

## *Gifts from our Faith*

Do you remember the old Zen story about the two fish? Have I told it to you before?

Two young fish were swimming along one day. They happened to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish nodded at them and said, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish nodded back at him and swam on for a bit. Then one of them looked over at the other and said, “What the heck is water?”

Now, this Unitarian Universalist faith has given me and many of you sustenance for life, just like the water sustained those two fish. And similarly, sometimes the tradition we inherited when we stepped through those doors and that we continue to enrich and evolve becomes like the water to the fish – we can take for granted, forget, what is life-sustaining.

I knew a stay-at-home mother with young children who started coming to a Unitarian Universalist church. A friend had invited her, and she went because at times she was overwhelmed by the task of caring for her young children, and guilty and sad about the mistakes she made, the very unloving things she did or felt sometimes in her exhaustion or anxiety or anger.

Solace came for her gradually in that church, from being loved and accepted by the other people. This love and acceptance helped heal old wounds that came from being a minority in what is still a very racist society.

It also came from the support the church gave her as she struggled for justice and inclusion of her emotionally challenged child in the broader world of school and town.

This support, this love and courage gradually helped her aspire to be more like the people of her church who, like Martin Luther King, were able to act out of love for others rather than fear of others.

However, aspiration does not accomplishment ensure!

Living life from a place of love rather than fear required changing from mistrust of the world, to having faith, to trusting in the basic benevolence of the universe and of the forces that undergird it. This was not where she started, and it was important that her that religious community affirmed this basic benevolence, for it was hard for her sometimes to see it.

I think Alcoholics Anonymous folks say, *Fake It Till You Make It*. There’s truth in that advice, and Unitarian Universalism in the beginning was a little bit like an AA group for this woman, who, for many completely justifiable reasons, was – as she joked to me – a recovering fear-aholic.

Like my friend, I too have experienced loving fellowship, and a great willingness to work for justice from people in this faith. But it was the gift of trust in the universe, God and people that

was the hardest for me, as it was for my friend, to accept. The gift of trust that humanity, creation, and what is bigger than our little selves, – call it God or the Holy or Nature, or Reality – are all basically good. This is the gift of faith, itself, the first gift from our faith that I want to talk about with you this morning.

Thank goodness for our roots in Judaism! In the Jewish Bible, in the book of Genesis' first account of the creation of the world, every day ends with God surveying the day's work and pronouncing it good. This is the water in which Unitarian Universalists swim, but for many of us who grow up outside the faith, this is a radical perspective.

And it was radical in the context of Middle Eastern religions of the ancient world. And we can see this radical belief still reflected in the celebration of life, rest and enjoyment that is the Jewish practice of Shabbat, or Sabbath. Sabbath is not a day to suffer or to inflict severities upon one's self, it is the day to rest, enjoy the fruits of a week's labor and celebrate God's generosity.

Shabbat says, the world is basically good.

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Similarly, a significant stream in the Judeo-Christian tradition, our ancestral tradition, continuously affirmed humans – as well as the world – as good.

This hopeful view of humanity is older than the more recent dominant Christian view that most of us are at least vaguely familiar with. We are made in God's image, the earlier understanding went, and therefore we are fundamentally good even though never able to fully live into that goodness. Pope Francis, current head of the Roman Catholic church, echoed this view of humanity, and turned recent papal priorities on their heads, when he made headlines last week speaking about finding God in everyone and in every thing, and the importance of loving people first before judging them.

I think the dominant Christian perception of humans, however, is still as depraved sinners, even wretches. Our direct religious ancestors in the 1800s were reacting *against* that Calvinist view of humanity. Our spiritual forebears thought of themselves and other human beings as worthy and good children of God.

Today, we echo this assessment in our Seven Principles where we affirm that all human beings are “of inherent worth and dignity.” Unitarian Universalists do not come on our knees to pray for forgiveness, we come walking in to the sanctuary knowing we are blessed, even when we have done hurtful things. We can renew our promises to each other and the holy, and begin again, in love and with dignity.

So for Unitarian Universalists generally, humans are basically good and a blessing just as creation – the world – is basically good and a blessing.

What about the unseen realm? That transcendent mystery that goes beyond our particular, little selves, whether we call it God or Nature or Spirit or Reality?

For Unitarian Universalists, this “beyond” need be neither terrifying nor judgmental, nor need it be indifferent. People in our faith tend to see this as benign or even loving, even though they come from many different theological perspectives to that conclusion.

I’ll give you just three examples: variations on theist, naturalist, and humanist perspectives.

For those of us who speak of God, God in this house of worship is unlike the God of the Protestant Reformation: this God is love, not judgment, nurturing, not harsh. This view of God is an old view, one that drew strength from Jesus of Nazareth’s language and teachings. For Jesus, God was loving, protective and could be known intimately and directly, a God who Jesus called Abba, meaning *Papa* or *Daddy* in his native Aramaic tongue.

