

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## The Infinite Inventory

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**FIRST READING** *Wisława Szymborska***Nothing's a Gift**

Nothing's a gift, it's all on loan.  
 I'm drowning in debts up to my ears.  
 I'll have to pay for myself  
 with my self,  
 give up my life for my life.

Here's how it's arranged:  
 The heart can be repossessed,  
 the liver, too,  
 and each single finger and toe.

Too late to tear up the terms,  
 my debts will be repaid,  
 and I'll be fleeced,  
 or, more precisely, flayed.

I move about the planet  
 in a crush of other debtors.  
 some are saddled with the burden  
 of paying off their wings.  
 Others must, willy-nilly,

account for every leaf.

Every tissue in us lies  
 on the debit side.  
 Not a tenacle or tendril  
 is for keeps.

The inventory, infinitely detailed,  
 implies we'll be left  
 not just empty-handed  
 but handleless too.

I can't remember  
 where, when, and why  
 I let someone open  
 this account in my name.

We call the protest against this  
 the soul.  
 And it's the only item  
 not included on the list.

**SECOND READING** *from the prophet Micah in the Hebrew Bible*

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God?  
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?  
 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?  
 Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly  
 and to love mercy  
 and to walk humbly with your God.

**THIRD READING** *from Bob Franke, from his song, Thanksgiving Eve*

What can you do with each moment of your life but love till you've loved it away?  
 Love, till you've loved it away.

## The Infinite Inventory

Picture an airport, a terminal, a gate, and 200 people in various stages of advancing despair. They've been there maybe an hour, going on two, waiting for word on their flight, which has been delayed by some problem with the weather or the engine or whatever. Everyone's day, everyone's plans, have been ruined and it's about to get worse. An announcement comes on that our flight is now cancelled, and the people dissolve into exhausted low-level chaos, making their weary way to the line at the counter. One woman barges ahead, her roller bag deployed now as a steam roller. She barrels up, furious, fist-pounding, her voice so loud that we can all hear it above the crowd: "Well that's not good enough! I just want what I'm entitled to!" She says it again, even louder, "You tell me what I'm entitled to!"- a white woman yelling at two workers, one an older African American woman, the other a younger Latino man. (Does this matter? I don't know...) "I just want what I'm entitled to," she says, and 199 people who don't know each other at all glance at one another, we raise our eyebrows, we're silently embarrassed, together, on behalf of all of humanity.

Entitlement is one way to manage your day, or your life: in a constant state of umbrage over promises denied. All of us fall into this once in a while, though typically not at top volume. A missed flight is one thing, but if we move through this life resentfully tracking what's owed us by the universe and how we've been let down, we're going to be bitter and angry a lot of the time. (I'm not talking here about human rights or civil rights – the necessities of survival.)

There's another way to travel, another way to orient the heart. The poet Szymborska says, *Nothing's a gift in this life. It's all on loan.* She counts the catalog of things, the infinite inventory of blessings unearned and undeserved, beginning with breath itself and the physical body, and including the animals and plants around us, stars above and soil below, sunlight, seasons, family and friends, fingers and toes, memory, mind, the mind's eye, our intelligence, our abilities, our agency. *I'm drowning in debts up to my ears,* she says. *Every tissue in us lies on the debit side... I can't remember where, when, and why I let someone open this account in my name.* Everything's on loan, except our soul, which is the means by which we may respond, if we choose, to the life we've been granted, our brief sojourn here. In the cosmic economy, we're strangers here, refugees just passing through, and anything we think is ours is borrowed. *I'll have to pay for myself with my self,* she says, *give up my life for my life* – which sounds vaguely, faintly, like something Jesus may have said, something about losing your life to find your life. It's a stern, almost Puritan arithmetic, archaic in this age of ego and entitlement. To hold everything as borrowed is to move with gratitude, humility and ultimately joy. In a song we sometimes sing here another poet says,

*There are sorrows enough for the whole world's end;  
there are no guarantees but the grave...  
What can you do with each moment of your life,  
but love till you've loved it away?*

How do you keep your own chart of accounts, what's owed to you and what you'll love away? That's another way of asking, *what religion are you?*

Last year the Unitarian Universalist Association brought out a small anthology of essays, mostly by younger UU ministers and lay leaders, some of them leaders of color. The book is called *Turning Point*, and it asks exactly this, *what religion are we?* In these early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, right now, right here, what kind of religion is Universalism? The book is an affectionate but chastening critique of the liberal religious experiment, now three and a half centuries old in America; it looks at the origins and the future of our current theologies, practices, and culture. Our Board here has committed to reading and reflecting on these essays this year; some committees may be joining them, and there'll be copies in the book cart in the Social Hall if you want to read along.

