

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

True to Gravity and True to Grace

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

Gravity

John Frederick Nims

Mildest of all the powers of earth:
 no lightnings for her—maniacal in the clouds.
 No need for signs with their skull and crossbones, chain-link gates:
Danger! Keep Out! High Gravity!
 she's friendlier.
 Won't nurse—unlike the magnetic powers—repugnance;
 She would reconcile, draw close: her passion is love.

No terrors lurking in her depths,
 like those bound in that buzzing strongbox of the atom,
 Terrors that, lossened, turn the hills vesuvian,
 Trace in cremation where the cities were.

No, she's our quiet mother, sensible.
 But therefore down-to-earth,
 not suffering fools who play fast and loose among the mountains,
 Who fly in her face, or, drunken, clown on cornices.

She taught our ways of walking. Her affection
 Adjusted the morning grass, the sands of summer
 Until our soles fit snug in each, so we can walk easy.
 Holding her hand, we're safe. Should that hand fail,
 The atmosphere we breathe would turn hysterical,
 Hiss with tornadoes, spinning us from earth
 Into the cold unbreathable desolations.

Yet there—in fields of space—is where she shines,
 Ring-mistress of the circus of the stars,
 Their prancing carousels, their ferris wheels
 Lit brilliant in celebration.
 Thanks to her, all's gala in the galaxy.

Down here she walks us just right,
 not like vast planets, whose unbearable mass
 Would crush us in a bear hug to their surface.
 No: she deals fairly.
 Makes happy each with each:
 makes the willow bend just so,
 the acrobat land true,
 the keystone nestle in place for bridge and for cathedral.
 She lets us pick up—or mostly—what we need:

Rake, bucket, stone to build with, logs for warmth,
The fallen fruit, the fallen child . . . ourselves.

Instructs us too in honesty: our jointed
Limbs move awry and crisscross, gawky, thwart;
She's all directness and makes that a grace,
All downright passion for the core of things,
For rectitude, the very ground of being:
Those eyes are leveled where the heart is set.

See, on the tennis court this August day:
How, beyond human error,
she's the one whose will the bright balls cherish and obey
—As if in love.
She's tireless in her courtesies
To even the klutz .

SECOND READING

Calling

John Fuller

There, don't you hear it too?
Something is calling, although
The day is blank and gray.

The eye fastened on nothing,
The ear undistracted
And we with nothing to say.

But still that sense of calling,
Of something seeking attention
Beyond our consciousness...

Whose is this voice? A god's?
Surely not. It seems
To be the voice of duty

That speaks of origins
And of relationships
Between things grown apart.

And I remember the muezzin
Singing every morning
the Muslim call to prayer

Singing in the dark hour
At a distance, over all,
And yet outside our door.

His practised lilt spoke more
Of the puzzles of night than of
The determinations of morning.

As though the light had still
To be charmed into being
And each day a reward.

The voice I hear is much like his,
A commanding meditation
Rising from the blankness

Of a sleeping senselessness,
Thoughtful, improbable,
But stirring us to beauty.

And like his, the voice we hear
Links us for a while
In its reiterations --

Then ends abruptly, as if
Distracted by something else
Of no great importance.

True to Gravity, True to Grace

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal tradition. It matters to us how we are in relation to one another as a community and as individuals, how we are in relation with other people, with history, with the natural world, with the holy and with our own hearts. All these covenants - spoken and unspoken, carefully crafted in beautiful words, in bylaws and in marriage vows or in magic marker on newsprint in the RE classrooms - all these covenants crafted in words or just quietly assumed after years and years of practice - these covenants define us in a way, or at least describe us, as religious people. If the life of the spirit, your spirituality, is an interior enterprise, intimate and private, I'd say your religion is a more public and relational experience; it's how we are, or how we mean to be, together. That can get a little fuzzy in a non-creedal, liberal tradition,

a covenant can fray, and when it does we tend to write things down, which is how the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association were first crafted, many, many years ago: to give our congregations and people in them a container, a map, a user's guide for how to be religious all together. Among the seven principles number four is "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," and it caught my attention this month when Amy Peterson Derrick reminded me that originally it had been "a free and *disciplined* search for truth and meaning." Neither of us could remember when the change took place, nor why. Maybe "discipline" felt too ... disciplined, too churchy, too harsh, too hard; maybe "responsible" felt more... responsive, more relational. Amy is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, and she says she misses "discipline" among the Principles, that somehow to her, growing up in our tradition, it felt rigorous, and real and demanding, more spiritual, in fact, than mere responsibility.

