritual* faith tradition—but not because we know the unknowable answers to ultimate questions.

We are religious because we *covenant* with each other, in the spirit of the Most High, to create and maintain a gathering of questing souls.

Our common foundation is worship, a reverent and clear-hearted reflection upon those things that call us to be our best selves—when we know we can be *so* otherwise. We honor the noble potential of the human spirit, as it interacts with the highest call of conscience and love and duty. We are religious in the word's root sense of "binding together," committing to a community that gathers in radical respect for each other, in honesty, in support, in challenge, in joy and grief. Our spirits crave—as the human religious spirit has always craved—meaningful ritual and symbol. We honor that which we perceive as through a glass, darkly.

Closure? No, nice as that would be.

Some of us like the nickname "God" and others of us do not. Some of us have spiritual, mystical longing worthy of medieval Catholic saints, and others of us don't give a hoot about the Absolute, let alone crave it.

And yet…. We know that each of us is responsible for our own spiritual practices or absence thereof. We know that truth-seeking humans need reverent community, especially in those numinous times of passage. Every one of us knows that our theology or philosophy matters not a whit unless it makes us better people in the world, somehow shouldering some of the responsibility for humankind as a whole. We understand that religious community exists in part to rear the children—those blessed, overwhelming little people—to be strong and whole, laughing and confident in their own embracing beliefs and values.

Can this work? Is it really possible (as some of our skeptical friends ask or imply), to have a religious institution that partakes of all the above, but has no agreed-upon theological center? Can a group that believes each person has a piece of the truth about "God"— but only a piece—hang together, be "bound together" in beloved religious community?

The answer, of course, is yes.

This community, at its best, is everything I have described and more. At this time in May, tiring as we come toward the end of a strenuous program year, we can sometimes forget just what a vibrant, dynamic, forward-looking congregation this is. Let me remind you.

Perhaps the biggest single event of the year was my extended illness last fall. I had two serious surgeries. There was the appendectomy-with-complications on September 22, which yielded a kidney cancer diagnosis. We had five weeks of uncertainty and fear. On October 29, my right kidney was removed and the result was that best-of-all-possible phrases, "cancer free." Even so, I lay incommunicado on my couch during most of November: drawing, watching Public TV For Kids, loving your cards and letters, gradually getting stronger. I worked a little in December, came back to sort-of-fulltime in January, and very gradually gathered strength into the spring.

It is very hard on a congregation, especially with no other UU congregations around, to have its minister completely out of commission for a prolonged time—in a possibly life-threatening situation. It is particularly hard on staff and lay leaders: Director of Religious Education, office manager, the Board, Cluster leaders, committee

chairs, task force workers, the Sunday Services Committee. But a person would not have recognized the difficulty, to observe you all in action.

In our faith, each of us is responsible for our own particular, personal beliefs and practices. At least as importantly, we covenant to be responsible for the religious community. Without the "closure" of commonly-defined belief, we cherish our coming together in shared values. You did that, and I returned to a warm welcome, but no frazzled exhalations of breaths that had been held in panic—spirits were high, worship had sustained you, the kids (all 110+ of them!) were learning and having fun, construction was moving along. (Well, sort of.)

For Unitarian Universalists, the church is the people. You proved that that is true in Boise, Idaho.

And—as if we needed outside confirmation—all kinds of people keep telling us that we are creating and sustaining real religious community out here on the eastern edge of the Pacific Northwest District. At least four UU ministers have conducted worship and other activities here this year. One of them calls us "the best-kept secret in the Pacific Northwest." Another just kept saying, "Wow," as he walked through our buildings and grounds, met people, felt the spiritual warmth of worship reflecting back to him. The staff of the District has identified us as one of the five congregations in the PNWD "to watch."

Let me lift up a few vignettes from this remarkable year.

- A completely inter-generational service about our cherished symbol, the flaming chalice—surrounding the congregation at the end with all who have been chalice lighters—first-time five-year-olds now especially proud, intently carrying the wavering holder, half as long as they are, bursting to receive their pins.
- Everyday work getting done by hundreds of people (always hoping for more to keep the vision alive by volunteering in ways large and small). A Sunday Service Committee doing such a resplendent job that no one knew they were stretched well past their resources.
- Way more than doubling our space, working through the financial and energy sacrifices that entails—making room for more Unitarian Universalists, old and young.
- Hard deaths. Hard, hard deaths, held in the heart of community. An assumed-healthy brother, suddenly taken to the hospital, dead a few days later. A middle-aged daughter, choosing to take a fatal dose of barbiturate, sitting beside a meandering stream above Idaho City. Two other children stricken by cancer and a terrible accident. Old Howard Johnson, one of the smartest, nicest, funniest, cutest men who ever lived, certainly one of the most radically respectful UU questers ever.
- New life, in the face of near-certain dying. A congregation breathing in prayer and practical help and hope as the embryonic twins reverse their womb home's death direction, birthing into this world tiny but undaunted.
- A minister without words to express her gratitude for love, for thoughtfulness, for the opportunity granted of deepening and knowing, for understanding weakness, for tears of joy as we reunited.

- Committed UUs who know that making justice is part of the spiritual path—a Welcoming Congregation Committee willing to speak out loudly in the larger community, to sponsor a controversial forum on ordination of gay clergy—a group of people eager to embody our belief that all are welcome through these doors.

We are, of course, even with the truly dazzling spirit and action of this congregation, not perfect, and there is always lots to do. As big as our church has gotten, there is dire need for more small groups of all kinds, so that more and more people may find both a Sunday morning worship-and-Sunday-School home, and the intimacy of thoughtful discussion, reflection, fun: the intimacy of friendship. After the "push" of a capital campaign last year, it feels to some that money is spoken of too brashly—but this year we may end up cutting corners we absolutely do not want to cut, if the financial commitment does not follow the spiritual one. As welcoming as we have become, people still "fall through the cracks," and do not feel invited into our joyous reverence. I hope that every one of you hearing (or reading) these words will reflect seriously upon what gifts you have to offer, and will offer them.

Acknowledging our "growing edges," then, I return to the larger truth: we are a community on the move, a gaggle of religious people who know how to worship, how to welcome, how to work, how to have fun, how to speak up courageously, how to join together in the formation of our children, how to honor the breadth and depth of the holy human soul.

Laila Ibrahim is a friend sfrom my seminary days in Oakland in the mid '80's. She, a life-long Unitarian Universalist, understands full well that we can expect neither closure nor the salvation of being taken up in the Rapture. But she knows what our covenant means. She knows how to articulate the values around which we gather, in worship and in work and in play. Let me close with her words:

> It's a blessing each of us was born.
> It matters what we do with our lives.
> What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth.
> We don't have to do it alone.

May it be so.