

ROCKY MOUNTAIN CONFERENCE  
*Reflections*  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

www.rmucc.org

March 2010

## Soaring

By David K. Popham

**G**rowing up in Kentucky, I anticipated the strong winds of March. The first breezes aloft were a signal for us kids to run to storage, or stores, or grandparents as kite flying season had arrived. By April the wind would be uncertain, but in March we could soar with the hawks and crows who rode the thermals high above the cornfields.

With the winds arriving my brother and I would rush to the store. Drooling, we eagerly combed the kite display. We checked new designs and the latest in high flying technology. It was a point of pride that our kites be an expression of ourselves cut free from gravity.

Out on the open hill top with the wind twisting our coats around us, we would launch our prized flying machines. The kids who flew their kite the highest or the longest held the boasting rights. Steadily we let out the lines, holding our breath as the kites climbed into the heavens. Feeling the tug of the string we accepted the invitation to let our imaginations soar. That is, until the sudden and dreadful loss of tension, signaling the kite was in a crash dive. If we ran fast enough the kite might regain altitude. But more often than not, the kite would lunge and spiral into the ground – proof that Newton was right all along.

From my time on the hill, I learned two important lessons about kites. First, it is the tension on the string that creates resistance and enables the kite to fly. Second, it is the weight of the tail that stabilizes the kite and enables it to rise as high as the string is long.



From these kite lessons I have been able to appropriate the deep wisdom of our faith. Real freedom is not unfettered do-as-you-please soaring. Rather true soaring is disciplined hope in the midst of struggles for peace and wholeness.

Soaring is not getting through this life without distress, but singing a spiritual in the midst of difficulty that leaves legs aching from dancing its joyous rhythm.

Soaring is not avoiding those things that leave us for dead, but rising with Lazarus and gnawing on the prime rib of life knowing it never tasted so good.

Soaring is pulling with all your strength on the resistance of injustice and imbalance, recognizing that it will lift you up and not drag you down.

Soaring is discovering, as Paul the apostle did, that “We have this confidence in Christ Jesus...”

Run hard. Run fast. Let the blast of your own sonic boom resonate through the resistance. Cornfields never look the same to those who have seen the tops of the clouds.

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## Sharing and Caring

**A NEIGHBOR** is a person who cares about another person. It doesn't matter if he lives 1,000 miles away in a storm ravaged area. UCC Church members from all over the country have come to the aid of their neighbors in New Orleans. They may not have known them before, but those that have met and worked together in cleaning out a home have established a bond of love, compassion and caring. Jesus tells us to "love our neighbor as our self." It is easy to look at a person's home and say, "This could be my home. This is my neighbor, my brother or sister in Christ. How can I help?"

In the four years since after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, thousands have volunteered their time through the National Disaster Ministries and Volunteer Ministries, funded by One Great Hour of Sharing.

**IN SOUTH INDIA** eating mushrooms as a part of the meal has become popular only in the last ten years, in part because mushroom cultivation has begun with much enthusiasm.

Through a grant from One Great Hour of Sharing, three women from The Center for Working Women attended a training course in a nearby Agriculture College and became trainers.

Mushroom cultivation requires little space and can be done inside the house. A single woman can cultivate mushrooms with waste materials and waste fodder from the farm. Seeds are easily available and a woman can earn an income without much strain.

**AT THE FIRST PERFORMANCE** of an 'All Our Children' children's theater project in Iraq's only institute for the autistic, the

director reported. "I saw something spark in the children I haven't seen in five years," the entire length of her tenure. Affectless children laughed for the first time. A child who would never approach strangers eagerly went to the actors.

A consortium of humanitarian agencies, supported by One Great Hour of Sharing, All Our Children hopes to mount up to thirty performances to Iraqi children in hospitals, orphanages, refugee camps and in poor neighborhoods. The goal is to improve the emotional health of these children who are disabled, fearful, anxious and depressed, their childhoods lost amid war, looting and insecurity.



**AS THE EMBERS** from the Balkans wars continue to cool down, and the region settles into a tenuous peace, UCC/ Church World Service is moving into longer-term development

projects. "We know what the risks are in creating dependence on paternalistic relief aid," said Vitali Vorona, CWS Balkans Director. "That is why we focus on assistance that empowers people and helps them generate their own resources."

Among the empowered people were 250 families in three villages near Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina who received agricultural assistance in the form of 22,000 kilos of seed potatoes.

