

Universalist Theology and Beloved Community

New York State Convention of Universalists – Rochester, NY

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Good morning, New York Universalists and Unitarian Universalists! I am so glad to be with you on this 193rd Annual Meeting of the New York Convention of Universalists. Thank you for that support and thank you, First Universalist Church of Rochester for hosting! I am grateful to be with you all today.

It is my great honor and privilege to serve as President of your Unitarian Universalist Association. And one of my favorite parts of this job is getting to be at gatherings of UU's and to be with our leaders and in our congregations. Two questions I often get asked as I travel are:

What is the UUA? And what does the UUA do?

The UUA has 3 core areas of our mission.

1 – To equip congregations for healthy, vital ministry

2 – To support and train leaders, both lay and professional

3 – To advance our UU values in the world, amplifying the collective voice of our over 1,000 congregations.

And the UUA is only here because of the covenant that our member congregations make to one another. It is your promise and support for one another that allows the UUA to be a partner to all of our congregations and covenanting communities – providing resources, leaders, tools and coaches to strengthen our UU tradition all across the country. And as your President, it is my great hope that the UUA can increasingly be a strong partner to you as you nurture powerful pastoral and prophetic ministries in your own communities. And I want to personally thank the New York Convention of Universalists for your continued generosity to your Central East Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Your generosity as congregations and as the Convention is critical for the powerful mission that all of us as Unitarian Universalists are called to live out in these times.

These times we are living in offer us daily reminders of how much our faith matters and how much it is needed. For ours is a life-changing, life-affirming, life-saving faith. And I know this personally because when I was five years old, Unitarian Universalism saved my life.

When I was five years old, the people, the ministry and two very special religious education teachers at Eliot Unitarian Chapel, where I grew up in St. Louis, dramatically changed the course of my life. You see, when I was very young, my family began falling apart. A more accurate word might be erupting. There were a lot of reasons for it, but one was that my mom became a feminist and an activist in the Equal Rights

Amendment movement. And well, this was not exactly what my dad has signed up for. It was certainly not the way he was raised.

This situation forced changes in their marriage – changes in parenting, work and housework. They had to fully re-negotiate their relationship, and this wasn't easy. What this meant was that as a child my home was not a peaceful or joyful place.

But I have another powerful memory from this time. It was of my kindergarten Sunday school class.

The class was taught by a married couple. What I remember was how much they seemed to love each other and how much fun we had. In class, they would play guitar and sing, and we kids would dance and sing along. It was joyful—and wow—did I need that joy. I wrapped it up around me. It was once a week for a few months in my life, but it stayed with me, as did my love for those two people.

The poet Mary Oliver writes:

“If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it.

There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.

We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed.

Still life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its [life's] way of fighting back, that sometimes something happened better than all the riches or power in the world.

It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case.

Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb. (Don't Hesitate)”

This Sunday School class, even though I did not have words for it nor fully understand its impact until years later, showed me that something else was possible in a marriage, something else was possible for a family, something else was possible for me. And that glimpse of possibility, that gift of joy and love – tended my spirit and sowed seeds that shaped my life.

I share this story with the permission of my parents, for they know it well, although a different side of it to be sure. And they even found their way through those difficult years of reckoning to a marriage built in partnership and mutuality, and I know our congregation had a role in that too.

Here is the thing about joy – we don't often take it seriously. But when we feel joy, we feel safe, we feel free, we feel loved – and that is the condition that we want for all people. Joy and love help nurture possibility and imagination in our lives. They also help us imagine something better for our world. Joy and love are acts of resistance, a way of life fighting back against all that seeks to diminish life and our humanity. And when our

congregations are places of joy and love, they nurture transformation in small and large ways.

In her book *Emergent Strategy*, the author, pleasure activist, and black feminist, adrienne maree brown says that right now we are in an “imagination battle.” Brown says some imaginations give us borders, give us superiority and give us race as an indicator of ability. She says she “often feels ... trapped inside someone else's imagination, and ... must engage her own imagination in order to break free.”

