

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Thick and Thin

Reverend Victoria Safford

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651.426.2369 vsafford@wbuuc.org

FIRST READING *from Tomas Tranströmer*

Romanesque arches

Tourists have crowded into the half-dark of the enormous Romanesque church.
Vault opening behind vault and no perspective.
A few candle flames flickered.
An angel whose face I couldn't see embraced me
and his whisper went all through my body:
Don't be ashamed to be a human being—be proud!
Inside you one vault after another opens endlessly.
You'll never be complete, and that's as it should be.
Tears blinded me
as we were herded out into the fiercely sunlit piazza,
together with Mr and Mrs Jones, Herr Tanaka and Signora Sabatini—
within each of them vault after vault opened endlessly.

SECOND READING *from Reverend Charles Grady, Unitarian Universalist*

Our churches are clearings in the wilderness of this time:
places of refuge and sanctuary for the bruised and tired,
and also places of healing and renewal.
They are 'workshops for common endeavor,'
and schools for learning and enlightenment,
transmitters and celebrators of a heritage,
tools for breaking down barriers.
tools for building new bridges.

Thick and Thin

From the music preceding the sermon, lines from Adam Guettel:

*A single voice in whispered prayer
can only pray to travel there
But [together] all as one
we sing our salvation
aloft and in formation.
Can we fly together
in a migratory V?*

Can we ever hope to be as wise as geese (who in my experience are not that smart, at least not on the ground)? Could we ever be as wise as geese, submitting our immense and impressive, our needy and spectacular egos, to travel in the same direction, helping one another as we fly through this life, believing (truly believing) it to be a *common* life, our days devoted to the common good, as if we (not just we in this room, but we humans) were one magnificent flock? Ava, thank you, and thank you, Mary – you’ve helped us hear anew an old, persistent question, about whether and how a gaggle of wild and woolly individualists can truly be or ever hope to become a true community, a beloved community.

Last summer, Charles Grady, Unitarian Universalist minister, offered a related question. This was in a sermon here in July. Charles said, *Each Sunday in this room we are likely to hear a Call to Worship beginning with these words, “Come in! Come into this house made holy by our presence...” And each time I hear it, a little red flag goes up in a corner of my mind: “Do we really make holy (that is, sanctify) this space just by being here? Isn’t that a rather prideful, narcissistic thing to say? Why do we think ourselves so special? Maybe we could do with a little humility instead. Perhaps we should turn it around: perhaps it is **this special place**, with all its dreams, joys, sorrows, work, music, aspirations, trials and celebrations, pent up inside these walls, that will make us, if not exactly holy, then at least strengthened and renewed, heartened in community for the business of living.*

Charles was minister here from 1966-1969; he died in January, 91 years old, and his memorial service was yesterday, so he is on my mind and in my heart. *Our churches*, he wrote, *are clearings in the wilderness of this time.* And he meant this time; this is recent writing. He meant this very time, with exactly this this much trouble and exactly this much beauty swirling all around us now. *Our churches*, he said, *are places of refuge and sanctuary for the bruised and tired, and also places of healing and renewal. They are ‘workshops for common endeavor,’ breaking barriers and building bridges.* Churches, he believed, and preached his whole life long, have a clear, strong, holy purpose, and it is more than intellectual stimulation; it is more than the relief of finding a tribe of others of like mind and resting easy in the relative comfort of homogeneity; it is more than friendship and socializing; it’s more than self-expression, or self-actualization, more than anything with “self” in the hyphenated title.

The church exists to hold and sanctify our sorrows and our joys, and to set these in the context of universal human suffering and universal gladness; to name and bless our memories of the past—our history, and to bless our re-membered, re-constructed vision of the future, when in distraction or despair we lose track of what that vision is, of where we’re trying to go one by one and together in our “migratory V.” The church blesses the memory of our future and our past, and calls us to live up to both.

