

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

**Prairie Pragmatism for the Wild and Wide-Eyed**

Sunday, November 22, 2015

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**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**  
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**FIRST READING**

*from a Facebook post a week ago Friday night, by The Harry Potter Alliance, a web-based nonprofit with thousands of young followers*

Here is what we know: unspeakable harm was done to Paris tonight; unspeakable harm will be done to people of Muslim faith and people of color by people who take advantage of tragedy to act on their hatred; people across the world - ourselves among them - are shaken to their very core; this is not the first time; we cannot say it will be the last time.

And so much of this feels intensely personal.

It seems that the list of safe spaces torn apart by violence grows every year: schools, movie theaters, schools again, places of worship, places of community...

But if you feel safest in the very places terrorists have devastated - in Paris, in Columbine, in Aurora, in Newton, in Charleston, and on and on and on - know that you have not lost them. If anger boils in your stomach, know that nothing can come from meeting their hatred with your own. The most powerful thing we can do every time we move forward from unthinkable loss is to hold on to love and to hold on to what we love.

The places we love - movie theaters at midnight, libraries where books changed our lives, venues where we sang late into the night - have given us not just entertainment, but spaces to make sense of the world, spaces to make sense of ourselves, crowds to be distinctly and lastingly un-alone in, lifelong friendships, lifelong magic, homes to carry with us. We cannot and will not let them take any of this from us.

Here is how we move forward: keep loving; keep fighting; celebrate story; laugh, dance, sing - with your friends, with strangers, with every single person who keeps showing up when the world tells them not to; resist hatred; resist cynicism; know none of this is foolish; know that it is necessary; protect and defend those who - not for the first time - will be victims of hatred falsely carried out in the name of justice; give love and light to those around you and those around the world; be excellent to each other; be good.

Always, always, always: the weapon we have is love.

**SECOND READING**

*posted on Facebook by Antoine Leiris, a resident of Paris whose wife was killed in the Bataclan Concert Hall*

Friday night, you took an exceptional life -- the love of my life, the mother of my son -- but you will not have my hatred.

If this God, for whom you kill blindly, made us in his image, every bullet in the body of my wife would have been one more wound in His heart.

So, no, I will not grant you the gift of my hatred. You're asking for it, but responding to hatred with anger is falling victim to the same ignorance that has made you what you are. You want me to be scared, to view my countrymen with mistrust, to sacrifice my liberty for my security. You lost.

We are just two, my son and me. He is barely 17-months-old, but we are stronger than all the armies in the world. I don't have any more time to devote to you. I have to join him as he wakes up from his nap. He will eat his meals as usual, and then we are going to play as usual, and for his whole life this little boy will threaten you by being happy and free.

Because no, you will not have his hatred either.

### **THIRD READING**

*adapted from William Ellery Channing, Unitarian, in a sermon called "Spiritual Freedom," written in 1830*

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I call that mind free ...  
which is not passively framed by outward circumstances, and is not the creature of accidental impulse;

I call that mind free ...  
which does not cower to human opinion;

I call that mind free ...  
which does not content itself with a hereditary faith;  
which does not mechanically copy the past, not live on its old virtues, but which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience...

I call that mind free...  
which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free...  
which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come;  
which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.  
which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit,  
and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.

I call that mind free ...  
which sets no bounds to its love,  
which has cast off all fear but that of wrongdoing,  
which is calm in the midst of tumults and possesses itself, though all else be lost.

## Prairie Pragmatism for the Wild and Wide-Eyed

In mid-November 1955, 60 years ago exactly, eighteen people met somewhere near here, near Maple Street, in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Carlson, to begin a difficult, exciting, subversive, practical piece of work together. Out of nothing, except their convictions and their dreams; out of nothing, except their hopes for their children, and for all children, their longing to make meaning from experience, their own daily lives and the turbulent, beautiful world around them, and to do so in the company of like-minded comrades, like-hearted comrades; out of next to nothing, except what one of them later, looking back, called their “audacity,” they met in a living room to make a church. Like mad scientists in the basement or wild cooks in the kitchen, they stirred up this concoction – this congregation -- where none had been before. The Rev. Arthur Foote and others from Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul gave support; some of these people were members there, making their way down to St. Paul once a week, in big old cars on curving roads before the highways had been built. Arthur Foote cast a vision at the outset, Unity gave some money and a hand-typed copy of their bylaws, but mostly they were on their own, free-range religious liberals in the wild woods of the northern suburbs in the 1950’s.