Fred Muir, the editor, says in the first chapter that our movement stands now at a kind of crossroads. Having challenged orthodoxies, dogmas, doctrines for a long, long time, and championing the individual (who is autonomous, free, and answerable to no authority except his or her own truth), Muir says Unitarian Universalism needs in this moment to recalculate its emphasis— from an ideology of individualism to a vision of Beloved Community. He says we're in grave danger of becoming “the ichurch,” with a lowercase “i,” like the phone: small, self-centered, increasingly irrelevant because of our homogenous, elitist past. Fred Muir cites a “trinity of errors” that weaken our potential to be (to continue to be) a radical, powerful, prophetic liberal faith. Those errors are *individualism*; an old attitude of *exceptionalism* (a tendency that creeps around sometimes to speak disparagingly of other faiths, especially those we ourselves have left behind); and a *distrust of power and authority and healthy organization*, especially in smaller congregations.

Some years back the denomination launched a brief marketing campaign that captured all of this in a single unfortunate slogan that appeared on billboards and bumper stickers, and in print and online ads. It said, “Unitarian Universalism: the religion that puts its faith in you.” I remember thinking when I saw it, “In *me*? Well, *that* can't be a good idea...” Yes, we trust every child and each adult to build a moral life and shape a unique creed and develop the personal practices, the spiritual disciplines, to grow their souls and serve this world with courage and with grace; we “build our own theologies,” but we put our *faith* in something larger, deeper, more eternal than our own single selves. My faith is in the web of life, the breath of life, the spirit some call Holy which breathes through all time and all space, the *God of many names and beyond all naming* which is creator and creation both. My faith is in community, persons bound by covenant, in families, congregations, deep affiliations, and in families of peoples, old nations and the great community of beings. My faith is in the ancestors I've never known and descendants I will never meet, the cloud of witnesses whose work we carry on. A religion that “puts its faith in you” – or me – would be a shaky, small and scary thing. (No offense!)

In reading this new book about the history and future of our movement, I think I'm right, and not totally deluded, in my sense that this church, our church, is moving mostly in the right direction. We say we're here *to grow our souls and serve the world*, and something in that tension guards a balance among personal need (which is real), personal devotion (which is essential) and prophetic action (which is our calling). Old time theologians used to say that the role of the liberal church was *to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable* which is what I think we're still about. We're here for solace and hard work, never one without the other.

Sometimes, there is no question: our spiritual growth comes through comfort: when we are weary and worn, when we are sorrowing, suffering, afraid, made small by shame (not remorse, which comes from within and may be appropriate, even required – but shame, which comes from outside of ourselves, and gets into the spirit; toxic shame which attaches to a person’s circumstance – you think of mental illness, addiction, economic class, physical capacity, body type, the repercussions of abuse. Shame attaches to circumstances, bullies you into believing that your circumstances are the same as your essence and that you yourself are flawed- that’s *shame*.) The church exists, this one just the same as any other, to hold us up, hold us together, when we are holding shame or grief or fear or loss, when you lose your bearings, lose your job, lose people whom you cherish, lose your faith, lose your way. The church exists to remind us what we are - which is beloved – and whose we are: we are children of God, whether you believe in God exactly or not. We *belong*; we are worthy, just as trees are worthy. The church exists because there are people who don’t believe this, can’t trust it, have forgotten who and what they are, and I’d say that is each of us at some point in our lives. The church exists to comfort us, to bring us safely home – through its theological orientation (what we hear on Sundays, in words, in music, in coffee hour, in the children’s classrooms), and through the building of community, setting a table at which everyone is welcome. This is Universalism, the larger Love that will not let us go.

The soul is nurtured by solace. But you know there’s more to church than that. We don’t come only to be comforted. Sometimes we do, but that’s not all. The congregation isn’t here just to meet our needs. We don’t want to be the ichurch, the me-church, a casual, comfortable, pleasant Sunday experience with good coffee, great music, free childcare, entitlements and perks from which we can withdraw at any time if we don’t like the topic, the speaker, the songs, the cookies, the cost. I know that you’re not here for ichurch, that you do not come seeking a slipshod, feel-good, superficial, spiritual smorgasbord. I know because I know you, I see you every day here teaching children, visiting in hospitals and homes, serving selflessly on committees that do hard and sometimes thankless work to raise money, raise awareness, finance mortgages and pay them off, design and implement new furnace systems. I see you stepping way outside your comfort zone to welcome folks from Project Home (to companion families laid low by bad luck, bad circumstances, homelessness - people not at their best at the end of long days on the street and on the bus that brings them here, and here you are at the end of your own long day, sitting with the people as if you were called to this, built for this, waiting all your life for this humbling opportunity laid low, compelled by some silent commandment to set aside your own needs and serve the abject need of someone else – I see this every day here and I am in awe). I see you working in the garden, the playground, or standing tall downtown with fists raised, tears streaming, in vigil, in holy resistance, standing on the side of love to testify that Black Lives Matter, though the structures of supremacy, the structures of privilege on which our own white lives depend, say otherwise. I see you bring your faith to bear to struggle with all this. I see you making coffee here on Sunday, making dinner Wednesday night, running Auctions, concerts, the drop-in place for at-risk youth– all these small works in the Great Work, returning love for love. It is an infinite inventory of generous gifts paid forward.

