

## **Festschrift for Reverend Bill Breeden**

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Presented on the occasion of Reverend Bill Breeden's retirement  
as co-Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church  
of Bloomington, Indiana

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## Foreword

Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

### As Bill Tells the Story

“I need a heterosexual male.” Allegedly, these words represent the first spoken request I made of Reverend Bill Breeden. As Bill tells the story, I called him on the phone in my role as youth advisor at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington and began our conversation with this appeal. I recall a more structured prelude to the request, which was an invitation to co-teach with me the comprehensive sexuality curriculum “About Your Sexuality”. At the time, in 1988, the fact that I was an openly gay youth facilitator was causing quite a kerfuffle in our congregation, and it seemed a heterosexual male would bring a nice balance to this educational adventure. And so began our first voyage as a didactic dynamic duo.

I begin this foreword with a story, because the narrative method is a key to Reverend Breeden’s ministry. I would even venture that Bill embraces a narrative theology. Narrative theology goes beyond traditional systematic theology (which develops a set of propositional truths reasoned from scripture) to look deeper into the meaningful layers of a story.

In 1998, a decade after that first telephone request, I asked Reverend Bill Breeden to speak at my ordination. I knew Bill as a peace activist, truck driver, and former minister, as well as my AYS co-teacher, and sought his unique perspective on this ministerial rite of passage. Once again, Bill said yes. “One of the liabilities of liberalism is Bible-phobia,” he told the gathered congregation that day. He spoke of the Bible as a rich source of wisdom, myth, and inspiration often overlooked by Unitarian Universalists, and then he tackled “one of the finest pieces of allegorical cloth within the

history of literary weaving.” He told the story of Jonah and the “fish--not a whale,” with passion, humor, and curiosity, sewing the story’s layers into a quilted pattern of meaning. He offered Jonah’s story as a text about calling, commission, commitment, conversion, compassion, and community. He addressed me specifically, saying that a call to ministry cannot be confused with a career choice; rather, it is a vocation. One cannot escape a calling, whether in a boat (as Jonah tried to do) or “in an eighteen-wheeler driving cross-country.” When Bill spoke those words, I knew that he was preaching to himself, as well as to me and to everyone present. At that moment, I never imagined that we would serve in a co-ministry together. We have now done so for over a decade.

In this Festschrift, a collection of essays and poems to honor and celebrate Reverend Breeden’s ministry, members and friends of our congregation explore Bill’s theology of love, social activism, vitality, and story. This collection is conceived as an ongoing, dynamic process. Others are encouraged to add their voices to these assembled pages. May you find inspiration and wisdom in this collection, just as we have all found these gifts in Reverend Bill Breeden’s ministry.

In respect and love,

Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

## Bill Breeden as Theologian

Byron Bangert

Bill Breeden understands himself to be a pacifist, a socialist, a universalist, and an agnostic. I cannot recall that he has ever said anything from the pulpit or in private conversation that would contradict this self-description.

In this essay I wish to focus on what I take to be the primarily theological dimensions of his self-understanding, as evidenced primarily in his preaching and public discourse, namely his universalism and his agnosticism. Yet, because Bill regards himself as an agnostic, it may seem oxymoronic to speak of his theology! Theology, after all, most simply and literally means “God-talk.” Does he even have a theology? Is it even fair to Bill to attempt to characterize his thought in such terms? Besides, Bill is so thoroughly engaged in other forms of expression of ministry, theology may almost seem like a sideline.

But Bill is a preacher, and theology in some form or other is necessarily part of his stock in trade. Moreover, he has a clearly well-honed outlook on life and the world, a Weltanschauung or world-view, that merits close attention. However others may answer the question of whether Bill has a theology, I am going to proceed on the basis of my conviction that his preaching possesses both theological intimations and implications, and that these are worthy of our serious consideration.

As another contributor to this volume has most aptly observed, Bill believes that no one is damned, but that everyone needs to be saved. On numerous occasions he has made it clear that he is a universalist with respect to the ultimate destiny of every human being. He may remain agnostic about that destiny, but he clearly

expresses a hopefulness, even optimism, suggesting that, whatever lies beyond this life, it is all to the good.

Do not get me wrong. I don't think Bill spends a lot of time worrying about the next life. Nor does his preaching have much if anything to say about the hereafter. Bill is very much concerned about the here-and-now. Nonetheless, and perhaps inescapably given Bill's upbringing in a religious milieu in which getting saved to secure one's eternal destiny figured rather prominently, I think Bill's outlook on life is profoundly shaped by his seemingly inchoate sense that it matters where the whole cosmic enterprise is ultimately headed.

Does that mean that he believes in an afterlife? Beats me. I think he wants to believe in what may be precisely termed subjective immortality, or the enduring and presumably everlasting perdurance of individual personal identity. From my own perspective, it is unthinkable that human beings might endure as subjects to one another beyond their temporal existence without the existence of a Supreme Being, or God. On the other hand, I find no grounds for believing that such a life after death is necessarily entailed by the existence of an Ultimate Divine Reality. Personally, I remain agnostic about any personal life hereafter, and regard most affirmations regarding this prospect to be wishful thinking.

As already intimated, I suspect that Bill's thoughts about life after death are deeply influenced by his upbringing in a family and congregation of the Church of the Nazarene. However, it is also endemic in our larger culture to believe in some sort of life after death. Moreover, many UUs evidently hold to such belief, and since Bill must relate to them as pastor on a regular basis, it would be quite unreasonable to suppose that Bill is impervious their expectations and beliefs. On the other hand, Bill's thoughts about life after death are surely also related to, and perhaps even derivative of, a truly fundamental conviction he has about the goodness of human life and, indeed, the goodness of existence –

whether viewed as creation or merely evolutionary process – as a whole.