The church exists to call you by your name and call you to account: to call you by your given name or chosen name, to acknowledge the shimmering constellation of identities that you comprise, your unique and unprecedented holiness and wholeness... and to call you to account. The church exists to hold us accountable to one another, and to all people, all persons, every sacred living thing, even unto seven generations. This is easy theoretically, in lofty Sunday morning words; the church calls us to practice all week long and on the ground, face-to-face and

one-on-one, to be Unitarian Universalists in person, all the time. Each one of us discerns what that must mean.

Within the confines of its walls and regardless of its walls, the agenda of the church is infinite and eternal. The church holds within the architecture of its building and the architecture of its worship- in every wedding and in the dedication of each child, in rituals of coming of age and in every funeral, every vigil, every time a committee lights a little chalice to commence its work- the church holds the arc of history, time out of time, so that we can move with integrity and joy through these times, our own times, which are rough and tumble times, but maybe no more so than other times, other generations. Ever and always, it is a clearing the wilderness.

The church exists that we may grow our souls and serve the world, and maybe, as one of your Board members said last Sunday in the *Welcome*, accidentally but wonderfully, “to *save* the world,” (she upped our game right there): to grow our souls and *save the world*, transform the world, upend this world, and shine light in every corner, any corner, where justice, freedom, peace, compassion are denied. The church exists that we might have a lens, a moral magnifying glass, through which we can read the signs of the times, a lens through which as religious people we can read a document like the proposed Federal budget released this past week, and read it not just politically, with our snarky and defensive opinions, but spiritually, morally, ethically, prophetically. How did that news land upon your spirit? With weariness, I’m sure, as with all the news this year, but then: to whom did your mind rush first, or your heart rush first, out of your chest, as you read through or heard recited, all the itemized cuts? What do you care about, stand for? What do you love? With who all else is your well-being, and your family’s well-being all bound up? The church exists to help us define words like “family.” Community. Commonwealth. Care. Think of your faith as a lens through which the morning news must be translated, comprehended and embodied, made incarnate. How does this play out on the ground, among us? Think of your religion as a lamp shining moral light upon a budget proposal that is almost biblical in its cruelty, its arrogance, and sinful in its greed. The church exists to say, “No, these cuts cannot stand.” (And I know, they probably won’t, not as they’re written, but even the spoken, cynical idea is dissonant and deeply wrong.) “This wall cannot stand. These cuts to food assistance, student loans, the postal service, Medicare, social security disability, veterans services, housing, children’s health care, AmeriCorps, environmental protection, regulation of banking and other industries, retirement for federal employees, prohibition against drilling in designated public lands, protection of the Great Lakes– these cuts will not stand.” *Our churches*, said Charles Grady, *are clearings in the wilderness of our time* – spiritual and also moral clearings. The church is like an expanse of flat, clear water (maybe it’s a pristine lake up north, maybe it’s a puddle in a parking lot) where migratory birds, weary travelers on an extraordinary journey, can stop and rest and check the map, check in on one another, on the family, and then take a breath, lift their wings, and find a better way.

It’s larger than any single one of us, and larger in fact, than all of us at any given time. In our new member classes here, we include a tour of the building. We stop in the Social Hall across the way. By then coffee hour has mostly cleared out, the bustle settles down, and in the rare quiet, we remember that not so long ago that space was the sanctuary (the “Meeting Room”) on Sunday mornings. All manner of strange and wondrous things took place: couples were married in there (some of you, in fact); babies dedicated, ministers ordained and installed, the beloved

