

THE LIVING TRADITION WE SHARE  
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
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**OPENING WORDS** (#172 *Lifting Our Voices*) ~ Edward Searl

Always there is a beginning -  
a new day, a new month, a new season, a new year.  
Forever the old passes away  
and newness emerges from the richness that was.  
Nothing is ever lots  
in the many changes times brings.  
What was, in some way, will be,  
though changed in form.  
Always there is a beginning -  
a new day, a new month, a new season, a new year.

Let us begin this day, this week, this month, this season...together in worship.

**STORY FOR ALL AGES** *The Story Blanket* ~ Ferida Wolff & Harriet May Savitz  
(*Babba Zarrah has a large story blanket, and the children of the village gather there to hear her stories. But when she needs knitting wool to keep the village warm, the only wool to be found is from unraveling the story blanket.*)

**READING** *Nothing is Static* ~ Manish Mishra-Marzetti

The ground shifts, sometimes slowly,  
sometimes like an earthquake,  
reminding us that the solidity  
we often love and seek  
is an illusion.  
The crumbling dust of the desert plains,  
the moist fertility of farmlands,  
the ending coastline of tidal shores,  
all are changing.  
Committees dissolve or are created,  
leaders retire or step away,  
ministers come and go,  
by-laws are amended.  
New experiences  
lead to new truths,  
which foster  
evolution;  
the natural course of life  
always pushing us  
toward greater understandings  
of what it means  
to be human.

Everything about our existence  
points toward change,  
flexibility,  
and dynamic re-creation.  
And it's hard because  
change involves loss.  
Can we hold the losses well,  
while not holding ourselves back?  
The ground shifts, sometimes slowly,  
sometimes like an earthquake;  
nothing is static.

## MESSAGE

### *The Living Tradition We Share*

I'll begin with a story. This one is from the Jewish tradition<sup>1</sup>, and as you hear it, see if you can simultaneously keep in mind the image of the "Story Blanket" from earlier today.

A young man went to seminary to study for the rabbinate. In the middle of the year he became discouraged and lost his faith. He went to his own rabbi and said, 'I must leave the seminary. I lost my faith in God and do not believe in the Bible and the Jewish laws.' The rabbi listened and then said, 'Let me tell you a story. About twenty years ago when I was a student at the seminary, I lost my faith and I went to one of my professors and said to him, 'Professor. I must leave the seminary for I have lost my faith in God and I no longer believe in the Bible, and the Jewish laws.' And the Professor said, 'Let me tell you a story. About twenty years ago I studied to be a rabbi and I lost my faith in God and the Bible and the Talmud. I did not know what to do. I finally went to the head of the seminary, a tall saintly man with a white flowing beard and piercing black eyes. I said to him, 'Father, Rabbi, teacher, I am ashamed to come to you for the purpose I have in mind. But I must leave the seminary. I have lost my faith in God and no longer believe in the Jewish laws. I must leave the seminary.' The kindly man put his arm around me and said, 'Sit down, I must tell you a story.'

This past Wednesday, we held our Foundations class for those who are interested in membership here at UFP. In the first session, we show a video that tells the history of Unitarian Universalism in under thirty minutes. A fast-moving slide show, it plays like a revolving door of personalities and influences...one after the other, tumbling through time. Each one seemed to find that the story of our faith was getting too small for them, that there just wasn't room on the blanket anymore. Each 'losing their faith' in what was, and then changing what would be. Each bringing something from the fabric of their own experience and adding it to the common one...thereby contributing to the ongoing evolution of this living tradition we now call Unitarian Universalism.

I believe that every single person who comes in these doors changes who we are. Every person throughout time who has been a part of what were, or are, or would later become Unitarian Universalist communities, has influenced our ongoing becoming. Every heretic, every doubter, every institutionalist, every committed soul. History has remembered some of these people and their stories for their particular impact on who we are. Like...

