

HERE AM I; SEND ME

A Sermon by
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READING: *“Call to Worship”¹ by Rev. Victoria Safford*

What if there were a universe, a cosmos, that began in shining blackness, out of nothing, out of fire, out of a single, silent breath, and into it came billions and billions of stars, stars beyond imagining, and near one of them a world, a blue-green world so beautiful that learned clergymen could not even speak about it cogently, and brilliant scientists in trying to describe it began to sound like poets, with their physics, with their mathematics, their empirical, impressionistic musing?

What if there were a universe in which a world was born out of a smallish star, and into that world (at some point) flew red-winged blackbirds, and into it swam sperm whales, and into it came crocuses, and wind to lift the tiniest hairs on naked arms in spring when you run out to the mailbox, and into it at some point came onions, out of soil, and came Mount Everest, and also the coyote we've been seeing in the woods about a mile from here, just after sunrise in these mornings when the moon is full? (The very scent of him makes his brother, our dog, insane with fear and joy and ancient inbred memory.) Into that world came animals and elements and plants, and imagination, the mind, and the mind's eye.

If such a universe existed and you noticed it, what would you do? What song would come out of your mouth, what prayer, what praises, what sacred offering, what whirling dance, what religion, and what reverential gesture would you make to greet that world, every single day that you were in it?

SERMON:

When I first walked into this room nearly eight years ago, I had no desire whatsoever to turn my life inside out – I was not looking for CONVERSION. I **was** looking for COMMUNITY - but I had no plans on anything other than finding some new friends.

¹ Safford, Victoria, *Walking Toward Morning* (Boston: Skinner House), 2003.

My move to the Fox Valley from California had been done with great intentionality. I had entered a chapter in my personal story where I needed to exchange the stress of metropolitan life for a calmer, more nature-centered way of being. It was just time for me. I didn't know what or why exactly, but I felt like some important life shift was occurring and I needed more SPACE than L.A. could provide. I needed to drink in the amazingly blue wide open sky with cottony clouds dancing across it... I needed to have time to linger at the sight of long acres of manicured farmland. I needed have my spirit calmed by streams and lakes --- Simply said, I needed to return to the earth as B so movingly sang. To be sure, there are plenty of places someone might discover all that, but it just so happens that I looked for – and found it - here, in the Midwest. And, even after these intervening years, I still do not take for granted these marvelous Wisconsin skies!

But, once here, I quickly became aware that experiencing nature in this way (not entirely unexpectedly) heightened my need to connect with other people. It seemed that the more I savored this expanded outer physical space, the more I recognized my need to delve even further into my personal interior space. And for me, as thoroughly as I adore nature, my greatest source of inspiration and connection to that which is holy in this life, comes to me through deeply relating with other beings. I set my mind to possibly find a compatriot or two – thoughtful people who were also trying to live consciously - people who were genuinely seeking to live lives of compassion. I didn't know where I might find them – I just put it out to the Universe.

And so, I was on this unhurried quest when a co-worker invited me to check out his faith community.....and, as we hear so often, I walked in those doors as an uncertain visitor and I left that very first weekend feeling quite hopeful that I had found my “home.” I was greeted that day by a group just like this --- caring people who had come together to individually and jointly be confronted with their piece of responsibility in changing the world and in holding high the hope for a brighter tomorrow! I was incredibly relieved to learn that a faith community such as this even existed!

At first, I came back for the people. In fact, it seemed that all the coolest people were here! Every time I'd be at some local humanitarian event, I'd run into Fellowship folks. Everyone was friendly, and the ambience was pleasant -- it just felt good to be here. But what surprised me was that before long, I realized that I had begun coming to hear the message. When Roger spoke, I heard a very unforeseen but nonetheless true story of salvation. He didn't speak of how we might be saved from the eternal wrath of some irate deity – or even how we could be saved from our own natures. No, he simply, directly, described a faith with a message of hope for THIS life, for THIS day based on unwavering mutual respect - and on individual accountability - and on the use of reason. I heard his words in a various settings and sermons, but a much-abbreviated bottom line seemed to be, “It's up to us, folks! What are we going to do about our own spiritual lives and about the state of our world?” From the beginning, each week's service has carried the implicit and persistent question - “IF this is what we believe, **how, then, shall we live?**”

That question just seems so useful to me! It roams in and out of my thoughts all the time. When we speak of our zeal for justice, equity and compassion in human relations – what

does that mean about the choices we will make later today, tomorrow, or the next? What does it mean about our engagement in national and local political concerns? The availability of medical care for all? The state of public education? The ever-widening wealth gap? What was conveyed in these walls, was the clear expectation that there would be growing coherence between the life I live and the faith claims I make. None of us is expected to be perfectly consistent – but we ARE expected to think – to live consciously, to investigate, to form our own opinions and then take action based on those opinions. We here are expected to be engaged in life – to uncover our passions and to follow them!

