

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The World is Before You

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*Note: The first two readings appear in the book, **Emergent Strategy** by Adrienne Marie Brown.*

### **FIRST READING**

*from Naima Penniman*

Many trees grow in a common root system underground; they are one being reaching up in many bodies- birch, ash mangrove. Oak trees wrap their roots around each other under the earth.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf coast, almost everything lost its footing. Houses were detached from their foundations, trees and shrubbery were uprooted, sign posts and vehicles floated down the rivers that became the streets. But amidst the whipping winds and surging water, the oak tree held its ground. How? Instead of digging its roots deep and solitary into the earth, the oak tree grows its roots wide and interlocks with other oak trees in the surrounding area. And you can't bring down a hundred oak trees bound beneath the soil!

How do we survive the unnatural disasters of climate change, environmental injustice, over-policing, mass imprisonment, militarization, global inequality, corporate globalization and displacement? We must connect in the underground, my people! In this way, we shall survive.

### **SECOND READING**

*from Malkia Cyril*

From water I have learned to move around and past fixed objects to achieve my goal.

From our winged kindred I have learned there are times to swarm and that such a swarm can take down even the largest and cockiest predator...

The land speaks to me of a longer time frame than the one my body understands. The earth, in the way that it spins under our feet, changing while no one is looking, reminds me both that what we win today can be gone tomorrow, and what we lose today can be won tomorrow. The only constant is change.

That is nature's greatest lesson to me: that change is inevitable, and time is unfathomable. It means I can keep going, when all seems to fail and fall around me. *Nature* is the source of my faith.

### THIRD READING

Some Questions You Might Ask

*Mary Oliver*

Is the soul solid, like iron?  
 Or is it tender and breakable, like  
 the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?  
 Who has it, and who doesn't?  
 I keep looking around me.  
 The face of the moose is as sad  
 as the face of Jesus.  
 The swan opens her white wings slowly.  
 In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.  
 One question leads to another.  
 Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
 Like the eye of a hummingbird?  
 Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?  
 Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
 who loves her children?  
 Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
 Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
 What about the blue iris?  
 What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?  
 What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
 What about the grass?

### The World is Before You

*The world is before you*, said James Baldwin – African American, queer, radical, expatriate novelist, essayist and activist, *The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in*. He spoke those words in 1960 at Kalamazoo College in Michigan to a mostly white audience, mostly students, very young, daring them to see, to hear, to speak, to live as if this world were mutable, changeable, redeemable, daring them to imagine and insist upon living in a country they themselves had not been born in but which they could establish by decree. He'd been asked to speak about "the Negro minority" in America, and with ferocious brilliance he declined to do so, and chose instead to speak to the majority before him. He dared them to imagine their own world, their country, their history, larger than they'd thought it was, larger and more complicated, more dangerous and endangered, more beautiful, more true. *The world is before you*, he said, not "ahead of you," as in some far-off, theoretical future, but *right here at your feet and right here in your hands and you could live in it right now, and ever more, as if*. *You need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in*.

*Sing to the Lord a new song*, said another writer, long ago. *Revelation is not sealed*, says a line in our own hymnal, and *everything is changing*, sings our choir sometimes, echoing the Buddha. How do we hold and sing and tell the stories of our lives? How do we map and thus create into being the landscape that we live in? What narrative, authored by whom, tells us who we are, and when exactly was that set in stone? Who holds the copyright, the movie rights? Who gets to edit the revised standard version of any sacred text, including the stories of our lives?

A young writer speaks about religion:

*From water I have learned to move around and past fixed objects to achieve my goal. From our winged kindred I have learned there are times to swarm and that such a swarm can take down even the largest and cockiest predator... The land speaks to me of a longer time frame than the one my body understands. The earth, in the way that it spins under our feet, changing while no one is looking, reminds me ... that everything is changing. Nature is the source of my faith.*

How do you speak about the sources of your faith, and your own soul within that faith, and how much of that story was given to you, and how much have you made up or discovered, or decreed, along the way? Many of us were taught as children to build our faith on scripture or church doctrine, to trust the priest or rabbi or the minister - and then we opened the back door and stepped outside on a dewy summer morning or a moonlit winter night, and our whole religion changed.

Or we took a chemistry class, or earth science or astronomy in school, and the known universe expanded in a test tube or a telescope.

Or we met someone, perhaps a little later, whose gender identity or orientation or economic class was entirely different from our own experience, and our questions, and our hearts, got bigger as the world grew smaller, and our religion changed again.

Or someone whom we loved and needed in our lives got sick, or someone died, or someone hurt us, or we fell in love, and each time faith was shaken and rebuilt.

*Nature*, says one young writer, *is the source of my faith*. What are the sources of yours?

