

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Freedom of Covenant

Rev. Jack Gaede

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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The first reading is “**Storage**,” by Mary Oliver.

*when i moved from one house to another
there were many things i had no room
for. what does one do? i rented a storage
space. and filled it. years passed.
occasionally i went there and looked in,
but nothing happened, not a single
twinge of the heart.
as i grew older the things i cared
about grew fewer, but were more
important. so one day i undid the lock
and called the trash man. he took
everything.
i felt like the little donkey when
his burden is finally lifted. things!
burn them, burn them! make a beautiful
fire! more room in your heart for love,
for the trees! for the birds who own
nothing -- the reason they can fly.*

The second reading is an excerpt from **Alan Watts**:

Now it's my contention--my basic metaphysical axiom--that existence--the physical universe--is basically playful. There is no necessity for it whatsoever. It isn't going anywhere. That is to say, it doesn't have some destination that it ought to arrive at. But it is best understood by analogy with music. Because music as an art form is essentially playful. We say, "You play the piano." You don't work the piano... Music differs from travel. When you travel, you are trying to get somewhere. And of course we--being a very compulsive and purposive culture--are busy getting everywhere faster and faster and faster until we eliminate the distance between places. I mean...with the modern jet travel, you can arrive almost instantaneously. What happens as a result of that is that the two ends of your journey become the same place. So you eliminate the distance, and you eliminate the journey. But the fun of the journey is to travel, not to obliterate traveling... In music though, one doesn't make the end of a composition the point of the composition. If that were so, the best conductors would be those who played fastest. And

there would be composers who wrote only finales. People would go to concerts just to hear one crashing chord because that's the end.

Same way in dancing...you don't aim at a particular spot in the room [and say] that's where you should arrive. The whole point of the dancing is the dance...

If we thought of life by analogy as a journey or a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end and the thing was to get to that end--success or whatever it is or maybe heaven after you're dead--we [would] miss the point the whole way along. [But you see...life] was a musical thing, and you were supposed to sing or dance while the music was being played.

Sermon

In our opening hymn, we sang the question "Where are we going?" But now with edits from Alan Watts, I wonder if our question should be "How are we going?" Do we have a single destination in mind and a one-track mind about how to get there (and how we might choose the fastest and most efficient route)? Or are we interested in enjoying the journey, savoring the dance moves and the music along the way? This question "how are we going" is really at the core of Unitarian Universalism, and this reality is most clearly evident in the fact that we are a religion steeped not in creed, but in covenant. We say this often, and we repeat our covenant every week, but sometimes we forget how hard the covenant actually is to uphold. Sometimes we focus on the freedom from (as in the freedom from creeds and dogma) more than we focus on the freedom to (as in the freedom to covenant, the freedom to agree to live together in a specific way).

Freedom can hardly be understood without an understanding of its opposites (slavery, compulsion, tyranny, or oppression), but we also can't celebrate freedom without celebrating the restrictions and restraints that we accept as a necessary cost to those freedoms. From a societal standpoint (unless one is a hermit living in complete isolation and off the grid), we live within various small communities that all have different agreements--whether they are spoken or unspoken. Some of these agreements are the laws by which we agree to abide so that we can potentially have a high-functioning society. Some of these agreements are the laws we agree to disregard like the unspoken understanding regarding freeway driving that if every driver goes a little bit over the speed limit, we can't all get in trouble. But in all these agreements, we see where individual freedom butts up against a collective restraint or restriction. And it's quite similar here in this church community.

People sometimes say things like, "Oh, I love my UU church. It's a place where people can believe whatever they want." And my response is always a bit more nuanced

than that. Yes, of course we believe in freedom of conscience and freedom of belief and of expression. But we also sometimes have to draw some hard lines in the sand and put up some actual barriers or protections against certain ways of thinking or behaving. There are some beliefs that are actually out of step with our principles and our covenant. For instance, we don't tolerate bigotry, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, or white supremacist thinking. They conflict directly with our principles of inclusion and justice, and they violate the principle of inherent worth and dignity. Here at this church, we are encouraged to make meaning of our lives, and we are also trusted to be the expert on our own lived experiences. However, we are not free to use our experiences as weapons against others or to make meaning of our own lives without having accountable and deep relationships with people here who have different identities and experiences than we do. A big part of the beauty of this covenant is that we do this work together.

Nico just led us in a thoughtful exercise where some of us moved through this very space together and navigated the spaces between ourselves and each other. And this actually feels like a perfect example of the tension between freedom and covenant--or freedom and responsibility. We were free to move wherever we wanted and yet something compelled us to move through the space respectfully, paying close attention to the people sharing our space. This same deep sense of paying close attention to our surroundings is the main theme of a book called "On Looking" by Alexandra Horowitz. She is an animal behavior research scientist, and she brings various experts with her on walks throughout New York City, where she lives.

Between her astute observational eye and the expertise of her guest walkers, I have learned a great deal, including some of the official science and vernacular behind the realities of living in an urban landscape. Even though I knew some of these realities by experience, I didn't know the actual theories or research studies behind them. For one walk, she is joined by an urban sociologist who studies pedestrian movement and who also founded an organization called Project for Public Spaces. During their walk, they approached a particularly busy intersection and when the light turned green, both sides of the street released a platoon of people heading toward each other. Quick sidenote: in the field of pedestrian movement analysis, a platoon is a large collection of bunched-up, unaffiliated walkers. The pedestrian expert and the author marvelled together as the two platoons weaved smoothly past each other without so much as a bump or a jostle.