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.questformeaning.org/clfuu/hold-on-to-your-hats-all-of-unitarian-universalist-history-in-sixteen-minutes/>

- The liberal religious voice of the prophet Amos, and others like him, who nearly 3000 years ago said that he despised religious assemblies and altars, and called for “justice to roll down like waters.”
- Jesus and his followers, who defied the oppression of the times and taught a universal love...to care for the hungry, to break bread with the stranger, to subvert the power of empire.
- Origen, who in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, publicly doubted the existence of heaven and hell, and taught that everyone would be reconciled with God. He was a very early proponent of universalism, or universal salvation.
- Pelagius, a 4<sup>th</sup> century monk, who countered Augustine’s teachings of human depravity, advocating instead for moral free will and spiritual liberty.
- Jan Hus, a Czech priest, who in 1415 was burned at the stake for sharing the communion chalice with the people. His followers combined the flame of his execution with that chalice...a symbol that provided inspiration for our chalice more than five hundred years later.
- Michael Servetus. At the time of the Reformation, he claimed that the Gospel knew nothing of the trinity, and he was burned at the stake for his Unitarian beliefs.
- King Sigismund of Hungary, who with the support of his Unitarian court preacher, Ferenc David, issued the first ever edict of religious freedom...the Edict of Torda, in 1568.
- Faustus Socinus, who organized non-trinitarian liberal congregations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century...dedicated to liberty, reason, and tolerance...a movement that founded hundreds of Unitarian congregations in eastern Europe.
- John Murray, whose 1770 words “Give them not hell, but hope and courage. Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God” established the beginnings of Universalism on this continent, a religion that praised God, and taught a theology of loving inclusion.
- Joseph Priestly, who, after being attacked and his home and church burned in England, escaped to the shores of this continent in 1794, bringing Unitarianism with him.
- William Ellery Channing whose leadership moved many Puritan congregations to embrace human free will, dignity, and rationality...congregations who began to call themselves Unitarian.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, and other Transcendentalists, who insisted on direct personal experience of the divine, and who began to embrace the wisdom found in other world religions. Their perspectives helped to move Unitarianism away from a strict belief in the Bible.
- Olympia Brown, regarded as the first woman to graduate from a theological school, who was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1863.
- William Barnes, who arrived in 1879 in Montreal to serve the (Unitarian) Church of the Messiah and brought with him a pluralistic theology of love and inclusiveness, focusing on character rather than dogma.
- Dorothea Dix, remembered as the most visible humanitarian reformer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who advocated for improvements in the treatment of patients suffering from mental and emotional disorders.
- Ministers like John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, who advocated for a “religion without God,” and who signed the Humanist Manifesto in 1933.

- Brainerd Gibbons, in 1949 and then the minister of the Universalist church in Wausau WI where I did my ministerial internship, preached a new kind of Universalism...beyond Christianity...as infinite as the universe.
- Our own founders...Ann Jex and Ed Adams among them...who after working to establish a Unitarian group here, applied for, and received, a congregational charter from the American Unitarian Association in 1961, bringing liberal religion to the Peterborough area.
- James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo who joined many other Unitarians in Selma AL in 1965, and who were both killed.
- Mark Mosher DeWolfe, who was called to our Mississauga congregation in 1982, and who was the first openly gay minister in Canada.

And the list could go on and on and on. In each of these records, I hear that voice... "I have lost my faith." The story blanket has gotten too small. We need to make it bigger, more inclusive. The way that it is, the way that we've been doing it, is no longer acceptable to me. Something has to change.

And so, something changed. Because of the people who acted to make change happen.

I suppose there is an even larger number of folks who walked away. Who got up and off the blanket and never looked back. And possibly they went on to affect change elsewhere. But for those who stayed...who lost their faith and found it again...what kept them in it? What keeps you here?

Of course, the answers to that question are myriad. But there are also some strong parts of our identity that have not changed much over the generations...things that have been passed to us, and which we continue to pass to others. Things that define us like:

1. The encouragement to question and to doubt – many of us have arrived here in this room because of rejecting something else. Doubt and resistance are a part of who we are.
2. The support of and advocacy for religious and spiritual freedom. This is a faith that is open to receiving inspiration from every religious tradition, setting a limit only at the place where beliefs are exclusionary or harmful.
3. A trust in our human capacity and spirit. We are not sinful creatures, but rather have inherent worth and dignity. Each person contains a spark of light.
4. An insistence on inclusion. We strive to open our hearts and minds to the stranger, the other, always trying to draw the circle wider.
5. A focus on how to live rather than on dogma. We are held together by our covenants with one another, not by a common set of beliefs. Our energy is spent on using what we have to improve ourselves and our world, and we teach that we all share in this sacred responsibility.
6. Here we offer the space to explore one's own spiritual path. You will not be judged. Challenged yes. But we accept that your path is yours to walk.
7. There is no ONE Truth, and revelation is not sealed. We are encouraged to listen, to explore, and to be transformed by what we find.
8. There is great meaning to be found in acting for a just and sustainable world...

