

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

All In

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

The first reading is adapted from Sarah Vowell, writer, commentator and radio editor, from her book, The Wordy Shipmates, a history of the Puritans in New England

Once I decided to devote years of my life deciphering the thoughts and feelings of the dreary religious fanatics who founded New England nearly four hundred years ago, I was often asked at parties by my fellow New Yorkers the obvious question, “What are you working on?” When I would tell them a book about Puritans, they would often take a swig of the beer or bourbon in their hands and reply with either a sarcastic, “*Fun!*” or a disdainful, “*Why?*”

I would never answer with the honest truth, namely: that in the weeks after two planes crashed into skyscrapers here in New York in 2001 on the worst day of our lives, I found comfort in the words of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. When we were mourning together, when we were suffering together, I often thought of what he said when he spoke aboard the *Arabella*, carrying bedraggled pilgrims from England to New England: *We must delight in each other, make other’s conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the world, our community as members of the same body.*

More than anything, it was a declaration of *dependence*.

In the days following the attack, I watched citizens patiently standing in a very long line. They were waiting to give blood. We were breathing sooty air. The soot was composed of incinerated glass and steel, but also, we knew, incinerated human flesh. When the local TV news announced that rescue workers sorting through the rubble in search of survivors were in need of toothpaste, half my block, having heard there was something we could actually do besides worry and grieve, had already cleaned out the most popular brand names at the corner deli by the time I got there. We were members of the same body, breathing the cremated lungs of the dead, and hoping to clean the teeth of the living.

The English Puritans had affection for the Old Saxon word, “weal.” It means wealth and riches, but it means welfare and well-being, too. On the *Arabella*, Winthrop told the colonists they must “partake of each other’s strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe.”

More than 300 years later, I thought about this in New York City.

SECOND READING

from Linda Hogan

Nothing

Nothing sings in our bodies
like breath in a flute.
It dwells in the drum.
I hear it now
that slow beat
like when a voice said to the dark,
let there be light,
let there be ocean
and blue fish
born of nothing
and they were there.
I turn back to bed.
The man there is breathing.
I touch him
with hands already owned by another world
Look, they are desert,
they are rust. They have washed the dead.
They have washed the just born.
They are open.
They offer nothing.
Take it.
Take nothing from me.
There is still a little life
left inside this body,
a little wildness here
and mercy
and it is the emptiness
we love, touch, enter in one another
and try to fill.

All In

We sing:

*Come, come, whoever you are
wanderer, worshipper,
lover of leaving...*

Maybe what you've left behind is some other way of doing religion, your parents' way, perhaps, or maybe no structured way at all, and now you're here, wondering what songs are yours to sing, what prayers, what scriptures, what new sacraments and traditions are yours to hold and shape and create,

or maybe you're in the process of leaving some chapter of your life behind, a finished chapter, whether difficult or sweet, and now this morning here you're starting with a clean, blank page,

or maybe you're hoping somehow to leave fear behind, or shame or doubt, or certainty, or numbness, or something else that you no longer need to carry...

come wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving –

maybe that means you're not likely to stay, you're just alighting here this morning, for whatever reason: curiosity, a recent grief, a friend's been nagging you to come, so you're here right now, but you love leaving and won't linger long; you're not a joiner (even though this is a houseful of wary non-joiners). Well, welcome anyway. We're so glad you're here.

Come, whoever you are, with all your strength and vulnerability and your gorgeous imperfections, because - I'll tell you - that's what makes it holy: that we dare to show up, all of us, broken and battered and bruised as we are... The bass line of that hymn is not printed in the hymnal; the baritones and basses sing it underneath: *though you've broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come.* That drone is the heartbeat, of Universalism, that reminder that we are here to forgive and be forgiven, to begin again in love.

I can't say what you'll find here, and there are no guarantees, but I can tell you this: *ours is no caravan of despair*, though vows are broken all the time – we say, *come, yet again, come. We're gonna sit at the welcome table.* We all are. We are all in.

I think of that phrase, the catch-phrase of this year's pledge campaign, and I think of children's games from long ago. You'd be out all over the neighborhood as the sun was going down, playing hide-and-go-seek. Someone's mother's voice would waft through the streets and all

among the houses that it's time to come inside. And after letting the mother do that two or three or four more times, the person who was "it" would finally call out into every last remaining hiding place, "Oh-lee, oh-lee, in come free!" and reluctantly, we'd all crawl out. The phrase is very old, and it varies all across the country: "Olly, olly, *all in free*, or *oxen free*," or "outs in free:" meaning all those on the outside can come in now, without penalty. Some linguists say it may have come from a mix of French and German across the sea to Appalachia, "*Allez, allez, auch sind frei*" or "*kommen frei*." Either way, the signal is clear: it's safe to come out now. It's safe to come out. It's safe to come in. *Everybody, come on home.* Instead of a church bell, we could shout that every Sunday from our roof, like the call to prayer from a minaret. I'm thinking today of beloved friends in the United Methodist Church, wishing they could shout like that this morning: *everybody, come on home.*

