

You Are Invited

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Reading: *Fault Line* by Robert R. Walsh in “Noisy Stones: A Meditation Manual

*Did you ever think there might be a fault line
passing underneath your living room:
a place in which your life is lived in meeting
and in separating, wondering
and telling, unaware that just beneath
you is the unseen seam of great plates
that strain through time? And that your life, already
spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
sent off in a new direction, turned
aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,
the level floor set at an angle in
some seconds' shaking. You would have to take
your losses, do whatever must be done
next.*

*When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
to lie in what you trusted most, look not
to more solidity, to weighty slabs
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
beam to save the fractured order. Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that's often torn but always healing. There's
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.*

One of the most unusual, creative, and insightful assignments I ever got from a professor was to deface a book. The school was Andover Newton Theological School; the course was Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics (interpreting the bible through a woman's perspective); the professor was the brilliant and somewhat eccentric Carole Fontaine, whom you may have seen on several recent history channel documentaries, particularly one of late on the Queen of Sheba. Not that I encourage the destruction of books, but our task was to find one (other than the Bible) that said or was about something we thought particularly offensive from a feminist perspective and give it a make-over. The trick was to let tidbits of that offensive language show through while at the same time presenting, in a creative way, a new message on the same subject, as we thought it should be.

I always hesitate to say this next sentence out loud, but I went to the Christian bookstore to look around and was not disappointed. I found a perfect subject for my make-over. It was called *A Woman's Place in the Home* and contained many, many choice pieces of advice from a very conservative and biblically literal point of view. Never were more demeaning words written in a more supposedly caring way. I really have to admit I had not known such belittling language was still used, much less believed, in this day and age, at least in the United States. It seemed to be attempting to shut women out of much of what life had to offer, including a sense of self-worth.

So I rewrote it. But my theme, rather than suggesting limitations on the life of a woman, was "You are Invited." You are invited, I suggested to women, to all the richness and fullness of life that is available to anyone. You are invited into possibility.

Since doing that book makeover, however, I have realized that, while that book was specifically about women, the idea behind "You Are Invited" is something that applies to more than only women, more than only the home. This is an invitation not to be limited in its application, nor in its timeliness. "You are invited" is a phrase for all times, all places, all sexes and sizes and ages. "Wherever you go, there you are," wrote Jon Kabot-Zinn; be open to the possibilities in the moment. You are invited to partake.

We are here this morning because we are on the cusp of a new joint adventure to which we have been invited. You voted as a congregation to create and empower a search committee with the responsibility of finding a new minister. It takes a lot of courage and confidence to invite this kind of purposeful change into your lives. But you did it. On my end of it I also extended an invitation, after reading the congregational record that was posted on the UUA Settlement site, for your search committee to read about me in my ministerial record. I have been courageous as well. And so we have progressed to this point this morning when we must make a decision about that to which we have invited ourselves.

What is this party to which we are inviting ourselves? I believe we are all searching for significant connection and community, the special kind of relationships in which we find our religious meaning. We believe in hope and the possibilities of the future, and that what can be accomplished together is ever so much greater than what can be accomplished on our own.

Way back last fall I was writing about the new ministry I was hoping for. Here are some lines from my ministerial packet, the information that first introduced me to your search committee. "I desire a position in parish ministry with a small to mid-sized congregation. I would like to find a community of people who are interested in real connection – with me, between and among themselves, and with the larger community." My delight is that you were out here looking for the same things! We, who are in search, are always advised to trust in the process, to have faith that a good match will be found. I sense very much, after our few days together, that you are wanting the same things I was writing about – real connection, in all its many forms. Shall we explore our possibilities? Together?

In a book called "Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics," author Diarmuid O'Murchu presents twelve principles he believes emerge from our present scientific understanding. The fifth of these (and perhaps we can talk about the others another time) reads: "Because the capacity to relate is itself the primary divine energy impregnating creation, we humans need authentic ecclesial and sacramental experiences to explore and articulate our innate

vocation to be people in relationship.” (p. 211, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 2004). In less traditionally high church language I translate this as meaning “Because the capacity to relate is the primary characteristic of all that exists, we humans, with our ability to think of ourselves as separate, need vehicles to find our mind’s way back into the relationships that are already there, waiting for us to recognize them and their possibilities.” Thus religious thinking and religious institutions throughout human history. We are here this morning – and probably spend much of our time – in an attempt to find those relationships.

If you would like your religious institution, this UU Society of Amherst, MA, to be such a place, YOU ARE INVITED to do just that. You are invited, you have the opportunity and the occasion to make this the community you would like it to be – for it is yours (I would like to say ours) to be nurtured and grown. You are invited to explore your vision and your dreams for this Society and to make them a reality.

I absolutely love these words of The Reverend John Wolf, minister emeritus of All Souls Church in Tulsa, OK, in which I find a reminder of why I am a Unitarian Universalist and why I am here today as a newly ordained minister of this faith tradition.

