

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

In Good Faith

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First Reading: The Thing Is | Ellen Bass

[The thing is] to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water
more fit for gills than lungs;
when grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, How can a body withstand this?
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.

Second Reading: Show Up Hungry | By Elizabeth Nguyen

I got off work at 7 pm and did the thing where you chase the bus a little bit but then realize you won't make it and walk sheepishly back to the bus stop. I'm already an hour late to Sunday night singing at the Lucy Stone Cooperative, a UU affordable housing co-op in Boston. I'm still ambivalent—I could go home to Netflix and grilled cheese. I could choose predictability and warm carbs. Or I could get on the bus to this community where I was first a member of the planning team and now a board member, this place where, despite my leadership role, I still find myself questioning whether and how I belong.

I give myself a little pep talk, reminding myself that I'm allowed to show up late and hungry and in need of a song. Reminding myself that being in community means offering care and being cared for, bringing my shiny self and my not-so-shiny self.

When I arrive, there's a teapot of hot water and a plate of fat dates on the table. A friend presses a bowl into my hands and there's broccoli soup. We sing “Amazing Grace”: “The wonders of accepting love have made me whole and real.”

Community is covenant. It’s the promise of a bowl of soup and a song at the end of the day. It’s love in the form of a house on Moreland Street that has said that it doesn’t matter that I don’t live there, that I too am welcome on Sunday nights. Laid bare, it is the succor and accountability of doing that thing together that we cannot do alone.

I’ve not always been my best self in the communities I’ve loved. I’ve shirked dish duty at Lucy Stone and missed weddings in my home town. I’ve dropped out when I was needed and showed up full of pettiness and exhaustion. The wonder of accepting love is only made evident when we’re allowed to shed the shiny and let the sourness show. Our communities of spirit are only real because we show up late expecting to be fed.

Because we both give and get. Because we bring our tart and our sweet, our gifts and our struggles. We need lemon in the lentils, rice vinegar in the sushi, a squeeze of lime in the chelada, and some acid in our communities. Without it, our communities are superficial. With no acid, we are one-note, monotone. Our vulnerabilities, our bits of brokenness, bring life to our relationships.

We are part of community when we show up shiny and not-so-shiny. When we ladle soup into each other’s bowls and eat it eagerly. When we bring our sour and our sweet. When we shed the shiny and show up hungry.

In Good Faith

Our political times are challenging, our planet seems to be suffering under our weight and people are scared and confused. We are living in divided times. Some of us may be starting to lose faith - faith in the possibility of goodness or hope or humanity.

How do we know who to put our faith in? How do we tell the snake oil salesperson from the genuinely helpful person? How do we see behind the masks people put on to make it through life?

Growing up Unitarian Universalist with an optimist for a mom, I’ve always believed that people are inherently good. I could easily have been the child that talked for a good ten minutes with my grandfather, who she had never met, and then said “My mom said I shouldn’t talk to strangers. ... What’s a stranger?”

In one of my professional evaluations – one of many hoops to jump through to become a minister – the results said that I have the tendency to be too trusting when it comes to the motives of others. Which I still find perplexing. Because I usually see it clear and obvious when someone is trying to take advantage of me.

I have rarely given, sold, or bought something and regretted it. I *have* given money to people who likely used it to buy drugs, I *have* sold something to someone who never paid what they owed me for it, and I *have* bought something I didn't need or want from someone who asked politely. I have **rarely** regretted serving a need in another person.

I remember reading a while ago, a story of a man who had his jacket stolen in the middle of winter. He followed the thief from the subway, chasing after him – “Wait! You forgot the hat and gloves!”

I don't know, maybe I am naïve to give most people the benefit of the doubt, to think that most people are acting in good faith. Maybe I am naïve to believe that no one really wants to beg on the street, or be so poor that they cannot meet their financial obligations, or have to sell shitty trinkets or gum on the street corners to survive. Maybe I am naïve.

Or maybe I have started to see that I am in no position to question the motives of people who are struggling. I **am** in a position to question the motives of people who seem to be thriving on discord and the destitution of others.

Maybe my inherent trust in humanity is balanced by my upbringing in a religion that has the inherent distrust of authority built into it's bones. Unitarianism and Universalism both were built on the foundations of rejecting authority, both based on refusing to accept religious doctrine that was handed to them.

I was raised to not take things at face value. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Do your research and your due diligence before making decisions... As an aside, when I first heard of Netflix it seemed too good to be true. For \$7 a month, I could get up to three DVDs at a time sent to my home to watch, and I could return and get more at any time. I asked someone I trusted if they'd heard of it, and with their hearty endorsement I made one of the best decisions of my life. It saved me from buying hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars' worth of DVDs – and I have had their service ever since.

