

“Absence and Presence”
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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One day last month, Diane Boydell and Janet Falconer handed me a three-ring binder filled with poems. “Read these poems,” they said. “Tell us what you think. We think the poems are exceptional. They were written by Lynn Shepard. We had no idea that she could use language this way.”

The pages were discolored. Each fragile page was buttressed in three places by Cheerio-sized and Cheerio-shaped reinforced “lifesavers,” meticulously glued into place. The poet’s typewriter was obviously *not* an IBM Correcting Selectric typewriter. As I turned the brittle pages, it occurred to me that I probably had not read such a “slice of life” conveyed in words by means of a *manual* typewriter in some 30 years.

Time passes. Time discolors paper. Time distorts memories, emphasizing some memories and minimizing other memories. Time is something that we have in adequate quantity while we are here but . . . “*not so much*” . . . when our time here is over.

Time is an old-fashioned vinyl LP which, when played, occasionally “skips.” That analogy was made in last Wednesday’s season premiere of the television show “Lost.”

I hope that I am not too literal when I say that all of us are lost. Time *is* like an old-fashioned vinyl LP which, when played, occasionally “skips.” We cannot change the past, and yet we must constantly *revisit* the past, and we must constantly *reinterpret* the past. Why? So that the future can, may, and might be the best possible future for the most number of people. Who knew that people who write dialog for a TV show could be such respectable philosophers? ;) Who knew that people who write dialog for a TV show could be such respectable theologians?

How do we make meaning of our lives, given that time passes? How do we make meaning of our lives, given that life’s only guarantees are taxes and death? Lynn Shepard wrote:

*A moon beam in the still water
Reflects to me a peace within,
But the wind blows
And the pattern is disturbed.*

^^

*I feel me wasting away
Pushed from a nest
Before my wings were
Hardly exposed to the air*

^^

*Is not that the same moon?
Isn't this still the month of March?
Yet everything seems different*

^^

*It comes so quietly
Silently – secretly,
Mist-clouds-fog.
And I see them farther away:
People-ideas-things-
Fading, and the world is quiet.
The city is dead.
The forest is silent –
Birds float noiselessly
Yet sound is tremendous
-- Inside.
Where do we meet?
The life between the world
And myself? It dies more and more.*

Lynn Shepard was once a member of this congregation. Whether she was ever counted in the congregation's annual certification of membership with the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, I do not know. Her poems were found by Debbie McCoy Schneider last year among the effects of Debbie's stepfather, Marvin Lenchus.

Marvin was also once a member of this congregation. He was an artist, and he led a class in art during his time here. Lynn was a member of that art class. Whether Marvin was ever counted in the congregation's annual certification of membership with the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, I do not know. Involvement in a congregation begins in different ways. Sometimes, a newcomer arrives as an infant, as Isabella arrived this morning. Other times, a new member arrives by conscious choice as an adult.

Back to Lynn. *Marilyn* Shepard was born in Los Angeles in 1929 and died in Riverside in 2006. She would have been 80 years old this year. Elmer was her father, Evelyn was her mother, and Thomas was her brother. Thomas had a son named Lyn. Sadly, Marilyn's nephew died. After Lyn died, Marilyn asked people to call *her* "Lynn" instead of "Marilyn" so that her brother might have another "Lyn" in his life.

There was a time when much of the day to day maintenance work in this congregation was done by congregants rather than by paid staff. Janet Falconer has been a part of this congregation for about 50 years. Janet recalls that Lynn would go through the membership directory and methodically designate various groups of people to be responsible for each week's maintenance work.

Janet remembers arriving on Saturday mornings and receiving direction from Lynn about which maintenance tasks needed to be done that day. *Every* Saturday was a "work party" day. Janet, Betsey Jacobs, and Lynn would wash this floor and set up the chairs.