This afternoon we'll hold, as we do once a month, an orientation for newcomers and visitors, people thinking of joining the congregation or just wanting to learn more about Unitarian Universalism. How we tell our story in these sessions, and elsewhere, matters, and what we tell and what we don't evolves, as does all history, and all folklore and fairytales and every family legend. Sometimes there really are "alternative facts." We center certain narratives and send others to the margins; we center certain characters and episodes and anecdotes, and before we know it they become the Truth; they set, like concrete, into dogma. There's always a choice in how we hold our story. *We need not take things, or leave them, as they were when we came in.*

Typically, the telling of Unitarian Universalism begins with freedom of conscience: in every age, stretching back for centuries, the stories of people resisting conformity and uniformity of doctrine, resisting religious oppression and tyranny, breaking from the Roman church, the Calvinist church, Luther's orthodoxy, and in America from Puritan control, always yearning toward what, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was felt to be a more faithful expression of Christ's gospel, till even that expanded. The narrative of religious freedom is laced with stories of courage, even unto death; defiance; self-determination, and also self-reliance; it's a narrative, even now, of fierce autonomy, lifting up the worth and dignity of every person, every single one a "different drummer," in Henry David Thoreau's words, marching to the beat inside their head. That becomes quite noisy: lots of people here find resonance between that history and their own experience.

Alongside this radical freedom, the old story champions reason, from the earliest examples of heretics and blasphemers, monks and scholars secretly studying scripture in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and also reading science, side by side - the starry sky, the earth below - and noting, at their peril, naming out loud, loud and clear, all the places where the Bible's holy word, God-given, is contradicted, countermanded by empirical evidence, logic, proof and observation. Many of them died for that. I think of them now, in these days with science under siege.

These are stirring stories, intricately interwoven with the rise in the West of philosophy and state-craft, science and mathematics, democracy, literature, learning, the entire western canon. It's a proud, important history, all true, in the way that all histories are partially but never completely true. So with every telling, there come questions, or there should:

How can a tradition so deeply devoted to reason admit that sometimes reason won't suffice, and *passion* is what's called for, passion and compassion, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, sacrifice sometimes, rage and outrage sometimes, endless grief and endless laughter, hope, despair, all at once and all the time, and none of that is rational and all of it's religious. How can that old devotion to reason- above- all expand to feel more fully human and more fully present? How can we return, humbly, to the ancient texts, seeking not literal evidence of how the world was made, but the metaphors and poetry we need?

The old Unitarian story is cerebral, very heady, very smart, but sometimes the body matters more; sometimes the body knows more, remembers more; holds trauma, loss and fear more fluently; speaks all the languages of loneliness, isolation, pain, and also therefore, understanding. Our bodies yearn, inevitably, for other human bodies; they speak all the languages of love. How can this somatic wisdom, incarnate intelligence, inform now and transform, a tired intellectual tradition? When people ask about Unitarian Universalism, we almost always begin with belief. But what if we started with practice, with ritual, with what we *do* here, what we sing, the food prepared so lovingly by many hands so someone else's body, physical body, and spirit, can receive it - our neighbors who are homeless, who live with mental illness, in St. Paul, or our neighbors at Century College, students who work fulltime and go to school but still have no money for food? They're sleeping in their cars, up there in the parking lot. When we talk about our faith here, we almost always start with beliefs, but what if we started with sacraments, all these tangible, embodied gestures of communion?

With every telling of a story that we've told a hundred times, a thousand times, come questions to challenge and reform it, and that's not always easy. At almost every class for new members someone will say, "For a congregation that talks so much about racial justice, you all seem pretty... um... *white*. What's up with that?" We'll point out our location here, the demography of the neighborhood and the region and the state, and mention that most congregations in America still suffer from intractable *and willful* segregation – but our best answer to that question is another question, honest, painful, and possibly transformative: to what extent is our proud beloved story essentially and at its core a white story, tangled up not only in western European culture and Enlightenment ideals, but also in the deadly shadows of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the righteous, pious greed that commodified, made into "natural resources" every tree and every river, all the animals and minerals, and millions of people, human people, on this whole continent and the continent of Africa? With every telling, there come questions: how is our small story implicated in larger complicated stories, and what now would the holy work of extrication and repudiation look like? What would sacred blasphemy look like for 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian Universalists? It would look, as it always has, like cracking open and recasting every cherished myth.

*The world is before you, and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.* This is the very watchword of a living tradition.

How might a religion so deeply devoted to spiritual individualism renounce that now, or at least evolve it radically into an ethic of interdependence, an ethic, a theology, a mythology, a sacred practice and a politics, of mutuality? Because the days of flat-earth individualism are done. The physical and psychic damage of individualism needs to be done.

Interwoven through our history there run threads of beauty, just as our own spiritual autobiographies carry traces of traditions left behind, traces that we treasure, that define us still. There's the Universalist insistence, for example, on the boundless love of God, the love that will not let us go, not any single one of us, no matter what we do or leave undone. No matter what, we are beloved and our calling is to act as if this were true for everyone, everyone we meet a child of God. The early Universalists understood the hard reality that even if their God loved everybody equally, human history did not, that we are unevenly blessed in this life, unevenly cursed by circumstance and by human cruelty, and our work in this world is to see this, name it, and to set it right.

