

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Where Do We Come From?

Reverend Victoria Safford

Sunday 3 December 2017

Gratitude

Carol Caouette

for Giving Voice to the Spirit and for her hymn, “Covenant”

the Choir, and Thaxter Cunio, for this morning’s music:

Wana Baraka

Hold Me, Rock Me – Brian Tate

Do Not Leave Your Cares at the Door - Elizabeth Alexander and Norman Naylor

Amy Peterson Derrick

for her Story for All Ages

David Dekker

for lighting the Chalice

the Reverend Shay MacKay

for teaching us the song, “You Are the Face of God” and for her meditation

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FIRST READING

The first reading is from the packet of material prepared by the Search Committee for our new Assistant Minister. One of the forms we have to fill out asks dozens of questions, including this one:

What is your congregation's dominant theology?

This is the response written last month by our Search Committee and our Worship Advisory Council:

At White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church we do not subscribe to a single theology, but to many. We are committed to an open, principled search for truth; we celebrate goodness and love from innumerable sources; and we recognize that each of our members is on a unique and meaningful spiritual journey.

Many in our community have found their way here via Christian traditions; some still find comfort in the familiar stories that formed the foundation of their spiritual identity. We also have a number of scientists and academics in our midst; some of whom speak also of mysticism—embracing not only empirical evidence, but mystery.

Many years ago, individual members of our church self-identified theologically with a variety of “isms” and “negativisms” (theist, humanist, “not Catholic,” “not religious,” etc.). There was a prevailing need to name what we were and/or what we were not. In this moment now, however, the congregation as a whole and individuals within it seem less interested in strict boundaries, less interested in defining or “dominant” borders. There is more theological openness, more spiritual curiosity, and a richer fluency with which to discuss the ineffable and to express the holy.

Our liberal religious life intends to be relevant, reverent, and courageous.

We engage beauty, truth and virtue in ways that have power, meaning and integrity. We take seriously our individual search for truth, but we do so in community where we matter to one another. There is a deep longing for ritual here, for integrity and beauty in our worship experience, and there is a longing to remain connected with the natural world.

SECOND READING

A Blessing Called Sanctuary *Jan Richardson*

You hardly knew
 how hungry you were
 to be gathered in,
 to receive the welcome
 that invited you to enter
 entirely—
 nothing of you
 found to be foreign or strange,
 nothing of your life
 that you were asked
 to leave behind
 or to carry in silence
 or in shame.

Tentative steps
 became settling in,
 leaning into the blessing
 that enfolded you,
 taking your place
 in the circle
 that stunned you
 with its unimagined grace.

You began to breathe again,
 to move without fear,
 to speak with abandon
 the words you carried
 in your bones,
 that echoed in your being.

You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing
 is that it will not leave you alone,
 will not let you linger
 in safety,
 in stasis.

The time will come
 when this blessing
 will ask you to leave,
 not because it has tired of you
 but because it desires for you
 to become the sanctuary
 that you have found—
 to speak your word
 into the world,
 to tell what you have heard
 with your own ears,
 seen with your own eyes,
 known in your own heart:

that you are beloved,
 precious child of God,
 beautiful to behold,

and you are welcome

and more than welcome

here.

Where Do We Come From?

I hardly knew how hungry I was to be gathered in, to receive the welcome that invited me to enter entirely— nothing of me found to be foreign or strange, nothing of my life that I was asked to leave behind or to carry in silence or in shame. [Jan Richardson, paraphrased]

I've heard people say this here, sometimes casually over coffee or dinner in the Social Hall, sometimes with more prompting, and more tears, in a new member class, and many times in emails. I've heard these words so many times, or something pretty close, and I'm reminded every time what this place is for. Sometimes it's someone who's not even stopping here for long: someone who needs counsel, someone getting married here, or holding a memorial because they have no place else to really go, or the two different families in as many weeks who had babies dedicated in small ceremonies by Shay MacKay right here on two subsequent Sunday afternoons. We may never see them again, but they made it holy, just as you all do, by their presence, and by their gratitude for being told, *Come in*.