We know who not to trust, without proof of trustworthiness right? Or so they say: Sales people, politicians, lawyers, contractors, mechanics – people who are too charismatic, people who collect other people. We can't trust people who look too trustworthy, or anyone who looks too shifty. We can't trust anyone who has their own best interest at heart, but who then can we trust, as we are all looking out for our own interests.

In these unstable times, when world politics is uncertain, when it seems the planet is trying to shake us off her surface with horrifying natural disaster after natural disaster, with snow in the middle of October, when more and more of us are hungry and homeless, it becomes harder and harder for us to have faith.

To have faith in others, in goodness, in humanity. It becomes clearer and clearer that we aren't all playing with the same rules, that white people are playing with a stacked deck, and most of us are happy to keep it that way

My theology holds that every being is worthy of love and compassion. Even the people I don't trust, even the people who want to take advantage of others. Even the people who could care less whether we live or die.

Inherent worth, though, it doesn't mean unchanging goodness, it doesn't mean inherent trustworthiness.

My theology asks me to have faith in people. But my theology doesn't ask me to be in relationship with or trust people who hurt me or others intentionally. If someone proves to be untrustworthy, abusive, deceitful, or manipulative, I will not hesitate to put limits and boundaries around our interactions. I will not put myself or others in positions to be abused or manipulated. So am I too trusting? Do I have too much faith in other's motivations? No. I have just enough.

I am no sheltered fool, I live in the same world you do.

I've held the cool ashes of my hopes and dreams in my arms and wept. Wept tears that felt unending. I've held the warm sleepy body of other hopes and dreams snuggled close in my arms and wept again, Wept tears that felt unending.

And still I choose to hold the face of life in my hands, the plain, unsmiling face with eyes that don't glitter with promise. I have held this face in my hands and said *“Yes, I will take you, I will Love you again.”*

I didn't do it alone. I did it with a tiny family pulling close, with an extended family reaching out, and a network of loved ones holding our pain. We embraced life, said 'yes', and 'we will not be broken' with the help of hundreds of people – locally and across the globe.

What do we have in this world except each other? We are deeply and unavoidably intertwined – Interdependent. We are impossibly and unbreakably reliant on each other to survive. It's a heartbreaking truth – we cannot go it alone. It's a liberating truth – we don't have to.

We *Are* in this together. We come here because we see that, we know that. We come into this sanctuary on Sundays, the social hall on Wednesdays, we come to be together. To share a meal or a message, to share ourselves – our vulnerabilities and strengths, loves and hopes, fears and anxieties.

We come to this place where the human is celebrated and the compassionate is expected. We come to be in community, because we have faith in each other. We have faith that we can *‘show up late, hungry and in need of a song.’*

‘Being in community means offering care and being cared for, bringing my shiny self and my not-so-shiny self.’ When we’re running late, and miss the bus, and realize it could be so much easier to go home and watch Netflix and eat a grilled cheese, but then we show up anyway. We do the harder thing to find connection and community.

My theology says that the only thing that will keep us from destroying ourselves and each other is groups of people who have faith in love and inherent worth. Communities of compassion, strengthening us with warm tea, a bowl of soup and a song. Warming our hands, our bellies, and our hearts.

Communities that make room for our sour and sweet, that don’t expect perfection, that show us that good works are done even in our mistakes and learning, that we are worthy in our grumpiness as well as in our joy. Communities that hold a mirror to our lives and help us see the beauty and the flaws, both intertwining and the same. Helping to us heal our hurts, and to examine our wrongdoings.

Unitarian Universalist Communities have been my nest, both that I was born into – learned to fly from, and the nest I have made for myself - to come home to. Communities of imperfect, lovely, angry, people. Some hurting and some healing. Communities of people hungry and longing for a song.

Czech playwright, writer, activist and the first president following communism in Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, said:

“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” Faith is hoping without proof – but having certainty that it makes sense.

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Faith is trust without absolute knowing

Faith is hoping without proof

Faith is dreaming and planning and showing up anyway when all you’ve created has fallen to ashes in your hands

Faith is rocking a small child to sleep feeling their breath on your shoulder

Faith is turning off the monitor, changing the channel, signing out of Facebook for a while.

Faith is coming into this room to share parts of myself with relative strangers – scared and hopeful and real

Faith is opening the door to the roofer I’ve never met, and barely checking his credentials before inviting him in.

Faith is sometimes foolish.

Faith is often unwarranted.

Faith is looking into a strangers’ eyes and confronting what you see there.

Faith is walking through a new town, at night, with your dog and your kid, learning where the dark places are.

Faith is moving a thousand miles, three thousand miles, even two miles down the road, the not knowing

Faith is seeing your neighbor’s political signs – so unlike your own.

Faith is scary and unconfirmed and dangerous

Faith is visionary

Faith is limited

Faith is calling us forward

It is calling us on