

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Each Other's Magnitude and Bond

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FIRST READING

The first reading is by Bonnie Ewald, a Unitarian Universalist who grew up in our church. She is traveling in Asia, and wrote a blog post in February from which this portion is an excerpt.

In my visits to temples in the last 6 weeks of travels around Asia, one thing I'm always struck by is observing the devotion of people who worship, whether they're monks or lay people passing through, and the comfort that they get from sharing verbal or silent prayers. One reason I like traveling on my own is that I can sit, pray, ponder, or meditate for however long I want in each temple I visit. I have always loved visiting churches and temples, especially historic ones; the cumulative hopes that sit in the air from years of worship leave me feeling rejuvenated and help me put my worries in context a bit. I've always been amazed at the devotion that people put into constructing the buildings themselves, oftentimes years of toil, without knowing if the project would even be finished or how long the building would last. Having such faith in the future is a special thing.

One of my favorite things about my Unitarian church in Chicago is that each week the congregation is invited up to light a candle for things that are "weighing or dancing on our hearts". I've lit many candles since I started attending in 2011. I remember lighting a candle on the 1-year anniversary of my friend Dylan's untimely death at age 21. I remember lighting a candle when my nephew Graydon was born, and again when he was in the ICU a few weeks later... and then again when he returned home, a healthy baby. I fondly remember lighting a candle when I realized I was falling in love with Jacob. When I was struggling with how to process the unjustly imposed death of Eric Garner in New York, I made an intentional trip to church so I could light a candle and silently share my grief with others in the space. I have appreciated so much being able to grow into adulthood with the support of the congregation and sacred space.

I feel very lucky to have been raised Unitarian Universalist. My home congregation, White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, in Mahtomedi MN, is one of my favorite places to visit when I go home. It is still in the same building that I used to bike to with my family when I was little, although it has now undergone two major renovations since the early days. Each time I visit, it brings up so many emotions. As anybody who lives away from their home knows, when you go home, it is easier to see how you have grown and in what ways you are still the same. (This is one reason I think moving away from home and traveling is such a powerful and good thing for people to do.) I love that, each time I go back, I am reminded of what it felt like leaving my parents in the meeting room and walking down the hallway to Sunday school each week; or what it felt like to be dedicated into the congregation when I was in 4th grade, the congregation giving me a de-thorned rose and verbally affirming to me that they would support me and my growth; or what it felt like to stand in front of the congregation after graduating high school and be given a rose with thorns on it, a sign of the beautiful but thorny "real world" I was about to jump into.

At age 27, more than 20 years after I began attending Sunday school, I still struggle with finding the words to explain why Unitarian Universalism resonates so well with me and why it has been such a good spiritual community for me. UUs generally just feel like "my people." One way I like to think of it is that UUs are open-minded and open-hearted, accepting and loving, free and

curious. In a recent sermon (which I listened to via podcast - a wonderful find for my travels!), my home minister described a bit of UU's foundation:

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. Our faith is not given, signed, sealed, received, but constantly evolving, and deeply private, and thus breathtakingly diverse.

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.

In November, my home church celebrated its 59th anniversary. In a sermon celebrating this history, while also recognizing the grief so many congregation members were feeling that month due to the injustices and hatred within our borders and around the world, our minister shared:

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.

I'm thankful for those who took the leap of creating something new, creating something they believed in - without knowing whether it would be a success on paper or not, rejecting the hatred of their times that they easily could have given into, and opting instead for standing on the side of love and having faith in the future. Just thinking about their audacity makes me tear up. To give a cheesy metaphor, the seed they planted has grown into a strong, fruitful tree - and as somebody who has benefited directly from that fruit, gaining inspiration and meaning from its open-heartedness and curiosity, I cannot thank them enough for planting it.

SECOND READING

Gwendolyn Brooks

Paul Robeson
 That time
 cool and clear,
 cutting across the hot grit of the day.
 The major Voice.
 The adult Voice
 forgoing Rolling River,
 forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge

and other symptoms of an old despond.
 Warning, in music-words
 devout and large,
 that we are each other's harvest:
 we are each other's business:
 we are each other's magnitude and bond.

Each Other's Magnitude and Bond

We cannot be reminded frequently enough,
 we cannot remind each other frequently enough, fiercely enough,
 of the ancient, modern wisdom
 the poetic, prophetic, spiritual, political wisdom,
 the ethical, practical, mystical wisdom,
 of the poet,

*warning in music-words
 devout and large
 that we are each other's harvest
 we are each other's business
 we are each other's magnitude and bond.*

We are each other's harvest –
 planting, cultivating, reaping what we sow:
 seeds of kindness, seeds of wrath, seeds of generosity or negligence -
 We are each other's harvest.
 Anyone with any experience of living in a family
 or a country
 or a community
 knows that this is true.

