

# *Coming of Age in Summit*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)**

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Last Friday was All Saint's Day. By what I have always considered a subtle cosmic joke, it was also my birthday. Now birthdays were never accorded much attention in my family of origin. There were no big parties; no elaborate gifts; no large gatherings. On the appropriate day, my aunt would bake her famous chocolate fudge cake, swirl chocolate-mocha icing over it, stick in a few candles and everyone would sing a chorus of "Happy Birthday" before the cake was divided and parceled out as the desert for the evening meal.

When I married, I was somewhat amused by the fact that birthday's assumed much more importance in Beverly's family--indeed there seemed to be an unofficial competition to see whose birthday celebration could be extended over the longest period of time. With the arrival of our children, we seemed to settle down into a hybrid of these two cultures. Usually, the birthday was a family matter, but it did tend to extend over time and the gift giving became reciprocal, as the birthday child received gifts from family members and gave gifts to family members in return.

In more recent years, as the children have grown and scattered, I have found myself reverting to my original practice. Birthdays have come and gone, with only modest observance, and often I have found myself having to do the math--subtracting 1936 from the current year--in order to remember my age. This year has been different. I was first aware that this was going to be a significant milestone, the other week when we were having dinner at the local Chinese restaurant. As the meal was coming to an end, I cracked open my fortune cookie. It was empty--no cute quotation, no advice, no prediction about my future. It was as if someone in the fortune cookie company knew I was about to be sixty.

Sixty! Think about it! Now, I know that for a few of you, that marks me as still a child; for others of you that age is so distant that you can scarcely conceive it. For me it is a wonderful and fearsome reality.

Being sixty means confronting some very clear truths. It is a solid, inescapable, immutable fact that more of my life now lies behind me than stretches ahead of me. It may be true, as I tell myself from time to time, that life is not lived in the past or in the future, that it is lived only in the present and that I have precisely as much time I have ever had to live--this moment. But the truth is that a sense of mortality crowds close upon me from time to time as my body, with its minor aches and pains and its more stolid, less graceful movements reminds me, and as my mind tells me on those occasions when I am left searching for names and words and ideas which I know, but cannot call up with the

old ease and facility. The scars and injuries of time's passing have left their marks on me as clearly as the scars on a tree which has been stripped of its leaves by an autumn wind. And I discover myself, from time to time, making little adjustments and modest allowances for the accumulating losses which are an inevitable consequence of living through six decades.

Being sixty also means having vivid memories of a world others can glimpse only through old photographs, and grainy films and scratchy recordings, and the stories told by the elders. I was born a child of the great depression and spent my formative years in a world engaged in the bloodiest war in human history. I can remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor; in my mind I can still hear the rich voice of Franklin Roosevelt and the unmistakable cadences of Winston Churchill. I remember the dropping of the atomic bombs and the mixture of horror, relief and fascination which that culminating event generated.

I was born into a world which was being shaped into one vast community by the magic of radio. I still remember evenings, after dinner, when my aunt sat with her mending and my uncle with his paper, my cousin with his toys, and I on my stomach on the floor, my school books and home-work papers scattered around me, listening as I worked to the radio--to the brief dramas, mysteries, love-stories, comedies and news bulletins which insensibly wove our family unit into the fabric of the nation.

And I was present when television began to reshape the family and the nation and the world. Few of us knew then how powerful a force was represented by that little circular screen with its flickering, snowy images. We did not know what we were doing when we took home that first television set, with its coin-meter on the side, into which we dropped quarters in order to be able to watch--quarters which would be collected to make the monthly payments for the device. We paid corporations and businesses to come into our home to convince us to consume their products--and we still pay for that privilege.

I watched the transformation of this nation from isolated and distinct communities and cultures into a vast homogeneous commercial establishment. When I left home for college, the road west from Maryland to Ohio was still a two-lane road which snaked up and through the mountains, wandering from Maryland into Pennsylvania, down into West Virginia and across the Ohio River. Trucks lumbered up that road and if you happened to be caught behind one, you turtled along for miles, for there was no safe way to pass on the upgrade and it was impossible to pass as the truck hurtled down the other side.

By the time my formal schooling was over, the nation was crisscrossed by a network of multi-lane highways carrying goods and people from place to place at incredible speeds, destroying all the barriers of time and space which had insulated unique cultures and communities and allowed them to flourish. In their place stood the great consumer culture we now know, a culture which entertains no limits, which is never satisfied, which dreams of endless growth, and which, while promising the good life, consumes more and more of our lives as we struggle for the resources to sustain it.

