

# WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Air and Smoke

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, April 3, 2016

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

*"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"*

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## READINGS

### *From Richard Rohr*

A philosopher of religion said that if you look at the history of all religions, they almost all begin with one massive mistake. They make a clean split between the sacred and the profane. Then all the emphasis is placed on going to the sacred spaces, creating sacred time and sacred actions, and ninety-eight percent of life then remains “unsacred.” This is at the heart of the problem. This is why so many people have such a hard time encountering the holy. These are not insincere people. They’re people who were told to look only in a very few places for God. The correct distinction is never between sacred and profane, but only between sacred and *desecrated* places, people, and things. It is we alone who desecrate God’s one incarnate world by our inability to see truthfully and to show reverence.

### *From Jan Richardson*

Perhaps it does not begin.  
Perhaps it is always.

Perhaps it takes  
a lifetime  
to open our eyes,  
to learn to see  
what has forever  
shimmered in front of us—  
the luminous line  
of the map  
in the dark  
the vigil flame  
in the house  
of the heart  
the love  
so searing  
we cannot keep  
from singing,  
from crying out  
in testimony  
and praise.

Perhaps this day  
will be the mountain  
over which  
the dawn breaks.

Perhaps we  
will turn our face  
toward it,  
toward what has been  
always.

Perhaps  
our eyes  
will finally open  
in ancient recognition,  
willingly dazzled,  
illuminated at last.  
Perhaps this day  
the light begins  
in us.

***From Thomas Merton***

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which [Godself] became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time.

And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

## SERMON

It must have been about 90 degrees – hot, humid; no air conditioning in that 2<sup>nd</sup> floor room, filled with buckets of paint, tarps across the floor.

And it seemed to go tiny strip by tiny strip – centimeters at a time; like trying to get every speck of an eggshell of a hard-boiled egg that isn't peeling well.

The wall we were trying to clean and prep for painting must have had at least 4 layers of wallpaper – probably evenly spread over decades dating back to 1927 when the house was built. Some of you surely have done this – scraping off years-old wallpaper, with a putty knife or one of those circular scrapers, or frustrated fingernails – these walls covered in not-so-earth-friendly toxic glue that you just hope isn't too poisonous.

The walls have been covered, infused over years with dust and dirt, and who knows what stories, lives, moments lived in those walls.

But it felt like, beyond the surface of the dated wall covering, we were clearing off the sticky dirt in search for some more authentic, something more true and lasting – the covered up identity of the old house.

Many people speak of places – homes or land – as having a core identity, something about the character of the place, the personality of it, that can't quite be put into words.

Sometimes there are layers of things getting in the way, covering it up, sticking to it so strongly that it is hard to see beyond the surface.

Do you ever feel like that?

Feel covered in layers – not the good, natural layers of a life changing and growing over days, years, a lifetime.

But covered in layers  
like paper and toxic glue  
of expectations we have of ourselves,  
for one another –  
expectations being placed upon us  
by the narratives  
of commercialism and capitalism –  
trying to be a good  
sibling, spouse, parent, child,

and failing everywhere else in life  
or trying to be  
productive, useful, helpful  
in the wider world,  
and failing to be present  
where it matters most – at home.

The layers can be put on thick,  
old, cracking layers  
put on with thick, cheap glue,  
layers of class  
of race  
of gender  
of class  
that you try to peel away, over and over,  
and seems to only leave more of a mess.

And when we can't even find ourselves  
under all these layers that obscure our radiant shining soul,  
how easy will it be to notice the bright blaze of divinity  
in someone else.

Catholic theologian Richard Rohr speaks of the massive mistake made across  
religious traditions in early histories – the clear separation between the sacred and  
the profane – places that were holy, and places that clearly were not.

This idea become embodied, literally, in greek and western culture as a separation  
between the soul and the flesh – the soul, that hidden part deep within us that was  
any good, was covered, by layer and layers and layers of sin-soaked evil flesh.

