

AN EMBODIED FAITH
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS ~ *Victoria Safford*

What if there were a universe in which a world was born out of a smallish star,
and into that world (at some point) flew red-winged blackbirds,
and into it swam sperm whales, and into it bloomed crocuses,
and into it blew wind to lift the tiniest hairs on the naked arms in spring,
and into it at some point grew onions, out of soil, and in went Mt. Everest
and also the coyote we've spotted in the woods about a mile from here, just after
sunrise on these mornings when the moon is full?
Into that world came animals and elements and plants,
and imagination, the mind and the mind's eye.
If such a universe existed and you noticed it, what would you do?
What song would come out of your mouth, what prayer, what praises,
what sacred offering, what whirling dance, what religion
and what reverential gesture would you make to greet that world,
every single day that you were in it?

Come, let us sing, and praise, and greet the world.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Mystery Bag*

"Object Lesson" suggesting that when we put our shoes on the morning, we might be reminded about how we 'walk' in the world, and the people that we want to be. Told the story of Olympia Brown and her travels working for voting rights (to honour Persons Day and Voting Day.)

READING *Are You A Practicing Unitarian Universalist?* ~ Peter Boullata¹

If Unitarian Universalists don't have a creed or one statement of belief that we must all affirm, what holds us together? ...

In the broader religious culture in which we find ourselves, there is an emphasis on beliefs. "What do you believe?" is the usual question that comes up when one identifies oneself as a member of a faith community.

What many – including UUs! – don't get is that ours is not a religious movement that is about common beliefs. It is not that we have no beliefs individually or even collectively—we do—but that these are not what unify us. ...

We are bound together as a community by the promise we make to each other to be there for each other, to help each other through life's transitions, to listen respectfully, to

¹ <http://peterboullata.com/2012/02/15/are-you-a-practicing-unitarian-universalist/>

edify lovingly. This promise a congregation makes is known as its covenant. A covenant is more than a contract; it is a mutual agreement beyond the words on the page. It is a moral agreement, the shape and parameters of the relationship it describes. We freely enter into this covenant, even as doing so requires something of us.

And being in covenanted relationship does require something of us. Like other intentional relationships it requires patience, affection, listening, attention, acceptance. Among other things, it includes our commitment to the wellbeing of our congregation spiritually, organizationally, and financially. And a covenant is based in mutuality; if a person takes and takes but never gives, we are not in right-relation.

...What we are about is relationship – the covenanted relationship of being together in a mutually sustaining way.

I find inspiration from the experience of our Jewish neighbors. Among Jews the question isn't "Are you a believer?" but rather, "Are you observant?" Similarly, what UUs believe is not as central as what we practice – both as individuals and as a community. We don't commit to beliefs, but rather to practice, including the practice of cultivating our common life.

Our practice includes creating and sustaining communities of mutual relation. Our practice includes meeting regularly together for worship. Our practice includes ongoing open-ended conversation on theology, morality, and philosophy. Our practice includes acts of care and compassion for others. Our practice includes working on the broader social order to reflect the values of our communities of mutual relation: democracy, fairness, peace, freedom, thoughtfulness, compassion, responsibility and interdependence.

So, you're a Unitarian Universalist. Are you observant?

MESSAGE *An Embodied Faith* ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

I heard a story once about a woman who was driving while stressed out, as some of us can be...in this case, late for work, talking on her cell phone (without Bluetooth, I suspect!) and trying to organize her many to-do lists all at the same time. The driver in front of her stopped for a yellow light, causing her to miss a chance to sneak through the intersection. She began screaming in frustration, honking her horn, and making angry gestures...you know the kind. Ever experienced anything like that? If so, you know how it can happen.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked into the face of a very serious constable. He ordered her to get out of the car with her hands up, and took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, the confused woman was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. "I'm very sorry for the mistake," he said. "You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and flipping

off the guy in front of you. I noticed the 'Practice Random Acts of Kindness' bumper sticker and the 'Hate is not a family value' bumper sticker ...and I assumed you had stolen the car!" I've told this story before, but I couldn't keep myself from telling it again this morning...on this day when we're considering how we might best embody our faith...how we might best walk our talk.

This story is an example of what it might look like to get caught, literally, for NOT living one's values. The woman's bumper stickers...her public expression of values...didn't match her behaviour. She presented herself in one way, but acted in a very different way.