In many ways, my life has been lived on the periphery, in the crack between worlds--between what was and what is to be. Born into a world of depression, reared in a world in which duty and honor and steadfastness were the virtues needed to win a terrible war, raised in a family defined by poverty and lack of education and limited vision or hope, never more than one or two paychecks from disaster and yet incredibly generous and caring, I was invited by the times and by my own inchoate yearnings into a world of limitless possibilities and richness beyond measure. I have straddled cultures and communities and have combined a persistent restlessness of spirit with a curious commitment to a core of defining values.

In the '50s--that decade of complacency and conformity to which so many people seem to want to return--I registered as a conscientious objector and Beverly and I were actively protesting the testing of atomic bombs, the building of missiles and the militaristic policies of our government. And as the seasons turned and the years passed by, we found ourselves actively involved in the struggle for an end to racial segregation; in efforts to extend the promise of the Great Society to the poorest among us--to migrant workers and to people trapped in the ghettos of our great cities; in efforts to end the terrible war in Vietnam.

Once more I found myself encountering the kinds of people with whom I had grown up, when I was invited by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union to explain to its rank and file members why that war was wrong and why it was unfair that so many of their sons were dying in a pointless struggle. In time, we found ourselves making the same point to federal agents, who came to confront us over our decision to withhold taxes to protest the war. We were fortunate to have found a career in the Unitarian Universalist ministry, among people who--even when they did not agree with us--valued integrity and freedom above obedience and conformity.

As I look back on those times, I am amazed at the deep, unexamined, often unvoiced faith which was the foundation of my life in those days. I still remember standing over the beds of my sleeping children, in our first house, in Park Forest, Illinois. I was preparing to go to one more march or demonstration. I stood watching them sleeping musing on the terrible world into which these children had been born and thinking, when this terrible time is over, they will inherit a new world--a world in which racism and poverty and war need not threaten young lives. I believed that the world could be changed and that we would change it. And I believed that with all my heart, despite the fact that all the years my children were growing up, nuclear missiles were pointed at their beds and the world was never more than thirty minutes from destruction.

And then, an ironic fate led me to serve a congregation which included many people who were career military people, working in the Pentagon and for the Defense Department, and other agencies of the federal government. I knew them as kind, generous people, who cared for their children, who worked hard for their communities and for their church, and some of who went to work every Monday morning to plot the destruction of the globe. That was a circle I could never square. I learned to love them and to hate the work they did. They learned to accept me despite my vocal critique of the system in which they

were involved, and they taught me how very difficult it is, in this world, to be untouched by defilements--after all, I and my family were supported by the salaries they earned at jobs I thought ought not be done.

And all the time I feared for the fate of the earth, I grew to love this world with a passion beyond words. Raised in a third-floor apartment in the poorest section of town, where anything thing green was considered a lawn and a red geranium on the window sill was a flower garden, raised with little contact with or knowledge of the natural world, I was taught by parishioners in half a dozen congregations to unblock the spiritual springs and to find refreshment and renewal in the world of nature. The scriptures of the world's great religions sounded cold and distant and passionless in my ear, but the sight of willows turning yellow-green in early spring or maples gone red in early autumn, clouds massing on a summer afternoon and dropping rain on a waiting earth, the swirl of snow against a street-light on a winter night--these had the power to stir my soul as no prayer or psalm or sutra ever could. I learned to watch the birds and the small mammals, the insects and the earthworms and to see in them a beauty and fitness, a wisdom which infuses all of earth. I learned that the earth herself is our mother, a living creature whose tides and winds and rocks and sands are all part of the process of life which contains me and includes me and lives in me and through me. Struggling to bring to birth within the human community the dreams which motivated me, I learned to rest in the knowledge that I and all my hopes and struggles are but a part of a vastly larger, profoundly sacred process. With the passing of years, I learned that I was not required to be right; that I was not required to win; but I was required to play my part, to serve that which seemed to me to true and right with all my heart and soul and for the rest, to trust the process--the sacred process which brought me into being, which sustains me in being and which lives through me.

To be sixty is to be increasingly aware that the outcome of all our doing is essentially unknowable, that even should we glimpse the land of promise, it is unlikely we shall ever cross over into it. To be sixty is to know that the reward of our efforts is to be found in the doing, not in the result. To be sixty is to know that what we have been building all those years is a soul and that there is no other lasting reward.