dead released to memory and stars. That went on for 17 years, and before that, for more than 30 years, it was the sanctuary of the Methodist church, and strange and wondrous things took place: couples were married in there (some of you, in fact), babies were baptized, children confirmed, ministers ordained, the beloved dead released to memory and to the same old stars. There are no Methodist stars, no Unitarian stars. Places like this are passageways, they're portals, and we're all passing through between one eternity and the next. Charles was right to wonder: is this place really made holy by our presence, or are *we* somehow made more holy and more whole by the intentions and vision and dreams and failures and losses and loves of all these invisible travelers on either side of our brief sojourn here? Who will sit here 30 years from now, and what will be their common struggle and their joy? What deep and lasting vision, saving vision, might they hold to, knowing that we held it, too? Churches exist for reasons that are older and deeper and more eternal than any of us here, they exist *to the glory of God* – which one Unitarian Universalist minister defines as the totality of every living thing, every person, every living thing, that has ever existed or ever will: that, for him, is “the glory of God,” and to honor that, to revere that, to tremble before it, to wonder ceaselessly about it, to delight in it and, for the time we're here on earth with other sentient pieces of it, to defend it, to defend one another – that is the work the church gathers us to do. Sometimes this is effortless and lovely work – coming on a Sunday and singing. Sometimes it asks more of us. I'm thinking of those men who died in Portland Friday night. I'm talking about that level of defense.

David Brooks had a column several weeks ago about institutions that are “thin” and institutions that are “thick.” Thick and thin. “Some leave a mark on you,” he said, “and some you pass through with scarcely a memory.” Thin institutions call forth thin commitments. “There's an ever-present utilitarian calculus,” he says. It's a transactional, surface-level relationship, where you tend to ask, all the time, “Am I getting as much out of this as I am putting in? Is this working for me? Do I like this? Do I like everything about this? Is anything bothering me? Can I do better elsewhere?” Even if no money changes hands, it's very much a fee-for-service kind of feeling. But “thick institutions,” he writes, “have a different moral ecology. People tend to like the version of themselves that is called forth by such places,” even though such places demand a lot, a deep engagement, of heart and mind and conscience. Those who belong to them are motivated more by a sense of belonging and mutual benefit than by personal enrichment. You're looking inward and outward all at once, all the time. There's a sense that the thriving of the institution is good for the world in tangible and intangible ways. In a thin institution, you're in it just for yourself (which doesn't make it bad – it could be a health club, for example, or a coffee shop). But in a thick institution, self-interest blurs with the good of the whole, and the whole becomes very large. David Brooks' own example was a summer camp he worked in years and years ago, where certain values about right relationship to other people and the land, infused every activity and *transcended* the activities. The ethos and the ethics of the place made it more than fun or useful; it was deep and thick, and though friendship was not its core mission, still deep and intimate, lifelong relationships were forged. he people flew in a migratory V.

Congregations are very thick. We become part of something larger, and therefore must give up, must sacrifice, submit, a dimension of the self that maybe once served well, but now cannot. We give up the myth of autonomy, the myth of self-sufficiency and individualism. Not individuality – you're still a unique and sacred being – but something must submit; our freedom in community is necessarily encumbered. This grates on the American spirit; it grates on the old-line bootstrap

Unitarian spirit, for this is the brave and loving heart of Universalism: this is the interdependent web of which we are a part; this is, in Christian language, the love that is neither *caritas* (charity) nor *eros* (affection), but *agape*, the love of other as oneself; in Jewish terms it is I/Thou; it is what the novelist Alice Walker meant when she had a character say, “I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.” It is *namaste*, the holy in me which greets, as an old friend, the holy in you; in Islam it is submission, the loud, proud self willingly subsumed not by the community, but by the community’s beautiful vision. It isn’t set in stone, handed down on tablets. We shape that vision all together, and describe it, speak it, sing it in a chorus of diverse voices; it evolves as we do, over time. But it is larger than any one of us, and to give yourself to it is to claim, paradoxically, a kind of power - stronger together - power that is more grounded, with a deep, wide root system, more flexible, more lasting, than any power any single person can claim all on their own. This is the power of love, and it is reciprocal: this place will hold you, steady you, center you and care for you when you’re not strong on your own.

David Foster-Wallace, the great novelist-philosopher, wrote, “The freedom to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation, has much to recommend it. But there are other kinds of freedom. The really precious and important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways, every day.” *Welcome to our church*, as Dick Ottman would say.