There is truth in adrienne maree brown's words. There is an imagination battle happening all around us. In this moment, I too often feel as if I am living in someone else's imagination – one driven by fear and greed, an imagination that only understands conflict, domination and scarcity, an imagination that can't think of a world without militarized borders, an imagination focused on winners and losers, extraction and wealth.

But here is the thing, as religious people, we are in the business of cultivating the spiritual imagination of people. And our Universalism imagines a world not of fear and division, but one of love and justice, of interdependence and interconnection.

In our hymnal are words credited to the father of Universalism in the United States, the Rev. John Murray. Research suggests that Murray may not have spoken them. It appears they come from Alfred S. Cole in his book, *Our Liberal Heritage*, where Cole imagines a spirit whispering this truth to John Murray: “Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. ... You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, 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. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

“Give them not hell, but hope and courage” – this famous Universalist message speaks to how we are charged to cultivate a spiritual imagination that has the power to radically change the way we understand, appreciate and live in the world and with one another.

We need words and actions of hope and courage. We need messages that don't drive us further into despair but speak to us of kindness and the power of everlasting, unconditional and overflowing love. Words that speak to us of the promise of humanity and the beauty of life and creation.

And yet, let's be clear – our Universalist theology is not cheap grace, nor an opioid to mollify us in a world of great injustice. This is the last thing we need. Indeed, our practice of Universalism must wrestle with the suffering, the injustices, the hell in this world.

Universalism teaches us that no one is cast out of the circle of love, that salvation is not individual but collective and that my liberation is bound up with yours. And the way we live this faith out loud is by developing greater courage and building more capacity for action and risk for the principles of justice, equity and compassion for all people today –

in this life. This is not only a deeply Universalist message – it is also a deeply humanist one.

Indeed, this is where our deep Universalism and our proud humanism powerfully intersect.

For ours is a faith that is concerned not with the hereafter but the Here and Now, the conditions of people's lives today. And right now xenophobia, anti-immigrant fervor, Islamophobia, anti-semitism, white nationalism, sexism, racism, transphobia, economic disparity, poverty, lack of access to healthcare, voter suppression, gun violence and the climate crisis, are threatening the lives, the well-being and the safety of our neighbors, our children, our communities, our people – all people and the planet. I wish the list were not so long. But it is also true that these practices of dehumanization and exploitation, whether of people or the planet, are not and cannot be separated. They come from the same moral and spiritual corruption of colonialism, conquest and violence.

And we must be honest that our own Universalism and our Unitarian Universalism have been shaped by and steeped in colonialism and the practices of domination. There is something deeply life-giving and liberating about a theology that says that whatever happens to one of us, happens to all of us. That we are part of one human family, and we are in this together. At the same time, our early Universalist forebearers understood their faith within the context of Christian and European supremacy.

This supremacy was codified in the late 1400's by Papal bull and known as the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine said that any land not occupied by Christians, was available to be "discovered" and claimed in the name of Christendom. It established that the people – pagans, non-Christians, savages, as they were called – were to be enslaved and conquered. It posited that indigenous people were not human and did not have souls. It was this doctrine that formed the foundation for the European conquest of much of the globe, including the Americas. It also formed the foundation of the United States legal code when it came to indigenous people and land rights and continues to operate in the ongoing theft and exploitation of indigenous land and violations of indigenous sovereignty.

Unfortunately, while the truth at the heart of Universalism contradicts these ideologies and practices of supremacy – early Universalism in the U.S. understood itself within this framework, and so the Universalism we hold so dear did not include indigenous people. I share this history to remind us that our religion is not pure, perfect or ahistorical. And that we still have work to do to free ourselves from the spiritual corruption of notions of supremacy and exceptionalism.

This is why the work of dismantling a culture of white supremacy, within ourselves and our congregations, is so essential. And by white supremacy, I do not just mean racism. I mean the perpetuation of systems and narratives that imagine hierarchy by race, gender identity, ability, class, nationality and language. These narratives feed the continuation of practices and policies that marginalize, denigrate and exploit people. They are the foundation of the persistent dehumanizing attacks in our society against people of color, indigenous people, migrants and immigrants, transgender people,

people with disabilities and women, and we have to both make visible and dismantle these narratives and practices, beginning with how they live in ourselves, if we are truly to be about the work of liberation and justice for every person. None of us are unharmed by these narratives, none of us are unscathed from these systems of exploitation, even though the impacts are different depending on the identities we hold. That is why we have work to do every day in all our congregations to take down walls of marginalization and exceptionalism that have the effect of separating us from one another and from the practice of our common humanity and our fundamental interdependence. That is why we need all of us – every single one of us – to build a new way.

