

**Thought for Contemplation:** "We do not need to think alike to love alike."

Francis David

**Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church**

**January 27, 2019**

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHALICE LIGHTING Eben Malcolm

Let this chalice be for us  
the light of hope  
the warmth of love

And the courage of action. Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP Lindsay Bates, adapted

Come, let us worship together

Let us open our minds to the challenge of reason,

Open our hearts to the healing of love,

Open our lives to the calling of conscience,

Open our souls to the comfort of joy.

Astonished by the miracle of life,

Grateful for the gift of companionship,

Confident in the power of living faith,

Here we have gathered.

Come, let us worship together.

HYMN *Come and Go With Me* #1018

CHILDREN'S TIME Rev. Anita

I have a best friend. Do some of you have a best friend?

I had a best friend in elementary school and we did everything together.

Later, when I was grown up I met someone who was thinking of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister at the same time I was thinking of it. We both decided to go to the same school to learn how to be a minister, called theological school, or seminary, and we became best friends. We did lots of things together.

We studied together, we went on walks together, talked about church stuff together, and often ate together.

Then my friend developed something called lactose intolerance. Which means she can't eat milk products. 😞 No more going out for ice cream together. Why? Ice cream is a milk product. No more going out for pizza. Why?

Well, going out for ice cream and for pizza were two of our favorite things to do together. Certainly they were among my favorite things to do. And now she couldn't do them with me.

So I had a choice. I could find a new friend who could do the things I liked with me- who could go out for ice cream when we felt like it , or go out for pizza when we felt like it.

I thought about that. I did have other friends who could do that with me.

But what other choice do you think I had?

My best friend and I could find other things we could do together. We could change the way we had been doing our friendship, so that it didn't always include having the same food.

And that changed a whole lot of other things, because now we knew that we could be best friends even if we didn't always do the same things, or like the same things, or spend almost all of our free time together.

Because we learned how to do that, be best friends even when we were really different, we are still best friends, even though we have not lived in the same state for 36 years. We find times and ways to be together, but they are always changing, just like we are always changing.

It is like that with friends, and with our church- we stay connected, even though we are always changing.

**Song** (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go now for a brief introduction to their program.)

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: *At the Liberal Barber Shop* by Robert Walsh (11:00 am reader: Barbara Murray)

I've heard about a beauty parlor where all the liberal customers make their appointments for Fridays, so they could talk about politics, religion, sex, and other topics without fear of hostile reactions. It reminded me of being young in the South in the early 1960's, when I had a recurring fantasy of the Liberal Barber Shop.

At Brooks Barber Shop in my home town, when conversation moved beyond the local high school football and basketball teams, it tended to be about segregation and states' rights, and the possibility of dropping the bomb on the Russians. There was never a dissenting voice. Waiting my turn, I would bury my nose in an old *Saturday Evening Post*, keep my mouth shut, and imagine what Brooks might do to my hair if he suspected that I favored school desegregation or nuclear disarmament.

It wouldn't be like this at the Liberal Barber Shop. It's not that the barber and his customers would have "liberal" views on everything. They would *be* liberal. They would express their disagreements (about politics, religion, sex, etc.) respectfully, and treat each other with civility. Though they might believe passionately, they would speak with the understanding that they might be wrong. The customer would feel so safe at the Liberal Barber Shop that he could speak freely about

abortion, free trade, the Iraq war, or same-sex marriage – even as the keen edge of the straight razor moved across his sideburns.

Maybe it's just a dream. People are people. And yet we are capable of overcoming our destructive impulses. We can build institutions that hold up respect and dignity, peace and reconciliation – institutions that keep calling on us, with all our brokenness, to live up to these values. I think we can even build a world like that, a little bit at a time.

ANTHEM *As Tranquil Streams*

ANTIPHONAL READING Hosea Ballou

**L:** If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury,

**R:** but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.

**ALL:** Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.”

OFFERING

SERMON

### ***Trust it Enough***

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

In 1898 W. H. Rivers, British social anthropologist, renowned for his work on kinships, made a field trip to the Torres Straits off New Guinea. Pat Barker describes his encounter:

“He squatted down beside the (native people), and, as he expected, found enough knowledge of pidgin to make

conversation possible. He'd devised a questionnaire that he'd used on occasions when it was necessary to extract the maximum amount of information quickly. The first question was always:

'Suppose you were lucky enough to find a guinea, with whom would you share it?' This produced a list of names, names which he would then ask them to translate into kinship terms. And from there one could move to virtually any aspect of their society.

(So, he did this with them)

"When he sensed they were getting tired he paid them their tobacco sticks and stood up to go, but then one of the women caught his arm and pulled him down again. Poking him playfully on the chest, she retrieved two words of English from her small store: 'Your turn.'

"The questions were posed again and in the same order. When he told them that, since he was unmarried and had no children, he would not necessarily feel obliged to share his guinea with anybody, they at first refused to believe him. Had he no parents living? Yes, a father. Brothers and sisters? One brother, two sisters. Same mother, same father? Yes.

But (he explained), he would not *automatically* share the guinea with them, though he might *choose* to do so.

The woman who'd pulled his arm looked amused at first, then, when she was sure she'd understood, horrified. And so, it went on. Because the questions were carefully chosen, they gradually

formed an impression –and not a vague impression either, in some respects quite precise, of the life of a bachelor don in a Cambridge college. Hilarity was the main response.... They'd have gone on laughing. They would not have known how to pity him.