Bill has explicitly and repeatedly related his universalism to his first experience as a father. The birth of his first child was, for him, a profoundly theological event. The beauty and innocence that he beheld in the advent and presence of his child impressed upon him how unthinkable it would be, first, to see this child as one born into sin and somehow needing divine redemption, and second, to regard as worthy of human worship any God who would impose such a condition of sin upon such a child. Such a God would be a monster, and certainly not a God of love. I cannot recall Bill ever speaking explicitly of having any conversion experience, but the way he has related the experience of the birth of his first child suggests that this may have been such.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of love, for Bill there is no more powerful reality in the universe. Love is the definitive touchstone of all human existence. If there is a God, that God must be love.<sup>2</sup> But whether there is a God or not, Bill speaks with conviction that love is the one thing that ultimately matters, and – hopefully – will ultimately triumph. Hence, whether or not he is strictly a Unitarian, in the traditional sense of believing in one God, he is altogether Universalist in his belief that every human being is deserving of love, and that love must therefore be determinative regarding the conduct of all human affairs as well as the ultimate outcome of all human existence.

But Bill is also a great believer in, and advocate of, justice. Perhaps nothing has more centrally defined his ministry than his commitment to social justice. Bill sees that the world is filled with horrible injustices, and he believes that he and everyone else are called to make this world a better place. Injustice is, of course, a particular word for sin, a word that Bill will occasionally invoke, usually with an aside to the effect that UU's don't like to talk about sin – may not even believe in it. But there it is. Because the world

is filled with injustice, and no doubt also because human beings are subject to other failings, it may be said that Bill believes everyone needs to be saved. They do not need to be saved from original sin, however, nor do they need to be saved from the wrath of God or any other sort of divine judgment. They need to be saved from themselves.

People need to believe in themselves. They need to claim what is good and beautiful and just within them, intrinsic to their very being. They need to act with compassion, against fear, with hope, with conviction that what they are capable of doing can and will make a positive difference.

I am unable to discern what Bill thinks will be the final outcome of the human enterprise if human beings fail to meet the challenges that injustice presents. He does reflect on the possibility that the human species may join the ranks of the extinct. He certainly has warned us of nuclear disaster and of the possibilities of ecological suicide. He certainly recognizes that for all too many people, including some he has known personally, such as those who sit on death row in the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, life may end tragically, without evidence of redemption. I think he harbors hope, however, that even they may ultimately be redeemed. This suggests, again, that he does not regard this temporal existence as the be-all and end-all of individual human existence. Although he has surely contemplated the demise of the human species, I'm not sure Bill's optimism permits him fully to pursue the theological implications of the prospect that the whole human enterprise may turn out to be a colossal failure.

Which brings me to where I find myself in clearest disagreement with Bill. I do not believe that humankind can save itself. I believe that, apart from divine Grace, we are doomed.<sup>3</sup> Bill sometimes speaks of grace, by which he at least means gift, but I am unsure what else he means, since he more often and more clearly avers that he is an agnostic who does not know, nor seem to consider it

essential to decide, whether a benevolent God somehow presides over the cosmos.

Bill's universalism is entirely compatible, in my view, with a theology of divine benevolence. But his agnosticism and what I take to be his hopeful optimism stand in some tension with his convictions about the need for love and justice to save the world from itself. Can we transcend ourselves? Can we rise above our self-preoccupations on our own? I think Bill would say we must, or maybe there is a God who can help us to do so, but since we don't know about such things, we've got to give it whatever we can. To paraphrase Bill, we've got to love our way out of the mess we are in. If we fail, it is clear that Bill thinks it will be because our brains are too big and our hearts are too small.

As a former parish minister, I must confess that while serving as a pastor there were always certain matters that got short shrift, including intellectual matters that might have led me to places that would have complicated my relationship with my congregation and denomination. I now have more clearly defined convictions about certain matters that would have made it difficult if not impossible to continue as a parish minister in my congregation at the time if I had come to those convictions at that time. Strong and intimate human relationships invariably shape our perceptions and our thoughts about life and the world, irrespective of what disinterested parties might judge the realities to be, and I don't think we would want it any other way. For good or ill, it must surely be the case for many UU ministers these days that the makeup of UU congregations mitigates against the pursuit and acceptance of many strong and particular theological convictions, especially strong theistic convictions, even though that is hardly where Unitarianism began.

Somewhere along the way, probably late in his seminary education, Bill encountered the theology of Paul Tillich. It obviously left a deep impression. Tillich's metaphor for the supreme reality, the

“ground of being,” and his metaphor for the religious dimension of human existence, our “ultimate concern,” still resonate with Bill. I think Bill would translate these metaphors into something like this: Our ultimate concern is whatever we most love, and love itself is the ground of our being. He would not attempt to provide any philosophical defense for these assertions. Rather, he would point to his own and other’s lived experiences, and would claim that these reveal, above all, the centrality of love.

I wonder what Bill would say to the question, Is love precisely another word for God – or the divine? If he were to say yes, then it may be that he is really not an agnostic, just someone who doesn’t find the word God very useful any more. I can heartily appreciate such a sentiment, since there may be no word in any language that is more frequently taken in vain.

If memory serves, Bill recently captured the negative side of theistic belief when he offered his counter to the well-known saying, “If there is no God, all is permitted.” Bill rejoined, “If there is a God, all is permitted.” His point was that every sort of heinous human behavior has been, and continues to be, undertaken in the name of God. No argument here. However, the rhetorical power of this observation does not obviate the truth of the original proposition. Nor is it necessarily the case that belief in God leads to human depravities. So much depends on how the Ultimate is conceptualized and how adherents elaborate their understanding of what it means to be faithful to, or in allegiance with, this Ultimate.

Now if Bill were to say no to my question about whether love is precisely another word for God, then I would press him to justify his conviction regarding the centrality and surpassing reality of love. It is hardly obvious to me, nor I suspect is it clear to most people on the planet, that love is the dominant reality, the force that will ultimately triumph over all adversity, with respect to the human enterprise. The horrific wars and genocides of the past 100 years present a strong prima facie case against that conclusion.