Those who've found and made a home here say it too, of course, speak through tears almost word for word those lines from Jan Richardson:

*I hardly knew how hungry I was to be gathered in...
Tentative steps became settling in, leaning into the blessing that enfolded me,
taking my place in the circle that stunned me with its unimagined grace.*

I began to breathe again, to move without fear, to speak with abandon the words I carried in my bones, that echoed in my being.

I hear that all the time and like you, I have known it. Someone said to us, "Come in," and somehow, we were home.

To this house, we come from Roman Catholicism, and the Orthodox church.
We come from Lutheranism, Wisconsin Synod, Missouri Synod, and the ELCA.
We come from all the many branches of the Protestant tree: Presbyterian, Baptist Methodist, Congregational, Episcopalian, AME Zion, evangelical and Pentecostal.
We come from Judaism – orthodox, conservative, reformed.

I say, "We come from..." but really it's more complicated than that. It's not as if we dwelt once in another country and then relinquished our passports at the border, never looking back. Many here hold dual citizenship, proudly, faithfully, on purpose. What I mean is "We *hail* from." What I mean is, we carry with us - in our bones, in our understanding of how the world was made and what our purpose is upon it - we carry in our hearts, in our beliefs, our practices, in the very words we choose to use to talk about all this, we carry *baggage* with us. Some of it is old and burdensome, and it just weighs us down with misery, and some of it is beautiful and necessary, required for our journey, this continuing adventure that is our spiritual life. So I say, "We come from this, we come from that," but what I mean is, "We *embody* this, we *carry* that." We are pilgrims on a pilgrimage and every welcome wayside rest, every port of call, every house

of hospitality along the way has marked us, shaped us, been important - even when they've proven ultimately inhospitable. We come with baggage light and heavy, treasured and resented.

So we come from Judaism and from Christianity.

We come from paganism, from Wicca, from the indigenous beliefs and practice of first peoples, some rooted in the soil beneath the concrete slab underneath the carpet here, and some from other places, other continents, other worlds entirely.

We come from AA and Al-Anon.

We come from circles of strong women gathered years ago far from any house that looked like patriarchal church at all.

We come from the Metropolitan Community Church, from loving, safe strongholds of queerness.

We come from art and from music, trained to sing the lyrics in German or Latin with technical fidelity and sometimes true-believing faith, and sometimes not.

We come from community organizing, from circles of radical resistance, from scrappy, underfunded movements for social change so often based in church basements, and until recently we never made our way upstairs.

We come from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, by blood or marriage or conversion, and we come from humanism, atheism, and a deliberate and devotional agnosticism. We come from science and reason and empirical evidence, and ethics, logic and math; we come from western post-Enlightenment philosophy and from the mysticism of the east.

We come quietly and fierce, from the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers.

In large numbers here, mostly young large numbers, we come from Unitarian Universalism. There are hundreds of people in this congregation - some in this room, but most of them in the Religious Education classrooms or the nursery or the youth group - there are a couple of hundred people here who are birthright Unitarian Universalists, or close to it, who have never known another spiritual address. They come buckled into car seats and they'll have their own story to tell.

We come tenderly or proudly or reluctantly, from the traditions of our parents.

We come with mixed feelings, mixed metaphors, from mixed marriages.

We come, fully mindful, or with no conscious memory at all, from the traditions of our ancestors.

A week or so ago our Director of Music, Thaxter Cunio, asked what we should plan to sing this year on Christmas Eve. That's such a simple question, especially since we've planned December

services together for many, many years. But given all this history, this genealogy, this beautiful and complicated baggage you all carry in the door, it's a miracle we sing in unison at all, ever.