“Audacity,” said Florence Jacques, who many years ago wrote down their early history (our early history), “Audacity was one solid asset the members had.” By the fall of 1956, one year later, they had gathered scissors and glue for the Sunday School, second-hand hymnbooks, a coffee pot, a wheezy old portable pump organ and the red Membership Book into which most of you would come in time to sign your names (though they didn’t know that yet in 1956). They rented the basement of the old Wildwood School here in Mahtomedi, a leaky concrete dungeon. They were like early Christians in the catacombs, except they sat on folding metal chairs, and stored their stuff during the week, all the accoutrements of the entire church and Sunday School, in a wooden cabinet on wheels, what they called “our barn and altar.” About the organ Jacques wrote, *[It] was hard to get it into the church – by which she meant down to the basement -- and very difficult to manage after we got it in. The bellows were old and when they dried out the pedals had to be pumped more and more energetically; the organist frequently finished the hymn out of breath. She often had to make impromptu repairs to the unruly instrument during the meditations, to the congregation’s confusion and amusement.*

In the first year, the group grew to fifteen families, and by 1957 there were many children, some of whom pushed forward the first questions about purchasing a real church building (the children resented having to come to their school on Sunday morning). By 1958, 40 adults were coming on a Sunday, humanists and atheists, liberal Christians, theists and agnostics, wrestling now with many pragmatic concerns: should they continue a formal relationship with Unity Church or move toward independence? Should they purchase land, or a building, or pursue a new rental, and if so where? (Someone offered land in Centerville; others voted for North Oaks.) How would they raise the money? And other questions came up, too, equally urgent, more spiritual than practical -though you know the line between the two is hard to draw. It’s all practical. It’s all the life of the spirit. If you are a community bound not by creed but by covenant, the way that you are in relation with each other matters just as much as what you say you think you maybe believe. This was (and it still is) prairie pragmatism for the wild imagination. A formal questionnaire went out: “Should we continue with the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday?” “Do you wish to have prayers at all?” 19 said “always,” 8 said “never,” 20 were somewhere in the middle

or withheld their comment, and Florence Jacques reports that that questionnaire, with its potentially divisive questions, bound the little church together in extraordinary trust. They risked a lot, in asking and answering what mattered most, and they found they could agree to disagree on almost anything if they would dare to name the issues and speak their truth in love on matters related to plumbing, related to prayer – everything. Don Gipple, who joined the church on the official founding day, November 18, 1956, wrote of the group at that time:

*We are rebels, who have come from other religious backgrounds and have in common the will to leave something we didn't believe in for something we do: in idealism, ethics, responsibility, enjoyment, compassion, humanity, brotherhood, beauty and nature. Most of us here try to face the ultimate problems of life directly, rather than from behind externally applied dogmas. We reject cynicism and pessimism.*

He said, “We are somewhat lacking in experience, determined to hang on, proud of our madness, eager for new members.”

Florence Jacques' history takes the story only up to 1963, their seventh year. Things have happened in the meantime: two buildings purchased, and then the Religious Education wing added, and then the new sanctuary, two services, three services, back to two again, ten ministers coming and going, part-time and full-time, and hundreds of people over 59 years, thousands, in fact, touching this place with their hopes, with their hands, and touched in return, forgiving and forgiven, healing and healed, making it holy by their care. Hundreds of people have come and gone, or come and stayed, including one, Dean Honetschlager, from that original living room meeting. Many friends have died, and some have just arrived this morning. In mid-November 1956, on a morning very much like this one, they dreamed of us, though they could not yet see us, see our faces in their minds.

It was a profoundly illiberal time, the 1950's – conventional, conservative, with the Cold War raging, fanning fear into full-blown paranoia nationwide, turning citizens against each other and against their clearest values as Americans; it was a segregated, racist time, when black lives truly did not matter; the northern cousin of Jim Crow was alive and well up here, evidenced in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, not least in white flight to the newly sprawling suburbs of St. Paul and Minneapolis. In that time, and in this place, a little band of newly-minted Unitarians did this plan-ful, practical, pragmatic thing, this prophetic, radical, urgent, sacred, faithful thing: they built a liberal church, and on Sunday mornings in those early years, when they prayed or didn't pray, they closed their eyes and called to us, across the years, “Come in.”