"All in" means more than "all are welcome here," which is easy to say and harder to practice – and it's our life-long calling to practice, to practice calling out to one another across the chasms of difference, gender and identity and belief and age and class and politics, every possible divide. "All in" to me means that I'll give my whole heart to this practice: heart, mind, soul and strength. We are, or we ought to be, religious fanatics in this regard. I think of William Ellery Channing, Unitarian in the 19th century, who said, "I am a living member of the great family of all souls." *All in* means you give your whole heart to that, you inhabit that, breathe in the implications, holding the ancestors, the descendants, and all the rest of us in this eye-blink in between; holding all that tragedy, all that joy, all the creativity and power and sadness and weariness of people, the beauty and brokenness of all souls, every one. You're pledging to hold somewhere, in some part of your spirit, some little pocket of your soul, at all times, bleary parents all over the world, up late in the night; weary workers all over the world, up early in the morning; lonely ones, frightened ones, hungry ones, war-torn ones, beloved ones, little ones, aged ones, to hold them all, named and unnamed; to breathe in and know also, when *you* are lonely, or feel somehow beyond the pale, beyond the embrace of loving hands, to remember that *you also* really are a living member of the great family of all souls. You can't not be, and to think otherwise is a kind of grandiosity; a kind of heresy here, because you are held by a love that will not let you go – we all are. That's what I think of when I think of *all in*. It's *we are all in this together*. We are trying to see how wide our embrace of humanity, of living things, can be, until it hurts our arms with reaching, and we know then for sure that we need other arms holding on to draw the circle wide enough, to let each of us rest when we need to and to call us back up when we're strong. This place is a microcosm of that intention, that theology.

It used to be that when people come here as visitors, they were asking, "What do you believe here?" That used to be a lively question for new Unitarian Universalists, and longtime Unitarian Universalists, and maybe it still is, but a livelier question, a riskier, more beautiful question, both efficient and spacious, and one I hear so much more often now, is, "What kind of life are you inviting me into?"

What is this place?

What kind of life are you people called to, and building and imagining and proclaiming, teaching to your children?

Is it a responsible, courageous, humble, joyful, thankful life, or some other kind of life?

Is it an engaged life, engaged in the struggle for justice and mercy, for love and freedom and hope, a relevant, reverent, prayerful life, or is it something else?

Does it care about truth, or settle dogma?

Is this a way of the head only, or the heart only, or the spirit, or is it all of these, so delicately intertwined within and among living bodies?

Is this religious way one that skims the surface, all platitudes, asking almost nothing from me, or will it invite me, compel me, to go deep, and to hold in my hands ambiguity, mystery, mortality all at once, plus gladness, plus gratitude, plus moral rigor and ethical scrutiny, and also teach me that my hands are strong enough to hold the questions, the well-being, the wholeness and holiness of everybody else as well?

These are questions about covenant.

“All in” is all about covenant, which is an old churchy word. It’s even older than church: covenant dates back to Moses and Miriam, to Abraham and Sarah, and Noah. It’s about the ways that the people meant to be in right relationship to that which they called sacred, and to one another, and about how God, or the universe, meant to be in relationship with them. Covenant is an old word for the promises we make, the vows we make and break a thousand times and make again, about how we mean to hold each other, and how we understand ourselves to be held, by forces larger than we comprehend: the web of life, the arc of time and history, the hands of God. To what and to whom are we accountable and grateful? You can be an atheist, an agnostic or a believer, and those are still good questions.

The old Unitarian and Universalist covenants in New England in the 18th century were based on old Congregationalist covenants, which were based on Puritan covenants, all asking *how shall we live together?* Sarah Vowell (from the reading) is an unlikely advocate for the Puritans: she says outright that they were “dreary religious fanatics,” which they were. But she holds this strange affection for them, which is not entirely misplaced, and she quotes John Winthrop in particular, the first governor of Massachusetts, who wrote so famously about their settlement as a “City on a Hill.” In 1630, still aboard the *Arabella*, Winthrop spoke a profound declaration of *interdependence*, 150 years before Jefferson drafted a very different kind of declaration.

Now the only way to avoid ... shipwreck ... is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work ... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together... So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace...

The Puritans, in caricature, come off as so mean-spirited and cold-hearted – which they absolutely were - but their covenant, their compact, insisted on radical, unsentimental love. The promise that they would bear each other’s burdens, that they would delight in each other and subvert private interests for the public good, laid the foundation not only of a new American church, but a new American republic. It’s good in these times to remember this history: this seed of an idea that we might still germinate and even bring to flower. Sarah Vowell notes rightly, that “when the time came for statehood, the citizens of Massachusetts colony did not become a

state, but a Commonwealth... It means wealth and riches, but welfare and well-being, too. They were all in this together, all in the same boat, even before they got off the boat. They wrote in their constitution: *The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people... for the common good.*

This, says Sarah Vowell, is what she thought about in New York City when history came crashing down on peoples' heads, and on all of our assumptions, and she joined her grieving neighbors in caring for the living and the dead. And I think about it here a lot – covenant - the promises and pledges (financial, but also other, deeper pledges of the heart) that join us each to each and each to all, across all kinds of differences. We're here because we mean to travel together, not alone.