And, in a more philosophical vein, I would ask Bill if he has any thoughts about the origin of such love as governs our very existence. Where does it come from? Is it inherent in all things? Was it present at the Big Bang — if indeed there ever was a Big Bang? Is it intrinsic to the tooth and claw existence of biological evolution? What is there to vouchsafe that this homage to love is more than a delusionist addiction to a post-modern romanticism?

There is in fact very little in Bill’s theology with which I can take serious exception. I share his universalism, his rejection of many hoary orthodoxies like original sin, his sense that love and justice are indispensable human virtues and values without which we are in the sorriest condition. I am not quite a pacifist or a socialist, but Bill’s quasi-theological critiques of violence and war, corporate capitalism, and our so-called criminal justice system generally strike me as right on the mark. And I can only stand in admiration of his capacity to draw upon his personal experience and that of those with whom and to whom he has ministered over the years to make vivid and powerful the theological claims that he is eager to make.

I am well into my seventh decade, and there is no preacher I have heard on a regular basis to whom I would rather listen, or with whom I agree more, than Bill Breeden. I will greatly miss his absence from the pulpit of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington. Bill has often thanked me when I have engaged him, and sometimes differed with him, regarding some point he has made or some issue he has raised. Any reservations I have about Bill’s theology probably arise from my sense that there may be more that it is necessary to think through, to believe, and to say, in order to be convincing not only at an affective but also at a cognitive level. I trust that Bill will neither be devastated nor offended by the questions and reservations I have posed here for his consideration and that of all who read these essays.

## Endnotes

1. Bill has reported that he has titled his forthcoming memoir *Billy Pilgrim and the Black Female Jesus*, the latter a reference to a poverty-stricken black woman he encountered in Nashville, Tennessee. This encounter may in fact be Bill's most significant conversion experience, but I have not yet heard him speak of it in detail.
2. In his sermon, "To the Seventh Generation," preached on 9-29-2002, Bill declared, "I have told you before that I believe one can insert the word "Love" in place of the word "God" in the scriptures of nearly any religion and do quite well in establishing principles of personal and social transformation. Indeed, when I find references to God in which the substitution of Love renders the reference non-sensical or oxymoronic, then I simply assert that this is no God of mine." In the context in which these words appear it is quite clear that Bill does not intend to be making a theistic claim. In other words, whatever he means by "Love," he is not saying that Love possesses the ontological status of God.
3. It is commonplace in monotheistic theology to regard the presence of evil as a, if not the, major conundrum. The explicit assumption is that God is supremely good and all-powerful, so why does evil persist? My own take on this question turns it on its head. Given the intractable and irrefutable experiential and existential reality of the presence and persistence of evil, how is goodness to be accounted for? This is a deepening of the question, Why is there something and not nothing? It is the question, Why do we continue to exist, and to experience goodness, love, truth, justice, and compassion, in spite of all that is destructive and subject to perishing and death? Or, as I have already implied, How is it that we are saved from ourselves?

## Theological Principles Observed in the Ministry of Reverend Bill Breeden

Reverend Barbara Carlson

*Prophetic moral commitment is rooted in a faith that sees the essential meaning of human life in the struggle to shape and reshape a just and compassionate community.*

*Great prophets of every human tradition, though they be outsiders, appeal to a covenantal bond, a fundamental law and love through which human community is shaped—and when broken, is reshaped. Being themselves bound by it, they feel compelled to speak out for it.*

*James Luther Adams, Unitarian theologian*

### Faith and Belief

Unitarian Universalists are responsible to develop their own theology based on their own life experiences, thinking, study, and reflection. Sources may include all the great wisdom traditions, as well as science and the lives of inspiring women and men.

Raised in the Nazarene tradition, Bill's gifts were evident early and he was expected to become a preacher. Following seminary, he served a Disciples of Christ Church. Some years later Bill was invited to serve as part-time sabbatical minister (2000) at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, and then as contract minister. When the Congregation decided to call Bill (to serve in a triad ministry with Rev. Barbara Carlson and Rev. Mary Ann Macklin) Bill decided he wanted to meet requirements for ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister. The outer facts of Bill's journey are illustrative of his inner, evolving spiritual journey and responsibility for his own theology, which continues to grow and deepen.

## **The Nature of Reality**

In the religious naturalism of Unitarian theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman, the sacred is inherent in the natural world, and evolving human creativity is nurtured in creative interchange. Gregory Bateson, scientist said: “Occasionally we may catch a glimpse of the greater whole to which we belong, and it is so over-whelming that people tend to attribute it to the supernatural.” The inherent wholeness and sacredness of the natural world is also expressed in Native American Black Elk’s vision of the Sacred Hoops in whose center “grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father...And he saw that it was holy.” The philosophy of Unitarian Transcendentalists in the 19th Century was expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.” Emerson described the soul as “the insatiable passion for the better.” In his preaching, his prayers, and in his life Bill is solidly grounded in religious naturalism and a passion for the better. He also maintains an open-minded respect for those whose journey has led them to different theological conclusions. “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.” (Francis David, 16th Century Unitarian martyr)

## **Eschatology and Social Justice**

Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther writes: “It is not our calling to be concerned about the eternal meaning of our lives...Our responsibility is to use our temporal life span to create a just and good community for our generation and for our children. It is in the hands of Holy Wisdom to forge out of our finite struggle truth and being for everlasting life. Our agnosticism about what this means is then the expression of our faith.”

Reuther’s emphasis on creating “a just and good community” is in harmony with our Unitarian Universalist commitment to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” (Sources of the Living Tradition).

A commitment that is powerful and basic to Bill’s theology. His enduring faithfulness to creating a just and good community is clearly evident in his work for peace, in witnessing and working in opposition to the death penalty, in his commitment to work for and serve the homeless, his service as emergency chaplain at our local hospital, his prison ministry—and probably in other ways we don’t even know!