Time and the unpredictable twists of fate have brought me, at last, to Summit, New Jersey. When I think about my journey, I am amazed to find myself here. A child of poverty, the product of a narrow and unsophisticated world, I find myself ensconced in one of the wealthiest communities on the face of the globe, a community of incredible sophistication and breadth of experience, and depth of education. An outspoken and unrepentant liberal, I am a citizen of a community which, by almost any standard, is profoundly and proudly conservative. A druid at heart, finding my source of spiritual renewal in the natural world, I live in the midst of a great megalopolis. It is only normal, I suppose, that from time to time I find myself feeling just a little out of place, wondering, as I walk through the town, whether someone is going to stop me and ask to see my green card. And yet, there is a sense that here is where I need to be, a witness to all those other people whose lives are woven into mine and whose voices still sound in my heart. With the coming of age, I discover that still my life bridges two worlds and I have been graced with a comfortable existence in the spaces between.

Having entered the community of the elders, there are some things I have learned that may be of some importance to you as you make your own spiritual journey through time. At sixty, I have discovered that I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. When I was a very young child, I was often worried by the fact that I could not remember the faces of those I loved. I remember lying in bed at night trying to bring their images into my mind and in desperation calling out to them, just to hear their voices tell me that they were there and it was all right. Now with the passage of time, I discover that while my mind is not always as agile as it once was and while names and dates and facts play hide and seek, the faces are there. I close my eyes and I see them: my Aunt Martha, my Uncle Jim; the seventh-grade teacher who taught me so much about courage and integrity; the man who owned the grocery store in which I worked; the college professor who saw in me a potential I did not know was there; my in-laws; the elementary school teacher in the first congregation I served; the denominational official who nagged me into seminary; the lawyer who chaired the board of the church in Park Forest; the list goes on and on. I close my eyes and I see the faces of those whose lives have been woven into my sixty years of living. And do you know what--every one of those faces is smiling. To be sixty is to know in a visceral way that the life you are living is part of a great stream of living and to begin to understand how much you owe to all those who have blessed you on your way, and to feel their continued blessing on your life. To be sixty is to understand that you live not for yourself alone, but for all those whose lives have been caught up in yours.

At sixty, I have also discovered that youth is only partly a matter of a supple body and an agile mind. It is also, and most importantly, a matter of the spirit. In one of his hymns, Samuel Longfellow wrote:

O Life that maketh all things new,  
The blooming earth, the thoughts within,  
Our pilgrim feet, wet with thy dew  
In gladness hither turn again.

From hand to hand the greeting flows,  
From eye to eye the signals run,  
From heart to heart the bright hope glows,  
The seekers of the light are one.

One in the freedom of the truth,  
One in the joy of paths untrod,  
One in the soul's perennial youth,  
One in the larger thought of God.

The freer step, the fuller breath,  
The wide horizon's grander view,  
The sense of life that knows no death,  
The life that maketh all things new.

Now, at sixty, I think I begin to understand this hymn which I have sung for years--

especially that line about "the soul's perennial youth." I grow older with each passing day. Every now and then, I am aware of doing things for the last time. And yet there is in me a deepening sense that this coming of age is itself an adventure, an opening up of paths untrod, an opportunity to understand myself and my world and myself in the world in new ways. I am overwhelmed by constant encounters with new dimensions of the sacred, new and larger thoughts of God. I feel my age, but deep inside I do not feel old. I feel blessed and comforted and renewed.

And I know in my bones that this is not a denial or a refusal to confront my mortality. I know that in time I shall die and that every passing moment brings that inevitability closer. I know, because I have watched, that the process of dying is not always pleasant and in our culture often consists of a progression of small, cascading losses. But I also know that this, too, is an inevitable, and essential part of the journey and that I am not alone as I walk that path. I am surrounded by people who have loved me and I am watched over by all those smiling faces who have made this journey before me. In a strange and curious way, they make it possible for me to embrace death as part of the sacred process by which life is sustained on this planet. I intend to live fully every moment that is given me to live, to embrace every opportunity to grapple with the challenges life and the world offers; I will rejoice in my comrades on the way, and I will witness to the fact that the coming of age represents the great spiritual journey. At sixty, I am convinced that the only real tragedy in aging is to fail to embrace the journey and to make it a conscious, joyful adventure.