For just a moment, close your eyes. Breathe in, breathe out, the breath of life. Think back across a lifetime, 59 years, and conjure them, those 18 people. Send a silent prayer of gratitude and deep respect. Breathe in, breathe out, the spirit of life, the spirit of love. Think out across a lifetime, 59 years forward. Conjure them, the people who will sit where you are sitting and stand where I am standing in 2074. We cannot imagine it, and yet we have to try, because some of them may be in our classrooms here this morning, and they will be the elders, then. Some are not yet even born. You cannot see their faces, but conjure them, smile welcome on those people, call silently, “come in.” *We've saved this space for you, held the bright vision, kept the faith. Come in. Sit down with us right here.*

A few weeks ago, you voted unanimously to approve the Board's recommendation for a Special Campaign to replace our aging furnaces and pay down our mortgage. Those furnaces were not built in 1956, but they act as if they were. Nothing could be more practical, prosaic or pragmatic. But as this campaign gets underway (it will roll out officially in the late winter, early spring), I hope it's clear that this is not about HVAC only, or fiscal responsibility only. It *is* a common-sense campaign, replacing stuff that's breaking down, building it greener, building to last, freeing up money to do what we do; it is a common-sense campaign - and it is a means toward a much larger dream. There's a continuity of audacity and practicality in the bloodline here.

When we say that we are "a congregation in the free faith tradition, celebrating pluralism in the spiritual search and ethics grounded in action," - we mean that. Those people in the basement in 1956 were standing, as are we, in a faith which goes back hundreds of years, and it is a slender ledge to stand on, a razor's edge, a cutting edge of radical religious imagination. It is old in this country, old in the west, old in the world, free faith and free thought, free conscience, the life of the spirit, which is wild, unfenced by doctrine or dogma or coercion or creed. That tradition, open-minded, open-hearted, artful, is wide-eyed and joyful and brave, and it is often under siege, the fire of it, the ember of it, kept alive in progressive congregations, the religious left, and in other kinds of communities sometimes, other ways of being human. In our case that freedom we so cherish is balanced, clarified, by covenant, the ways we walk together and intend to be with one another. Our governance, our polity, is deeply democratic, deliberately inclusive; the worth and dignity of every single person is held safe in a sacred web of acknowledged interdependence - we honor each other and we require each other.

The free faith tradition stands against fundamentalism of any kind, insisting that there's always more to see, more to feel, to learn, understand, imagine and try. There's always more to wonder about, question, doubt, consider and explore. The old hymn says *revelation is not sealed*, and this is not glad news for fundamentalists. Our faith is not given, signed, sealed, received, but constantly evolving, and deeply private, and thus breathtakingly diverse. I expect our ancestors in the Wildwood School heard or spoke on many Sundays the litany from 1830 by Unitarian William Ellery Channing:

*I call that mind free ...  
which does not cower to human opinion;*

*I call that mind free ...  
which does not content itself with a hereditary faith;*

*which does not mechanically copy the past, not live on its old virtues, but which listens for new  
and higher monitions of conscience...*

*I call that mind free...  
which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come;*

*which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.*

*which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit...*

*I call that mind free ...  
which sets no bounds to its love...*

The free faith tradition stands against fundamentalism and absolutism always. (Absolutely.) It is at ease with mystery, ambiguity, imperfect truths. It is a mystical path that follows very closely the trail of scientific method, which is a trail of wonder, and it is humble, therefore, at its best, human and laughing, erring, errant, willing to be fallible, to fall down and get up again. It is a fierce tradition also: you think of Galileo, Giordano Bruno, Michael Servetus, Mary Dwyer, people persecuted, willing to die for freedom of belief, or expression or conscience. Even now, it is not an easy path.

*I call that mind free which has cast off all fear but that of wrong-doing, which is calm in the midst of tumults and possesses itself, though all else be lost.*

This is a religious way which stands against arrogance and apocalypticism, the end-time religions which are so lethal, so brutal, so certain and so sure. They rise up, terrorizing, terrible in every age, and this tradition stands in loving opposition, cleaving to hope and forgiveness and mercy, even when the evidence says everything is lost. This is a saving faith.

The free faith tradition grew up in America as Universalists and Unitarians both broke away from the mainline Congregational churches, the puritan churches, the Universalists longing for more love in the church, more compassion, more courage, less shame; the Unitarians insisting on more reason, less dogma, less pious superstition. This was in the mid- 1700's, exactly concurrent with the rise of the new republic, bright with Enlightenment confidence and trust in the wisdom and power of people. You can see this in our congregations still, the way we govern, the way that every voice is equal, the way, at least in theory, tolerance prevails, and not just tolerance, but acceptance. It is a crazy way to do religion, trusting more than any scripture, more than any doctrine, orthodoxy or ecclesiastical authority, the human spirit, the human heart, our intuition of the holy, the part of us that stays childlike, always, wondering, imagining, trusting more than any carved-in-stone commandment our own separate and collective testimony regarding the sacred, the beautiful, the true and the good.