Bill has often spoken of his life-changing late night conversation with Fr. Phil Berrigan, activist Catholic priest whose commitment to peace was total and caused him to be incarcerated by the government on more than one occasion. Bill’s commitment to peace was a factor in choosing to live with his family in a tepee in the woods to avoid paying taxes to support the war in Vietnam, which he believed was illegal and immoral. Bill has been an outspoken speaker at local demonstrations opposing Middle East wars. He has a natural gift for eloquence, illustrated in a Candlelight Peace service at dusk that he and I co-led with the Quaker community. Bill commented, As the outer darkness deepens, the inner light grows brighter.

Bill’s prison ministry is another deep commitment. He and his wife and partner, Glenda, have been active in opposition to the death penalty. Some years ago I joined them in a prayer vigil on the Courthouse lawn on a cold and blustery November night, protesting the execution of a prisoner whom the court had defined as mentally retarded. Many of us had urgently implored the Pardon Board and the Governor to intervene in this tragic execution. The State had passed a law making it illegal to execute a person judged retarded, but this man was sentenced before the law was scheduled to go into effect. Joining us in pleas to remedy the tragic absurdity of carrying out this execution, in addition to Unitarian Universalists, were members of the Jewish, Catholic, Methodist, Quaker communities and others. Bill’s leadership in interfaith work for justice has been noteworthy, also.



### **“Perfect Love Casts Out Fear”**

When Bill decided to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, he asked me to conduct a required interview for the Unitarian Universalist Association. In the course of our discussion he told of driving a truckload of medical supplies and food to the Sandinistas in their struggle with the Contras in Nicaragua (1980's). The mission was forbidden by the U. S. Government; also, he was warned that roads and bridges were impassable. Bill set out on the journey. He was stopped in Honduras, and imprisoned blindfolded for two days and nights. When I observed that it must have been a terrifying experience...Bill said, I wasn't afraid because I knew I was doing the right thing.

### **An Ethic of Risk, Solidarity, and Joy in the Struggle**

Unitarian Universalist theologian Sharon Welch has written of an Ethic of Risk – referring to faithfulness to the work of creating a just and compassionate community, even though the goal may not be achieved in one's lifetime. An example is the long term commitment over years and generations to freedom and equality for African Americans in our country. Civil rights victories came after many years, much suffering and many failures. And there is still important work to be done in this struggle. Our call is to be faithful no matter what or how long it takes. Bill's ministry is a paean of faith to the ongoing struggle to shape and reshape a just and compassionate community *no matter how long it takes*.

There is solidarity and joy in the struggle. As Bill has often said, “They cannot take our joy away!” The great teacher Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life abundantly.” Bill's life and his ministry are filled with abundance.

In faith, love, and respect,

Reverend Barbara Carlson, May 2014

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way out such a soul sending a voice

Barbara Child

for Bill Breedon

with thanks and apologies as well to e. e. cummings, who wrote  
*"anyone lived in a pretty bow town"* in 1940 when he was 46, and of  
whom Malcolm Cowley wrote: *"e.e. cummings grew up a Unitarian. His  
life embodied endless conflict between radical individualism and faith in love."* \*

breeden preaches by uu choice  
(way out such a soul sending a voice)  
here elsewhere down town out of town  
bill took that sign loves wife and kids.

younguns and old (in church or not)  
learn from breeden i tell you what  
to change the world you must look out  
love more hate routs

people learn (all who will come  
not to cluck in a bucket like chicks so dumb  
thinking the racket means there are)  
lots more of them lots by far

when by word and sit by sat  
he loves the doomed man teaches him that  
whatever he did so long ago  
a monster he isn't in bills fine mind

he prays for haters every week  
knows that hating is in us too  
(love lost where and why) we  
point our fingers we live our lies  
here there now then

(but our good rev bill does get us to see  
how much we have lost can begin to find now  
way out such a soul sending a voice)

one day breeden leaves this hall  
(but everyone knows to say fare well)  
even milk weed pods boast that bill sent me  
button by button and each by all

show that we have learned each hour  
and hear that voice now his and ours  
breeden and all of us held in that circle  
drawn by candles of sorrow and joy.

daughter and dad (eleven and more)  
shucked off convention found the door  
showed real living in revolt its true  
thanks bill to you

## **His Voice**

William Harvey Hegarty

Implores

Pleads

Inspires

Beseches

Prays

Invites

Howls

Demands

Wail

Screams

**Love Your Mother**

**EARTH**

\*Quoted in "E.E. Cummings: Poet and Painter (1894-1962)," Notable American Unitarians 1936-1961, ed. Herbert F. Vetter (Cambridge: Harvard Square Library, 2007), p. 63.

## Over the Bridge

*Encountering Bill Breeden's Encounter with the Sacred*

David Keppel

If Bill Breeden were presented with his own theology, wrapped in a bow as a Christmas present, as a formally closed system, I doubt he would welcome it with the enthusiasm with which Molière's Monsieur Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* greets the announcement that all his life he has been speaking prose. Bill does not really speak prose; nor does he live in prose. "Poetry" means "making," and both Bill's life and his encounter with the sacred (which, for him, is neither more nor less than the totality of life) are constantly and dangerously a-making. He is anti-systemic, politically and otherwise. He chooses to live on the creative edge of chaos, because he really has no choice. The hounds of the heaven he does not want, the fire and brimstone of his fundamentalist youth, pursue him; and he in turn pursues the very different heaven that we can only create together, here on the beautiful but vulnerable Earth.

Though I cannot hope to rival this incomparable preacher and storyteller, who is currently writing his autobiography, I can say how he has changed – actually, awakened – my own encounter with the sacred.

My first interaction with Bill was hardly positive. It was in September 2002 in the Indianapolis office of Senator Richard Lugar. Recently arrived from Connecticut, I found myself the spokesperson of a MoveOn.org group opposing the still prospective U.S. invasion of Iraq. Together with my invaluable co-coordinator, Cindy Hoffman of the Indiana University Psychology Department (and, I learned, the Unitarian Universalist Church), we put together an impressive delegation, including area experts from the IU faculty and members of the Indiana General Assembly.

