

Happy in Our Faith
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

First, two brief readings from the two men whose names together became the name of our Ballou Channing District within the Unitarian Universalist Association.

These words come from the Universalist Rev. Hosea Ballou (1771 – 1852):

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.

And next from the Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing (1780 – 1842):

The great end in religious instruction is... to inspire a fervent love of truth... to touch inward springs... to quicken and strengthen the power of thought... to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment... In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life.

The third reading is from another minister of our tradition, this from Rev. Laurel Hallman, who serves currently as the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas. This brief passage came from a 1999 sermon, “Sacrifice: Give All that You Have”

...I’m here to tell you today that we all give all that we have to something. We all give the days of our lives to something. We die for something. If not as martyrs to some great cause, then we die because we have lived. We have walked this Earth as an embodiment of what it means to be human. Our lives, at the very least, are examples of what it means to live. And we die for that privilege.

We give all that we have to something. And it doesn’t take much thought... for each of us to figure out what that might be, what several things that might be. We give our time, we spend our money, we do our jobs. We give it all away. Sometimes in exchange, sometimes not. We give to others, whether intentional or not. We give of the qualities of our spirit. Hope, joy, peace... We give of our resources. To the automobile dealer, to the bank for our mortgages, to the checkout clerk at the grocery store. We give and give and give of the time and resources of our lives. We actually give all that we have, even unto death.

We give our hearts and our loyalties to love, even as now we know we must maintain our own selves. We give our resources to the common good—even as we know we must be able to support ourselves and be smart about our future... We give ourselves to our work, our daily work, even as we know that we are not only what we do. And, in an ultimate way, we give ourselves to Life...

Sermon

The Unitarian Universalist ministers from the Ballou Channing District, which includes our southeastern corner of Massachusetts, Cape and Islands, and Rhode Island, meet each month. In January our topic was membership numbers in the Ballou Channing District during the past twenty or thirty years. Overall, there has been a real decline. Here at Old Ship we have modestly bucked the trend, during most of that period either growing or holding steady. But overall, a decline in this region.

For awhile the conversation at our meeting about all this was what you might expect, and along the lines of concerns I have heard more than once over the years: What can we do to grow? What are we doing wrong? Why can't we attract this demographic group or that one? Is there something about our message that limits our numerical growth?

Then one of my older colleagues, who is serving one of our small churches in an interim capacity this year, said the one thing that has stayed with me. He said that he is tired of all this talk about growth, and tired of UU pronouncements from on high about what we need to do to grow, to be different in this way or that way... and so on.

He went on to declare that we are by our nature, and given the nature and reality of society today (and for a long time past and probably for some time to come) counter cultural and therefore are and will be a small minority faith – but with a real and important role to play *as we are*.

And then he used the words that gave me this morning's title. He invited us to accept who we are and to be happy in our faith.

Well, I've been musing on this ever since. And I want to say at the outset that I don't think he was inviting us to be *complacent* in our faith; that, after all, would be antithetical to the very nature of Unitarian Universalism. Rather, "happy in our faith" implies to me an acceptance and love for who we are, for our traditions, for our principles, for our affirmations, for our sources of inspiration, all of which call us not to complacency but to deep careful reflection and to action, to full lives in the midst of life's contradictions, challenges, suffering, injustices – I'll quote Zorba again this week – in the midst of the "full catastrophe" that is life.

"Happy in our faith." (And I'll add a note here – I know that the very word "faith" may be a problem for some of you; let me reassure you, if reassurance you need: today I am simply using it as shorthand for our tradition, our Unitarian Universalism. As simple as that.)

Personally, I find that can trace my own UU journey through this notion of being happy in our faith.

When my family first joined the Unitarian church in Freeport, New York, forty-five years ago I experienced this happiness. I could believe what I wanted! No Christian dogma or Presbyterian Sunday School teacher would any longer tell me what I had to believe, what absolutely was true – whether it made sense to me or not. I could discern the truth for myself. Happy in our family's new religion, Unitarianism. Why, I was so happy in my faith that I wrote an essay about it for my seventh grade English class! (I mis-spelled "Unitarian" but I was happy!)

As time went on I realized that a responsibility came with that freedom which had made me so happy – as our Principles now put it, in language deeply rooted in our tradition, we affirm "the free *and responsible* search for truth and meaning." But what a wonderful responsibility, a

happy responsibility, an opportunity actually. For example, as I studied philosophy and religion in college, questioning just about everything, exploring everywhere, I had no fear that my studies and explorations could contradict my Unitarian Universalist faith – rather I knew that the very process of study and exploration was one of the foundations of our faith, part of being Unitarian Universalist.

I could still be, and even more so, happy in my faith!

In a similar way, a little later on, as I began to contemplate seriously the path of Unitarian Universalist ministry, I knew that I was free to weave all my interests, all my beliefs and values, my passion for peace and justice, my love for the earth... along with all my questions, and all the mystery too, all of it, all of me... I could weave it all into my path. Indeed, it was a requirement to bring all that I am into the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

What good news!

Still... happy in my faith!

And so it has been in all the years of my Unitarian Universalist journey. So that when I look at the Principles and Sources of our tradition I am happy and proud to affirm that this is my way, our way, in religion – good principles affirming the value of the individual and of our interdependence with all existence, affirming the quest for truth, for justice and peace, for world community; and the richest sources of inspiration one could imagine: transcending mystery and wonder, prophetic voices of the ages, wisdom and love from all the world's traditions, humanist and scientific teachings, and the wisdom of earth centered traditions.

Good principles and inspirational sources of life and love and wisdom.

