

*Ain't That Good News?*  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship  
Thunder Bay, Ontario  
Sunday, April 17, 2016

**Lighting of the Chalice**

*We light our chalice with these words from 18<sup>th</sup> century Universalist John Murray:*

You possess only a small light,  
but uncover it, and let it shine,  
Use it in order to bring more  
light and understanding to the  
hearts and minds of  
men and women.  
Give them not hell, but  
hope and courage.

**Opening Words – “An Eternal Verity”**

*[#647 – Waldemar Argow (1891-1961) was a poet, author, and served in Baptist churches before becoming a Unitarian minister, serving in Iowa New York, and Maryland.]*

Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar.  
Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire; ancient as the soldier is the priest.  
Older than written language is spoken prayer; older than painting is the thought of a  
nameless one.  
Religion is the first and last – the universal language of the human heart.  
Differing words describe the outward appearance of things; diverse symbols represent that  
which stands beyond and within.  
Yet every person’s hunger is the same, and heart communicates with heart.

Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one, with a holy land washed by ocean  
waters, or a holy land within the heart.  
In temperament we differ, yet we are dedicated to one august destiny; creeds divide us, but  
we share a common quest.  
Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning,  
we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.  
For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities;  
We are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.

**Reading #1: “Remember, and Give Thanks” Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons** from her essay  
“Primal Reverence” in UU World, Summer 2012

It’s one thing to have the night sky take your breath away and leave you feeling both  
exhilarated and humbled; it’s even better when someone else says, “I know what you mean;  
I’ve had that feeling, too.” It’s one thing to contemplate with poignant gratitude the  
sacrifices that were made for the sake of your freedom; it’s something different when a  
whole community remembers and gives thanks together.

**Reading #2: “The Good News” Thandeka** from WELCOME: A Unitarian Universalist  
Primer, 2009

So, if someone tells you that she or he knows pain, loneliness, loss, fear, and dismay,  
but does not know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider, deeper, and

infinitely vaster than the sorrows, hear those words as a commission. Hear your commission to love, to create community, and to heal.

One at a time in personal relationships, ten at a time in covenant groups, hundreds at a time in our congregations, hundreds of thousands at a time in our religious movement, millions at a time as we take our commission deeper and deeper into humanity's heart as a justice-loving people who will transform the world.

This is the Good News of our faith.

**Sermon: "Ain't That Good News?"** by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

In the Roman Catholic Church in which I was raised I encountered Jesus, with head bleeding from a crown of thorns, pointing to a heart pierced by a sword. The virginal Mother Mary cradling her dead son's crucified body. Saints of all ilks – dying in horrible ways or the One True Faith. Sins – mortal and venial. Lots and lots of stuff was sinful – like eating meat on a Friday, walking into church with your head uncovered [if you were female], even wearing a sleeveless dress to Mass in the heat of July [it was an "occasion to sin" – tempting the males in attendance with your too-abundant show of skin.

Oh my. When I think of my spiritual upbringing I sigh, and wonder at the puritanical, conservative, grim aura of it all.

And the idea of Original Sin – we were all born with an innate depravity, a tendency toward evil, due to Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The wages of sin were the eternal fires of hell. The reward for righteousness was eternal glory in Heaven. And most of us poor sinners would spend a whole lot of time in Purgatory, getting purified of our many sins. If you were an unbaptized baby, or a really righteous non-Catholic like some of the Greek philosophers, you spent eternity in Limbo – a space separated from the face of God.

And, as a child, I believed it all. Lock, stock, and barrel.

It took going off to college to separate me from every-Sunday church attendance. There didn't seem to be a Catholic church near the campus of my small liberal arts college in south-central Wisconsin.

During college, after a couple of [what I thought of as] very unfair occurrences in my life, I started questioning the fairness of God. It wasn't long until I had a litany of beliefs I was seriously questioning:

Original sin

Salvation – how could a loving God send his only son to be executed? Surely he could think of some other way to fix things. Was God really that angry over people being just human – curious, questioning authority, disobeying silly rules?

So, was God not really good? Or was he just not all-powerful?

Virgin birth – how did that work?

Limbo for innocent babies?

Only the members of the One True Church having the opportunity to be saved; all others to be shunned and ignored. And I do mean shunned [*story of 8<sup>th</sup> grade--boys & girls separated and told, by the priest, not to associate with non-Catholics when we went to high school*]

[*story of mom—when told non-Catholic friends could not enter heaven, mom said then she wouldn't go there either*]

With all my doubts and questioning, who knew I was well on my way to being a 1970s UU? A true non-believer & skeptic.