But on Cindy's wise insistence, the group also included local peace activists who had just signed up online or whom Cindy knew in the community. Our pre-meeting instructions urged people to dress formally and to prepare a substantive and respectful two-minute presentation. Most of the participants did an excellent job. But one man came in scruffy in colorful costume; and his salty language and devastating denunciation of U.S. imperialism were, I felt, less than respectful. But then I am the son of a career diplomat, and Bill Breeden was never one to genuflect to power. He at times practices Diogenes' saying: "In the house of the rich man, the only place to spit is his face."

It was only in our second encounter that I got some sense of who Bill is. The occasion was a winter vigil, with candlelight, silence, and speeches, on Courthouse Square in Bloomington, as the invasion loomed ever closer. The candles were a disaster, because it was wet. The silence was unbearable, because it was so cold. I really didn't listen to the speeches, except to mutter under my breath that our organizers' scheduling seven speakers in this weather showed why we were going to drive away even our loyal supporters. Seven speakers! I wondered how many fingers and toes I would have at the end of the rally. Bill was the seventh. And I honestly have no idea what he said either. But I will never forget that as he stopped speaking, after the shortest of the speeches, I found I had laughed and cried, and I remembered why I was a peace activist in the first place.

I still had no intention of ever going to church. That happened as an accident. My father, John, died in June 2003. We had agreed not to have any service, since many of his friends were dead and we thought that others, on the East Coast and in London, would not want to come to Bloomington. But after his death, my mother and I changed our minds and decided that my father's story – of an Establishmentarian turned dissident – needed to be told, not to his old friends but to fellow residents at Meadowood Retirement Community, since few of them had seen more than a man in

rapidly declining health. We needed a minister to officiate, and I talked with Bill and with Rev. Mary Ann Macklin. Both said they would be happy to help. But then my mother, Grace, ever with a sense of social occasion, remembered that Bishop Elson, an Episcopalian, was among the retirees at Meadowood, and she was worried he would be offended to be overlooked. I was uneasy, because John was by then more a Humanist in the tradition of Montaigne than the Upper East Side Episcopalian of his birth. I was also worried about disinviting Bill and Mary Ann. Bill assured me by phone that Bishop Elson would be professional, and he encouraged me to ask him to leave God and the afterlife entirely out of the service, in which Elson cheerfully cooperated. I thought I owed Bill and Mary Ann at least one visit to a Sunday service as a somewhat perfunctory courtesy. Little did I realize that despite the easy-in, easy-out, no pressure greeting, a visit to Fee Lane and the Bypass can be anything but perfunctory.

Like Jesus of Nazareth, Bill is a subtle religious wrangler who prefers country stories to dogma. In his case they are not parables but bits of his lived experience. His southern Indiana family – with two sets of twin brothers, as well as singles, all boys – went into trucking. Though Bill was destined in his mother's mind to be the next Billy Graham, he and his twin brother Darrell spent time together behind the wheel of a large semi. (Darrell continues the business.) They were on a long haul, and Bill had relieved Darrell an hour before so Darrell could get some sleep, when he started to feel drowsy himself. He did not want to wake Darrell, so he pulled into a truck rest stop, parked the truck behind another. He noticed the driver of that vehicle get out and head into the building. He decided just to put his head on the steering wheel and take a power nap. A few minutes later, Darrell woke up and, seeing Bill's head on the wheel, grabbed him violently. Bill, still half asleep, desperately slammed on the brakes, a very noisy affair with big trucks. Just then the driver of the other truck walked back from the building. "Get 'er stopped, did you?"

A little AM radio, especially in southern Indiana, is enough to explain the desperate braking. Another window on it comes from his fondness for a hymn that was long one of my reasons for avoiding any church – “Amazing Grace.” I had always gagged at the saccharine melody and did not, in any case, want to be saved. I hadn’t known that the author, John Newton, had been captain of a slave ship who then turned against slavery. Bill changes the crucial line of the hymn from “saved a wretch like me” to “saved and set me free.” When we sing the hymn, Bill always remarks, “I don’t see any wretches.” In Bill’s world, no one is damned, but we all do need to be saved. The damnation theology of his youth lends his quest an urgency that saves his ministry from the bland potpourri of cute multicultural aperçus that are the stock of industrial Unitarian Universalism. He himself finds his salvation in every encounter, but above all in what he learns from those whom society deems wretches.

Prison, for Bill, is not a Sunday metaphor for mortal existence. It is a place he has been as a prisoner – in Odon, Indiana, for his protest stealing a sign naming a town street in honor of Iran-Contra criminal John Poindexter; in Honduras, in serious danger, after delivering supplies to Nicaragua; and with peace activists such as Daniel Berrigan. It is also one of the United States’s largest and most problematic industries, a vast complex where white America holds a huge share of the African-American male population. And it is a place he visits monthly as spiritual advisor to a man on death row, whose life he has transformed and who has transformed his own. For Bill, we can affirm the worth and dignity of every person only by encountering the worth and dignity of those most demeaned and there learning what our own true worth and dignity are. He doesn’t go to save them but to let them save him, and it is this reciprocity that seals to them his authenticity.

In his affirmation of everyone he encounters, Bill is strangely like Grace, my Christian Scientist mother. After a negligent and botched hip operation, my mother was confined to a wheelchair

in the Meadowood Health Pavilion, and Bill and Glenda, who often together did a monthly Sunday service at Meadowood, got to know her. I visited Grace every afternoon to read fiction. She had a standard goodbye: “Drive safely and know that everyone else will too.” It was not as naïve as it sounds: had she not known that people often drive dangerously, she never would have raised the subject in the first place. But instead of saying “Watch out for crazy drivers,” and thus inviting mistrust and cynicism, Grace challenged you to see the world and especially other people with alert optimism. Bill and Glenda, who is truly part of his daily life ministry, do too. They were also very kind to Grace. One Sunday, Bill brought his guitar, and Glenda sang her song about “A Horse Named Grace.” I wondered for a moment how my mother, who loved Paris, would take it, but I needn’t have worried. She felt the love and returned it.