9. And perhaps most importantly, we know love to be the most powerful force on earth, and, though we miss the mark regularly, we return again and again to love's promise and its practice.

These loosely gathered concepts and philosophical touchstones form the foundations of our tradition...it is for each of us some unique combination of them that holds us together...that gives form to who we are...that keeps us returning. Our principles and sources are the current container for all of this, and yet, even those are subject to change. For example...take a grey hymnal...

Turn to the 1<sup>st</sup> song...#1...and then turn back one page. On the lefthand side you'll find our Principles and our Sources. Who among you is looking at a hymnal which lists "Humanist Teachings" as the last source? And who has a hymnal which lists "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions" last?

This 6<sup>th</sup> source was added in 1993, after some of our hymnbooks were purchased. In fact, a list of sources was first adopted in 1984, when there was a substantial change made to the previous principles that had been in place since the Unitarian and Universalist merger in 1961. Our principles may seem immutable. Solid. Something that is passed to us. But they have changed, and they will change again. There's now a proposal for an 8<sup>th</sup> principle which speaks to racial justice.

Ours is a living tradition. It moves, it changes, it evolves...AND there is some essential core that remains and carries on. We have roots, and we have wings. We have tradition AND innovation.

And, if it is the tradition that binds us, we are called to constantly re-evaluate that tradition. Here's another story...this about a Guru's cat.<sup>2</sup> Apparently when the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So the guru ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died, the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.

To be stewards of a living tradition means to strive to have a fresh relationship with our forms and our practices, our principles, our worship...and to be willing to regularly evaluate whether or not they are worthy of continuing within our tradition, and if they remain true to who we want to be. Do they offer grace, do they bore us? Do they encourage us to love, or to exclude? Do they humiliate or create possibilities for transformation?

A living tradition requires that we be willing to see and let go of those things that we no longer want to define us. Tired or stale ways of doing things. Practices of our dominant white culture. Oppressions and inappropriate behaviours...sexual and otherwise. We should look plainly at who we are and have been, and then confront whatever shadows lie within. We are called to unravel those threads and re-make them into something new. Something useful and beautiful for today. Maybe even for tomorrow.

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<sup>2</sup> From Anthony De Mello, *The Song of the Bird*

This living tradition does not end; it continues. Within it are woven all the threads, fabrics and patterns that have contributed to it over time. And like the story blanket, it will continue to evolve, to enlarge and contract, according to those who come and add their life and their passion and their own stories. We are always at the forming edge of this Living Tradition that We Share...it is constantly changing as we learn and seek new answers to our questions, new forms for the legacy that we have received, and which we will pass along to others for its continued evolution.

May we be ever vigilant stewards of this legacy...this living tradition...faithful to its history, open to seeing both its shadow and its light, and ever willing change agents in its unfolding.

Amen.

**READING**                    *From the Fragmented World*                    #440

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

*\_\_By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.*

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

*\_\_We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.*

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

*\_\_We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.*

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

*\_\_Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.*

In this spirit we gather.

In this spirit we pray.

**CLOSING WORDS**                    (#181 *Lifting Our Voices*)                    ~ *Judith Meyer*

This is what we do with our faith:

Live in this world knowing that we will lose each other;

loving despite the hard bargain it demands of us,

doing what we can so that truth may be safely lived,

measuring our faith by the difference we have made,

building up this faith community to continue after we are gone.

You are a critical, beautiful, important part of the living tradition that we share.

Go in peace, knowing that there is sustenance here for you...and that you are here to provide sustenance for others.

Amen.