*We are a church in the free faith tradition, a community of youth, adults and children, dedicated to pluralism in the spiritual search and ethics grounded in action.*

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Last week people wondered, rightly, all over social media and other media, why the terrorists' attacks in Paris garnered so much more attention than other violence everywhere, and that's a haunting question. It begs an honest reckoning. This is not 1956. We can see with open eyes any time of day or night the scale and scope of human damage, human evil, sins of omission and commission, everywhere apparent. Paris is one catastrophe among so many others. It's easy to get defensive when someone posts, as many did, the numerical comparison: fewer than 200 dead in Paris, yet hundreds of thousands in Syria, and scores in Beirut just days before, and in

Palestine constantly, and what about those 300 Nigerian girls, and the students lost in Mexico? We do well to attend to those questions, however harshly they're posed.

And yet – for better and for worse, in certain undeniable ways, France is like America, and so even if it isn't right, it may be that our hearts are broken just a little differently. America and France are siblings, for better and worse. One revolution followed on another in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the cry of *liberty and justice for all* was borne across the ocean and swiftly translates to *liberty, equality, fraternity*. Unitarians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> named *freedom, reason and tolerance* as their highest values, an echo in the free faith tradition of that democratic ideal.

What breaks my own heart though, as much or even more, is another parallel. In his call to arms this week, President Hollande sounded eerily like President Bush in 2001, promising on September 12 that year “a warlike response,” the so-called War on Terror, which ensued shortly after and still rages on. These things are not unconnected. France is a symbol of openness, equality, democracy, and yet those lines in *The Marseillaise*, (the national anthem, which people are singing everywhere now, with raised fists – and who can blame them?), those lines about *the impure blood* of foreigners, about the joy and the honor in spilling such blood, *le sang impur* – those are chilling lines. They could be the theme song of those 30 out of 50 governors who have rushed to assure us that if they can prevent it, no Syrian refugees will ever settle in their states. That's a lot of territory. Whether they can achieve it legally or not hardly matters. The fact is that they want to. We can be proud of Governor Dayton, who stood strong with the remaining 20, saying, “This is Minnesota,” but we should tremble at the Pioneer Press poll this week, which showed 71% of Minnesotans opposed to settling Syrian refugees here. “Not even orphans?” someone asked Chris Christie of New Jersey, “Babies under five?” No way, he said. What breaks my heart is the closed heart, closed mind, clone mind, chained mind, xenophobia, Islamophobia, race hatred, the terror within us that rages among us and says to the terrorists, “You won. We will trade liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, decency, love; we'll trade our humanity, for the myth of security, the anxious solace of unwinnable war, and that ancient lie, that there exist evil gods and one good God, who are even now fighting their cosmic battle, that persistent and simplistic superstition about God's chosen people and everybody else.

Our free faith tradition is one bright strand among so many gorgeous threads in a vast fabric of resistance. The founders of our church held a thread of it in 1956 and we hold that banner still; the founders of our country held a thread of it, and the partisans of France, and artists everywhere, and poets, protestors in public squares, teachers of children, lovers of life. The free faith tradition is one strand among so many that hold the spirit of life joyfully, and hopefully, courageously. They hold *joie de vivre*.

“So no,” says Antoine Leiris, whose wife was shot in the concert hall last week. “No, I will not grant you the gift of my hatred. Responding to hatred with anger is falling victim to the same ignorance that made you what you are. You want me to be sacred, to view my countrymen with mistrust, to sacrifice my liberty for my security. You lost. I don't have any time for you. My son will wake soon, and he will eat his meals as usual and we are going to play as usual, and for his whole life this little boy will threaten you by being happy and free.”



“Here is how we move forward,” says *The Harry Potter Alliance*, a web-based, international non-profit with thousands and thousands of young followers:

*Here is how we move forward: keep loving; keep fighting; celebrate story; laugh, dance, sing - with your friends, with strangers, with every single person who keeps showing up when the world tells them not to; resist hatred; resist cynicism; know none of this is foolish; know that it is necessary; protect and defend those who - not for the first time - will be victims of hatred falsely carried out in the name of justice; give love and light to those around you and those around the world; be excellent to each other; be good.*

*The places we love - movie theaters at midnight, libraries where books changed our lives, venues where we sang late into the night - have given us spaces to make sense of the world, spaces to make sense of ourselves, crowds to be distinctly and lastingly un-alone in, lifelong friendships, lifelong magic, homes to carry with us. We cannot and will not let them take any of this from us.*

*Always, always, always: the weapon we have is love.*

That is the tradition we stand in.

That’s what our campaign will be about in the spring.

It’s what our church was founded for.