This is, in one poet’s words, *a serious house on serious earth*, and that gravity grounds all the music and art, the playful, laughing loving embrace of community; that gravity grounds the

friendly house in something deeper, more eternal than itself. We come here for comfort, absolutely, and also to be challenged to the core, to be held -and held accountable.

What religion are you?

I'll speak just for myself. I know that I need and even want not only a gentle, joyful, forgiving spirituality to hold me together, but also theology that sometimes will rip me apart; a religion to break my hard heart; to open as if with a crowbar my closed mind; to rouse, not gently but rudely and loudly, my slumbering comfortable conscience; and to put me in my place, a beloved, worthy place, but a small place, in the great, grand scheme of everything – a humble place. I want a religion that puts my ego, the sometimes monstrous self, into right proportion, that demands of me a certain awe, and a certain profound sympathy; a religion to remind me that I'm not here, on this earth and in this life just to be beloved, but to love. To remember everything is borrowed. I want and I need a religion that compels me to notice, to name and to rectify all the times when I overstep or I fall short, the actions and inactions that were once, usefully, called *sin*, sins of omission and commission. Such a useful word, and I would use it more except I know that you'd all hate that – but I do believe we are seeking a religion to build moral muscle in us one by one and as a people; to build what was once, usefully, called character, and to build it in our children, so that they will grow not only tender hearts, compassionate hearts but brave and mighty hearts.

Our age now is in some ways no different from that of the people long ago who braced themselves when barefoot prophets came to town, with their wild eyes and their ranting. The people were not generally glad to see these guys, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, because for all their bluster and calling them out as wicked sinners in a wicked system, these uninvited visitors often spoke a plain and inconvenient truth. The people wondered all the time, *what do I need to do to be a good faithful person, true to my religion? Should I bring a thousand sheep, rivers of oil, burnt offerings, recite all the antiquated prayers?* Shall I just be pious, and nice? These things would in fact be easy, said the prophet Micah, but they're not actually what the Lord or this life really asks of us. We're called to act justly with each other, intimately and globally. We're called to love mercy, to not pound our fists and shout at airport counters, to forgive ourselves and each other a thousand times, and begin again, and then again, in love. We're called to go humbly with our God, with that which we call holy- which may be nature, which may be humanity, which may be a much, much higher power, whatever embodies our ultimate concern. We're here to take stock of the infinite inventory of blessings we have known, and to act accordingly. The church serves to remind us.

It used to be, not long ago, that new members here and visitors would ask up front when they came in, "What do you believe here? What do Unitarians believe?" That's an interesting question, and important, but not as interesting or important as *What do you believe in?* which is a deeper question, and which seems to me to invite a different kind of answer, less individuated and more outward-looking.

*Ours is a tradition, we are a people, who believe in love and justice, in the redeeming power of love to hold and heal broken spirits, and to repair our broken world.*

*We are a people brave enough and humble enough to believe in something larger, deeper, more eternal than ourselves, and whatever that mystery is, we believe it shows up in community.*

You have your own responses. And even this question is not as deep or urgent as the one I hear people asking now. There's a shift, I think, in the way that people come to congregations now, busy people who might just as well stay home. They ask, *What kind of life are you inviting me into? What kind of religion is this, and what will it ask of me, this Unitarian Universalism as preached and practiced at White Bear UU Church at this exact point in the history of all things?*

“We’re here to grow our souls and serve the world in love,” we say, “to dwell in peace, to seek the truth and help each other” which is the beginning of a life-long answer.

For a few years now, our new member classes have culminated each time in a little worship service. We hold it in here in the sanctuary for those who are signing the membership book – a small circle of chairs, the chalice, some singing, some words. We ask each person to say what they hope to find here, to describe for us this life they want to be invited into. We show them the red membership book, hundreds of names over decades of years, fellow travelers, some long parted, and some 700 or so still very much close by. We read them some old words, the Bond of Union from Unity Church –Unitarian in St. Paul, from which, in 1956, this congregation was formed. The words sound old-fashioned now, and quaint:

As those who believe in religion,  
As those who believe in Freedom, Fellowship, and Character in Religion,  
As those who believe that the religious life means the thoughtful, trustful, loyal and helpful life,  
As those believe that a Church is a Brotherhood [*sic*] of helpers,  
wherein it is made easier to lead such a life-  
We join ourselves together, name, hand, and heart,  
as members of ~~Unity~~ *White Bear Unitarian Church.*

They crossed it out just like that – not ungratefully or irreverently, but with gratitude for solid roots and hope for a bright future.

*Come in*, we say. The house is made holy by our presence – not because we’re so holy and so awesome, but because our presence in this place signifies our need to be together to acknowledge the infinite inventory of blessings we have known, to heal an infinite inventory of sorrows, and to build by hand and heart, by grace and by our will, the Beloved Community. The holiness is in the questions that we carry in and place like offerings upon an altar:

*What will we do with each moment of this life,  
- this borrowed, beautiful life -  
but love till we’ve loved it away?*

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