For those of us who see what is bigger than our little selves in Nature, Nature is not primarily cruel; it is a wondrous gift of great sublime beauty. Our ability to see beauty and order in the material world imparts a sense of awe, and sometimes deep connection and unity with it. A Chinese poet, Li Po of the 8th century, captured this last possibility well. He wrote:

*The birds have vanished down the sky.  
Now the last cloud drains away.*

*We sit together, the mountain and me,  
until only the mountain remains.*

And then there are those of us who think of what is beyond our immediate selves and senses as Reality, a vast ocean out of which we and other particular realities coalesce, and back into which we subside, when the circumstances that brought us about cease. Some humanists share this perspective. From this perspective, when we reduce our clinging to what inevitably changes and dies, we can develop a sense of being truly at home, and of deep joy in the present moment of life.

Whatever the theological approach, though – and I’ve only touched on three possible perspectives out of many – Unitarian Universalists generally agree that creation is basically good, people are basically good, and the holy is good. This is our foundational assumption, and it is a great gift. You can come into this church and absorb some of this habit of the heart, and if you aspire to share it, it can become your own.

Think of how radical this sounds, to those of us, and there are so many of us, who for whatever reason have difficulty trusting the universe, or the people within it. And can you imagine trying to learn to trust the world on your own, without a larger community of faith that supports you in this effort?

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The second gift of our Unitarian Universalist faith that I want to focus on this morning is the high claim that justice and love have upon us. This claim grew out of the first gift I spoke of, the belief that Unitarians and Universalists had that people, God and creation were good and that people were similar in the eyes of God, or equal.

This high claim of love and justice is what drove our spiritual ancestors' strong sense of social mission. They had a strong desire to serve people who experienced hardship or oppression, and to work not just to alleviate individual suffering but the suffering caused to groups and classes of people by our social structures. Jesus's command to "love God and your neighbor as yourself" was the language that initially undergirded this work, and the work was considered the right response to the love the benevolent God shows to us.

In addition, our spiritual ancestors discarded the idea that the focus of religion was what might or might not happen after one's death. For them, and for many of us, the point of sharing our spiritual lives in a faith community came more and more to be how we will live this life so as to best answer the claims love and justice place on us.

So the Unitarian Universalist tradition came to focus increasingly on how we can help realize a world of justice and love, right now.

This sense of mission on behalf of excluded or marginalized groups of people is a true gift. It helps us remember that real love involves action, and that we have much to give and receive from others.

But it is not easy to figure out what the claims of love and justice mean in the world.

Indeed, Unitarian Universalists proclaimed the same basic message of love and equality in the 1800s as we do now, and some of our forebears were leaders in the abolitionist movement to free slaves. And yet, we did not welcome African Americans into our clergy until the 1930s. It wasn't until the 1980s that women were accepted as clergy in any significant numbers. It took a long while for us to learn some of the deeper dimensions of the calls to love and justice, and we still have much to learn.

And another challenge stemming from this high value placed on responding to the world in love and justice is how to make the judgments about what love and justice require, to advocate for that, and to still hold the people who oppose us or disagree with us in our hearts with love, and to interact with them respectfully and caringly. Our strong tradition of advocacy for justice can at times make it hard to be in relationship with those with whom we have fundamental values disagreements. And yet, love calls us to do that. Our faith tradition challenges us to it.

The high commitment to justice, and the related tendency to judge those who disagree with what we see to be just, can manifest itself in how welcoming we Unitarian Universalists can be to folks who disagree with our movement's dominant interpretation of the demands of justice, or even who are simply not in sync with the dominant theology of a particular church.

Can we be loving enough to refrain from judging individuals even while working to bring about the justice they disagree with in the larger world? Can we speak and listen to each other without judging the whole person by a part, by a belief?

Perhaps we will be able to explore more deeply the tensions between justice and love when we trust more deeply in and remember our historical ability as a community to grow in our

understanding of these values over time. Humility and confidence can come from knowing that our spiritual ancestors did this over and over again in the past with respect to equal rights and opportunities for African Americans, for example.

One last aspect of this gift of a strong commitment to justice and love, and the resulting tension between judging and loving is reflected in our ability, or lack thereof, to listen *without judging* to other people's *theological* views. This is love up close and personal. I think it is surprisingly hard for people in our churches, as it is for those people in churches of many denominations, to bring up their theological views if those views differ from what are perceived to be the majority views; here at First Parish I think the majority view means a non-theistic and humanist point of view. Our conversations will continue to grow richer and our relationships deeper when we are even more intentional about being curious about our theological differences rather than judging, when we can be open and therefore make connections with each other when exploring these differences. As a famous Unitarian once said, "we do not have to think alike to love alike." This is truly a spiritual challenge, one that I feel deeply. I hope we will explore what pursuing this as a goal might mean for us, right here.

Our life is truly blessed.

Faith in the basic goodness of life and the holy, and the challenge of doing justice and acting with love towards all people: these are two great gifts among many that our tradition offers us. Perhaps at least one of these is a gift that you, that we as a body, have not yet fully accepted.

Are we willing to be changed?

Shall we say, Yes?

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May it be so.

Amen.