We are each other's business –

that's gospel to us here, that theology, that philosophy, that economic ethics.
 Every living breathing thing, interconnected and interdependent, and all the people, all the
 lonely, lovely, doing just fine and doing not so fine, people...
 Think of them this morning, sitting in their sunlit sanctuaries,
 or sleeping in safe beds now, halfway round the world.
 Think of them, all of them, those sitting and those sleeping and also all the others,
 those neither sitting nor sleeping, but moving in the darkness now,
 immigrants and migrants, refugees from war and thirst,
 ocean waves of children, women, men, so far from home or what is left of home,
 and others also:
 those who move only in spirit, only in imagination, only within the space,

the spaciousness, of their own minds:
 all of those in prison, and the sick, in body or in mind,
 wide awake in morning light or in the midnight dark.
 We are interwoven, each and all, interrelated
 as surely as we're bound to bird and grass and sky:
 prisoners and power brokers, native born and newly landed,
 all of us caught in the same "garment of destiny" (as King said)
 for the briefest little while.
 In this life, on this small earth, *we are each other's business* says the poet –
 and that is gospel truth to us,
 and we come to church to try to figure the implications of it,
 the costs and benefits of this undeniable economy.
 We come to discern how to mind our own business, which is a big business.

We are each other's harvest.
We are each other's business.
We are each other's magnitude and bond.

We come here to remember that, because we cannot be reminded frequently enough,
 and so once a week, or more than once a week, or maybe less sometimes,
 we come to hear again that holy imperative,
 to be reminded not just of who we are but *whose* we are,

- (this church is a covenanted community, and *covenant* means *accountable*; it means literally, to walk together)-

we come to be reminded of who and whose we are and what we're here to do, here on earth to be and do. That's what religion is – you think about that stuff. We come to be reminded and to whisper to each other, sing and speak to one another, pray silently and out loud for one another:

Friend, you once were lost, perhaps, but now you're found. Here, for an hour, or a lifetime, is a beloved community that will embrace you as you are and also coax you and cajole you, nurture you and badger you into who you're called to be. Come in- we're all made better, stronger, by your presence. We are made more whole, made holy, by one another's presence. We are each other's magnitude and bond.

In a church like this, we're encouraged to hold the whole world, earth and sky, and memory, the physical mystical cosmos, and tangible, political, boots-on-the-ground geography. We're encouraged to hold the whole world in our hands, and serve the world, heal it up with love and hope and action and imagination. In a church like this, the small self, self-interested and self-involved, dissolves in larger work; the little self is joined to older, deeper, larger, eternal, infinite story. Together we dream of new chapters and write them into reality. In a church like this the small self is transformed into something larger than itself and that's a good thing, always a good thing. The ego steps back into right relation, and by sharing our stories, or a task, or coffee or a meal (a meal right here on Wednesday night, or maybe the even more beautiful meal cooked here once a month and shared with mentally ill homeless adults down in St. Paul) – by sharing

we fall back, the self falls back, into perspective, just a bit. This is reverence: to know your own place, your own rightful but limited place, in the family of everything.

And, paradoxically, at the very same time, in a church like this, the little self, the sorrowing or lonely self, the struggling, striving, lost and searching self, weary and worn, addicted, ashamed, tempest-tossed and tired out, the little self is held here and cherished, like an ember, and cherished back to life. The wide world, the heavy world, rolls back a bit, and you can heal your heart in here. You let the music of the choir, or the silence, or the laughter of children heal up your heart. In grief, whether private or shared, in loss, in fear, in sickness and in health, you're held here, we all are, by one another, by a loving, caring, real community. Weaving its fabric - the small groups, the classes, the services, the Sunday School - is the work of the church, weaving the fabric of community so it can hold us all.

Last week, a volunteer working in the office, one of you, stopped just before leaving to talk. He'd been typing up the notes from a recent gathering convened by Laura Smidzik. Laura is working on a project to connect church members and friends who live in the St. Croix Valley, from up in Scandia or Marine down maybe to Afton - more than a hundred households. They'll still be completely connected here, on Sundays and at other times, but in between they might meet in their own neighborhoods, for a meal, or a hike, or to work on a community project with folks from other congregations in Stillwater - all kinds of possibilities for more local connections. The project is a pilot for other gatherings we might do in the future with members clustered in St. Paul or Woodbury or to the north and west. The people in this St. Croix group were asked to write a little about what they hoped for, why they wanted to take part, and the office volunteer was typing up those notes (not part of the group, just part of our church). Afterward, he just stopped for minute and he told me he loved seeing all those different responses, what people wrote about the church and about themselves, beautiful things - but he was struck by how many people said they were lonely, looking for friends, seeking connection, needing community. It cut across all ages, elders, families, couples young adults. He said, "Sometimes I think I'm the only one. but typing these notes I see that's not true at all." I told him, "I can assure you - speaking personally now, and not just professionally as the Minister, but speaking *as a person* - I can assure you, you are not the only one."

We're held here in community, by a fabric stronger than our own thin cloaks. It takes a while to find it. It takes patience and some time. And that's not all. In this church we are also held, and even more profoundly, in a graceful and forgiving theological narrative that insists without exception that all are beloved of God - whatever that means. In this church we're held by each other *and* by a larger Love that will not let us go. That is the radical, heretical, saving message of Universalism. We ourselves, in human form, in mortal, messy, clumsy form, are not just the image of God, but the very shape, the actual ears, eyes, hands, beholding you and holding you when the weight of the world is too much. In this house we uphold and we held within a graceful, hopeful, laughing, weeping, forgiving, saving faith.