I have come to understand Bill in creative tension with the lessons of my great teacher, my father. Raised to continue the family business in fine prints, but devastated by the Great Depression, my father was formed as a division commander’s aide in the Normandy Invasion in the Second World War. He afterward felt that his privileged position had saved him from being killed, as many of his friends were, and that he owed the rest of his life to public service. The horrors of war, as well as his time in Stalinist Russia, had shown him the best and the worst of which humans were capable. He never divided people into the good and the bad, because he believed we were all capable of both. For John, not Christianity, but less theistic classical Greek and Chinese wisdom, was a moral compass. Wisdom consisted of nurturing the good, the kind, the creative, and avoiding those stresses that can drive any organism into what psychologist Philip Zimbardo calls “The Lucifer Effect.” Or, as my father, a boater and a sailor, would put it, not getting too close to Niagara Falls.

For Bill, we are already over the falls. He is not so much concerned with how to prevent disaster as how to live amid disaster. It is

this sense of Apocalypse that makes him willing to risk paradise or utopia – pacifist and socialist -- that, to others, would seem unrealistic. John loved to tell the Russian story of the frog and the scorpion. A frog was swimming across the river. A scorpion was also trying to cross but was drowning, and it appealed to the frog. “But,” asked the frog, “won’t you sting me?” The scorpion assured the frog it would not and climbed on its back, only, a moment later, to inflict the fatal sting. “Why did you do that?” moaned the frog; “now we shall both drown.” The scorpion replied (my father would first give it in Russian): “It’s in my character.” My father was no cynic, nor, as the initiator of our project on creative uncertainty, was he a fatalist. But he did want me to remember that even a radically better world will still be made of fallible human beings, and unless we plan wisely and realistically for that, utopia will last only the short span of its enthusiastic beginning. But Bill is not planning utopia at all. He is living it now. In this, he actually agrees with John, who believed we should take our satisfactions not from a distant result but from the quality of our daily effort.

One day in his youth, Bill and one of his brothers, this time an elder brother not his twin Darrell, were in a big truck approaching the Ohio River. Bill, who at the time was still learning to drive the big trucks, was behind the wheel. The bridge was much too narrow, and the trick, especially if you were in a truck, was to enter the bridge when no truck was coming in the opposite direction. Inevitably, just as their truck was on the bridge, another enormous truck appeared in the opposite lane. His elder brother spoke: “Don’t look at the truck. Don’t look at the rail. Look at the space you have to drive through.” They got over safely.

Bill leads us over that bridge, but it is only to the world we have always lived in but somehow never known. The life for which he has saved us is our own.

## The Arc of a Life (or a New Trinity According to Bill)

Jack King

We first met in a campus church—  
his beard and hair expected badges of the activist,  
a cone-shaped Appalachian hat the surprise.  
Those who gathered planned  
to demonstrate for nuclear disarmament.  
Two teams would do three-day marches,  
one from the Hoosier town of Washington and  
the other from Moscow, Indiana.  
They would meet halfway,  
as we hoped the same-named capitols would do.  
He led one set of hikers.  
Two groups of locals here  
would go out and greet them  
on arrival.  
I steered one of those.  
It must have worked—  
treaties that we favored all got signed.

I soon heard more  
about this lover of just causes—  
his roots  
in the distant land of Odon,  
his tribal life  
in a Brown County tepee,  
his circuitous religious path.

Then, at the turn of the millennium,  
he showed up as a pastor  
for the church we just had joined.  
I expected him to be a preacher

in the mold of Hebrew prophets,  
and in many ways he is.  
When he limns injustices of our time,  
describes systems that grind humanity down,  
demands that wrongs be now made right,  
there is a righteous passion in his call.  
And I, for one, hear how I am complicit  
in the evil just spelled out—  
or at least how I draw benefit from it—  
and thus owe the world my getting up and doing.

But there is more.

This prophetic voice  
does not leave me just with guilt.  
I am invited into community  
to be empowered  
to make a difference.  
Over the years this man has learned  
in the presence of prisoners and priests,  
shamans and scholars and just plain folks,  
that narrow religion which shuns and judges  
can not be foundation for the love writ large  
that might save us from our lesser selves.  
He would have us draw circles of inclusion  
ever more widely—  
there are none unworthy of being loved,  
none incapable of being human.

And he still persists in pursuing  
impossible ideals.

The children and grandchildren are always in his mind.  
Mere mention of the coming generation  
brings him near to tears.  
It is for their tomorrow

that we need today  
to care for one another and the earth.  
Therein lies hope.

The arc of Bill Breeden's living  
leans toward this trinity:  
justice,  
community,  
hope.

And I raise a voice  
in four directions  
and to earth and sky  
in deepest gratitude.



## Bill and the Bible

Guy Loftman

While I intend this essay to be more about Bill Breeden than myself, a bit about me may provide context.

1. I was raised a Unitarian from about the age of 8, some 60 years ago, and adhere joyfully to the Unitarian Universalist faith.
2. I consider myself a Universitarian, i.e., I recognize the universe as the supreme entity, attributing to it no supernatural powers, recognizing that it may have powers far beyond those we know as natural.
3. I am a Jesusian, i.e., a lover and follower of Jesus of Nazareth. While I resent his Christification, were it not for it I probably would never have heard of him.
4. I am a Bible lover, and I stick with the King Jimmy version. It pulls the fewest punches.
5. Bill says I'm the first Unitarian Universalist he ever met, so I assume I'm the first who met him.

As a Bible lover I particularly appreciate Bill's biblical sermons, and will remark on two.

The first is titled "The Mooning of Moses", based on Exodus 33:22-23. In it Moses beseeches God: Show me thy glory. Warning him that if he sees God's face he cannot live, God works it out as follows:

And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:

And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

(I note that you've got to be reading King Jimmy itself to get this unredacted version. Beware all substitutes.)