Discipline is this month's theme and I remembered this week a story I read some time ago about a wildly disciplined person, a young person, who all their life has followed their heart truly, madly, deeply, but also rigorously, almost religiously in a search for truth and meaning. Taheen Abu Hanna lives in Israel and grew up in a Palestinian neighborhood, in a traditional Arab community that's part of a tiny Catholic minority – so no stranger to fluid identity. At some point, as a little boy, he gave up karate lessons for ballet, and he grew into a willowy teenager who stole his mother's lipstick and borrowed his sisters' dresses, and ordered sparkly cases for his Iphone in secret. This was not safe, not in his family, his neighborhood, his church, his country, not in this whole world. Somehow he found a circle of gay friends and queer friends, and at age 21, after gender reassignment surgery, Taheen Abu Hanna became Israel's first transgender beauty queen, headed for a global title. Everybody loves her – she is so beautiful, so brave, so completely, unapologetically out there, lip-syncing in Hebrew and Arabic to cheesy music, a Jewish mesuza on her door, and her Muslim boyfriend's name (Muhammed) tattooed on her arm, with Christ in her heart. Everybody loves her, except the equally large contingent of "everybody" who resents her, fears her and hates her, all over the world – Arabs, Israelis, Palestinians, straight people, gay people, women and men, Muslims (of course), Jews (obviously), Christians (naturally), her own family, everyone who feels she's betrayed or disrespected them, everyone who insists on singularity, conventionality and unadulterated, un-intersected loyalty. She is beloved and despised. Nevertheless, she persists in her insistence that humans are wildly, gorgeously, complicated creatures, and in Taheen's case, what looks like flamboyance and frivolous indulgence, all hair and heels and self-centered sparkle, is in fact a mighty discipline, not without real danger to her spirit and her body every day. She gets dressed in the morning and she has to think about it, she has to choose it. It is a mighty discipline to be her own self at all costs, on behalf of all selves. She talks about that.

Discipline can feel puritanical and stuffy; it can also feel like following your heart in laser-focused, death-defying ways, free and responsible ways that search for truth and meaning and integrity, and model right relation to the self, to the other and to the holy. Discipline is about saying yes absolutely and saying no resolutely, to the right things, at the right time, in the right measure. It seeks balance. It asks, "To what are you truly true? To what are you accountable – to what principles, convictions, goals, ideals, core beliefs, commitments, covenants, dreams, people: to what, to whom, will you be accountable? Where is your truest heart leading you now? Not your fancy, but you're the core of your soul?"

John Fuller, a poet, writes about calling, which is not just about work or your job; it's about your way of being, who you are and who you're called to be, and staying true to that, with disciplined intention.

*There, don't you hear it too?
 Something is calling, although
 The day is blank and gray...
 something seeking attention
 Beyond our consciousness...
 [Surely not a god...] It seems
 To be the voice of duty
 That speaks of origins
 And of relationships
 Between things grown apart.
 And I remember the muezzin
 Singing every morning
 [the Muslim call to prayer]
 Singing in the dark hour
 At a distance, over all,
 And [right] outside our door.
 The voice I hear [within] is much like his,
 A commanding meditation...
 Thoughtful, improbable,
 But stirring us to beauty.
 And like his, the voice we hear
 Links us for a while
 In its reiterations --
 Then ends abruptly, as if
 Distracted by something else
 Of no great importance.*

