

## Imagine Abolition

2020 June 7

I wonder sometimes if we have become too pragmatic. Too practical, empirical, methodical, logical, evidence-based. By “we” I mean Unitarian Universalists, we who have inherited this tradition of “reasonable” religion, which has always struck me as an oxymoron, a contradiction waiting to explode, or implode, or otherwise prove impotent right when we need unflinching faith the most.

What purpose could religion really serve if it has to pass the test of reason every time you need to mourn, for example - I mean cry and cry your heart out, convulsed with grief and fury, at everything, at God, as when someone whom you love has died. There’s no room for reason there, no place for rational religion, even months later, years later, when people shake their heads and say, *you should be over that by now. You’re not doing very well. The stages of grief say blah, blah blah...*” but you’re still broken-hearted, broken-spirited, just broken through and through.

What purpose could religion really serve if it has to pass the test of reason every time you need to praise the day, for example, or give thanks out loud, delight in music, children, joy? You’ve seen the news, you know what’s going on, it weighs on you like lead – and still the sun came up this morning, and you are grateful and amazed and glad, laugh-out-loud delighted – and that just makes no sense at all, under the circumstances, the weight of our shared circumstance. But there’s no room for perfect reason here. Even in the midst of struggle, failure of gratitude, neglect of joy, is blasphemy against the gift of life.

What purpose could religion really serve if it has to pass the test of reason every time you need to muster righteous rage, speak truth to power, terrible truth to terrifying principalities and powers, bring your unchecked outrage to the street, to City Hall, to everywhere, to every precinct, without pausing to evaluate what good it will do, this marching, this protest, this uprising, this revolutionary love? Sometimes there’s no time for that and to wait would be a sin.

What purpose could our religion really serve if it has to pass the test of reason every time you need to love someone who maybe doesn’t deserve it, maybe proof can’t prove that they deserve it, but you are called to love them anyway? There’s no space in that equation for scientific method – for the sterile exactitude of Enlightenment thought, which has bedazzled Unitarians since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes - all the time, in fact - we’re called to love humans at their most unlovable, to love and to forgive, starting with our own shabby and imperfect selves. That is a Universalist commission, and there is not a drop of reason in it, not an ounce of logic. You could search all day for empirical evidence of your shining worth and dignity, your inherent beauty, not earned, but stamped upon you – you could search your whole life long for evidence of that, and it might not add up – but still it’s true. What would be the purpose, what would be the point, of a religion that said otherwise about you or anybody else?

It seems to me that Unitarian Universalism, if it offers anything at all, says this to us: *You are dignified and worthy. Everybody is – so act like it. The light that shines within you is primordial light, holy, powerful and beautiful. Now act like it. Walk around as if this were true. Live your life, sing your songs, grieve your unspeakable sorrows, shout your gratitude unceasing, tremble,*

*do your work, speak your truth, serve this world and one another, as if at any moment you might die, as if at some point you will die. Bless this world and love it fiercely, as if you have nothing to lose. You are dignified and worthy. Act like it. See to it.*

That to me is the doctrine of our faith.. And sometimes I wonder if somehow we've strayed from the center, from the core of our tradition, even as it is evolving. I wonder sometimes if we have become too pragmatic. Too practical, empirical, methodical, logical, evidence-based. What purpose could religion really serve if it has to pass the test of reason every time you need to dream, or to cast in your mind a vision of the future that is rooted in the present, rooted in the past, and yet so radically different, a future so utterly transformed, that we might not even recognize the ashes of our present world in the glory of the new one? What would be the point of a religion that did not allow us, that did not compel us, to imagine transformation? Our theme this month, chosen a year ago, is "Myth: the practice of telling our stories," and this seems like a good time, June 2020, to re-examine every myth we live within, every story, every fairy tale and every lie, everything that seems like solid, immutable fact because we've lived with it so long – it feels like fact and yet it's not. This is a good time, this troubled time we're in, to think about telling new stories, dreaming and living and breathing and walking around in new history, making it up as we go. And listening- with holy, reverent attention - listening for the stories other people are telling, which may in fact carry more truth, more evidence, more weight, than what we ourselves, in our little worlds, can imagine. What if Unitarian Universalists listened to the stories, the testimony, of Black people, brown people, native people, people of color, queer people, trans people, people on the margins, both within our congregations and beyond our walls (walls which don't actually exist now anyway unless we ourselves erect them)?

