

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Gathered Here

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING from Oliver Sacks, writer and physician (adapted)

My mother and her 17 brothers and sisters had an Orthodox Jewish upbringing — all photographs of their father show him wearing a yarmulke, and I was told that he woke up if it fell off during the night. My father, too, came from an Orthodox background. Both my parents were very conscious of the Fourth Commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”). No work was allowed, no driving, no use of the telephone; it was forbidden to switch on a light or a stove. Being doctors both, my parents made exceptions. They could not take the phone off the hook or completely avoid driving; they had to be available, if necessary, to see patients, or operate, or deliver babies.

Each week around midday on Friday, my mother doffed her surgical attire and devoted herself to making gefilte fish and other delicacies for the Sabbath meal. Just before evening fell, she lit the ritual candles, cupping their flames with her hands, and murmuring a prayer. We all put on fresh clothes. My father lifted his silver wine cup and chanted the blessings.

On Saturday mornings, my three brothers and I trailed our parents to Cricklewood Synagogue, a huge shul built in the 1930s in northwest London. Though I could not understand the Hebrew in the prayer book, I loved its sound and especially the old medieval prayers. All of us met and mingled outside the synagogue after the service. After a cold lunch at home — gefilte fish, poached salmon, beetroot jelly — Saturday afternoons, if not interrupted by emergency medical calls for my parents, were devoted to family visits. Uncles and aunts and cousins would visit us for tea, or we them; we all lived within walking distance of one another.

I chanted my bar mitzvah portion in 1946, but this, for me, was the end of formal Jewish practice. I did not embrace the ritual duties of a Jewish adult and I gradually became more indifferent to the beliefs and habits of my parents, though there was no particular point of rupture until I was 18. It was then that my father, inquiring into my sexual feelings, compelled me to admit that I liked boys.

The next morning my mother came down with a look of horror on her face, and shrieked at me: “You are an abomination! I wish you had never been born!” The matter was never mentioned again, but her harsh words made me hate religion’s capacity for bigotry and cruelty.

Years later, well past middle age, I connected again with religion and with my family through a distant cousin. He is a man of great intellectual power but also of great human warmth and tenderness, and deep religious commitment — “commitment,” indeed, is one of his favorite words. He is a renowned economist, and although, in his work, he stands for rationality, there is no conflict for him between reason and faith.

In 2005, he received a Nobel Prize. He was not entirely an easy guest for the Nobel Committee, for he went to Stockholm with his family, including 30 children and grandchildren, and all had to have special kosher plates, utensils and food, and special formal clothes, with no biblically forbidden admixture of wool and linen. He made a point of saying that, had he been compelled to travel on a Saturday, he would have refused the prize. His commitment to the Sabbath, its utter peacefulness and remoteness from worldly concerns, would have trumped even a Nobel.

My cousin invited me, and my lover Billy, to join him in his home for a Sabbath meal. I felt a little fearful— my mother’s words still echoed in my mind — but we were warmly received. How profoundly attitudes had changed, even among the Orthodox. And some things hadn’t changed: the peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering what if: What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?

And now I am old and weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer. I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, and to traditions and community and family. My cousin said to me, “Sabbath is extremely beautiful. It is about improving one’s own quality of life.”

SECOND READING from Theresa Novak, Unitarian Universalist

Saved

Come into this place
 There are healing waters here
 And hands with soothing balm
 To ease your troubled days.
 Bring your wounds and aching hearts
 Your scars too numb to feel.
 Your questions and complaints,
 All are welcome here.
 Rest awhile.
 Let the warmth of this community
 Surround you,
 Hold you,
 Heal you.
 When you feel stronger,
 Just a bit,
 Notice those that need you too.
 They are here.
 They are everywhere.
 Weep with them
 Smile with them,
 Work with them,
 Laugh along the way.
 Pass the cup,
 Drink the holy fire.

Take it with you
Into the world.

We are saved
And we save each other
Again,
again,
and yet again.

Gathered Here

It hit my heart.

It hit your heart, says a tiny Unitarian Universalist theologian, Joshua Holzer, three years old, as his parents are talking about what their congregation, this congregation, means to them.