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It wasn't until after I graduated with a BA in English, then graduated from nursing school and got my first job that I thought about going to church again. Catholics were out. But what about Lutherans? Methodists? Episcopalians? Presbyterians? I knew nothing about them or their beliefs. And even less than nothing about non-Christian faiths – Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, earth-centered beliefs.

I did know I believed in justice, and fairness, in women's rights, in rights for Native Americans, in the humanity of gays and lesbians, in working for peace, in a burgeoning movement to care for the earth. Heck, I belonged to the WILPF, NOW, WRL, the Sierra Club. I subscribed to the Iroquois nation newspaper, *Akwesasne Notes*. I was copy editor for a lesbian/feminist magazine.

So when I discovered Unitarian Universalism, I found a group of people who held many of the same views on faith, and disbelief, and justice as I did. I was in my faith home – if I could call it that, since what I mostly knew were all the things I did not believe in.

What I couldn't do [in 1980] was tell anyone what UUism was; what it was I did believe in.

As a classmate, John Cullinan, tells it: “As a whole denomination over the decades, we have become far too good at defining ourselves in opposition to other faiths – as something other, or different, or even better. We have become experts in telling the world what we are not.” [*Your Life Is a Gospel*, p28]

During this time as a UU I held book discussion groups; and attended Sunday lecture-like presentations; and went to demonstrations and marches; and letters to the editor in support of the new gay support group in our little town; I heard fellow UUs say “Do we really have to light that thing?” in reference to the chalice.

As John Cullinan writes: “The first response from outside observers of our faith is... ‘Unitarian Universalists? Those [folks] don't believe in *anything!*’”

Try explaining our non-creedal faith to an Apostles' Creed believer.

Try explaining my non-creedal faith to my very conservative Lutheran sister-in-law.

“Another common response comes from casual observers both inside and outside our churches. ‘Unitarian Universalists? Those [folks] can believe *anything they want!*’” [*Your Life Is a Gospel: Selected Sermons, 2007-2009*, pp138-39]

[*story about teens at a youth con—girl announces that we UUs have to believe that a rapist had good reason to rape*]

Neither extreme is true.

Some of us may have held beliefs we need to think through and discard [“deconstructive theology” is the seminary term].

But we all have some beliefs about humans, about how the world works, and how the world might thrive.

UUs tend less toward a [fully-articulated and totally-subscribed-to] belief system, and more toward a system in which we ask ourselves: “How can we, how ought we, to live together in love and justice?”

We sometimes express this religious philosophy as “Deeds, not creeds.”

“Deeds, not creeds.”

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What is our UU Good News?

In the Greek bible the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – are often called the Good News, the Glad Tidings.

*I've got a crown in the Kingdom, ain't that good news*

*I'm goin' to lay down this old world*

*Shoulder up my cross*

*Goin' to take it home to Jesus, ain't that good news.*

An African American spiritual. Talking about the good news of Jesus, and salvation, and a home in heaven. [The Good News of Christianity.]

What are our Unitarian Universalist Glad Tidings?

What is our Good News?

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I've come up with three general areas:

### **Home for Heretics & Doubters**

We can be heretics – people who are able to choose.

And, no, we can't choose just any old belief, or none.

We are called to a responsible search for truth and meaning. No easy task. In fact, a life-long commitment to discover what is most right and true. What is most right and true for us – not necessarily what is right and true for that person sitting next to you in the pew.

We have a Great Commission – to build a theology – not from whole cloth, not from nothing. We look to our Sources of wisdom from which we draw. Experience of the transcendent. Teachings from all over the world. Earth-centered traditions.

Our search is wide and deep. We use astrophysics and microbiology. Geology and chemistry. Metaphor and music. Martial arts and quilting. Psychology and philosophy.

We share a common quest, to search for purpose and meaning in life. We ask not for certainty. We come, sometimes reluctantly, to détente with complexity and ambiguity.

And in this complex, ambiguous world in which we live, with its diversity of people and views; in this world that needs all the legitimate doubt, and the true wisdom it can find.

We don't need to believe the untenable. We don't need to settle. We need to search. This is the Original Blessings with which we were born – and ain't that Good News?

### **Welcoming / Radical Hospitality**

We are a motley crew. We are atheist and theist, agnostic and professional doubter, we are scientist and poet. We are Christian and Muslim and Buddhist and Taoist. We are heretics – we have, with mind and heart, chosen our beliefs.

And, because we are so varied in the ways we approach life, it behooves us to practice the fine art of hospitality, of welcoming the strangers. For, indeed, in many other venues in our lives, we are the strange and out-of-place.

Now we, as a denomination, have done a good bit of welcoming work. Lots of work on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning topics.

