

# **WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

## **On the Way**

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, March 20, 2016

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

*"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"*

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## READINGS

### *An excerpt from Martin Luther*

This life, therefore, is not godliness  
but the process of becoming godly,  
not health but getting well,  
not being but becoming,  
not rest but exercise.

We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.  
The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on.  
This is not the goal but it is the right road.  
At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle,  
but everything is being cleansed.

### *Waking Up as I Fall Asleep by Joyce Sutphen*

I turn on the news to fall asleep,  
but what I really want to know is  
how my life is turning out.

I wonder if I could find myself  
if I had to. How would I think in  
that situation, I ask myself.

Where is the first place I would  
look  
if I lost me? What kind of  
disguise would I wear?

Would I look like her? Could she  
talk like me? Does she have any  
odd hobbies, I wonder, and

has she been spending money  
that I don't have?

Who does she talk to  
when she wants to know

what I am thinking? Would I  
listen? Why is it that when I am  
talking to her I always think of

something to say after I've gone  
away?

When will I come back again,  
and  
will she recognize herself when I  
walk in?

***From Bishop Ken Untener of Sagnia, in honor of Archbishop Oscar Romero, entitled A Step Along the Way***

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
An opportunity for [God's] grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

## SERMON

*The question is, said Universalist Clarence Skinner in the early 1900s, how to transform this old earth into the Kingdom of God.*

Perhaps the question changes and shifts,  
Transforms itself over time,

And yet still asks the same timeless yet timely,  
Persistent and prophetic question:

*The question is:*

*How to transform this old earth into heaven?*

*How to transform hatred into love*

*Greed into generosity*

*Stranger into kindred*

*Fear into courage*

*Despair into hope*

*Oppression into liberation*

*How to transform ourselves, our communities*

*each and every day in seemingly small moments*

*that are part of the larger path – to always be “on the way”*

Those are big transformations that normally happen in the small, tiny, incremental transformations. Sometimes they come in large waves of change that have been building for some time, sometimes they just seem to appear from seemingly nowhere and find fertile ground for change to happen.

I have been told by many parents, about parenting, that *the days are long, and the years are short. The days are long, and the years are short.*

I probably heard it from my own mother first.

That's what all of life seems to be - when we are in the moment, it is sometimes hard to see the larger picture - what the Bishop of Sagniauw as (Jocelyn/Bob) read to us, called to long view.

A step along the way - the incremental transformations.

It's a little like when our daughter looks at pictures of Jenna and I from high school - and I can't believe she recognizes us - because she sees us deeper than we see ourselves sometimes. Or as she recently said about a high school picture - "it looks kinda like papa." That's about right.

We are always changing and we're always kinda the same -  
we kinda look like we used to,  
we kinda act like we used to,  
we're kind of who we once were,  
what we once did, how we once thought, felt,  
we kinda believe what we once believed  
we kinda recognize our old self.

The poet Joyce Sutphen asks, "I wonder if I could find myself if I had to - would she recognize herself when I walk in the door?"

As Victoria mentioned last week from the poem, life is about living in the layers - the complexities - the many transformations our souls and spirits go through in a lifetime - even in a day.

Some traditions speak of this with the language of *becoming*  
That we are, as the reading form today said, *on the way*  
That this being human is always a process of being and becoming  
of now and not yet...

we are great, and we can be better  
we have come along way and have a ways to go  
we are not stagnant beings – this is not a stagnant world  
we are transformational becomings.  
collective selves of who we have been and are yet to be.

I tend to think about transformation, as is natural, in the retrospective.  
How much I've changed since whenever – years, days, minutes ago –  
when I was less evolved, less intelligent, less great. When you look back  
and think, “uffda – what was I thinking?”

And then we realize it's going to keep happening – “oh my god, this  
might be the worst I'll ever be again!” We'll keep changing, growing,  
learning, adjusting, evolving – probably more in a circle than in a line. It  
can either lead to fear or a deep curiosity of the way ahead...