Maybe you have experienced this phenomenon before. If not, I encourage you to pay close attention the next time you're on a crowded sidewalk and watch how we navigate past each other. There is a very specific slip-slide that walking pedestrians do. It involves twisting the torso so that you are leading with one shoulder instead of your nose and so that your shoulders are not at their broadest and hence their most

un-passable. Can you picture it? This simple little slip-slide, and we do it so often that it becomes almost second nature. And we often don't even notice it or think about it until we pass someone who fails to do it--whether they weren't taught the same trick, whether they are unable to do it, or whether they just aren't paying attention. But when it works, when we pass each other seamlessly on a crowded sidewalk, we are enacting a specific agreement--we could call it "the code of the sidewalk." "Together," Horowitz says, "we are doing a cooperative dance, a kind of pedestrian jig, without even knowing we are dancing."

For me, this dance is quite similar to movements in other species--schools of fast-moving fish, flocks of swooping and diving birds, army ants, locusts, and other migratory animals. For us humans, many of these movements are unconscious or instinctual or learned at an early age, and they are reinforced societally. But what I find most interesting is Horowitz's analysis: "One reason all of our step-sliding, pedestrian-jigging works is that we are regularly looking--ahead and at each other. We do not just look to see who is there; we constantly, steadily look to calculate how we need to move relative to those around us." And it is that movement, that agreement that most fascinates me. Especially in the context of a community that responds to each other and a community that holds each other to account. Or worded differently, a responsible and accountable community.

This tension between freedom and responsibility has taken center stage in my thoughts this week in the context of civic engagement. This is the week every year where many people celebrate a holiday called Independence Day, and many people throw around the word "freedom" like it's some kind of frisbee. And it really got me thinking. Well...first of all, freedom for whom? Who really reaped the benefit of our independence in 1776? Basically, it was only white male landowners and the people to whom they chose to pass along some benefit. But that's a sermon for a different day.

I was also thinking about what kind of responsibilities and covenants we hold as citizens that counterbalance our freedoms. And a friend suggested jokingly that we should have Fourth of July resolutions much like our New Years' Eve resolutions. Initially, I just laughed, but then I started thinking more about what it would look like to make resolutions to be more-engaged citizens. New Year's Eve would be for personal resolutions; the Fourth of July for civic resolutions. Just last week, we were asked by the Reverend Karen Hutt to learn more about our own country's history, specifically the Reconstruction Period from 1865 to the beginning of the 20th century. Knowing this history would honor the people who lived it and would help us be a more-informed citizenry who would be less likely to repeat history--once we knew it. Responding to Rev. Hutt's invitation is my resolution this Fourth of July. And I'm just wondering...are any of you willing to join me in that resolution? What other civic resolutions are you willing to take on?

Yesterday, I drove by the District Ed. Center and noticed that they have a sign out front with a profound thought by Albert Camus (maybe it's still there today?). It read, "Freedom is nothing but a chance to be better." And I think Camus was really onto something there. He understood that freedom includes a lot more than just freedom from, as in freedom from oppression and tyranny. It includes freedom to as well. The freedom to be better, the freedom to choose a new way. We see this same nuance from Mary Oliver. Once she was **free from** certain burdens, she became more **free to** love and free to wonder. "I felt like the little donkey when his burden is finally lifted. Things! Burn them, burn them! Make a beautiful fire! More room in your heart for love, for the trees! For the birds who own nothing--the reason they can fly."

Have you had these moments of burden-free flight before? Have you experienced this freedom? For me, a couple moments come to mind. First, my 3 1/2 month cross-country trip through various parts of Asia. To travel for that long with just one backpack was both limiting and freeing. And I discovered a lot about myself in the process. But another moment comes to mind as well. Some of you may have heard of it already, but there is a local group/movement that calls itself Don't You Feel It Too? It's hard to describe, but I'll give it a try. It is basically an exploration of dance and physical expression in public spaces. People gather in the same general vicinity and then each person puts in their own earbuds and dances to their own music. It celebrates the place where the individual meets the communal, and it interrupts some very deeply held and often unstated beliefs. For instance, the belief (held by some) that only certain places are for dancing or the belief that for someone to just be dancing in public to their own secret music is weird or unsocial in some way. But what this group does is it subverts these beliefs. When a large group of people is dancing together but separately in a place where dance doesn't usually happen, a bystander who notices them might feel like they are the outsider, like they are not in on the secret. Often, those bystanders end up asking one of the dancers what they are doing, and the dancers are instructed to answer simply with "Don't you feel it too?" This movement started out as a protest during the 2008 RNC Convention in St. Paul, where people who had felt unnoticed (or even some who felt like certain politicians were trying to erase them or deny their existence) decided to protest with their presence, with joy, and with dance and expression. The practice has changed and deepened a lot in the eleven years since its inception, but I have seen this practice be a transformational practice where the freedom to express is fully celebrated. Just this past spring, one of the founders of Don't You Feel It Too led a workshop at the Twin Cities Youth Con (attended by some of our WBUUC youth).

This practice isn't all that different from this morning's meditative movement. It takes courage to step out of our usual comfort zones, but there can be a certain joy and freedom in disrupting some of our usual patterns. And as Alan Watts reminds us, "the fun of the journey is to travel, not to obliterate traveling. The whole point of the dancing

is the dance... If we thought of life by analogy as a journey or a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end and the thing was to get to that end--success or whatever it is or maybe heaven after you're dead--we [would] miss the point the whole way along. [But you see...life] was a musical thing, and you were supposed to sing or dance while the music was being played.”

This dance we are dancing as a covenantal community is beautiful and hard and it takes some serious resolutions. But the point isn't just to get there and to get there quick. The point is the process, the journey it takes to get there. And that takes movement, and it takes trust. And it takes a sense of freedom to, not just freedom from. Let's be free to covenant together. Let's celebrate the constraints that allow us to cohere as a community and let's celebrate the freedom that we have as individuals within that community, but let's not forget the responsibility and accountability that we feel toward each other. Blessed be, and amen.