If you could travel far enough, travel back in time, close your eyes and spread your wings, fly out of these windows beyond the walls of church (like the bald eagle who swept past here on Friday afternoon); if you could soar beyond the walls of congregations, creeds and customs, beyond commandments and beyond the fitful certainties of doctrine;

if you could fly even farther back, past the proud, ambitious facts of science (which do guide us and guard us and keep us from idolatry and reckless foolishness, but which are still, in the great, grand scheme of things, truths only lately acquired and not yet sufficient to make sense of this life, this tear-stained, lovely life);

if you could travel back in time beyond everything you think you know, travel back to where you really come from, you would come - no matter who you are or what religion you were raised in or say that you claim now- you would come to where you came from ...

... and it would be a circle of tents in the desert,
or a circle of stones on a hillside,
or a circle in in a woodland, by a river, near the sea,
or a circle in the jungle,
or on the polar tundra.

You'd be somewhere on a younger earth. In the center of a small circle of people (your people) is a small fire, and darkness presses all around, made darker, strangely, and deeper, by the net of stars shining infinite above. Silence presses all around, a deafening silence, made louder, strangely, more profound, by the voices of the people, gathered round the little fire, singing, or speaking, wondering, remembering, mapping the mathematics of the heavens, or the geography of their relationships to each other and to everything. They sing the words of the artist Paul Gaugin, but in long ago languages no one now living can remember,

*Where do we come from?
What are we?
Where are we going?
Mystery, mystery, mystery.
Life is a riddle and a mystery.*

They are singing the same songs that we are singing now, praying the same prayers, asking the same sacred questions that when we're brave enough and strong enough, or desperate enough or wise enough, the questions we raise up right now. They are wondering where, in this vast universe of silence and darkness and terror and beauty and wonder and love, where in the world they belong.

A poet answers the question, "Where Do Your People Come From?" which is the title of her poem.

*Great-grandfather originated
inside the seamless shell of a hickory nut,
being enabled, thereby, to see
in blindness the future brightness
of combusting seeds....*

*Three aunts came up through the roots
of raspberries, rhododendrons and oaks
and so perceive prophecy in the water-seeking
lines of the moon...*

*My sisters were spun outward
from the pinion and swirling-lariat swim
of seals under ice. They walk on earth,
therefore, with bodies as smooth
and radiant as daylight through snow.*

*From the line between rock and sky
come my brothers who hold flocking
violet-green swallows and thin, shining
robes of rain in their stone-steady bones.*

*My cousins rose right out of the cheery,
cheery, cheery chu cry of the painted redstart.*

*And I, rising up through sedimentary
earth—fossil femur, jaw and shell,
— I speak as I must,
in just this way, of all beginning
points of origin. [Pattiann Rogers, excerpted]*

You think on this, and think upon the world at war, perpetual religious wars, seething and burning, raping and rampaging so long, and in the lines of the old gospel hymn, *Sometimes it causes me to tremble...* No matter where we come from, we come from the same place, same soil, same rain, same fire, under the same lonely stars. It's only lately that we scattered, and sometimes I think religions are the stories that we tell ourselves in our longing to get back, to make our way to the place where we belong.



In this house, we come from many places, or maybe, more accurately, we've travelled many roads, many winding streets, to arrive by grace and luck and diligence at this particular intersection – and when we got here, gasping on the threshold, someone said, “Come in.” They did not ask for our credentials. They did not interrogate us: *Humanist? Theist? Christian? Agnostic? Are you a good and proper Unitarian?* They simply said, *come in.*

A writer who is a Unitarian Universalist, and an atheist, tells this story:

When my mother was dying, a care team comprising a doctor, a social worker, and an interfaith chaplain gathered to help us in the final days. As they prepared to leave, I asked the chaplain if I could have “a prayerful moment” with him. The request surprised us both. I didn’t know precisely what I wanted. Prayerful is not a term I’d ever uttered. I knew that he was an Episcopal priest who, as a chaplain, served people of all faiths as well as those who did not identify with a religion. I also felt, instinctively, that he could interpret my request for a prayerful moment, even if I could not. He led me to a small room of chairs and tissues and did his best to understand.