The Christian activist, Shane Claiborne, in his book, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, writes:

“Don’t choose issues; choose people. Fall in love with people.” Build relationships of love and friendship across boundaries of suffering and marginalization, “then you won’t have to worry about which cause you need to protest. Then the issues will choose you. [For] it is our love ... not our rage or our arrogance that counts.”

Claiborne’s words remind us that it is Love that breaks down the barriers of separation and division, love that reminds us of our fundamental interdependence, love that calls us to see the fullness of one another’s humanity, love that is an antidote to arrogance, to rage, to greed and to conquest. And when I speak of love, I do not mean a passive kind of love, but a courageous form of love. After all, consider the word courage, its root is the word *coeur* – heart. Courage is heart strength, the power of the heart, of love, to not be stopped or daunted by fear. Love that is the seed and foundation of the imagination we need.

Let’s go back to this notion of the imagination battle that adrienne maree brown says we face today. In his groundbreaking articulation of Universalist theology, *A Treatise on Atonement*, Hosea Ballou takes on the question – but what about evil doers? What about those people who perpetuate violence, hatred and evil – do they also receive atonement and God’s love? To this question, Ballou argued that when we imagine God as vengeful, angry and one who divides people into worthy and unworthy, saved and the damned, then we recreate this in our communities and society. When we imagine God as a spiteful and cruel and unforgiving then we believe that is how power ought to be used. We create here in this life what we imagine of God. Consider just for a moment the merger in this political and historical moment of fundamentalist Christianity and its support for right wing politicians, consider what is valued, celebrated and imagined about God and punishment within that theology and what we see on display by our President in rhetoric, in policy and in practice.

Our spiritual imagination informs what we value, build and create here among our lives. So, what does this say to us of the spiritual imagination we need to be breathing into life and proclaiming that would inspire us to create a world that values interdependence, dignity, community and the worth and dignity of all people.

This is a critical moment in history – and as Unitarian Universalists we are called to demonstrate our faith boldly and powerfully.

Two things are clear to me: This is no time for a casual faith and This is no time to go it alone.

Oppression, poverty, the constant anxiety of a chaotic political situation – all of these are demoralizing and exhausting. That's part of the design. Our hearts, our spirits and our communities won't survive if we resist these systems of oppression alone. Creating and sustaining community is complex and messy, but community is integral to surviving and thriving in this moment. Because the most powerful tool we have to interrupt the constant messages of division and fear that we receive is actually human contact, relationship and community.

There is a saying in the immigrant rights movement that the only safe community is an organized one. The act of reaching out to our neighbors, to one another, knocking on doors, talking to strangers and people in our community – even those we think we will have nothing in common with – is to humanize one another. And we must be connected and invested in one another if we want to live in a world of abundance, where all people can live and thrive.

A great prophet who helped imagine this kind of humanizing community was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A foundation for King's philosophy was the Beloved Community. For King, the Beloved Community was not some far off place, an unattainable promised land, but something that was accessible now, if we would only turn our attention and spirits to one another. King described the Beloved Community as one of overflowing compassion and care, where the fullest unfolding of each person was nurtured. And the Beloved Community is one where poverty, discrimination and violence would not be tolerated because it would violate people's fundamental sense of human decency.

For King the Beloved Community is internal and external. It's about radical care and ministry within community and the powerful solidarity and actions for justice beyond. And King understood that when religious communities embraced this practice and calling of the Beloved Community – this was the difference between congregations being mere social clubs and actually “[being] the church” we were created to be and that our ancestors left to us. It is what leads us to be real agents of moral and social change. Because the Beloved Community is about providing that safe space for a girl who needs a break from a troubled home as well as providing sanctuary for a family who is facing separation.