Just as we each are in stages of transformation, always forming and  
reforming, dying and rising to a new day – so to is our religion. We each  
personally go through different developmental stages in many areas in  
our life – in relationships, careers, family roles, personality – and so to  
do communities, congregations, and entire faith traditions.

Unitarian Universalism in many ways is an old faith – with a long history  
dating back to Jewish and Christian identities, specific histories during  
the reformation – in Europe, and newer forms in North America.  
Ideas and theology have stayed with us since the early founders of the  
Christian church (we tend to lean toward the losers of the various creed  
councils) but still a long history.

And in other ways, our way of being now is quite new. This free faith of pluralism and justice, without creed or uniform liturgy – is not that old.

Even a hundred years ago, what was Unitarianism and Universalism, two separate denominations, would have been known and experienced much more like congregational Christian churches today – with communion, the Lord’s Prayer, and other traditional rituals that some, but not most, of our congregations practice today.

In terms of religion, then, it can be said that Unitarian Universalism is in a unique and young stage of development – we’re kind of like an adolescent with a lot of wisdom but also still trying to figure this all out – how to do this religion thing.

We have been transforming, for generations, changed by changing culture, changing religious and scientific insight, by study and the sometimes fast and sometimes slow tides of new thought, new perspective, shining new light on timeless truths. Ours, like every faith, is one that has been transforming quickly, slowly, since its beginnings.

.  
Fred Muir, an author, editor, and Unitarian Universalist minister, wrote recently about a developmental change needed in our faith to continue to be relevant in a new world.

He presented an essay in 2012 at our association’s general assembly, to the gathering of ministers from across the country, which just recently appeared as part of a new book about Unitarian Universalism’s future – a challenge to how we might need to transform now, sharing his fears about some of our tendencies as Unitarian Universalists that are challenging, off-putting, and even damaging to our future.

But since it's pledge month, I've decided to ignore those and say – everything's great and we are awesome.

Which is true – but that's not the whole story. I think we care deeply enough about this faith to wrestle with some of our greatest challenges. Testifying his deepest concerns and hopes about this tradition to his peers in ministry, Rev. Muir wrote this challenge:

*Fundamental to our future is recognizing that our way of faith - from its ministry to its members - has been supported and nurtured by a trinity of errors leading not only to ineffectiveness but an inability to share our liberating message; which is to say, while Unitarian Universalism's gospel is good news it is losing its vitality and relevance.*

*We have, for some time, experienced a Trinity of errors - The trinity of which I speak is individualism, exceptionalism, and adversity to authority.*

- First, we are being held back and stymied - really, we are being held captive - by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times;*
- Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news;*
- Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.*

*We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality yes, but not individualism.*

*As unique as our experience with Unitarian Universalism may be, it is not the only way. We must stay conscious of how we explain, defend or share lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, isolating even humiliating of others. The iChurch's exceptionalism is a barrier to sharing the good news of Unitarian Universalism.*



*Unitarian Universalism's allergy to and misuse of power and authority is a factor in our inability or unwillingness to welcome and listen to a diversity of interests and passions - without being distracted and immobilized - and then move forward, "promising our mutual trust and support" for the common good while walking as a community with space for those who disagree.*

*If individualism led us to the iChurch, then covenant can shape the Beloved Community, where the promise of individuality and justice inspire, empower, broaden and deepen all.*

*We have arrived at an epistemology opportunity - a break-through moment - where we must write a new narrative.*

A new narrative, he writes – an opportunity, a turning point to move toward Beloved Community.

If we are to offer to the world our best message and our most vibrant, relevant, engaging, hope-filled, justice-centered, free-faith religion, then we also need to, together, hold some of the challenges and stumbling blocks built into our heritage.

It is not that such vices came out of nowhere, or didn't have a reasonable entry point into Unitarian Universalism.

Individualism came out of a real need for less oppressive hierarchy and more individuality and free faith expression.