Lynn Shepard was schizophrenic, and she was hospitalized for some portion of her life. This congregation and other Unitarian Universalist congregations have welcomed people who lived with mental health challenges. Lynn wrote:

*Laughter scatters me into
 Particles of wild lack of
 Identity and lack of dimension.
 And when I laugh I wonder
 Who I am.*

^^

*Clouds drift over the warm morning sky
 And enclose infinite wonder into solitude.*

^^

*Listen, the silence will answer.
 Quietly, patiently wait
 And there will be a voice.
 There was nothing.*

*Hours of solitude passed,
 Hours of bleeding hope,
 Until she answered herself.
 She heard the voice.*

As we were planning this service, Janet asked, “Will anyone care about people they did not know?” “Yes!” I said, but a more accurate answer is probably “Some will, and some will not.” Sometimes we need to be reminded to expand our circle of care and concern to people outside our family, our clan, our tribe, our nation. I was very moved by Ron’s words highlighting similarities between family and congregation. I worry though if the metaphor of “family” brings unintended limits to expectations around congregational size. In a family, everyone knows everyone else or, at a large family reunion, can at least be told how everyone fits into the family.

A congregation that wants to grow might benefit from having a different image for the relationship among its members. When we come to care for people who we do *not* know nearly as much as we care about people who we *do* know, then we extend kindness and caring farther

into an often hurting world. One way we can do this is to open our hearts and minds to the experiences of others, to the experiences of Lynn Shepard, for example. She wrote:

Death is not a door that

Is open – then closed.

Death is everything

And grows silently within

Until it wins your heart

^^

hospital

^^

Cleanser, brooms, dust mops and polish

Under their key of life.

Cleanliness is next to Godliness

The only God they know.

Lines, locks, pills and shocks

Under their key of life.

Routine is next to Godliness

The only God they know.

^^

I am caught in a tar web

Of “trust” and hate. There

Is no escape from anything.

I can’t go on,

I can’t stop.

I can’t live.

I can’t die.

Where do I meet myself?

Last Sunday, nearly a dozen members of this congregation helped shop and cook and serve meals to 211 people at Sumner Elementary School. They cared for people they did not know. Each Sunday's collection of food and money for the Beta Center food pantry demonstrates caring for people who we do not know. On this, the last Sunday of the month, the congregation will donate money to the Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California. We care for people who we do not know. On occasion, it may happen this way: When caring for people who we do not know, we meet our very self. Lynn wrote:

Written on Ward 413

^^

*A lonely bird flew across the endless sky –
As I am a lonely person going through endless
Time, feeling a need to be close to someone,
Is the search as endless as time and space or
Do I die of hunger before forever?*

^^

(from the ward onto Bloomfield street at a steady stream of cars)

*From the window I peered, before daylight, much to
My horror into a line of white eyed monsters blindly
Following each others tails past the glowing sky of
Moving into the city of nowhere to fasten together
Society into one big mass machine of emptiness, with
No soul, no feeling. I stood in sleepy terror but the
Empty dance of society did not end.*

When does it stop to look inside?

^^

It may take a disaster or a wild joy to prompt society as a whole to look inside. 9/11 comes to mind. The inauguration of Barak Obama is a happy event that has prompted our society to look inside. As individuals, we can look inside at any moment. However, finding a supportive place to share our thoughts and feelings can be difficult. The new Small Group Ministry program

provides a supportive place to share our thoughts and feelings. Over 40 people from the congregation are involved in the program, and new groups will start in April. At its best, Small Group Ministry feels like being part of a family . . . *only better* because every couple of months, you can be part of another family. The circle of care expands. Lynn wrote:

*Tonight I cry bitter tears
Against the hardness of life,
Against being alone.
Tonight I want to break loose
From my life – and find freedom.
[From my life sounds frightening].
I wish it would rain again!
I don't want all that much –*

Lynn Shepard, thank you for writing poems. Thank you for caring for this building with such diligence. Thank you for not allowing mental health issues to keep you away from this congregation. You touched lives during your time here. I am sorry that life seemed so bleak to you at times. I am grateful for the companionship you found here. None of us is immortal. Yet we have “immortality of influence.”¹ We live in the memories of those whose lives we touched.

May we honor the memories of those who are no longer with us. May we care about people who we know and about people who we do not know. May absence and presence enliven each other in our hearts. May it be so!

¹ “The immortality of influence” is from the Rev. John Dietrich, a humanist Unitarian minister, whose influence began in the early 20th century. See the *American Religious Humanism* by Mason Olds.