

“To Trust the Dawning Future More”

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Reading

*Our reading this morning by the Rev. Victoria Safford
comes from her essay “The Sacraments of the Word and Celebration.”*

On those occasions when the weight of the world is closing in
and the evidence against hope mounts as I read the news,
when I start confusing cynicism with pragmatism
and begin muttering miserable, unrepeatably things at the radio,
when I sigh, “I’m so tired. I’m so discouraged.”

At those times, my [husband] Ross, will say [to me], in the kindest possible way,
“What kind of self-indulgent whining is this?
What kind of entitled grandiosity of privilege is this,
to think that you or I or anyone has the right
to sever the bright thread of hope,
the tradition of dedication to the common good
and faith in people’s power to imagine great change,
to imagine and take great risks?”

There is a beautiful, proud history of work for human rights and freedom, for
social change and peace and protection of the earth.
This is the story in which we choose to stand.

This is not the story of oppression and imperialism and militarism and
corporate greed and plunder, but that alternative story,
[a story] equally true,
of those who lived their lives and gave their lives for love,
for a difficult and truly [noble] ideal—liberty and justice for all.

This is an ideal that is gradually gathering up everyone—

women and slaves and indigenous people;
children and elders and immigrants;
those fighting for human rights and civil rights,
for [better] schools and pluralism;
every person, gay or straight, who would sit at the welcome table.

We're only here to pass this story on," Ross tells me.

"All you have to do is keep the fire burning for a little while,
stoke it with your life, don't allow it to go out, and pass it on.
You have no right to put it out."

Not in [exactly] so many words—
but that's [pretty much] what Ross will say [to me].

Sermon: "To Trust the Dawning Future More"

Wow, so that was a close call, eh?!

Judgement Day.

The End of the World—or at least the beginning of the end.

Surely you've all heard about the 20,000 billboards around the globe
emblazoned with a dire warning from a group of Christian fundamentalists that
yesterday would finally bring the Rapture and divine judgment
and set in motion a devastating series of earthquakes
to end life on the earth as we know it.

Now, I didn't lose sleep over this,
and I doubt any of you did either—and for good reason.

Apocalyptic predictions have been around for a very long time.

But, I did get a chuckle at the thought of some well-meaning soul
making their way this morning to First Unitarian in Toronto—
unaware that our entire congregation is meeting down here today—
and, upon finding our building abandoned, being left to wonder if...
well, if just maybe, the Unitarians were the ones raptured off to heaven after all!

Now, I suspect it would come as a surprise to us
as much as anyone to find our Unitarian-selves in Heaven!

And, how confusing it would be to all those non-Unitarians left behind,
finding only piles of our cast-off Birkenstock sandals and tie-dyed t-shirts,
fleets of our fuel-efficient cars and more fair-trade coffee
than anyone would ever dare to drink. . .

What I really want to know, though, is what those ministers who've been
predicting the end of the world are actually preaching about this morning!

I want to know whether they bothered to write their sermons in advance—
you know, just in case things didn't go as hoped.

And, I want to know how they picked up the pieces
when the sun began to rise this morning—
and they realised that this would be just another day
in the long, unfolding story of the universe.

I want to know how they met their disappointment
and if they found some measure of hope to carry on.

I want to know whether they found the courage
to lift the shards of their broken dreams up to the sky
to see the light of a new day shining through.

I wonder because this is, to me, the great challenge
at the heart of our human experience:
to find the strength to carry on when our dreams have been dashed
and all seems lost,
to trust ourselves to a future filled with uncertainty,
and yet to chose to stand in the story of ongoing hope.

My hunch is that those disappointed yesterday
that the skies didn't open up and that true believers weren't whisked away,
will simply set their hearts on a new date
and begin the cycle of waiting once again.

(There's always the Mayan prophecy of 2012 to look forward to, after all!)

Though such prophecies have been a predictable part of the human story, they have come, and continue to come, I believe, at a high and dangerous cost to life on this planet.

I've taken some comfort in recent days that comedians have had as much or more to say about these latest predictions as preachers.

In my book, that's a very good sign!

But, the truth is, the imminent destruction of the earth is a frequent theological theme in human history.

Running through most of the world's great religions— at their outer edges if not at their core— is a feeling of ambivalence about this world, and an underlying distrust of the future.

In a world shot through with suffering, religion has very often pointed to an escape from life's misery— a way out, a promised path to a place where justice will finally be found and the heartache of life and death will be no more.