But there are counter-traditions to that, and the ancients believed something quite  
different.

Peeling back the layers, diving deeper beyond the surface of superficial identity, we  
might find the holy hiding smack dab in the middle of everything.

In the Jewish tradition, the sacred aspect of humanity, the soul, comes from the  
word *nefesh* which means breath, air, life. God breathed into humanity, into the dirt  
and dust of the earth; through breath, created life. So, the soul, our very breath and  
bone and blood, then, is the very essence, made out of the air of God.

In gnostic traditions, and carried in new ways in the Quaker tradition, the indwelling of the holy in humans is spoken as the spark of the divine - the *inner light* - that of *God*, in every person, that we often fail to notice right in front of us.

Several summers ago, on a regular camping trip, we were trying to light the campfire when the temperature must have been 100 at 9:00 at night, and the dew \]point must have been 1000 degrees. But it was the last night of the summer camping trip, so we, of course, needed to sit 'round the campfire - maybe just not so close.

But we were out of kindling, so we improvised - now, if you're on the global climate team, just forgive me - but all we had for kindling was the pages of a phonebook.

But the wood was wet - and the paper was damp, and as we paged through the phonebook - a, b, c, pizza advertisement, d - that wood was not lighting - we just added a thick smoke to an already hazy valley, and gave into failure.

When you keep dousing the sacred embers within each of us  
with the toxic chemicals of shame, of judgment, of oppression and fear,  
pages soaked with irreverence, disregard, disrespect,  
hatred and division,  
that little light is going to be smothered  
by the worst humanity has to offer;  
billowing up smog that clouds our clear vision  
of each other's divine spark,  
rather than fed with the clean, crisp  
air and breath and oxygen  
of grace, compassion, beauty, justice, affirmation, and love.

What is the soul, then  
other than  
the breath  
the air  
the spark and light and fire  
of God  
infused in everything  
dwelling in all that is  
in me  
in you.

To speak of the soul is to name a sacred quality,  
a presence of divinity,  
within us all.

As mystic Hildegard wrote:

*"I am that supreme and fiery force  
that sends forth all the sparks of life.  
I am that living and fiery essence  
of that divine substance that flows in the beauty of the fields.  
I shine in the water,  
I burn in the sun and the moon and the stars.  
Mine is the mysterious force of the invisible wind...  
I am life."*

It is actually both our Universalist tradition and our Unitarian tradition that speak of the divine or the sacred in each person.

Universalism with the traditional language that we are all children, or kindred, of God.

And Unitarianism with the language of Unity – oneness – that God, or the Sacred, is infused and present in all things, in many sources, many people – not limited, but limitless.

It is everywhere – if we just realize it.

It's like if you have ever played hide and seek with a very young child, perhaps you know a different type of hidden-ness. You walk into a room, and right there, smack dab in the middle of the floor, is a person-shaped object obscured only by the blanket on top of their head. And, as you can imagine, when the person who is supposed to hide looks, say, like me – it's pretty hard to not notice something just might be under that blanket.

All one must do, then,  
on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville for Thomas Merton,  
or on the corner of Malple and Mahtomedi,  
on the corner of anywhere,  
is simply notice...  
notice what has *forever shimmered in front of us*  
what has always been blazing within us  
this whole world  
dust and earth, sea and sky,

hands and hearts and voices  
are shining reminders  
that it is all holy;  
all this ordinary stuff,  
you, me,  
the grass and sun and wind;  
the road and the table and the stranger -  
take off your sandals everywhere you go,  
because every step you take,  
every person you greet  
every moment you live  
is on holy ground,  
in sacred time;  
this life, your life,  
is a living sacrament.

Richard Rohr also says, today, that there is *only a difference between sacred and desecrated places, people, and things.*

If all of life is sacred, then the loss of life is desecration.  
The loss of life literally,  
the loss of community,  
or hope, or habitat,  
the loss of  
trust or possibility or one's future.