“I see your mother listed Unitarian Universalist as her religion.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s mine, too.”

He asked if I would like him to say something in keeping with our faith. I struggled for words, finally coming out with, “Could you just . . . say whatever Episcopalians say in situations like this?” He put his hand on mine and prayed that God would bring comfort and peace to my mother and our family. I sniffled my thanks and went back to Mom’s room.

*A devout Christian might say that God was reaching out to me. A confirmed atheist might suggest I was too sad to think clearly. Here’s what I think: I needed comfort, from the most direct source of that person’s heart, which was Episcopal tradition and belief. Further, I knew that to receive comfort in the language of his faith would not cancel or threaten mine; my beliefs were safe within me. [Kris Willcox, “A Record of Things Wonderful,” *UU World*, fall 2016]*

I love that. I want that Episcopalian chaplain to be our next Assistant Minister, and I want that atheist writer to teach us all how to be a faithful congregation. We long for their proficiency in the language of the spirit, the fluency of faith that calls and answers with such open-hearted, open-minded, pluralistic reverence and respect.

We’re in the search process this year for a new Assistant Minister. The Search Committee, the Board, the staff here, all of us, must take such care. In this one instance we won’t just say, “Come in;” we will do some gentle, loving interrogation. But more important than the specific beliefs our candidates may hold, is *how* they hold what they know and love and wonder, *how* they hold their own experience of loss and love, hope and fear, war and peace and politics, death and immortality- and how they will hold yours. How we hold each other is what matters here, across all differences of belief and practice; what matters is how hospitable we are.

We come from many places. No one ever knows anyone else’s true story, but for sure we do know this:

We all come from the country of grief.

We’ve all lived in the land of self-doubt and uncertainty.

We’ve all visited, sometimes for long stretches, the islands of shame.

We've traveled from fear, we've traveled in hope.

We come from common sense and common dreams, and we travel both comfortably and ill at ease with mystery.

The choir sings the words of Norman Naylor, Unitarian Universalist:

*Do not leave your cares at the door.
Bring your pain and sorrow and joy,
There's a place for them upon the altar of life.
Come on in; you are welcome here.
This is a place of grace,
Stumbling and starting over.
Every journey is sacred here, even yours.
Be open to forgiveness and transformation —
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.*

In a house like this, we're all looking for light, needing a blessing by whatever name we call it, and we should be asking one another not *what do you believe?* as if there were a litmus test around here, which there's not, but a softer, harder question: *what do you care about?* We should say,

Friend, I don't know what you believe in because I can't know your story, not entirely. But what I want to know is: will it hold you through the night? Will it hold you in the darkness, in the pressing silence? Can you gather your spirit around it? Will the flame of it be bright enough to warm you? And what does it look like in practice? Tell me, not so I can quiz you and correct you, but tell me, teach me, because I have so much to learn, and I, too, am a traveler, and the night is dark and I am far from home - like you.

That's a line of inquiry fit for Unitarian Universalism in 2017. Not *Are you a theist or a humanist?* but *How is it with thy spirit? What can I learn from you? How can I help?* This fractured, fragmented world is crying out for the largest, most hopeful and healing model of compassion we can muster.

This is the practice of hospitality – to know that we all come from somewhere, with pockets full of doubt and backpacks full of faith, dragging trash bags of regret and amulets of hope and curiosity. We carry our religion inside of us and hospitality is the art of offering each other a place to set it down, to let it grow and share it.

You hardly knew how hungry you were to be gathered in, to receive the welcome that invited you to enter entirely—nothing of you found to be foreign or strange, nothing of your life that you were asked to leave behind or to carry in silence or in shame.

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that you are beloved, precious child of God, beautiful to behold, and you are welcome and more than welcome here.

- silence -

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