This business of having no creeds in our faith actually makes it a bit tougher for us, I think. I've heard it said that Unitarian Universalism is not a religion for lazy people. While we celebrate the absence of any cosmic rule book, we know that the work of our spiritual lives is our own – each of us must dig in to find our own authentic path. We honor the individual's search for truth and meaning. We recognize the import of that statement – it's central to our faith – and we know that there are countless ways for meaning and purpose to be manifested in people's lives. But that means that it is our own work to look for opportunities to be transformed. We have no prescribed conduit for grace or spirituality - as Unitarian Universalists, it's up to us.

One day as I was having an honest and deep conversation about my faith with a Lutheran minister, a beautiful thing happened. She had limited experience with UU's and was unclear on how such an un-corralled faith could survive over the centuries much less inspire people today. It almost felt too loose to her to qualify as a religion. We began talking about our appreciation for the sacred writings of all faiths, and for the inspiration of poetry and nature, and for the truth that shines through the eyes and words of others. At one point, my dialogue partner pushed back in her chair and exclaimed, "Oh! So, it's actually HARDER for you! You think EVERYTHING is sacred!"

And, yes, for us, as our reading suggests, we recognize that every single day, our vast and incomprehensible universe calls us to worship. There is so much WONDER available here. If we but open our eyes and hearts, a quick glance in any direction reveals a transcendent moment. The phenomenal intricacy and beauty of our world is all around us, waiting to be recognized, waiting to be cherished.

This faith taught me about **that** sort of worship. And, as I learned more, I embraced this liberal faith with my whole spirit. The experience of being part of the large group of lay leaders in this congregation was absolutely life giving, and at the same time my business ambitions began to fade. As I've shared with you before I went to the desert with my partner, Rosie, for my 50th birthday. She had a conference and was gone much of the time and I chose to sit in the silence and contemplate my future. I read the book, WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOU ARE and I couldn't help wondering where, indeed, it was that I was going. In the desert, I REALLY found plenty of the wide open internal and external space in which to do my pondering – and there it became clear that I felt called to make a dramatic shift toward a full time commitment to the service of humankind. Not just generalized service, though, but service of and through this Unitarian Universalist faith.

You see, I happen to believe that we are LIVING HOPE in these walls. Each week, we gather here – all UU’s – but some who identify themselves more as Christian, some as Humanists, Buddhists, Agnostics, Taoists, Pagans – and everything in between. All of us Unitarian Universalists – all of us devoted to respecting one another’s differences and celebrating the phenomenal universe in which we reside. With the benefit of our differing vantage points, reaching upward, we express awe and reverence together. Reaching outward, we join hands to bring healing to our troubled world. We commune here together week after week with hugs and laughter and unending passion for justice - and we embody the words of our forebears, “We need not think alike, to love alike!”

To me, the occurrences of our world tell us every single day that the need for such a faith as this is urgent and profound! All around us we see the devastation caused by narrow unbending interpretations of truth. We are naturally positioned to be bridge and peacemakers. We have a theology that can help create the space for compassion and mutuality in which global understanding can grow. It is within our power to carry forward the sorts of social change that have been so prominent in our Unitarian and our Universalist heritages for centuries. From our ranks have come influential leaders in the abolitionist movement, the women’s suffrage movement, the struggle for humane treatment for the mentally ill, for public education, the creation of social service agencies like the Red Cross, Amnesty International. Our denomination has been at the forefront in taking courageous public stands for the civil liberties and the civil rights of **all** – regardless of skin color or gender or age or sexual orientation well before others faith groups were speaking up. We have certainly NOT done it perfectly, but we have striven for honesty and self correction when we have fallen short. Our track record is one to be proud of. It was our publishing house that had the courage to print and distribute the Pentagon Papers book the early 1970’s. We were the first to ordain women into the ministry over a hundred years before that. It is our Association that has been steadfast and prominent in the fight for marriage rights for ALL loving couples. For our relatively small numbers, we have had a magnificently disproportionate impact on progressive society! May it ever be so!!!