From James Baldwin, writer, essayist, social critic, brilliant change agent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

*Most of us are about as eager to change as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock. Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.* He was writing to black people here, and at the same time separately, to white people, about white safety, knowing full well that black safety did not anywhere exist, as it still does not. *Any real change implies the breakup of the world – the white world - as we have always known it, the loss of all that gives us our identity, the end of our safety.* Any real change is going to be dangerous for white people because it must imply the breakup of the mythologies white people live in and love. *And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knows, or the things that one possesses. Yet, it is only when we are able, without bitterness or self-pity [or white fragility, or petulance, or violence, it is only when we're able] to surrender a dream we have long cherished or a privilege we have long possessed that we are set free — we have set ourselves free — for higher dreaming.*

*One must say Yes to life, and embrace it wherever it is found - and it is found in terrible places. ... For nothing is fixed, forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea*

*engulfs us and the light goes out. Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

What are we willing to face?

What story, mythology, preexisting conditions and assumptions, are we willing to lay down, to shatter, to renounce, like an old religion that no longer fits? We always say we're done with dogma, and yet we worship white supremacy as it were a gospel truth.

What can you bring yourself to imagine?

And here's where logic leaves us, and perhaps we are at last converted to a saving faith, a religion that likes reason (very much) but loves imagination more, loves passion more, and heart and soul, and sacrifice and service to a larger love that transcends our understanding.

160 years ago, and earlier than that, long before the Civil War but culminating then, Universalist and Unitarian congregations, like other sort-of progressive Protestants, were sorely torn. The rupture, between congregations, and/or within a single church, and also inside individuals, the moral dilemma running right through the heart of some people – the rupture was a jagged gash, and though it came to crisis in the years leading to the Civil War and through the war itself, it did not start in 1860 or 1850, or in the 1800's at all. The jagged gash between congregations, and within them, and inside the souls of some people, was way older than that, dating at least to 1619, before the Unitarians and or Universalists were even a thing, before they'd split away from the Congregational main line. The rupture was old, but it came to crisis with the Civil war, and looking back from now, it's hard for us to believe, maybe, or at least painful to know, that some of our congregations, some of our ministers, some of our people (many) were not abolitionists, not at all. The people were divided among and within themselves.

Some didn't want to get involved – it was just too messy, too political, *that's not a proper role for the church* – or they counselled patience, fired their ministers if they spoke out too loudly or too much, spoke in measured tones about and to people who literally had chains around their necks, whose children were placed in child-sized shackles when they were led away, they counselled them to be more patient, more discreet in their resistance. “We'll get there,” they said, “We just need to do it through the proper and orderly channels of government, the great, false promise of democracy. Uprising and rebellion, burning people's stuff – those are not good tactics.”

And there were some others, in our pulpits and our pews (this is in the north now) who just flat out didn't believe Black people were worth it, and they had all kinds of scientific evidence and/or theological evidence, the latest research, to back that up.

And there were still others, many others, who said, “No, of course this is a moral crisis. Of course this matter will not wait,” but they could not imagine, they chose not to try to imagine, an America without slavery at its center, without slavery at the heart of its capitalist soul, the lifeblood, literally, of the American economy. They could not imagine abolition, having never lived in that United States. That country did not yet exist, and it felt like a fantasy, a mythological, idealistic dream, and failing to imagine abolition, they couldn't really imagine free black people, either - and that failure of imagination haunts us still.

I said it was a rupture, a jagged gash - and that's true. In Universalist and Unitarian congregations, as in others, there were also people, white people, maybe a majority (and also, by way, all along, black people, in those pews as well), who fully imagined and fought for abolition, but it was not unanimous or easy and looking back it's hard for us, painful, to see how practical and logical, methodical and "reasonable" some of our people were. "What will be the impact on commerce and international trade if the cotton industry and sugarcane are compromised?" They were right to worry – and they were wrong to worry. It's painful now to hold our history entire, including the history of white Unitarian women, icons of equal rights, demanding women's suffrage, but when asked to put the freedom of black women first, or black people first, when asked in their day, if black life mattered, they demurred (because they could) and said, "We'll do that next."

What can we imagine now?