It hit your heart? he asked.
Yes, says his mom, *in a good way*.

It hits my heart.
It touched my soul.
It saved my life.
It knows my kids, and loves them.
It makes me cry.
It makes me think.
It makes me feel.
It holds me up.
It gives me hope.
I'm forced to sing.
I'm asked to care.
I asked for help.
It gave me help.
It needs my help.
It hits my heart.
It heals my heart.
It grows my soul.
It serves the world.
It calls me out to serve the word.

These are the things I hear you say all the time when you talk about your church, in new member classes and Board meetings, youth group, committees, coffee hour, choir.

These are the things on which people think who live...

The list comes from W.E.B. DuBois, American scholar, historian, activist, a founder of the NAACP, writing a century ago:

These are the things on which people think who live: of their own selves and the dwelling place of their parents; of their neighbors; of work and service; of rule and reason and women and children; of Beauty and Death and War.

These are the things, he said, on which people think who live -- people who are alive and know they are alive, who choose to live not only a material life but also a transcendent life, spiritual, ethical, wide-awake life; a life of integrity with head and heart and hands all joined to needs and dreams beyond one's own.

They are the very things that you gather here to think about and speak and sing and pray about every Sunday morning. We think on

our own souls...

and the dwelling places of our parents, whether living or passed, and of their parents, all the way back: your own history and world history and natural history, history back beyond memory, back to where all stories meet, our common, human ground;

We think of our neighbors, said DuBois, however generously or narrowly you may construe the neighborhood. Who gets to sit at the Welcome Table? Who's excluded from the circle on purpose or unwittingly? Who decides?

We think of our neighbors, he said, and *our work*: the privilege of service, the imperative of lives spent out in love,

and rule and reason and women and children (whomever now may be among the least of these, the oppressed, the invisible, those without voice).

People who are alive, he said, awake and aware, think on all these things, and *Beauty and Death and War...* It is a serious list.

That we choose to think on it, and mourn and celebrate these things and act on them together, instead of by ourselves, alone, matters. That we choose to gather instead of living solitary, one by one, which we could freely do -- this gathering matters. That we have chosen, each of us, to mingle our own liberty -- our search for truth and meaning -- with the inconvenient liberty of everybody else in the room, 700 other people, despite the risks and the excruciating compromises that such joining imposes, matters. That relinquishment of individual sovereignty, that rapprochement, matters.

And because we've chosen freely, the bond that holds us each to each and all together is not a burden for us here. It is a holy gift, a blessing, and it is far stronger than any bond imposed by creed or law, or fear or force, or even by tradition. It is our great covenant, to dwell together. It

is our call and our delight to join our hands and build, within the broken world and within the beautiful creation – to build within the only world we’ve got - the beloved community, which might lovingly repair the one, and reverently bless the other, repair the world and bless creation. To be a congregation matters; to consider, all together, these concrete and transcendent things, these intimate, ultimate things.

Someone wrote to me this week, a member of our Board, describing how she came here several years ago from another congregation. She said there was a song in her old church that she loved, but over time it made her angrier and angrier to sing it, a beautiful song called “All Are Welcome Here.” She said, “We should have sung except after every single line.” It is a lovely song:

*Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured,
taught and claimed as word within the Word;
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace;
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter
All are welcome. All are welcome. All are welcome in this place.* [Mary Haugen]

“They weren’t,” she said. “We weren’t – but we are, here. I am so proud to be with a group of people,” she wrote, “who give a damn about others each and every day.”