Exceptionalism comes out of a real testimony from people who have experienced this faith as radically different and liberating and nourishing from other experiences.

And an allergy to and misuse of authority, or clear structure of decision-making, comes from a place where leadership was less shared and far more authoritarian in other forms of religion.

That tends to propel us a bit too far into an ethic of egalitarianism – where every idea is equally valid – rather than our actual democratic faith – where there is room for disagreement without failing to make decisions and move forward – trusting the integrity of our many leaders.

And many of these come out of real pain and grief of shattered hearts and souls from other traditions – experiences of misogyny and heteronormativity, shaming, belittlement, suffocating structures that were used to control – trust that was obliterated in webs of lies and cover-ups; abuse of the soul and spirit and body and mind in a thousand ways.

Those are real and worth the depth of outrage and calls for accountability. Such a conversation calls for a type of depth that is better than a casual dismissal of certain theological words, or generalizations of other traditions as if we are the only ones who have it figured out and having anything worthwhile to offer intelligent people. In an ethic and practice of *becoming*, it is quite literally *unbecoming* of us, and unwelcoming of us, to speak our stories with exceptionalism and individualism.

Our faith, our religion, is on the way – we, collectively, are practicing *becoming*, transforming – we are asking the questions for a future that is not ours alone.

And we can speak, powerfully, and testify to the best of our tradition without trash-talking another or claiming to be better than anyone else.

As we know, trash-talking others, in whatever context, says more about ourselves than those we are speaking of.

Fred Muir offers a trinity of promises as a way to begin re-telling our story: *A trinity of promises: generosity, pluralism, & imagination*

Friends, I cannot, nor would not, speak on your behalf. These are your questions to wrestle with as much as mine, as well as all of our congregations and those who are yet to find our doors.

But I can give testimony to my own hopes for our faith, both from my own experience, but also as being privileged to witness the testimony of others, many of you, who over and over have expressed that this church has nourished and challenged and loved them beyond words.

And so this is my prayer for us. My hope, among many, for how we might practice becoming.

My prayer is that we might be generous;  
in welcome to the outcast and stranger,  
generous in spirit to those with whom we assume we might disagree,  
generous in open hearts and ears  
to experiences that are not our own.  
Generous with our own self so that we focus less on protecting our  
individualism and celebrate how we can help each other grow.

My prayer is that we might be pluralistic;  
that we focus on what this church means to us in the positive  
rather than how it is better than, different than, more evolved than,  
more intelligent than, more educated than, more justice-seeking than,  
someone else's faith, creed, hopes, or dreams.

Pluralistic to remember we don't have all the answers,  
that our openness to mystery and questions  
doesn't become an absolutism of rejection  
of any tradition that offers something different;  
and that we don't assume we are the only ones  
who are open, loving,  
have questions, love mystery,  
or have different ideas  
about religion and faith and God and love and humanity.

My prayer is that our pluralism doesn't become  
skewed into an inverted fundamentalism.

My prayer is that we might imagine  
imagine expansive theological language  
being welcomed and celebrated  
lest our pluralism brings us to the lowest common denominator,  
where nothing can be spoken that might offend another,  
and then nothing is spoken at all.

That we might imagine appreciation for many words  
to describe the complexity of life,  
and not assume that those sitting next to us right now  
want to cast out or mock the same theological words we do.  
In fact, those very words one may want to be rid of,  
might be just what the beloved friend next to us  
may need right now.

I believe we do this in many ways. We are on the way, always,  
*becoming.*

We can, and do, speak about how great this faith is without critiquing or rejecting or mocking another faith.

We can, and do, celebrate the personal freedom of faith it offers without having fear that someone's else's language – traditional or new-age, is deficient, threatening, simple, or archaic.