We have a theology that goes deep – it is one that is inextricably intertwined with reason AND with action. We are carrying forward the many centuries-old faith of people who were unwavering in their belief that religion is -and must be- a matter of individual conscience and that unthinking adherence to dogma does violence to the human spirit and to all that is holy in this life. (Several of our ancestors have died martyrs death in their fight for that crucial concept). As Unitarian Universalists, we do not attempt to explain the complexities of life away with a “sweet by and by” mysticism. We know that the unavoidable truth is that there have always been dreadful events throughout history (witness the recent horrifying school shootings) --- but we also know that there have always been positive actions to counter the horrors. No matter what’s going on in the world, there are legions who remain devoted to working for the cause of good in our world. Both the horrors and the good are invariably true and it is OUR resolute decision to continue the struggle to bring more love, more forgiveness, more compassion into our world.

Some days it is discouragingly hard to find life’s beauty. But what wise people have known throughout time is that we are faced with precious few choices – we can succumb to

the ugliness – the evil - of the world – we can surrender to it - we can conclude that it’s all too much and that our labors are pointless. OR we can link arms and redouble our efforts – we can dig in harder and focus again and again and again on that thing that is waiting right before us to be done.

It is my belief that we are – each one - called to make our own unique contributions. And that we each must be willing to respond to that particular call which is our own to hear. That can be a challenge, I know, to persist in seeking the situations that allow our most authentic self to shine, the place where our distinctive gifts can be used in the service of building a better world. It is especially difficult when we stumble over our own self doubt. We sometimes know – or at least have an inkling - what is beckoning us, but we hesitate to respond. We think perhaps someone else who is better equipped will come forward and then we won’t really have to commit.

There’s a story about this in the Hebrew Scriptures; it is one I have long appreciated. In this narrative, Yahweh (in full Yahweh-like splendor) is looking around, searching for someone to go and do the work of the people. Isaiah is there, watching... but he’s not exactly enthusiastic about stepping up to the plate – his timidity makes him pause. The words ascribed to him at this point are actually “woe is me...” which I think any of us might understand thinking at such a moment. But, in the story, Isaiah finally recognizes that he IS enough and he conjures from within the strength to respond. He steps forward, “HERE AM I; SEND ME” he says.

Here am I; send me!

The Older Testament is not typically a place where I turn for inspiration, but something about that particular phrase has always gotten me. It speaks to that common desire to make a difference – the yearning to “**Be of Use**” in the world. As Marge Piercy writes in the final paragraph of her poem by that name...

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, its smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphora for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

In a very real way, the ceremony we’re engaging in tonight is very much about this work to which I am **called** and which I have found to be oh-so real. I know the “call” language may seem odd to some – I don’t perceive an omnipotent BEING calling me – but my own heart, it seems, has been patiently pulling me forward for the last four years, - and maybe the fifty years before that - as I have prepared to do this work.

Tonight following our democratic process, you will ordain me a minister! There is no central ministerial clearing house that sends clergy where they need to go. There is no bishop or hierarchical body of church leaders before whom I will kneel. It is YOU (the congregation) who has the right to name me as worthy of this calling. In our case, the Governing Board on this congregation's behalf, has examined my credentials and has determined that I have adequate ministerial skill to serve. It is an incredible joy and honor to me that that is true; especially so since I am the first one to emerge from your midst to walk this path of ministerial training. Given the vibrancy and dedication of this place, though, I don't in any way imagine that I will be the last.

And, after the ordination ceremony (or, as one of our creative youth referred to it) "the coronation"... after that ceremony, when you have all declared me to be a true minister, it will then be appropriate for me to wear the clerical stole on certain occasions, as Roger does ... and I will also then have earned the title of "Reverend." It's not something I plan to use regularly – and to be honest, it feels just a bit peculiar. I understand the historic intent – I appreciate the fact that it is a way of expressing respect for the commitment and the work being done – so I am grateful to receive the title. But I've also set up a private little agreement with myself – to help me remember what's important, to inspire my own heart in stretching toward the person I wish to be in the world. (I guess it's not so private if I share it with you....) but the agreement is that whenever I see my name written with the title ("the Rev. Dottie Mathews") or someone calls me by that term, I will translate it in my mind to "*reverent*" – that I might remember to always view this most sacred work with reverence, that my heart might remain soft and open to learning throughout all my years in the ministry; that I might bow my head in humble gratitude for the wondrous cycles of life and the endless way the Universe goes on creating anew every single day, always bringing new options, new opportunities for life, new reasons for hope. May I look with reverence over my shoulder to all who have gone before me in serving this historic and forward thinking faith. May I never grow cavalier about the reverence with which I view my bond with each one of you. May I forever be the *Reverent* Dottie Mathews, and may I ceaselessly be willing to risk. May I always be ready to say, "**Here am I; send me.**"