Sometimes you can hear it. What calls to you with the urgency of a call to prayer, every day, even more than once a day, reminding you of who you are and who you mean to be, reminding you of what you love and what you mean to cherish? If you believe that humans, by definition, have free will, that within our means, theoretically, we can do whatever we want, what stays your hand? What limits you by your own choosing? What calls you out when you'd prefer to snuggle down in safety? What calls you home when you're stretched out way too far? What makes you stop when it's time to stop whatever thing you're doing, what *within yourself* makes you stop working, stop loafing, stop drinking, spending money, wasting time, caring too much, not caring at all? What makes you start, caring, working, loafing, doing what you need to do? What practices, self-imposed, temper your freedom, and thereby infuse it with meaning and purpose, and direction, lending your life a kind of discernable shape? This is where following your bliss, singing your heart's own song, meets discipline, *becomes* a kind of discipline, and there's joy in it; there's agency.

I read an article this week by a very old man, 88 years old, reflecting on what a strange substance time can be. He said he's lived in this new millennium now for exactly as many years – 18 – as he lived in the time from birth to finishing high school. “It seems inconceivable,” he said, “Between 1930 and 1948 I went from newborn to adult, from toddler to the leader of an infantry squad.” Those first 18 years were a journey, an adventure, while these last 18 seem like an epilogue, winding down, just waiting for the end to overtake him. He realized one day, or remembered, that's not his true nature, and while he's respectful of age (grateful for wisdom, careful on icy sidewalks), still he wants to reignite that sense of excitement he knew when he was young, not yet even 20. He doesn't want to be young again, he wants to be youthful in spirit; not to extend his life (he knows he could go down at any moment) but to be as fully alive as possible while he is in fact still breathing. In small but brave, deliberate ways, he's re-examining what he eats, what he reads, where he walks, his fitness routine, his music. He's talking to a therapist not about his troubles, but about how the mind works after almost nine decades, and how he could use it differently, train its rusty mechanism to think a little differently. He's questioning whether he really needs a nap every afternoon, and he's started asking his wife out for coffee dates instead, or for a glass of wine, things they've never, ever done in the middle of the day, and they try to go to different places every time. It's hard to do all this at 88, to make the world as new and strange and interesting, as beautiful and terrifying, as it felt at age 18; it's hard to hold the practice of it, the intention, and think up all these age-appropriate adventures and muster up the will to go, to break out of comfortable habit and forego his safe routines, but it steadies him, to be himself again. Not to do what he once did – his body and his budget won't allow it. Not to do what he once did - but to be what he has always been.

In discipline abides the word “disciple.” There's something here that asks us to be faithful and wise, forceful and humble, true to desire and also to reality, true to desire *within* reality, to be mindful and respectful of so many forces that we don't control, to bend when we must, like a willow bends in wind, and to refrain from bending too much if we're 88 years old. Disciples are true to disciplines and find their bliss within the given-ness of things. You find your holy place within the holiness of everything, the holy ordinariness of everything, all this messy mortality we're in. You find your way through the thicket of covenants you've made and mean to keep, even if in some ways they constrain you. Disciples live by the bracing discipline of the Serenity Prayer, whether they've heard of it or not, whether they're the kind of people who pray, or not: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* I think of 88 year olds, conceding age but not surrendering; I think of 21 year-old Taheen Abu Hanna, eyes wide open to closed-minded fear, living out-loud anyway. Acceptance and resistance both require discipline.

I love the poem of John Frederick Nims about gravity, his love-song to the force of gravity, reminding us that some pre-existing circumstances really aren't all bad, some limits to our liberty.

*Mildest of all the powers of earth,
She's our quiet mother, sensible
But therefore down-to-earth,
Not suffering fools who play fast and loose among the mountains,
Who fly in her face, or, drunken, clown on cornices.*

*Ring-mistress of the circus of the stars,
 Down here she walks us just right,
 Makes happy each with each:
 Makes the willow bend just so,
 The acrobat land true,
 The keystone nestle in place for bridge and for cathedral.
 She lets us pick up what we need:
 Rake, bucket, stone to build with, logs for warmth,
 The fallen fruit, the fallen child... ourselves.
 Instructs us too in honesty,
 Our jointed limbs move awry and crisscross, gawky, thwart,
 She's all directness and makes that a grace,
 All downright passion for the core of things,
 For rectitude, the very ground of being,
 Those eyes are leveled where the heart is set.*

In nature sometimes, which is wild, and always following its heart, we find the best role models for our own disciplined adventures. Sometimes rules are good.