*[Fred & Stephen stories; Fred-his Christian group tried to “cure” him of his homosexuality; Stephen-Baha’I, for whom being gay was “unnatural”]*

Those of us who are plain, garden-variety heterosexuals still get confused by some of those terms. That’s okay. The spiritual discipline is that we keep trying to understand. Like Jacob with his dress – what the author calls “gender non-conforming” children – we stretch our minds and our hearts to accept someone we may initially label as “other.”

We UUs are a predominantly white denomination. And so we work to stretch our minds and our hearts. We purposefully take time to study issues of aboriginal rights.

We open our minds and hearts and homes and pocketbooks to welcome Syrian immigrants, to learn about their religious beliefs, to find the commonalities between us.

But, before we get all puffed up...

Sometimes we’re not so good at being welcoming to each other.

*[Missoula UU story-come with cookies; woman at door says, “I thought I was doing refreshments today.” Milwaukee UU story-totally ignored as a visitor]*

Truly being welcoming, practicing the art of radical hospitality, is about acceptance. It’s not about condoning. Neither is it about judging. Radical hospitality is about embracing and affirming the Sacred in the other, in the stranger, in the person who believes other than we do, in that person sitting next to you in a pew.

Truly being welcoming, practicing the art of radical hospitality, is about listening.

“Hospitality is a way to counter the thousands of times another human being has felt less than human because others didn’t listen. Listening is the power of hospitality; it is what makes hospitality the life-giving thing it is.” *[Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love, Fr. Daniel Homan, p216]*

True hospitality, of course, includes boundaries, boundaries that keep us from feeling used or manipulated. *[Hospitality, 203]*

But true, radical hospitality is about “preparing a table” – “work[ing] to make our entire existence a welcoming table, a place prepared for others to be at ease, to receive from us comfort and strength.” *[Hospitality, 127]*

*[Come, come, whoever you are,  
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.  
Ours is no caravan of despair.  
Come, yet again, come.]]*

Another life-time of practice. Another Great Commission: to welcome one another. But, when you can feel the welcome in your very bones, ain’t that Good News?

## Hope / Love

UU theologian James Luther Adams describes the “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith” as the smooth stones of liberal religion. About hope, he writes:

“It is easy in this world to fall into despair. Yet, there is something in the genuine religious perspective that, while recognizing the tragic nature of the human condition, continues to live with a dynamic of hope.

Hope is not denial. Hope is the realistic assessment of ‘ultimate optimism’ that history is full of meaning and beauty is all around us.”

18<sup>th</sup> century Universalist preacher John Murray told his followers:

“You possess only a small light,  
but uncover it, and let it shine,  
Use it in order to bring more  
light and understanding to the  
hearts and minds of  
men and women.  
Give them not hell, but  
hope and courage.”

*[Let your little light shine, shine, shine  
Someone down in the valley, trying to get home...]*

I sometimes describe my occupation as hope-monger. Not a cheese-monger. Not a fear-monger. Or a war-monger.

A peace- and love- and hope-monger. I deal in hope.

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In our opening words Waldemar Argow tells us:

“An eternal verity abides beneath diversities;  
We are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.”

And in the second reading African-American theologian Thandeka tells us:

“Hear your commission to love, to create community, and to heal.”

“[Let us] take our commission deeper and deeper into humanity’s heart as a justice-loving people who will transform the world.

This is the Good News of our faith.”

At a recent memorial service for a longtime member of the UU church in Virginia I read from the Song of Solomon, [chapter eight, verses 6 and 7]:

*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;*

*for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.*

*(Love’s) flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.*

*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.*

But, as my preaching professor, David Bumbaugh would tell it:

Love is stronger than death.

Love is stronger than loss, stronger than grief.  
Love continues,  
regardless of time,  
and death,  
and the space between the stars.  
Love abides.

We are liberated for love  
at life's beginning;  
and we are liberated into Love  
at life's end.

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This is the Good News of our faith.

That we have the freedom, and the responsibility, to search for truth and meaning.

This is the Good News of our faith.

That we are inextricably interconnected. Part of the web of Life, created by the first Cosmic Burgeoning, Big Bang, Great Radiance. Know that what we do matters – for the future of this planet, for the future of our precious children.

This is the Good News of our faith.

That each of us carries that first spark within us. We are commissioned to let that light shine. Let it embrace. Let it zap hate and ignorance. Let it illuminate our faces, and the faces of our neighbor.

This is the Good News of our faith.

That we each of us can be a hope-monger. We each of us can do our part to ensure a place at the table for all our sisters and brothers, for our children's children, for our green blue earth.

And, ain't that good news?

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.