This year's Pledge Committee is inviting you to write your own definitions of covenant, as you experience it here, and to post them in the Social Hall. Last Sunday on a snowy afternoon, a group began this work. People wrote beautiful things:

Covenant means being part of something bigger, broader and certainly better than oneself. It is a promise of compassion.

Being in covenant with WBUUC means joining to gather spiritually, psychologically, mentally and with action to work, live, pray, love and be together for the betterment of all humans.

I am in covenant with this church because I believe in sustainability. The work, the people, the message sustain me. I want to do what I can to help sustain the church.

I am in covenant with this church because I "belong" to this church. I do not "donate" to the church, any more than I "donate" to my family when I pay our household bills. I "participate" and I "support" the church because I belong to it. I am part of this family.

To be in covenant with wbuuc I strive to keep my mind open, my heart open and my hands willing.

WBUUC is a beacon of UU values that shines far beyond the four walls of our Maple Street building.

To, without shame, take what I need, and to give freely what I am able.

"All in" means we're holding it together.

There's a line from a novel someone sent me once, in which a character says, *My mother used to say that if you whispered "Money, money, money" when you saw a falling star, you would get rich. She used to add, seeing my eager eyes, that anybody who could manage to think about*

money when a star was falling would probably get rich in the end anyway. [Joan Brady, Theory of War]

It's about the money, and more than the money – no one's getting rich here, least of all the church. We spend out what comes in quickly and deliberately, and though we try to bank a bit, responsibly, against the unexpected (say, more snowplowing in a single winter than anyone thought possible), mostly the church lives as do many of us here, from check to check, practical and lean, visionary but also vigilant. Prairie pragmatism still prevails. We know that if every household makes a pledge we will absolutely meet our budget goal; if everyone who's never pledged makes a gift, and everybody else continues, with an increase, we will reach the goal. If everybody who can't give any money – *which is real, of course it is* – just fills out a card to say “We're with you; we just can't do this thing, this time,” and trusts that there's no shame in that, because there isn't, and if everybody else takes that into consideration, remembering that the only way to avoid shipwreck is to bear each other's burdens (because this church will not be strong or true or beautiful or worthy of its name unless it's wide and truly open to everyone regardless of ability to give) – if each of us does what we can, in covenant, mindful that we're all in this together, it holds. And every year it is a kind of miracle. Your generosity is a miracle.

The campaign is about the money, and way more than the money. We're all here trying to remind each other to watch for falling stars and rising suns and the lovely falling snow and acts of grace and beauty, acts of kindness, acts of love, that leave us breathless every day. What circulates here, way more than cash, is spirit.

I think of our pastoral care volunteers, and our memorial team, making lovely meals when people are so sad;

I think of the men's groups, brave and strong in the ways that they hold heart and soul and story against all cultural assumptions about gender;

I think of the adults here who serve as mentors of our coming of class, when those kids are the most tender and so vulnerable;

I think of cooks in the kitchen, singers in the balcony, teachers in RE, all of you holding all of us in love.

I think of a woman whose family was ripped apart by grief when her brother died two months ago. That same week, an agency working with our sanctuary family called to ask if we could possibly help with another family, housed in a place with no furniture at all, and my heart just sank. There was no way our church could help. But this member who was grieving saw a line in the Sunday program, and called and said, “They can have my brother's stuff. We'll bring it over, my siblings and me” – a truck-full, a whole house-full of really nice, nearly new furniture, for an immigrant family with nothing at all. And they did that, weeping with thanks for this chance to help. She told me it healed up her heart, just a bit. That's our covenant here – that if we open our hearts to be broken, they will be, and that's how all the light gets in.

Poet Linda Hogan says the open space inside us is all that we can offer to each other, and I believe that's true. We come here so filled up with open space and emptiness:

with sorrows spoken and unspoken;

with worry for our children and our aging parents, our own aging and our lack of confidence no matter what our age;

we come with our addictions and anxiety;

with our frayed relationships to other humans, and the earth, our relationships to technology and to no one and nothing – our loneliness.

We come with all our broken covenants strewn around our feet.

We come filled up with money worries, job worries, school worries, mental health, physical health-

and all of this before we dare scroll through the news or open a paper to take on the worries of the world.

My hands are rust, says Linda Hogan.

They have washed the dead.

They have washed the just born.

They are open.

They offer nothing.

Take it.

Take nothing from me.

There is still a little life

left inside this body,

a little wildness here

and mercy

and it is the emptiness

we love, touch, enter in one another

and try to fill.

Come, come whoever you are.

Come into this place where love is the spirit
and the greatest covenant we know is to seek the truth
and help each other grow.

Ollee, ollee, in come free:

It's safe to come out.

It's safe to come in.

All of us.

All in.