There is only one reason for being part of a Unitarian Universalist Church and that is to support it. You want to support it because it stands against superstition and fear. Because this church points to what is noblest and best in human life. Because it is open to men and women of whatever race, creed, color, place of origin or sexual orientation.

You want to support a UU church because it has a free pulpit. Because you can hear ideas there that would cost any other minister her or his job. You want to support it because it is a place where your children are not saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial voyeur, where they can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love.

You want to support it because it is a place where walls between people are torn down rather than built-up. Because it is a place for the religious displaced persons of our time, the refugees from mixed marriages, the unwanted free thinkers and those who insist against orthodoxy that they must work out their own beliefs.

You want to support a UU church because it is more concerned with human beings than with dogmas. Because it searches for the holy rather than seeking out the depraved. Because it calls no one a sinner, yet knows how deep is the struggle in each person’s breast and how great is the hunger for what is good.

You want to support a UU church because it can laugh, Because it stands for something in a day when religion is still more concerned with platitudes than with prejudice and war. You want to support it not because it buys you some insurance policy towards your funeral service, but because it insults neither your intelligence nor your conscience and because it calls you to what is truly worthy of your sacrifice.

[From “The Gospel According to John...Wolf,” a sermon by The Reverend Thom Belote, Shawnee Mission UU Church, October 10, 2004.]

John Wolf has a way with words, and even though they were meant to be said as introduction to the offering, I find them inspiring at any time. They invite my passion and my action toward an end as he describes.

Another example of the vision to which we might find ourselves invited comes from The Reverend Alice Blair Wesley. Her passion is to call us all, ministers and lay people alike, to the covenantal nature of our free liberal faith tradition and its grounding in love.

To join a free church is to sign a promise that may sound simple – it should sound simple, but which, if you ‘keep covenant,’ brings you into intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster, in all the years of your lives.

No simple matter this. Entrance into the covenantal community summons a lifelong, forbearing engagement of heart, mind and body. So why would anybody ever rejoice to sign such a promise and regard it as a great privilege to do so? Because we human beings, social creatures through and through, are gifted individually – such is the dignity of human nature – to experience and to learn and to claim as our own these wonderful truths: ultimately, the only freedom adequate to human dignity is the freedom to do what love asks of us. And the greatest blessings of life come to us and through us to all the world when, with intimate and freely bonded companions, we are trying together to live with the integrity of faithful love. All this is what it means to say together in our church:

Love is the doctrine of this church,

The quest of truth is its sacrament,

And service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace

To seek knowledge in freedom,

To serve human need,

To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine –

Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

[p.38, “Our Covenant, The 2000-01 Minns Lectures” by Alice Blair Wesley, Meadville Lombard Theological Press, 2002]

[To the end that all souls shall grow into harmonious relationship, thus do we covenant with each other and with that which we find to have greatest meaning.]

You and I are invited to create such a place of welcome, affirmation and love. To my mind, our human-ness may come from our form and the evolved abilities of our brains, but our *person-hood* comes from our ability to relate. We are invited at every turn of our lives to relationships of intentionality and depth. We are invited to regard each other as subject to subject, not subject to object – to see in the other not a separate entity but rather an extension, perhaps expansion, of ourselves. To find the possibilities in our interactions, not the limits of our isolation.

Principle number twelve from the book on quantum theology comes to the same conclusion. It says “love is an interdependent life force, a spectrum of possibility, ranging from its ultimate divine grandeur to its particularity in subatomic interaction. It is the origin and goal of our search for meaning.” (p. 214) We are invited to relationship, the ultimate of which is pure love.

Being from western PA brings with it a certain proprietary fondness for its local television personalities; the same, I’m sure, is true here. I recently found a delightful little book authored by one such “star” with whom my daughter had grown up – on the other side of the TV screen. He wrote “If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet:

how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.” I think the world lost a beautiful soul when Fred (Mr.) Rogers died. His words, written for the young and vulnerable, are nevertheless true for all of us. There is power, and process, and change, and healing and growth to be had in and between every connection we allow ourselves to have in our lives.

To what are you invited? To religion done right. To a freedom to give when you have what is needed, to receive when you are the one who needs. You are invited to make this building and this society and this community exactly what you want it to be – maybe even more than you can now imagine. You are invited to the possibilities of love.

These words by Sara Moores Campbell will end our sermon this morning.

Loving is more than compromise and trade-off; it is mutual nurturing of growth. Loving is more than trust in each other; it is trust in something that transcends human experience. Love is the mutual gift of freedom with the mutual gift of commitment. Love is more than being true to ourselves; it is being true to a common reverence for life and a common vision of community. Love is more than loving each other; it is loving Life itself.

[p. 18, “Into the Wilderness,” Skinner House Books, Boston, 1990]

To all this and more, You Are Invited.