It is our aspiration, imperfectly embodied, and it is not easy. We stumble all the time. We scrape our knees, wound our pride, wound each other, drop our guard, start over. We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again, and yet again, in love. “All are welcome,” *all are saved*, is a wild, heretical theology, and we practice and practice this religion, trying to get it right. This week, we’ve had, hard meetings here about providing sanctuary to people who are undocumented, and providing safe home to people who are transgender; we’re providing beautiful meals for homeless adults with mental illness, and a haven for homeless teens and youth, and providing the grace of acceptance for people in our own midst, struggling mightily with burdens too heavy to carry alone. More and more, this room provides warm welcome to grieving families with no place else to go for a memorial service (someone called me just last night), or to wedding couples, with no place else to go when other congregations turn them down because their religion isn’t right, or their color or their orientation or their music or their money isn’t right or quite enough or white enough. Here we lean, we yearn, toward love and inclusion, theologically, politically, stretching our minds and our hearts and our bodies and our language across the perilous borders of race, of gender identity, of party affiliation, of age and experience and class, not to “help other people,” but to make our own selves whole. *All are welcome in this place*, at least that’s our aspiration: to sing the song unqualified. We want that news to hit the heart, to crack our hearts wide open, and that is a hard and holy way to do religion in this world right now. *We pick up a lot of strays here*, said someone here, some years ago, *and I’m one of them*, he said. We all are. We’re all seeking some kind of sanctuary (aren’t we?), some kind of grace, all seeking to love and be loved with unwavering love. It’s hard, particularly if your other aspiration as a liberal religious church is to be prudent, practical, pragmatic, reasoned, responsible and smart, and to have a balanced budget.

Jane Yolen, a writer of children's books, has a beautiful one in which she describes for very young readers sacred spaces all around the world: Mecca and the Wailing Wall, the River Ganges, Stonehenge. She writes,

*Hush,
This is a holy place, a sacred place,
where visions dwell,
[and dreams began] ...
Someone's God has stepped here,
slept here,
knelt here, dwelt here
spoken here of life, of death, of holy things.
Since you have been here,
truth has been shaped,
truth has been shifted,
truth has been shown in its many forms.
All truths.
One truth.
So walk softly,
talk softly,
be mindful of the dreams.
This place is a sacred place.
Hush.*

What qualifies? You think of Stonehenge, a circle built of monoliths so large that ancient people couldn't possibly have moved them. But they did, and according to the best science they knew (which may have been religion for them; we can't really know), somehow they arranged them with such precision that a beam of sunlight cast at dawn on the winter solstice still illuminates a barren plain, that's dark all year, with light. By the evidence of archeology we know little of those people. But by the evidence of intuition we imagine or remember people worshipping there, people wondering, singing, mourning, gathering their forces, gentling their fears. Sacred sites hold little messy human lives, wounded, gorgeous, human beings within the cosmic wheel of stars and time. It's how this house holds us, this altar where you bring your babies in for blessing and your beloved dead, bring in God and politics and poetry. It could stand five thousand years or crumble very soon. The building isn't sacred, but it is built on holy ground. Here we are kept mindful, always, that we're all adrift in the same boat. We're singing the same songs, asking the same questions that people everywhere have asked:

*Where do we come from?
What is our place, our rightful place, under the stars?
What is holy?
What is God?
What do we love, with all our heart and mind, and soul and strength?
What are we afraid of?
What can we trust, in the face of our fear?
To whom, to what are we accountable at the end of the day, at the end of our life?*

What shall we do with the gift of the days we are given?

These questions are the source of all our worship; they are our core curriculum for children; they are the purpose of our meeting every Sunday face to face; and they are not new.

I'm thinking of Oliver Sacks, who, in the reading, describes his love, as a child, of the Jewish world in which he was raised, a world within a world in post-war London: his orthodox parents and their neighborhood, their synagogue, Yiddish, Hebrew, gefilte fish, and Sabbath, his mother's candles making a temple of their table, his father's prayer calling from the ordinary present, every Friday night, into ancient time. Oliver lost all that, and left it, when his parents (so enlightened and intelligent, both doctors) could not bear to learn that he was gay. "My mother's harsh words, based on a verse from Leviticus, made me hate religion's capacity for bigotry and cruelty," he said. He became a famous physician and a writer, but he also became an addict, and lived with crushing loneliness for years. Decades later, by some miracle, he met up with his cousin, who embraced Oliver, now well past middle age, and who invited him, with his partner, to Sabbath dinner. There at that table Oliver found the sense of peace within himself that he'd last felt as a boy. "It infused everything, and I wondered, what if: what if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of life might I have lived? My thoughts drifted to the Sabbath, to tradition and community and family. My cousin said, "It is extremely beautiful. It is about improving one's quality of life."