Now, I'm not saying we're perfect... that's not my point; not perfect, not better than others. But ours. And good.

This said, our faith does pose particular challenges, sometimes even problems, for us.

Some, both outside our tradition and within our faith community, note the danger, for example, that in seeking truth and inspiration from many sources, drawing water from many wells, drinking nectar from many flowers (metaphorical overload alert!), the result could be a superficial spirituality, an ungrounded faith. Some say you need to be rooted deeply in *one* tradition only, not what may seem to be a hodge-podge of traditions masquerading as one tradition.

Well, I've thought about this a lot over the years. And I see some sense in it. But... you know (speaking mostly for myself, but I think in a way that defends and affirms our Unitarian Universalist tradition and path) this is just who I am – and I guess just who we are. I simply can't resist drawing from many wells. I love going from flower to flower – from Jesus to the Buddha, from the Torah to the Koran to the Upanisads to the Tao Te Ching, from poet to pundit. And this *does* sustain me! It does!

Indeed, though I surely see the value of drinking deeply from one well, really learning deeply and broadly in one tradition only... whether Christian or Buddhist – it simply isn't me... and isn't us as Unitarian Universalists generally. I am – and we are – insatiably curious about all the world's religions and philosophies, and, though I recognize that the Christian tradition is, not surprisingly, more deeply in my *bones*, my personal history and our cultural history, I am nourished by *all* the traditions, as well as by the scientific quest, each in a different way.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, the mystery of the Creation and the Source of Creation is so vast, it seems to me, that many religious and poetic and scientific languages are needed to approach it, to evoke it, none of them finally, all of them provisionally, yet each of them evocatively and sometimes provocatively.

A second challenge to or of our UU faith might be posed this way: UUs, many say (sometimes we say), are too much talk and too little action.

Well, do we like to talk? You bet. But this is not a bad thing in and of itself. It is simply – again – who we are, and at its best can help us to clarify our thoughts and convictions. After all, if religion and philosophy are human inventions which speak to uniquely human needs, so too is talk, complex language!

Socrates himself pioneered the idea that philosophy was something you did not just at your desk or in solitary contemplation, but in conversation, in the marketplace. It is in conversation, Socrates knew, and we should remember, that our ideas and values are often best articulated, sometimes questioned, always shaped, often can find firmer ground on which to rest.

So, yes, we talk – and we like to talk.

Does this preclude action? Well, sometimes it might delay or slow it down – but that is hardly always a bad thing. (A little more national and international talking four years ago, for example, might have saved much suffering and many lives in Iraq.)

And... as for action – we *are* very active on the issues of the day. Some might say active on too many issues (third challenge). *Do* we disperse our energies too much sometimes? Maybe so. But if so, it is simply the price we pay for having a lively conscience and for understanding that our religion is a religion not only for personal use, but is meant by its very nature to be taken into the marketplace, and taken in different directions depending on the passions of each person and each church. So, it will always be a challenge to focus our energies and to marshal our forces. But this is simply the challenge of a democratic faith rooted in a passion for justice, all of which is our faith.

A faith in which I, for one, am indeed happy. (Have you gotten that point yet?).

Are there, then, dangers in our eclectic approach to spirituality? Yes. Is there sometimes a weakness that comes with too much talk and from our many and varied passions for justice and peace? Perhaps.

But... we are who we are.

We'll change over time and we must be open to change, to critique, to new possibilities. But if we nourish a basic acceptance of and happiness with who we are as Unitarian Universalists, not always wishing we were somehow different in some way, better in some way, but essentially happy in our faith... we will be all the better able to make a difference in the lives of our members, our communities, and the world. And I would expect to grow too, attracting those who are seeking a path such as ours, but may not even know we are here – and would no doubt prefer to spend time with people who are happy – not dissatisfied – in their faith.

So... with all this in mind... and heart... today we celebrate Old Ship's expression of Unitarian Universalism; for today we re-affirm our commitment to this place and to one another. As we celebrate, may we be moved (time for the Pledge Campaign Commercial) – in the spirit of our reading from my colleague Laurel Hallman – to give as generously as we are able to this

community, to this Old Ship expression of our shared faith. Because Unitarian Universalism, like any faith tradition, does not exist in the air as an abstract set of ideas. It exists and is made real, generation to generation, in community – in communities such as ours.

In that reading, Laurel Hallman reminded us that whether consciously or unconsciously we are always giving all that we are to the world – to our families and neighbors, to our religious communities and to the world, to life. Every day we give of who we are through the ways in which we interact one with another, through the work we choose to do and the spirit with which we do it, through the causes and institutions we choose to support.

So, if we are happy in our faith, and if this community, this Old Ship expression of our shared faith, for all its imperfections, nourishes our spiritual lives and our social and ethical commitments, and if we believe that all this makes a difference not only to our lives but also to the world... ought we not support our faith and Old Ship as best we can? Isn't it as important in some ways as our daily bread and the roof over our heads?

It can be a hard world, I don't need to remind you. And these are hard, sometimes frightening times, but they are also I believe hopeful times. And I don't know about you, but in this world and in these times I need a place like this and a faith like ours all the more. I am so grateful that we are here together. I am grateful, too, that we are part of a larger community of Unitarian Universalists, along with many others with whom we share values, convictions, and passions, with whom we share a desire (and here perhaps is a nine word summary of our approach to religion and to life) to think more clearly and to love more deeply.

And so may we continue our journey together – bringing all that we are to the challenges of our age and of every age, to the challenge of living deeply reflective, good and decent, kind and loving lives.

Happy in our faith.

So may it be.