These are difficult and dangerous times and so much is on the line. That is why we are called to live our faith out loud – to be our bravest, our boldest, our most loving selves – right now, in the streets, in our congregations, in the halls of government and in the voting booth.

Right now, we are less than 13 months from what is the most critical election in our lifetimes. You will choose your candidates as individuals, but as a movement, I propose that we UU the Vote. What do I mean by this?

Well – out in the wider community, Unitarian Universalists are known as the people who show up, faithfully and consistently. And I challenge us over the next 13 months to not

only be the people who show up but the people who get others to show up and turn out to vote.

We have the opportunity, we have the ability and we have the power to show what it looks like for those who ascribe to a faith of love, to challenge the forces of hate and exclusion. What happens in November 2020 matters. And with what we do starting tomorrow, we begin to write what happens on that day.

So, from now until the 2020 election, we will be rolling out a comprehensive, multi-tiered, association-wide strategy that is designed to be accessible to UUs everywhere. The UUA's Organizing Strategy Team will be collaborating with movement partners, as well as UU organizations, state advocacy networks, congregations and individuals to help Unitarian Universalists grow and sharpen our skills for faith-based electoral organizing.

We believe that Wisconsin, Arizona and Pennsylvania will be key places that we as UU's can make a difference because of how many UU's we have in these states and how we are positioned in both cities and critical suburban communities. And we have an important faith voice to bring.

Think about issues that really matter to you and your congregation. They may be healthcare, combatting mass incarceration, fighting poverty, ending gun violence, protecting voting rights and/or reproductive rights. Start building partnerships with groups that will be working on ballot initiatives that matter to you as Universalists and progressive people of faith.

Remember the local and down ballot candidates and issues matter. Look into hosting voter education conversations for and with the community, inviting public policy advocates to discuss and help the community understand the issue. Share how candidates vote on these issues. Organize to support voter protection efforts. This absolutely matters – across the country and right here in New York!

I know many of you may already be engaged in the work. If so, now is the time to bring it up a notch. If you are not yet engaged, find a way to get involved. For the best tool we have to defend democracy and counter increasingly sophisticated voter suppression efforts is through voter engagement and voter mobilization.

And this is not just political, for we UU's this is faithful, moral work because we hold democracy and the right of all people to have a voice and a vote as part of our seven principles, part of our core values. This is about the inherent worth and dignity of all people, it is about our care for the planet and it is about our commitment to justice and equity.

If we start now, this fall, with voter registration efforts, with finding community partners to join with, then when 2020 begins we've already built the muscle of talking to neighbors, knocking on doors and making phone calls, and we can turn that all out for the issues and individually, for the candidates, we care about.

Imagine, what would it mean, if across this country 150,000 UU's were able to get half a million people to vote with love, to vote for humanity, to vote their values!

Our voice, our values and our ability to show up matters right now. And it is needed. We are small but we are mighty, and that mighty love and spirit centered courage is exactly what is needed today.

The reality is that in times of change and disruption, there is a tendency for individuals and institutions to withdraw and to grow fearful. This is why the rhetoric of hate, scarcity and isolation grows in this country. There is a tendency in times of uncertainty for institutions to double down on a failing status quo, no matter how unjust and deadly, when it is exactly in these times when we need vision, when we need boldness and when we need audacious leaders and communities that are showing a new way forward. One that is life-giving, life affirming, and justice centered.

As Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, our communities can powerfully counteract the forces of greed, division and fear that threaten our humanity and our children's future. Our ministries matter, and I believe when we live our values boldly within and beyond our walls that we are one of the most powerful forces for good in our communities. Only together, with courage, love, deep commitment and bold and unprecedented generosity, can we be the people we are called to be.

I am grateful for this honor of serving as President of your UUA. I know that I cannot do what I do and the UUA can't do what is it called to do without your strong, consistent and generous support. I am inspired by what we are already doing all across this country and the ways we are embracing a deeper practice of community, a bolder commitment to act in solidarity for justice and a more courageous expression of Unitarian Universalism. May we keep answering this call.