As I listen deeply to the testimony of people whose lives are nourished and changed by this place and our larger movement –

As I have listened over and over in the conversation circles this month to the multiplicity of stories, of testimonies, that make up our larger story -

(And this is not a plug to join our last conversation circle today at 12:30 with lunch provided and childcare available, walk-ins welcome)

...when I listen to the testimony it is a reminder that when we open our heart, share our stories, then our beliefs are held less rigidly, and we can envision a more expansive language, a more gracious appreciation of others, where other religions don't become part of a joke but become part of the larger fabric of wisdom that can help grow our soul by learning and listening to the wisdom it has...even as we claim a very different story... and there are real things we have left behind.

That's what church does – what we strive to do, at least - Church gathers us in from the various paths from which we come, spiraling through our days, our weeks, our years, gathers us in...

and yes, it's a little bit about belonging,  
it's a little bit about friends,  
it's a little bit about like-mindedness  
it's a little bit about  
the music, the coffee, the poetry, the window wall...  
but really – when I think about it,  
it's about something far deeper than that;

People keep coming to church  
because it is about bringing us out of our isolated selves  
out of our individualism,  
bringing us face to face with the largest questions of life  
and love and death and hope and resilience  
and placing our soul  
vulnerable and open to the mystery and wonder of  
God, of earth, of sky,  
and doing so together – side by side, hand in hand,  
reminding ourselves and each other,  
the state of our soul is marked and sealed as beloved.

Make no mistake, this is a salvific, a saving faith  
that transforms lives and spirits.

Ours if a faith that liberates  
someone from the brink of death and despair to the hope of new life.

Let us not forget the depth of what we do here  
and what we are yet to become.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday,  
he rode on a donkey as political theater.

He proclaimed a heaven on earth  
rooted in humility rather than prestige.  
Riding on a donkey was a symbol of lowliness –  
a statement of humility in the face of immense social power.

The message he shared  
regardless of how you define his essence  
was welcome to the outcast, stranger and marginalized  
justice for the poor and oppressed  
service and love to the neighbor and enemy.  
And that message was too important  
that there was no room for ego or arrogance.  
The critique of the empire was too deep to do so lightly –  
the depth of critique needed had to be held in  
humility and integrity and serious, radical love.

We are all on the way  
and on our own road,  
how is our message travelling –  
we are on the way  
being and becoming  
and our faith, just like our own lives,  
still has some growing up to do...  
and there is nothing deficient about doing some growing up.  
In fact, it can be quite inspiring, and beautiful, and hope-filled.

Our message is too important  
to be clouded by arrogance or elitism or ego,  
by individualism or exceptionalism,  
it must be *on the way* of humility and welcome and love.

I think one of our members, Mara Coyle,  
put it well, what our calling is as Unitarians  
in this poem – *how to be a good Unitarian*:

Show Up. Speak Up Quiet Down. Listen.  
Recognize the wisdom around you.  
Feel the pain, sit with it, let it go.  
Believe, doubt, question, challenge.

Honor the past.  
Envision the future.  
Celebrate the now.  
Be grateful, remorseful, forgiving.

Clean up your mess. Hold doors for others. Invite them in.

Show up. Speak up. Quiet down. Listen.

Agitate, appreciate, congregate, consecrate.

Let the sun shine in and expose the darkness.  
Let the tears stream down.  
Throw back your head, and let your song be heard.  
Know that you are not alone.  
There are others who  
show up, speak up, quiet down.  
**Listen.**



*For a few moments we'll be silent together.*

*A closing poem...*

I want to find that balance of  
human being and human becoming.  
Being open to more wisdom  
more stories  
more beauty  
by becoming  
a little less full of myself.

Being proud by becoming humble.  
Being humble by becoming proud.

Being more compassionate  
more loving  
more mindful  
more hopeful  
by becoming more aware  
of the grace that enfolds my being.

Becoming myself by being made new.

I don't know if there is a balance  
or a scale  
or any type of measurement to be sure,  
but I'm starting to feel  
more comfortable  
in this  
becoming human being,  
this being  
becoming human.