The poet Tomas Transtroemer writes of being in a great cathedral:

*Tourists have crowded into the half-dark of the enormous Romanesque church.
Vault opening behind vault and no perspective.
A few candle flames flickered.
An angel whose face I couldn't see embraced me
and his whisper went all through my body:
“Don't be ashamed to be a human being—be proud!
Inside you one vault after another opens endlessly.
You'll never be complete, and that's as it should be.”
Tears blinded me
as we were herded out into the fiercely sunlit piazza,
together with Mr and Mrs Jones, Herr Tanaka and Signora Sabatini—
within each of them vault after vault opened endlessly.*

The church exists that we might practice here with one another, and then out there and everywhere we go, this sense of ourselves as incomplete and ever-unfolding, arch after vaulted arch. We’re incomplete, and insignificant, and magical mysterious, magnificent – and so is everybody else. We practice believing that here, and then take it on the road.

So here’s a story. A few years ago, one of you sent me an article about a woman whose church membership was reinstated many decades after she had died. She was kicked out of her congregation, voted out, dis-membered by the board of deacons or the elders or whomever held the power, and then years later, almost a hundred years later, they voted her back in. It was not a Unitarian Universalist church –we don’t really do that kind of thing. It was an amazing story:

Elizabeth Bartlett Grannis was a humanitarian, social reformer and pioneering suffragist, an active member of her New York City church for fifty years, at the turn of the 20th century. The church elders voted her out in a dramatic ecclesiastical trial because she'd brought charges against their pastor, who was wildly popular and great at raising money, but who was also a sexual predator against young women and young men, who'd been tried but not convicted of sexual assault. Even so, the congregation resented Elizabeth Bartlett Grannis making trouble, and furthermore they resented the presence in their all-white church of Grannis' adopted daughter, who was six years old and black. "I suppose to certain of the elders, my child was repulsive," she wrote later. "They could not bear to see me in fellowship with that child. They could not bear to see how I would let her touch me with her little brown hands." They voted her out on some trumped up charge involving decency or decorum, but here's the thing: she never left. Elizabeth Grannis continued to attend her church on Sunday mornings, suffering the hypocrisy of the pastor, and then the complacency of his successors. In time they fired the bad guy, when they discovered he'd taken a lengthy vacation in Canada, at the church's expense, with a young woman who was not his wife, but they did not reinstate Elizabeth Bartlett Grannis. Side by side her daughter, she continued to worship there. She believed it was her church as much as anybody else's, and she believed in its mission and vision, which were larger (older, deeper, better) than its current iteration. She believed that the church would unfold into goodness, find its way home to the glory of God, she believed that people and institutions evolve over time, or they can. It was thick for her, not thin, her commitment to its promise.

I'll hasten to say here that I'm not suggesting that survivors of abuse should ever remain in congregations that have hurt them, congregations that are dangerous, that act in evil ways. Grannis was not a victim of abuse herself. She was a witness. She was a defender of life and love, a defender of the faith.

She grew old and she died and her story was eventually forgotten, until in 2011 a graduate student discovered it in microfiche articles from the New York Times, and wrote a paper on it, and notified the current pastor of the church. And he, together with the current board, was saddened and appalled, and they moved swiftly to overturn her case, and reinstate her fully into membership, honoring her "outstanding life and work for justice," and petitioning their denomination, the Disciples of Christ, to do the same. They acknowledged that she had in fact redeemed the church. It was thick for her, her relationship not with the people in the moment, but with the thing itself, and the principles, the convictions, the larger love it claimed to stand for. She held it accountable to its own possibility. Her staying was what caught the attention of the press at the time, her sense of ownership and belonging and responsibility, and hope, not for herself, but for the whole.

We have such power, if we would but claim it, such power, when we align ourselves with purposes and principles, visions and missions larger than ourselves, imperfect but worthy institutions that coax us into mighty V formations, like the geese, instead of flying solo on our own. This is how we have to love our country now, for the time being: we love it into its original premise and its true promise. We will love it hard and loud, for the foreseeable future. It's how we love the communities we're part of, and our families, and congregation. As wise as geese, we know we're incomplete without each other, and holiness unfolds in time.