The history of policing in America is a complicated story, but there is no doubt that part of the institution, the tradition, the mythological reality that we know as the police, has its historic root in the need to serve and to protect, with violent, murderous efficiency, a social order defined by and dependent upon slavery. The slave patrollers, with their badges and their guns, their night watches, their authority, north and south – so much of what we're living now starts there. It takes a lot of weaponry, and a lot of complicit silence behind that weaponry, to defend what is morally indefensible. It takes an embedded army protected and legitimized by conventional, rational, well-educated, liberal white silence. Lots of our Unitarian ancestors were abolitionists, for sure, but some of them could not allow themselves, compel themselves, to imagine the breakup of their world. *Most of us are about as eager to change as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock. Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced. Until it is imagined.*

We don't need to waste our time wondering what we would have done back then, because we live right now. Right now, you can read pages and pages, scroll through screen after screen of brilliant posts, articles, essays, blogs, resources from MPD150 and other organizations, coalitions, scholars on abolishing police, a new abolition movement, addressing an old and dangerous construct, this outworn mythology. The Unitarian Universalist Association itself has a growing archive of resources, references and toolkits, all of them asking, in the recent words of writer Ta-Nahisi Coates, *What would it mean to build the state around principles of nonviolence, rather than reserving that exacting standard for those harmed by the state?* What would abolition of the police even begin to look like? And before you dismiss such a question as ridiculous or irresponsible, remember that 150 years from now, people in our own churches may look back on us, if our churches still exist, and shake their heads, and say, *"Wow, those people back in 2020, they were really smart, really practical and cautious, but they could not dream a dream to save their lives. What was even the point of their rational religion, that old Unitarian Universalism? They were right there, in the midst of the great transformation that cracked the world right open, and they didn't even notice it. They must have been too comfortable, or scared, to want to notice. They must have had too much to lose."*

Already we are hearing: the University of Minnesota has severed ties with the Minneapolis Police Department. The Park Board, the Walker Art Museum... The Minneapolis school board and the teachers union voted to do the same. Every school district in the state could follow suit. People are asking, "What can I do?" and instead of bringing food downtown, you could call your school board, and demand that armed officers come out of the hallways once and for all. People are calling for the defunding of bloated law enforcement budgets that have resulted in a deadly and systematically anti-Black militarization of police departments nationwide. Late last week chokeholds were banned in Minneapolis – and this is all directly down to the people in the street; we know that. Power doesn't just give way. The pressure's on; it's working. Already we are hearing: city counselors are calling for the police department to be dismantled. Taking their cue from people in the neighborhoods, they're talking again, and for real now, about what it would look like to send county mental health professionals to mental health 911 calls, instead of cops, and EMTs to opioid overdose calls, instead of cops, and turning traffic enforcement over to unarmed teams who could do it just fine, instead of cops. Already we are seeing people in communities caring for each other, protecting one another, taking over a whole hotel to house homeless people in the midst of the pandemic, meeting with their neighbors, setting up their own vigils and mutual aid, resolving together, pledging, not to call the police, not ever. The UUA has posted on its website guidelines for our congregations, urging us to think hard about what circumstance if any would compel us to call the police in an emergency and offering alternatives, ways of being in relation with each other and our communities to keep everybody safe. Ways of being in relationship with our principles, our values, our imagination, ways of being in relation with our history and our future, to keep everybody safe.

This is not about your niece or nephew who all their life wanted to be a police officer and went to the academy and now they're in a uniform somewhere, and the family's so proud to have such a good, brave person on the force; it's not about the members of our own congregation who are retired cops, who have in fact been talking about this for a long, long time, because they've seen it. It's about generations of trauma and brutality, power and abuse of power, killing black bodies and others, but mostly black bodies, all the time, in our name. It cannot stand.

One night last year in September, when guests from Project Home were living in our building, a neighbor called the police. It wasn't even nighttime, it was daylight, well before eight o'clock. The families, children and mothers, were out on the playground with our volunteers, talking and laughing, and a neighbor called the cops because it was too loud. It wasn't too loud. They complained about "a disturbance," but there was no disturbance. Someone was uneasy, for no apparent reason, and whoever it was didn't bother to call the church, didn't come over, didn't think twice, and maybe they didn't realize, *or maybe they* did, that to call a cop on a bunch of black women and kids in Mahtomedi, Minnesota is an act of potentially lethal aggression and an ugly mistake— even though the officer from Washington County handled it so well, and, I think reluctantly. We knew then that before Project Home comes back to our church, before we could in conscience say, "Here is safe and welcome space for you; be at home," we would have to leaflet the neighborhood, call for community meetings, lay down the law of right relationship – and if it weren't for the pandemic, we'd be doing that right now.

What would abolition look like? Feel like? And who gets to write that new story? Who gets to spend all the money we'd save dismantling police, and who gets to redefine words like "safety"

and “security,” words like “peace,” and “protect and serve?” Who gets to frame the conditions of beloved community? What does your own faith compel you to imagine? What purpose does our religion really serve if it has to pass the test of reason every time the cry for change is heard or the call for justice?

*Nothing is fixed, forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing... said James Baldwin. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the light goes out.*

*Spirit of life, may the light within us and among us, shining all around us now, guide our steps toward a new day. Amen.*