This place is known to us by many different names— as Nirvana or Paradise, as the Pure Land or Heaven.

Each enchanting and inviting, and each seductive in its own way.

I say this because what we believe about the future— about the horizon of human history or of a divine purpose on this planet— has a great deal to do with how we live out the days of our lives.

It has a great deal to do with how we understand our responsibility to the earth and to each other.

And it has a great deal to do with whether we feel a debt of gratitude to those who've gone before, and a sense of responsibility to those who will follow after.

Our religious ancestors made a significant shift when they declared that our religion is at least as important to the here-and-now

as to any hope of a heavenly reward or the fear of fiery damnation.

They rejected the notion that a loving God
would or could condemn people to an eternal hell—
because they believed that such a thought deeply dishonoured God.

Now, they had their doubts about heaven, too,
and in time, began to think differently
about the meaning and purpose of their lives on this earth.

Eventually, our religious ancestors
championed the idea of “Salvation by Character,”
believing we could cultivate the divine spark within us all
through deliberate moral education and ethical growth.

I know that such theological issues may seem tedious and antiquated now,
but the shifts they brought about have had enduring consequences.

They’ve meant that heaven and hell came to be seen
not so much as destinations for the afterlife
but as descriptions of the human condition in the here-and-now.

With this insight, our forebears recognised
everything they could dare to imagine about heaven or hell
could be found right in the midst of their daily lives—
in their hearts and in their homes,
in their congregations and within society at large.

From their day down to ours, those who’ve discovered
heaven and hell can be found pretty close to home,
have also found that with this realisation comes a responsibility and a calling—
a calling to build up a better world, beginning with our very selves.

As Unitarians, that calling has shaped so much of our history,
guiding us to do something about what we see,
guiding us to labour for the better part of two centuries
in the cause of justice and of peace.

It has led us to wrestle with what it means to live a life of integrity,
to struggle with the fact that diversity need not mean division,
and to endeavour to know, as though our lives depend on it,

that we are caught up in a delicate dance with all of life.

I am convinced that our commitment to living into this calling in the past has changed this world for the better—
and that it has changed us in the process.

It has certainly changed me, and I know it has changed many of you.

So often people come to this faith
under the false, and sometimes annoying, impression
that they can believe anything they like—
that they can come as they are and expect to stay that way.

Sometimes we're even complicit in keeping that impression alive!

But, the truth is that there is a transformative power
at the centre of this faith that works on us over the long haul—
when will let it, and sometimes even when we resist—
wearing down our prejudices,
challenging our assumptions,
enlarging our hearts and
widening our capacity for wonder and awe
at the great gift of life we find in this present, precious moment.

This faith teaches that there is rapture to be found here and now,
even among the most bittersweet facts of this life—
that because life is fragile, it is all the more precious,
and because life is so very precious,
that we are called into covenant with the web of being itself
to uphold and sustain it, and pass it along as the cherished cargo that it is.

All of this is the good news of our faith—it is our saving message.

It is a theology that can hold its own in the world of ideas
and the marketplace of religion.

And, with every fibre of my being,
I believe this is a message we have an absolute obligation to share
with a world that stands in desperate need of a different religious story.

The question we must answer

is whether we are willing to tell that story with our lives,
“to stoke it with our lives and to keep the fire burning.”

So often I’ve had people say to me that we don’t really proselytize,
that we are not evangelical.

Sometimes I think they’re gently trying to warn me,
but, more often, I just hear in their voices a fear—
a fear of not wanting to offend someone,
a fear of not wanting to risk staking a claim,
a fear, perhaps, of not wanting to contend with the change
that would surely be required of us
if we were to throw wide the doors of our hearts and our congregations.

I recognise that fear, and I know it well within myself.
But the story I want for us to tell
speaks of what we love instead of what we fear.

To tell that story may seem the hardest thing we’ll ever be called to do,
but harder still is explaining ourselves if the story goes untold.

That means the stakes are, frankly, too high
for us to simply maintain our congregations
as friendly outposts of like-minded folks
who have interesting and sometimes odd ideas about religion.

As we’ve heard this weekend,
to meet the very real needs of this changing and challenging world,
no matter our size or our context,
means that our congregations can’t become closed and isolated clubs.