These are lofty things. Esoteric. "Spiritual." They need a container, sacred space, a house. The work of the spirit, when done in community, and in the real world in real time, needs a workshop, an institution, a roof and a floor, with governance, bylaws, and a little light bureaucracy; space for children, space for tables and chairs and a coffee pot and coffee; it needs

salaries and benefits that are fair and that you're proud of for the staff, and lights and computers and a parking lot, sheet music for the choir, matches for the chalice, and furnaces that work to keep the people warm, that are as green as they can be and are replaced, responsibly, when they are ancient, inefficient, when the cost of duct tape isn't worth it any more. Unitarian Universalists love to say that they're not joiners, and they're not into institutions or organized religion, but furnaces are good, and curricula for children are good, and prudent fiscal management (like paying down a mortgage that is in the way, now, of programs you imagine and good work in the world). A vibrant Unitarian Universalist congregation in this corner of the American heartland in this decade of the 21st century, with 250 babies, children and teenagers, and 750 adults (those are members, the non-joiners who joined, and there are several hundred more who orbit here as friends), a congregation of plus or minus 1500 people striving to serve the world and anchor their hearts in love, in principle, in conscience, in reason and faith, and in a long, historic line of radical hope and inclusion, a congregation like that, made as we are of flesh and blood, dreams and bones, requires brick and stone to hold it safe and house it. Bonnie Ewald, who grew up here and is now traveling round the world reflected on her blog a month ago about visiting temples, mosques and churches and how these buildings, over centuries, hold the hopes and the anguish of people; babies welcomed and the weddings and all of the beloved dead. Think of what these walls have seen and heard and held: the *aspiration* of a people, which like *inspiration* comes from the same root word as *spirit*, which means *breath*, as ephemeral and real as wind, and different from the wind, because it's gathered here. *I have always loved visiting churches and temples, she says, especially historic ones; the cumulative hopes that sit in the air from years of worship leave me feeling rejuvenated and help me put my worries in context a bit. I've always been amazed at the devotion that people put into constructing the buildings themselves, oftentimes years of toil, without knowing if the project would even be finished or how long the building would last. Having such faith in the future is a special thing.*

So writes a young woman whose first experience of congregational life and beloved community was in this building – well, in *that* building, across the hall. Bonnie is 27 years old, and her little Religious Education class was heated by the very same furnace that we are still using right now. To be responsible stewards of this beautiful and sacred space, we need to invest in it from time to time, and to be true to our principles, to walk our talk, we need to be sure that the building sits as lightly on the earth, this sacred place, as it can. Last October, after careful research by the Building Committee and the Financial Oversight Committee, you voted to do two things this year: to replace the aging furnace system and also to pay down the mortgage which constricts our dreams and our good work in so many ways. You set a goal for a special campaign that is well within our reach, and you chose to run that campaign concurrently with the annual pledge drive in March, because really these things are all of a piece: this is care for the congregation that cares for all of us, the space that holds our dreams, our aspirations, our children, our loneliness, our going out and coming in, our deepest questions and our best efforts to be better human beings.

It's a lot to ask, as Dale said in the film, "I know, it's a lot." We're being asked to continue our annual support, to raise that a little bit, and also, at the same time, to make a one-time special gift. The last time we did this was ten years ago, to build the sanctuary. This is a significant threshold. For some of us, the gift we make here is the largest gift, for some the only gift, that we make anywhere. There are others, members here, who never pledge at all. I don't mean those who truly can't, I mean those who just never fell into a habit of it – several dozen households. I

don't know what that's about. What we do know, from the campaign team and the Board is that if all of us participate, at a level that reflects our own financial situation and what the congregation means, we will reach both goals. That's a very hopeful prospect.

Bonnie Ewald wrote on her blog about the founders of this church, who sank deep roots before she was even born. She writes, *"I'm thankful for those who took the leap of creating something new, creating something they believed in - without knowing whether it would be a success on paper or not, rejecting the hatred of their times that they easily could have given into, and opting instead for standing on the side of love and having faith in the future. Just thinking about their audacity makes me tear up. ...The seed they planted has grown into a strong, fruitful tree - and as somebody who has benefited directly from that fruit, gaining inspiration and meaning from its open-heartedness and curiosity, I cannot thank them enough for planting it.*

We are each other's magnitude and bond, and gratitude is another name for the love which is the spirit of our church.

SILENCE

WORDS IN CLOSING

adapted from a selection in our hymnbook, by Eileen Karpeles, UU minister

Out of wood and glass and stone, out of dreams and sacrifice,
the people build a home.
Out of the work of their hands and hearts and minds,
the people fashion a symbol, and a reality.

May these walls hear the voice of the child as surely as that of the orator,
and the sound of singing, and laughing and weeping,
and the click of a keyboard, the swish of a broom,
and know that all are as holy as the shout of a million stars.

May the rain fall softly on this house,
the sun shine warmly,
the winds blow softly,
and bless it
as a place of joy and peace.