To "payback" the seed potatoes loan, the communities sent more than 35 tons of potatoes to seven soup kitchens throughout the country, where more than 6,000 people received food—based on need, not on ethnic background. The families are on their way to independence, and in the process, they are helping to build peace in a country still struggling with the legacy of war.

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## Listening for God

*By Tom Rehling*



The United Church of Christ has proudly proclaimed that “God is still speaking.”

God has spoken in ancient times and, I believe, continues to speak to and through us today.

Sometimes God speaks to our hearts and other times through actions. Chances are that God communicates with us far more often than we are aware.

The book of Acts includes the story of Peter being inspired to preach to a diverse crowd of people. Amazingly, everyone heard Peter’s message in his/her own language.

People were caught up in the moment and aware that something extraordinary was happening. As they talked among themselves, they asked two important questions. First, they asked, “What does this mean?” Then they asked, “What are we supposed to do?”

Are you hearing God in your life? If not, pick a day this week and “listen” for the “voice” of God.

- Pay attention all of the ordinary and extraordinary things that happen in your day.



- Notice the people who speak to you and those around you in public areas.
- Enjoy the sunrise, smell the air, feel the grass, and stare at the moon.

As you go through the day ask yourself, “What does this mean?” and “What I am supposed to do?”

God is still speaking!

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## Change and renewal

*By Peter Sawtell*

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Though most New Year's resolutions have gone by the wayside by now, their lessons can remain, IF they coincide with slower and deeper change.



While sudden conversions in belief and behavior can happen, most of us will move slowly through deep changes. Religious educator Katherine Turpin writes about "ongoing conversion" as more realistic than sudden transformation.

An old hymn makes the point that "new occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth." Major changes in how we think and live will be instinctive and durable when they align with a changed awareness about the world and our place in it. We'll know that our hopes for new beginnings have come when what was once normal and treasured becomes grating and uncouth.

At the church where I am a member, the children's story during worship is often a "secular" children's book. A long-time favorite book has been Miss Rumphius – a lovely story about a woman's intentional and unconventional life seeking adventure and meaning. The last and most challenging of her goals is to spread beauty in the world. She finally achieves that by scattering flower seeds across her English countryside.



Last spring, as the narrative concluded with her sowing of lupine seeds, I saw quite a few people squirming in their seats. After church, as we slurped coffee and munched cookies, we talked about our discomfort.

"Miss R. was spreading an invasive species, wasn't she?" was the gist of the comments. The lupines that she seeded took over the hillsides, displacing other plants, and disrupting the ecosystem. Other people listened in to our coffee hour conversation, and they, too, quickly realized the implications of Miss Rumphius' attempt to beautify the world.

Our increasing awareness of ecological relationships and fragile habitats made a favorite and familiar story less appealing. There is

much about the story that is wonderful -- her setting of life breaking out of social expectations, and questing for beauty the world. But the thoughtless sowing of flowers without an appreciation for environmental impact doesn't sound nice anymore. That form of spreading beauty is not something that we want to teach our kids, at least not without some serious discussion. Time makes ancient good uncouth.



That reading of Miss Rumphius was a moment of new beginning for many. It was a sudden realization of our changed awareness, and of shifted values. Collectively, we have come to see a greater beauty in ecological health than in hillsides covered with purple lupine blossoms.

That change came slowly and quietly. There hadn't been a sermon or educational program on invasive species. Nobody led a campaign against the evil Miss Rumphius. Through the last few years, though, a growing and pervasive sense of being part of the intricate web of creation has taken hold in the church. Our theologically grounded awareness of ecological responsibility now shapes the way we hear a lovely children's story -- just as it leads us to pull things that can be recycled out of the trash cans.



That is what real change looks like. When a beloved and familiar story sets your teeth on edge, then you know that a different set of values has taken hold.

The disappearance of Miss Rumphius from church is an indicator that this congregation -- and perhaps the larger society, too -- is "getting it". The spontaneous reaction from so many members of the church indicates that ecological awareness is starting to be written in the DNA of the congregation.

New beginnings come slowly, and take hold in surprising ways. A rash resolution on New Years Eve isn't likely to be followed if some of those precursors have not taken root. On the flip side, a congregation's commitment to environmental stewardship will be lived more fully when the values and knowledge which shape that commitment have been affirmed and nurtured.

Real change in our personal beliefs and behavior, and real change in our congregations, is a gradual process of "ongoing conversion". Significant steps in that transformation will take hold when they build on an existing foundation. But when that foundation is present, then what once seemed good and normal -- Miss Rumphius sowing lupines, or power plants spewing carbon dioxide -- will become uncouth and unacceptable.

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