This place is like that table.

Sometimes people are under the impression that Unitarian Universalism is some kind of new age, wispy fad, a fly-by-night, feel-good spiritual application easily down-loaded from any wacky website, an insubstantial trend with no theological heft, no articulate message, fluffy, flaky, marked most often by tiresome tirades, bordering on adolescent acting-out, against the mainline religions from which most of its members have fled.

(Why, do you think, would people be under this impression? Sometimes, when we fail to take our own faith seriously enough, we are our own worst enemy.)

For the record - our oldest congregations on this continent were established more than three hundred years ago; in Europe they're two centuries older than that. It is true that the earliest organized expressions of Unitarianism and Universalism were a certain kind of acting out, they were in fact reactions from within Christianity, critiques from within Protestantism, against the abuses of the medieval church and the state. Early Unitarians and Universalists were radical Christians who set out to offer, to proclaim, an alternative to superstitious religion, dogmatic religion, religion made dull by rote ritual, made dangerous by shame and the doctrine of unforgivable sin, religion that silenced the brilliance of the mind, that hated the wild passion of the body, religion corrupted by power and in cahoots with imperialism, dependent on mind control and sometimes on terror. It's fair to say that we still stand against all that. But those early visionaries, many of whom gave their lives for this free faith, did not for the most part intend to start up a new alternative religion; they believed they were continuing the Protestant Reformation, hoping to call the church back to its original beauty and power: the radical teachings of the rabbi Jesus, and the old idea that the gifts of free will and intelligence could be

tempered in a person, and balanced in communities, by compassion, humility, reverence and especially *agape*, or love. “We shall love one another as we are beloved by God,” said the Universalists, “boundlessly and without precondition.” Our movement was not and is not now an alternative to “conventional” religion; it was, and it is, like all sacred paths, an alternative to materialism, to commercialism and consumerism, an alternative to militarism, hypocrisy and greed. It sings songs of hope in the face of despair; love songs which are not sentimental or naive but deliberate and potent in the face of hatred; songs of wonder and gratitude even though our lives are short and sometimes difficult, littered with loss –and in all of this, like most religions at their best, we are doing nothing new or original. We are asking the old questions, as relevant and pressing and beautiful and hard in the 21st century as they were 3000 years before Jesus was born, or Buddha sat down, or Muhammad uttered a word:

What is sacred to you?

What do you love?

What do you fear?

What is your place, in the midst of a thousand stars?

What is the purpose of your days?

And what is it worth, to you and your family, that a space exists, and a community, to hold you and your questions?

These are not theoretical questions.

Over the course of this month you’ll hear more from the Pledge Committee and the Board, about how each of us, every one (members, friends, visitors) may answer. How can we hold – how must we each hold- responsibility for the health and sustenance of the house that holds us all? There’s no one else to hold it, maintain it and fund it. “It is extremely beautiful,” said the cousin of Oliver Sacks, welcoming him home to the family and faith that shaped him as child. Community, tradition, spiritual home – “It is about improving one’s quality of life.” Over the course of this month, I encourage you to listen to the pledge committee and the Board, and one another, with open, generous, curious and loving hearts. You are telling the story of your church, and it is a bright, strong story, full of possibility. This place renews us and transforms us- we renew and transform one another, in this house where all are welcome.

From Teresa Novak, Unitarian Universalist:

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There are healing waters here

And hands with soothing balm

To ease your troubled days.

Bring your wounds and aching hearts

Your scars too numb to feel.

Your questions and complaints,

All are welcome here.

Rest awhile.

Let the warmth of this community

Surround you,

Hold you,

*Heal you.
When you feel stronger,
Just a bit,
Notice those that need you too.
They are here.
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Weep with them
Smile with them,
Work with them,
Laugh along the way.
Pass the cup,
Drink the holy fire.
Take it with you
Into the world.
We are saved
And we save each other
Again,
again,
and yet again.*