It means that we will need to stretch and take risks
to do things we thought we could never do in a million years—
+ like letting go of our anxieties over our theological differences,
+ like getting over the idea
 that our faith is only for those lucky enough to find us,
+ like taking a hard look at what it would take for our congregations
 to welcome people who are different from us,
+ like recognising that our youth are not our future, but our now.

To do any of this means that we would need to take our faith seriously,

and maybe ourselves a little less so.

It would mean coming to see Unitarianism not as a hobby to be practised—
but as a commitment to an ever-deepening faith,
to a way of life actually meant to transform us
in the sacred hope of bringing more justice, more peace,
and more understanding to our lives and to this world.

That's why this faith, if we truly dared to dream,
could play such a vital role in the times in which we live
and in the times that lay ahead—
that is, it could if we were to summon our collective will to remain relevant,
even when it scares us,
and if we were to truly devote the resources of our hearts, our hands,
and, of course, our wallets to actually bring our dreams into being.

This isn't a fundraising sermon, but I'm guessing your presidents and ministers
might appreciate my pointing out that, demographically,
Unitarians are consistently ranked as the most highly educated religious group,
at the top of the scale in terms of wealth,
and, as you might guess, near the very bottom
in terms of financial support of our religious institutions.

I have to wonder how all of that might change
if we truly trusted the future?

I wonder what our world and our own lives would look like
if we “lived our lives and gave our lives to love”
in telling the story of who we are?

I ask this with the deepest respect
and a heart full of love and gratitude
for all those who've made this faith what it is today.

And, I ask also with a heart full of urgency.

There is so very much to be deeply worried about in this world of ours.

There are moments when it startles me how deeply I resonate
with that great bumper sticker that asks:

“Where are we headed and why are we in this handbasket?”

If any of us manage to make it back to the 100th anniversary of the CUC,
I can only imagine that we will look back on how easy life was in 2011.

As challenging as these past 50 years have been,
the next fifty are almost certain
to be some of the most challenging humanity will ever face.

Between oil spills and nuclear meltdowns,
a world awash in weapons and people burning other people's holy books,
it's clear, even from here, that we have a long way to go on this planet,
not merely to live in harmony, but maybe even to survive.

I realise how very apocalyptic that sounds.
Don't worry, I'm not really that kind of preacher.

I have no magic mathematical formula to predict the end of the world,
no crystal ball. I don't know what the future holds any more than you.

But, I do believe there is deep cause for concern,
and there are real reasons for alarm about the future that we are facing.

And, that leads me to wonder, hope, and pray
that ours will be a faith that is able not only to respond,
but to help lead this world toward a future that chooses heaven over hell.

This is something we already happen to know something about,
because we've been telling this story for more than two centuries.
It's the story in which we've long stood
and the story in which we still can stand.

I'm not advocating that we all head out to the street corners to chat people up
about heaven and hell, but that we look to the living of our own lives
as our greatest opportunity to preach the good news of our faith.

I became a minister because I believe the solutions
to so many of the problems we face are not technical in nature,
but are, ultimately and unavoidably spiritual.

While policy and politics matter,
the deeper work I see before us

involves bringing about genuine change in the human heart—
away from isolation and greed, apathy and despair.

When I look to the challenges before us,
it seems that so much of our work must be
about recognising and honouring the depth of our connections
and about restoring those connections
in the places where they've grown weak or been broken altogether—
work our Jewish friends call “tikkun olam” – the repairing of the world.

Here's the thing, though: to undertake this work of healing the world,
we actually need to love the place—and we need to love it enough
to stay put and not be looking to get out on the first available flight.

This comes easily enough to us as Unitarians.
After all, our faith offers no ready escape;
we make no promises about some life to come.

Instead, we know that every day is an opportunity to
“keep the fire burning for a little while, [and to] stoke it with [our] life.”

With the rising of the sun this morning,
it's clear enough that the world has not ended.

Today is just another day in the unfolding of the universe.

The story of our lives
and the story of the world is still being written.

How that story will end is anybody's guess,
but how that story *will be told* is entirely up to each of us.

Let us, then, tell a story of lives grounded in gratitude,
and dedicated in service to the greater good.

Let us tell a story of a people, anchored in love,
who are transforming the world around them with justice and peace.

Let us tell a story of a generation of Unitarians
that came alive with courage when it mattered most—
who overcame their fears and risked even their significance

that they might go on to tell an even greater story.

With all that is within us, may we live to make this story true. Amen.