I was once 'person-ing' a tent at Queen's Park in Toronto....preparing for a rally for ISARC...the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition. We were waiting for folks from other Unitarian congregations to join us, although we didn't know the people who might be coming. My companion and I were playing a game which involved trying to guess which of the people approaching were Unitarians. We based our guesses on things like Tilley hats, Birkenstocks, carrying cloth bags, t-shirts with political slogans, and the like. If we could have, we might have tried to determine Unitarianism on the basis of whether or not they drove hybrid cars, or listened to the CBC. The younger of them might have had Chalice haircuts, such as is shown on today's order of service, or maybe even been sporting chalice tattoos. (Truth be told, we really weren't very good at this guessing game.)

Can we judge a Unitarian by their appearance? Certainly, what a person chooses to 'show' to the world creates some expectation of who they are, that is, how they might behave. We are inclined to think that we, that everyone, should practice what we preach. But it also goes the other way. We are able to identify, or at least make assumptions about, a person's values based on what they practice.

A few years ago, when visiting the UU congregation in Appleton, WI, I noticed that they had a bulletin board featuring something like the employee recognition campaigns that we've all seen in businesses or organizations. In this case, the prompt was "Caught being UU" ...and the challenge was to notice someone doing something particularly Unitarian, and to then write their name and the action witnessed on a card to put up on this bulletin board...for the world to see. Makes me ponder how often I might be caught being UU.

Last week at Gord McLellan's memorial service, I mentioned that I would have liked to have him here for 'show and tell' this morning, because if we had a bulletin board like Appleton's, his name would probably be up there many times. For those of you who didn't know him, he was a man who truly lived his values. It was said on that day that he'd never spoken a harsh or unkind word; I'm sure that's not completely true. But the overall experience of Gord was that he had committed himself to be a person who respected all, who treated all with kindness, and who carefully examined his actions in light of his values....and then he followed up on those commitments. He was a man who truly embodied his faith.

I don't think embodying one's faith is quite the same thing as being authentic. Being authentic, it seems to me, is about recognizing one's true nature and paying attention to that still voice within. Being authentic is saying "this is who I am."

Embodying one's faith is more about aspirations...about "this is who I want to be"... about naming what matters to us, looking at the things we'd like to be better at, and making commitments in order to align ourselves with our chosen values. Embodying one's faith is about journeying by means of an intentionally chosen compass...one that instructs us in what to do, and say, and be, in order to live those values.

Our faith? I know both of those words might be a sticking point. But this message is not for Unitarians alone. This message cannot even assume that all Unitarians share the same values or hold the same things to be of highest import. This message is for all of us who would like to live lives that are more congruent with who we say we are, more true to the people we want to be.

But that said, what is the Unitarian faith? Well, in part, it is a realization that faith is not expressed exactly the same for each of us, and that some of us don't even like to use the word 'faith.' Still, we can start with our Unitarian Universalist seven principles... principles which, as a congregation, we claim to 'affirm and promote.' (If you're not familiar with those principles, you can find them on the inside of the welcome brochure in the pews, or on one of the first pages of the grey hymnal.) To a great degree, to live our faith, as Unitarians, is to live in accordance with these principles...which call us to treat all with respect and dignity, to practice compassion and justice in all our relationships, to search for our own truth and meaning, to support the spiritual journeys of one another, to practice the democratic process (like voting tomorrow), to care for the earth and to work for peace, and to deepen our appreciation for the interconnection of 'all that is.' You might deduce from this list that to be Unitarian is more about ways of being than about holding similar beliefs.

And, just like there are 'sometimes predictable' things about Unitarians...about the way we dress or the cars we drive or our political leanings... there are also 'sometimes predictable' traits we share such as openness, generosity, and inquisitiveness. Perhaps of particular note, we choose to make a commitment to being together...exploring and learning... in community.²

In community, we support each individual's search for truth and meaning...which is our fourth principle...a lifelong process that is central to the question of how each of us might embody our faith. That principle requires that we examine our own lives, and from that

² Adapted from a sermon by Peter Boullata, <http://peterboullata.com/2012/02/15/are-you-a-practicing-unitarian-universalist/>

examination, to determine and name exactly what our personal faith is. It is only then that we might know what an embodied faith requires of us.