The difference between something profane,  
and something desecrated,  
is that if something is desecrated,  
it's inner most identity is yet sacred,  
even as it has been destroyed,  
or threatened,  
or disrespected.

It is an irreverence for life,  
a failure to recognize the dignity,  
the shining spark of the divine  
in all places and people,  
that leads to destruction.

How often do we hear of desecrated places, people –  
young people of color lying dead in the street,



a church, a business, a public square  
turned from life-affirming centers  
to places of terror, loss, bloodshed,  
and the earth itself  
groaning from the crushing weight  
of neglect, abuse, and poison.

One need not look far for holy places feeling the weight of desecration. North Minneapolis has been in national news because of the depth of loss that was felt in the midst of a much wider conversation around oppression, poverty, modern forms of white supremacy, unconscious bias, and a system that, while intentioned to be even-minded, neglects the realities of the uneven field of socio-economic status, histories of oppression, and life experience.

I am not a legal expert – some of you are.  
I am not in law enforcement – some of you are.

What I am is a servant  
of justice, beauty, love, God,  
one who tries each day,  
often failing and always striving,  
in humility,  
to listen deeply to heartache, loss, grief –  
to the stories of fear and intimidation,  
the stories of distrust and abuse,  
the stories of heart-shattering brokenness.

I listen,  
because the stories themselves,  
are the air, the breath, the fire and the smoke  
of the Holy.

Liberation theology, stemming out of communities suffering under oppression in Latin America, provides a reminder that the God of the Abrahamic religions and scriptures spanning traditions from generation to generation, speak of the presence of God smack dab in the midst of the mess and brokenness of this world. While all people are sacred, and all places holy, it is in times of desecration, brokenness,

fear, hate, division,  
where a holy presence  
a sacred spirit  
is needed most.

Liberation theology's core teaching is about  
God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed –  
not to neglect the presence of God with those in power,  
but to even the playing field with the ancient teaching –  
those on the margins, those cast out and neglected,  
the places of oppression and destruction and suffering;  
where hope is needed most, is where the presence of God most fully dwells –  
because religion is about compassion,  
and God is about compassion – which literally means to *suffer with*.

There,  
on Plymouth Avenue in North Minneapolis,  
the divine spark of a young man,  
the sacred breath of God,  
was taken – a life cut short;  
as if God herself lay bleeding on the ground.

Not because it isn't complicated,  
but because of the draining questions...  
how is it  
we operate in a system  
where a young man is killed 60 seconds  
after his first encounter with police.  
How is it  
that the stories told by those in positions of authority,  
those lives sworn to serve  
are weighted mightily  
over the stories of eyewitnesses  
who were discounted  
as untrustworthy.

Sure, the evidence and the decision may seem reasonable  
but we can, and do, view evidence and facts to bear out the story we already hold  
within us; clear cut facts give us the illusion  
that our stories are fullproof – when they might be used to prove multiple stories  
true.

Regardless of the justification of force once it reached a certain point,  
regardless of the outcome of this particular instance  
among far too many,

Certain families have to tell their children  
especially their sons  
how to, and not to  
interact with police  
walk through a store to not be looked at as suspicious  
wear your clothes a certain way if you don't want to be bothered,  
or feared, or stigmatized.

Certain families have to tell their children  
act this way with these people,  
look this way in this situation,  
stay away from this place,  
not because it's polite or "right",  
but because it might cost you your life –  
because you never know  
when internalized racism  
can rage.

Certain families have to do these things.  
Certain families don't.  
And how might those experiences change  
how one walks through this life  
free, or layered.

I can't help but hear the overwhelming evidence  
of a system and a culture set up for some to fail  
and others to be protected  
and day after day,  
generation after generation  
communities,  
lives,  
the sacred breath and divine spark of life  
lay lifeless in the street.