That's one thread of beauty. Another comes from Emerson, of all people. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote famously of self-reliance - which was not that hard to imagine, strive for, or achieve in the 19<sup>th</sup> century if one were not a slave, or native or female or poor; he wrote with ignorance and arrogance of spiritual self-reliance, but he also wrote, with deeper intuition, of the soul:

*We are streams whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence... [It is] that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every [person's] particular being is contained and made one with all other; We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within [us] is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. [It is a] deep power in which we*

*exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us... We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. It is undefinable, unmeasurable, but we know that it pervades us and contains us.*

This is the mystical, Transcendentalist side of Unitarianism, and it shows up again and again. Even before they had the physics or cosmology to anchor their spirituality in science, the Transcendentalists knew we are connected, that all things on the planet around us and within us are connected, and 200 years later this bright chapter in the old story is just beginning to unfold.

*My faith comes from nature*, says one contemporary writer.

*From water I have learned ...*

*From our winged kindred I have learned ....*

*From the land I've learned ...*

Another speaks of trees, the oaks which wrap their roots around each other underground in weavings wider than their canopies. The forest is a single being reaching up in many bodies, and amidst the whipping wind and rising tide of hurricanes, the trees can stand their ground. It is a parable, a sacred text: we have to stay connected. To survive, we have to stay connected, because we are connected, in the way that atoms, molecules, particles, breath, are all connected. Our stories intertwine. There's no real singularity, ever.

In 1960, almost 60 years ago, to white students in Kalamazoo, James Baldwin said, "Whether I like it or not, whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you. There is no way around this. I am suggesting that these walls – these artificial walls- which have been up so long to protect us from something we fear – must come down. I think what we really have to do is create a new country. I conceive of my life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better. Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war, love is a growing up together... The world is before you," he said. "You need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in"

Our theme this month is *soulwork: the practice of centering*. It seems like such a solitary, private thing, the soul, the one thing about you that is yours alone, the core of your identity. And yet I wonder. In some traditions, people believe that within each person there is light, which is part of God, primordial light, and that seems more real to me, more beautiful and maybe more scientifically consistent, than any separation. We are made of vapor, light and stories. What if we could say, as Unitarian Universalists in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that part of our story is this: that no matter the uniqueness of your circumstance, no matter the particularity of your personality, your pain, no matter the singularity of your own shining spirit, no matter the ways we've centered the self and the ego and the individual in the past, we know that the soul is collective, that there is no such thing as a person apart. We are part of each other, and the ethical implications of this- the ethical, spiritual, political, theological implications- are the center of our faith.

*Is the soul solid, like iron?* These are questions you might ask, says the poet.

*Or is it tender and breakable, like  
 the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?  
 Who has it, and who doesn't?  
 I keep looking around me.  
 The face of the moose is as sad  
 as the face of Jesus.  
 One question leads to another.  
 Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
 Why should I have it, and not the ant eater  
 who loves her children?  
 Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
 What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
 What about the grass?*

I have a friend, a colleague, whom I love deeply and admire, a mentor who is a minister of color in our mostly white Association. Someone asked him recently what keeps him in, what keeps him keeping on as a Unitarian Universalist, the faith he grew up in, but which has not always felt like home, sometimes not even remotely hospitable. He spoke of loneliness, and heartbreaking disappointment. He said the only way that he can stay inside this faith that he loves is by holding it up to harsh light, all the time, constantly interrogating our history, our words, our lived practice, challenging the stories that we tell about ourselves, holding them accountable to a higher aspiration. He reminded us that this practice of interrogation and indictment is built into our tradition. Revelation is not sealed. Evolution is always underway. Every unexamined doctrine has to be shattered to let the light shine through. When we forget this practice, which is a kind of rabbinic practice, when we forget or shy away, all kinds of old assumptions and threadbare old beliefs can calcify, and we perpetuate a story that is not holy or complete.

He said the other thing that's saving him is prayer, which seems like such a solitary action, but I know that for me prayer is a longing toward communion, to hold and to be held within a larger love, transcending understanding; to sink a root that finds and intertwines with countless others, all the others. This is how we stand the storm, like oak trees planted by the water.

What is this faith we claim to love?

How do we tell this story?

It's all before us, and we need not take it or leave it as it was when we came in. Everything is changing, moving, evolving, and love is a growing up together, all of us together.

Carol sang to us just now the words of Roberta Flack:

*There's a river somewhere, and it flows through the lives of everyone.  
 And it flows through the mountains and valleys and the meadows of time...  
 There's a star somewhere, shining in the lives of everyone...*

That is a song of the soul.