You might ask, so what? Or even, who cares? Well, our tradition upholds the value of each life. Your life matters...and what you do with the life you have matters. Embodying what we believe...living in sync with our values...is a way to make our lives matter...because as a favourite song here says, 'the only measure of your words and your deeds, is the love you leave behind when you're done.' The fact that we share and influence others, through our words and deeds, is the means by which our lives have impact.

In the Sunday School of my childhood, we sang a little song with a big message...

Do you know oh Christian, you're a sermon in shoes...(2x)

Jesus counts upon you to spread the gospel news...

So walk it, and talk it...so know it, and grow it...so give it and live it...

A sermon in shoes.

I've resisted the message of that song for much of my adult life. I've resisted the expectation that I had to live a particular subscribed message, and that if I couldn't do so, my life was of no consequence.

Through my adult eyes, I now see that I gave a value I don't even hold...that is, the belief that there is only one Truth, one particular 'gospel'...all the power to determine the value of my life. I see it differently now. I see that there can be, that there in fact ARE, other gospels, or values, that I DO want my life to embody. I want to share what I believe...not because I think it's the only way...but because it's important to me and therefore might be helpful to someone else, and I want my life and what I believe to have some impact.

The 'gospel' that I want to share, if I were to name it as such, is that there are many paths to, and up, the mountain, and further, that there is more than one mountain. My personal gospel tells of the worth of each life, of the power of love to heal, of the gift of creation, and of the centrality of connection. My faith assures me that no matter how many mistakes we make, or how many ways we are broken, that there is always the possibility of forgiveness and transformation. My faith requires me to 'show up' and stand up for what I believe, and to take responsibility for my actions.

What about yours? Can you articulate it? (If you've been part of a "Building Your Own Theology" course here, I know you can!) What does it require of you?

So, the question before me, before US, is, if we are to embody our faith, how shall we live? Truth be told, I'm better at some parts of it than others. I often forget to pay attention to principles that I've chosen to guide my life. But still, they are there...as something I can return to, as the foundation that reminds me of that which most matters to me. As I continue to grow and change, I can even revise, or re-prioritize, my faith. And, here in community, I am challenged and inspired to more fully examine, and then more fully embody, what I believe.

James Luther Adams, a great theologian in this tradition, taught that faith is not fundamentally about one's beliefs but about one's commitments.³ What one values most is at the core of one's faith...whether or not you would use the word 'faith'...whether or not you would consider yourself religious. When our chosen activities, placed alongside what we most value, claim more of our time than they deserve...when we sacrifice great things in life to the small things...Adams said that we are then living out a perverted faith. So, it follows that to truly live an embodied faith is to make those things that we value a priority in our lives...and to remain true to them no matter what.

It is said that one of Adams's favorite parables was an apocryphal tale about the Protestant reformer Martin Luther. When asked what he would do if the world were about to end, Luther apparently replied, "I would go out and plant a tree." What does that tell you about what Luther believed? Perhaps, even in the face of the end of the world, Luther's faith would not allow him to live without hope, without a commitment to the future.

And that might be the ultimate test. Faced with something that shakes our faith, that, in Mary Oliver's words,⁴ "pries with its stiff fingers at the very foundations" of what matters most to us, will we, could we, even then, live true to our values? I daresay that our faith is shaken every day...by world news, by the bombardment of advertising, by the myriad expectations placed on us, and by us on ourselves.

It's a challenge. But, my faith would have me remember, each time I put on my shoes and head out into the world, to walk my talk, to practice what I preach, to be a sermon in shoes. My faith would remind me that the path I walk...that who I am, and how this body acts in the world...is a living testament to what I believe and most value...and that the world needs my contribution...and yours.

May each of us endeavour to better embody our faith.

So be it.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Robert Lawrence Smith

Let your life speak. Have the patience to be silent and listen for truth.

Then have the courage to let the best that is in you direct your actions. Recognize that your true identity is nothing more or less

than the way in which you conduct your public and private affairs -
the way in which, for good or for ill, you let your life speak.

As Frances of Assisi is quoted as saying...preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words. Go and preach YOUR gospel with your life. So be it. Amen.

³ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/james-luther-adamss-examined-faith>

⁴ "The Journey" by Mary Oliver