Now as I recall Bill works up to this in the context of forbidden knowledge and dangerous truth. Certainly he knows his share about the dangers of truth telling. Bill outraged the powers that be in Odon, Indiana when its favorite son, John Poindexter, got in trouble as the architect of the Iran Contra Affair, back in 1986. John was National Security Adviser to President Reagan. Ron was upset that Congress had cut off his funding of the Contra's efforts to overthrow the democratically elected Sandanista government in Nicaragua. So John arranged to sell banned arms to Iran and use \$6,000,000 of the proceeds to fund the Contras. The scandal broke. Odon, undeterred by felonies and rumors of felonies, proceeded to erect a John Poindexter Street sign. Bill, an Odon boy himself, took it and announced he was holding it for \$6,000,000 ransom, which he would give to the Sandanistas to, so to speak, level the playing field. Odon does not bear lightly the humiliation of a local boy who's done well, in which category John was firmly ensconced. This was particularly true where the one poking fun was a fallen home grown Fundamentalist preacher gone to weed and seed and New Age Communism. Bill was charged with Felony Theft, and faced 4 years in prison. Following the longest running circus in Daviess County history, Bill was convicted of a misdemeanor, and became the only person associated with the Iran Contra Affair to serve jail time as a result.

Bill told an unpopular truth that was heard by those least able to tolerate it, and was punished as severely as Odon could manage.

In large part as a result of that situation Bill was recognized by Hoosier novelist Kurt Vonnegut as a Holy Clown, earned a place in Howard Zinn's People's History series, and became a bit of a movie star and national celebrity.

So back to Moses and God's butt. Some truths are too risky or unpleasant or uncomfortable to see. So people hide their eyes, or have them hidden, lest they die, or worse. For many find public mortification worse, as did those ancient Greeks who preferred death to exile. Odon could not stand the truth that Bill forced into its consciousness: the Golden Child was a criminal who defiled the law and the Constitution and his oath to uphold them both. When they were forced to see it, they responded with total intolerance and a remarkable lack of a sense of humor. Of course, if they had let Bill get by with his prank and made nothing of it, it would have been no more than a tiny blip in the Bloomington Herald-Telephone, which was the only paper to cover it, clearly appreciating the political theater. Instead, they raised up a great storm which showed them to be the bullies and dolts that they were.

Bill and Jesus are only two of the countless millions of humans who have been sacrificed on the pyre of affronted dignity by those who can't stand the truth or take a joke.

The second sermon I address had a name which I can't recall, but a Bible verse that I can easily retrieve, 2 Kings 2:22-25. The Prophet Elisha has arrived, like the Lone Ranger, in Jericho. He finds the citizenry of that pleasant city facing a terrible drought and resultant crop failure. Elisha takes a mug of salt and pours it in their spring, and, behold, the waters spring forth, and the land becomes fruitful again. It is in the context of this act of supernatural kindness that Bill gets to his main point, that being the scripture I reference above:

So the waters were healed unto this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spake.

And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of

the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head.

And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.

And he went from thence to mount Carmel, and from thence he returned to Samaria.

Bill acknowledged that he had, perhaps, an inherent sympathy with Elisha, with whom he apparently shares a certain personal characteristic well known and rather obvious to those who behold it, yet rarely mentioned in polite company, as most of us who suffer from it are a bit sensitive about our condition. Nonetheless, even given the provocation of a horde of unruly moppets issuing forth from Bloomington and telling Bill, “Go away, Baldy”, I just don’t think he has it in him to call forth two she bears to attack the miscreants and tear forty-two of them to shreds.

As I recall, the morals of the story Bill drew from Elisha’s tale were two related truths. One: You just can’t take the Bible too seriously. As with God revealing his back parts to Moses, there is a complete disconnect between the narratives and common sensibilities that are broadly shared through the religions of the Abrahamic tradition. Most of us generally try to keep our pants on around others, and don’t seek wanton destruction of those who make fun of our foibles. Yet here we have Biblical examples of God acting exactly as none of us could imagine him doing. Two: The god depicted in the Christian Bible isn’t anyone you’d really want to hang out with. How those who worship him can do so without reservation or any sense of irony is in fact the source of great human tragedy. Surely the Christian Crusaders against Islamic peoples, whether in the twelfth or the twenty-first century, do not see the hilarity and fallibility of their assumed maker. Nor

do Jihadis teaching children to strap bombs to their bodies and explode them among other people in the name of God. Nor Israelis punishing the whole Palestinian people for the sins of those among them who prefer war to peace.

Bill and I surely prefer a god who sometimes looks and acts foolish, while muddling through like the rest of us. Clearly enough, that is the god in whose image man was made.

**Fire in the Soul – Action in the Feet  
A Radical Theology for the 21st Century**

Stuart D. Yoak

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;  
its temple, all space;  
its shrine, the good heart;  
its creed, all truth;  
its ritual, works of love;  
its profession of faith; divine living.

Theodore Parker (1810-1860)

These words by Theodore Parker, Unitarian preacher, writer, and social reformer, capture the authentic theology of Reverend Bill Breeden, Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Bloomington, Indiana.<sup>1</sup>

To experience Reverend Breeden's ministry is to come face-to-face with a powerful commitment to divine living and the imperatives of a faith that goes everywhere and embraces all living things. His dynamic theology, like Parker's, springs from the combined forces of universal love and social action.

**Divine Living**

Divine living means actually living one's faith—putting faith into practice, fulfilling our obligations to help others in need, and creating a better world each and every day. Reverend Breeden's theology is a ministry of doing. A ministry where each of us, in ways small and large, reach out to those society has ignored or left behind, but who will be found in homeless shelters, among

those injured and killed by gun violence, and especially those who languish in prisons on death row in communities across our country.

Like Parker, Breeden models divine living in his personal life, in his ministry to others and in the pulpit as he inspires us to participate in this joyous way of living our Unitarian Universalist principles.