Jeanne Lohmann, another poet, has a piece in which she talks about being true to gravity and true to grace. True to gravity: to the empirical, the indisputable, all the pre-existing circumstances, to be mindful and aware of limitations to our astounding freedom, pushing some boundaries, bowing humbly to others. Gravity comprises all that is gorgeously real, and all that is grave. True to gravity and also grace: to the transcendent, the mysterious, whatever it is within us or beyond us that calls us to our higher selves. *Let us try*, says the poet, *Let us try what it is to be true to gravity, to the given, and to grace, faithful to our own voices...*

Discipline is the practice of trying to make sense of the world as it is, to honor it and sometimes challenge it, and at the same time to lean with all our passion and power toward the world as it might be.

This year, the Board of Directors here has been reading a book together, discussing two chapters every month at the start of every meeting, and holding to this discipline even when their agenda is full, the budget off-kilter, the night wearing on for busy volunteers who need to get home and get up in the morning and go to their day jobs and live their own lives; they're holding to this discipline of reading and reflecting together, which is a kind of spiritual practice, and a beautiful modeling of leadership. The book they've chosen is difficult. It's called *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity and Power in Ministry*, a new anthology of deeply personal reflections of Unitarian Universalist ministers of color. They're sharing what it's like to be leaders of color – black, Latinx, Asian, Arab, native – in the ocean of whiteness that is our Association. And some of what these colleagues write is harsh, and some of it is painful, for the writers and for us, their readers, and sometimes someone in our group will say, “I don't know why we're reading this; this is the most disheartening book we could possibly have chosen,” or someone else will say, “This doesn't feel relevant to us, way out here in the Minnesota suburbs.” Sometimes someone will voice what others surely wonder, “If these ministers are so unhappy, why are they still here?” Some of the essays are hopeful or funny and inspiring, but this is not easy reading, and

there are no easy answers to the problems that are named - and that in itself is the point of this practice, this discipline: sometimes to follow the true calling of your heart, you have to dwell first in harsh places; it's how you become who you're really called to be.

This month, this week, actually, as we welcomed, gratefully, more of these brave writers into the space of our circle, I was struck by one in particular, Rev. Natalie Maxwell Fenimore, who says this about her calling and her ministry:

Shirley Chisholm was asked why she, a Black woman, was running for President. "You don't have a chance. Why are you doing that?" And she said, "Because I am in love with the America that does not yet exist," and that's how Unitarian Universalism is also. I'm in love with the Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. But I have to hold both the love for that thing and the love for the reality. It does not yet exist. It will probably not exist in my lifetime. I don't think it will in that of my children, but I can't deny my love for it. You know, wanting to be there in that struggle. That's why I'm fighting.

It's a beautiful discipline, to live in the reality of the given world, just as it is, sometimes loving it, sometimes raging at the edges of the possible; sometimes engaging it playfully, the way a baby toys with gravity, the way an old man courts adventure; sometimes engaging ferociously, the way a Palestinian Arab Christian Trans beauty queen gets up in the morning and gets dressed in her tiara and her dignity; or the way a talented, dedicated Black UU minister paddles the craft of her calling, her talent and her faith, against the current of the present toward a future she herself will never see, following her spirit and her heart. We are paddling as well. It's a beautiful discipline, living this life true to gravity and true to grace, to the world as it is and as it might become. We live in the now and the not yet all the time, making our choices, our promises, our dreams and resolutions, holding with a joyful discipline (never accidentally) all the covenants that hold us in place - true to our hearts, true to our gods and true as we can be to one another.