He looked up, at the blue, empty sky, and realized that their view of *his* society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs. No bearded elderly white man looked down on them, endorsing one set of values and condemning the other. And with that whole realization, the whole frame of social and moral rules that keeps individuals imprisoned – and sane- collapsed, and for a moment he was in the same position as (he believed) these drifting, dispossessed people. A condition of absolute free-fall.”<sup>1</sup>

The recognition that our truth is not The Truth, and that our way is not the Right way or the only way, can result in the kind of profound disorientation Rivers experienced. Some people may experience that when they step into Unitarian Universalism. Without a set of prescribed beliefs, it may be unclear how to find one's orientation, how to set one's moral compass. Misunderstanding our religious freedom as license to believe anything you want to, can feel terrifying, rootless. But we know that isn't true of our very grounded historic faith. As long as our personal and particular chosen beliefs result in ethical behavior, there is great freedom of belief. But even with those constraints, that vast territory of possible beliefs can be unnerving, disorienting even.

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Barker, *the Ghost Road*

When Rivers realized that what he considered right and true, was simply culturally subjective, and that *another* way of understanding people's relationships and their meaning might be just as valid, he went into an emotional turmoil, a free-fall. Truth was no longer simple. Right was neither clear nor obvious. The external judgement of the old white man in the sky was rescinded, and Rivers would have to rethink and weigh judgements on their own merits- and their consequences or outcomes. He didn't know it, but he was entering what would become the world, and the world view of Unitarian Universalism.

It is not that we think that everything is relative, but we allow that much more of it is relative than is commonly believed, understanding that so much of what we consider right or good or true is framed according to our culture, our custom, our social class, our economic class, our multiple identities. We grant that we may not know it all. We may *even not* know more than we *do* know. And we agree to live in the unknowing.

That is hard. Very hard. We want anchors. We want to be able to be oriented, grounded. Truly, we'd like to be comfortable. But the cost of the comfort is high, too high for most of us. To have the comfort of surety, of certainty, is to relinquish the free and responsible search for truth, and it is in that commitment to search for truth, that

our safety and security reside. It is not an easy place because new truths surface, and we need to keep being willing to rearrange our beliefs, and even our practices.

Back in the 1970's when it became apparent that Unitarian Universalism had been developed and structured with sexist presumptions, the recognition turned a lot of things upside down, challenging the words of songs we'd come to love, and opening the doors to women in our ministry.

Now we are doing some of that corrective work on the racist presumptions, and racially excluding premises that unfortunately have shaped our faith and its traditions. Educational and class backgrounds have fashioned the culture of Unitarian Universalism. What music we sing, what we consider respectful, how we order our worship, how we talk about God, what we mean when we speak of liberty.

My Dad was a very smart man who never finished high school and was an elevator operator. Would he have been comfortable in a Unitarian Universalist church? At A2U2? It might depend on what questions you first asked him when he got here. What was important to you, for getting to know someone? Where he went to school? Where he worked? What his politics were?

Or the more meaningful and sometimes overlooked questions like: “What drew you to Unitarian Universalism?” “For what are you seeking?” “What about Allen Ave. UU Church was interesting enough to get you to take the chance of showing up and walking in the door?”

It is not surprising that we have some confusion and ambivalence about these issues and approaches. Unitarian Universalism was created by combining two faith traditions that had become extremely similar in their approach to theology and religion – so similar that it was often difficult to tell them apart. I remember meeting a woman when I was serving as the chaplain to the Doolittle Home, a Unitarian Universalist Retirement home in Foxborough, Massachusetts, back in the 1970’s who told me, with a keen sense of the humor and irony in it all, of her having been raised a Unitarian and then converting to Universalism, only to have them both decide to become the same thing. She laughed recalling her angst at deciding between them-unnecessary had she waited long enough. Yes, the two denominations were theologically very similar.

But they were culturally quite different. Universalism drew its adherents from the farmers and tradespeople, from the rural and small-town folk. Universalism drew its people from the less educated and less affluent. They loved church suppers.

The Unitarians were primarily city folk. They were often university educated. They often had leisure time and discretionary money. They were often the influential and the deciders of the communities. They thought they knew stuff.

And Unitarian Universalism brought these two groups together, not unlike the surprising contact between Rivers and the indigenous people off the coast of New Guinea. There were lots to sort out. There still are. Inclusion sometimes means being willing to allow ourselves to go into free fall, much like Rivers did, as we take in the truth that there is more than one reality experienced by people, even people living together in the same community, in the same congregation. And hopefully our faith will give us the confidence that there is a safety net that will catch us, the safety net of a faith that trusts the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the interdependent web of which we are a part, that catches us and hold us together. Some of us call those things the God within, and the God of the whole, and some of us call it science, or human intelligence, or the unfolding of the universe.

It matters not what we call it. What matters is that we trust it, trust it enough to release our grip on the certainty of our world view, and our ways of doing things, to consider alternatives. What matters is that we trust it enough to release our grip on comfort and open

ourselves in radical hospitality. What matters is that we trust it enough to behave in the ways that reflect the world of which we dream, the world Robbie Walsh dreams for his barber shop, our barber shop, that though we:

...might believe passionately, (we) ...speak with the understanding that (we) might be wrong. The (people) would feel so safe at (our) Liberal Barber Shop that (they) could speak freely about abortion, free trade, the Iraq war, or same-sex marriage—even as the keen edge of the straight razor moved across (our) sideburns.<sup>2</sup>

With the world so fragmented, and the tensions so high we need such a place more than ever. With Robbie Walsh, I believe,

We can build institutions that hold up respect and dignity, peace and reconciliation—institutions that keep calling on us, with all of our brokenness, to live up to these values. I think we can even build a world like that, a little bit at a time.<sup>3</sup>

We can do it here, at A2U2, one day, one step, one conversation at a time, one glimpse of understanding at a time.

May it be so. Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Walsh, "At the Liberal Barber Shop", in *Stone Blessings*, Skinner House: Boston, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Op cit

CLOSING HYMN *Faith of the Larger Liberty* #287

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)