### **Good Heart**

For Reverend Breeden, divine living arises from the good heart in ourselves and in others. Not a physical shine or place, but rather a sacred way of being in the world. From the good heart springs forth the power to love ourselves and to love others. The good heart reveals the personal awareness that we hold goodness at our core - universal goodness we share with all others.

The good heart also provides the confidence within us that our actions do make a difference, an assurance that we have the ability to heal ourselves and assist others in the healing process.

### **All Truth**

Throughout his life and ministry, Reverend Breeden has championed the Unitarian ideal of truth seeking. Whether in his commitment to expose inequality in our society, to combat racism, or to stand against the false belief that war can achieve peace, Reverend Bill has lived the Quaker admonition of speaking truth to power.<sup>2</sup>

Genuine truth seeking requires strong moral courage, as both Parker and Breeden recognized first-hand.<sup>3</sup> Such courage demonstrates an undaunted confidence that human progress is not only possible but an actual truth we can live by.

The Unitarian way of faith, as Parker exemplified, replaces creeds with deeds. And, Reverend Breeden's action theology is a passionate and wholehearted affirmation that goodness does prevail.

### **All Space**

The religious significance of the temple as a place of worship reaches across denominations, cultures, places and times. The temple of Reverend Breeden's theology has no walls, and instead he invites us to worship where ever and with whomever we find spiritual growth and fulfillment.

Nothing signifies this better than the prayer Reverend Breeden uses on Sunday services:

“Eternal spirit of life, we send a voice in four directs, to earth and sky...and all that is sacred in these gathered hearts.”

Breeden's ministry bridges differences and celebrates the web of life. He embraces the inter-connectedness of all living and non-living things that make up the world on which we live. As a humanist, he draws on science as well as spirit in acknowledging we are part of this planet. His ministry calls on each of us to care for the earth.

### **Works of Love**

Reverend Breeden's theology is love and works of love constitute his ministry. Universalists assert that human beings all begin with a good heart. Breeden (and Parker) enlarge this vision with the insight that it takes works of love to grow the heart.

Love defines us as the person we are and it defines how we treat others and the world around us. Love invites us to draw within our circle the other— those who are different from us, who disagree

with us, and even those who cause harm to us or to the earth. The power of love enables us to cast out our fear of the other and work together in celebrating the good heart we all share.<sup>4</sup>

For some, love may be a feeling or attraction, but in Breeden's ministry it is much more. Love is what we do. There is no force more powerful, but only if we put our love into action. Acts of love, social justice, and caring for others and our earth become the ritual for Unitarian Universalists. And, in the larger circle of faith, hope, and love - - the greatest of these is love.<sup>5</sup>

### Pure Joy

No exploration of Reverend Breeden's ministry would be complete without acknowledging the gift of music he shares with others. Music speaks to us in a powerful language that conveys both meaning and emotion. Music, sacred and secular, connects the heart and the head, and engages the soul. Breeden's ministry uses music to reach deep within the soul and bring people together in celebration of the love we share with one another.

Reverend Breeden's theology embraces pure joy and, in so doing, builds on Parker's construction of the Unitarian Universalist faith. Music making with others brings joy into our lives and expresses the joy in divine living.

In the spirit of joyful music and Reverend Breeden's ministry, I offer the following addition to Parker's words:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;  
its temple, all space;  
its shrine, the good heart;  
its creed, all truth;  
its ritual, works of love;  
its profession of faith; divine living, *and*  
*its music, pure joy.*

### A Prayer for Reverend Bill and Glenda Breeden

Eternal spirit of life, we send a voice in four directions, to earth and sky. And in the name of all that is sacred in these gathered hearts.

We send a voice of thanksgiving for the ministry Reverend Bill Breeden has shared with all of us,  
a voice that like sunshine goes everywhere people of good hearts will gather, to the farthest reaches of our world and to those we touch each day with truth and love.

We send a voice of thanksgiving for the music of the spheres and the harmony of joy we have created together.

And, we draw a circle around Reverend Bill and Glenda Breeden so that they may know that his ministry is alive and beating strong in the hearts of this blessed congregation, a circle of love so great that they may carry with them the blessings of this congregation throughout all their days.

In four directions, to earth and sky, and in all that is sacred in these gathered hearts, we do so send a voice.

## Endnotes

1. Theology “the study of religious faith, practice, and experience” Merriam-Webster Dictionary – online at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theology>
  2. A phrase coined by the Quakers. “The phrase ‘speaking truth to power’ goes back to 1955, when the American Friends Service Committee published *Speak Truth to Power*, a pamphlet that proposed a new approach to the Cold War. From Larry Ingle’s article “Living the Truth, Speaking to Power” as published in Chuck Fager’s *The Best of Friends*, Vol. 1, Kimo Press, 1998.
  3. Parker served as the abolitionists’ Minister at Large to fugitive slaves in Boston and provided fugitives with material aid, legal assistance, and help in eluding capture. In 1854, his assistance to Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave, led to Parker’s indictment by a federal grand jury. He was charged with obstructing a federal marshal. See: *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*, by Dean Grodzins, University of North Carolina Press, 2007. See also: “Theodore Parker, radical theologian” by Dean Grodzins, <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/170709.shtml>
- “Many people know of Breeden because of his extraordinary experience after appropriating a street sign in his hometown that honored Odon’s John Poindexter, who, as national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan, led several operations in what was labeled the Iran-Contra Affair and was convicted of five counts of lying to Congress (the convictions were later overturned on appeal). For a long time, Breeden was the only person to serve jail time for anything related to Iran-Contra (felony theft of that \$35 street sign) and the whole head-scratching incident became the topic of a 1994 PBS documentary, titled *The Times of a Sign*.” –  
See: <http://www.magbloom.com/2014/04/bill-breeden-activist-photogallery/#sthash.XCjQ4hCs.dpuf>
4. “There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath punishment; and he that feareth is not made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:18, Holy Bible, American Standard Version
  5. “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13, Holy Bible, New International Version