And yet and still  
because air and breath,  
fire and smoke,  
continue to shine within each of us,  
within our communities,

on every street  
in every chant  
in every moment,

there is a strength and resilience and a sanctification  
that happens in even the most desecrated spaces.

As one poet puts it,  
*the veil of night keeps falling  
but the God of love keeps calling  
and our voices keep on rising  
like prayers of air and smoke.*

Some of our members was involved in the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct occupation late last fall, and one spoke of the beauty and sacredness she witnessed in the face of struggle and fear – this is some of what she wrote on her blog recalling the community that was formed:

*At the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct,  
Tents sprang up, then food service,  
then winter clothing giveaways.  
Sisters Camelot pulled their bus right into the camp  
and unloaded hundreds of pounds of fresh produce  
over the days of the occupation,  
most of it flowing out into the community.  
Some days, the lines of cars stretched for over a block,  
each one pulling up to donate firewood and propane  
to keep protesters warm day and night.  
For eighteen days,  
campfires burned in a line down one block of Plymouth Avenue.  
They were carefully tended: logs laid in careful formation,  
coals stoked to a new blaze,  
water and sand at the ready nearby,  
ashes diligently swept away.  
The miracle of this string of lights wasn't the fuel needed  
to keep those fires burning;  
it was the community that formed to keep the whole occupation  
bright and steadfast.  
And I'd like to believe that, in the seasons to come,  
the smell of woodsmoke  
and the feel of yarn  
and the sight of tents*

*and the greetings of new and old friends  
will remind everyone of what the uncommon,  
beloved community we built together at the 4th Precinct.*

Profound words and experiences,  
echoed by Rev. Laura after attending last week's rally:  
*When it feels like there is little hope and progress I look at all who gathered to raise  
our voices and believe that together we can make change.*

Laura also shared with us a picture, or rather literally a video,  
of joy that comes in the midst of these gatherings:  
a monk, or friar, if that's still a thing,  
wearing his brown robe and sincture  
flanked by two young African American men,  
jumped and danced at last week's gathering  
to the radiant words: "*we're gonna be alright*"

It's the sacred in the ordinary.  
It happens all the time, over and over,  
throughout this life.  
At times of joy and celebration,  
at times of great loss and grief,  
at times of uncertainty, wondering and wandering:  
God, or whatever you call most sacred,  
shows up.

And I am perhaps most astounded  
of what happens after death –  
every death –  
in communities of protest  
or a hospital bedside  
or at the end of a long life,

God shows up  
in the simple, ordinary, sacred things.

In the face of death,  
on Plymouth Avenue, on Maple Street,  
on every corner and bedside where grief strikes,  
sanctification happens in those places of desecration.  
A festival for life is held –  
God shows up

in bread and pie and sandwiches  
and cookies and coffee,  
like an altar spread across the kitchen counter,  
like a sacrament served on paper plates,  
like a procession of saints pulling up the driveway  
with sacred gifts of food, drink, firewood,  
holding each other closely  
as if they are holding God –  
because they are.

A few years ago at the Community Thanksgiving Service in White Bear Lake, the Presbyterian chaplain from Cerenity Health Care center preached; he shared stories about how people in the health care center, from many traditions and no tradition at all, showed to him the presence of God.

So he ended by taking out his phone, and saying – “hold still – smile; I always wanted to have a picture of God.”  
We are living pictures of the Holy – in real life, in real time  
walking around shining like the sun.

It’s the ordinary things,  
that seem to be the most sacred.  
The sunlight through the afternoon window,  
the crayons and paper and scissors and glue,  
the evening walk,  
the call from a friend,  
the cup of coffee and the shared meal;  
the breath of life,  
the divine spark,  
the presence of God,  
is in the air we breathe.  
What is the soul, other than  
the breath - the air  
the spark and light and fire  
of God dwelling in all that is  
in me - in you.  
When you peel back the layers set in the way,  
then you realize it’s just a blanket  
hiding the holy  
right smack dab in the middle of everything;