

Opening Words

We are here
poised on the brink of spring's fresh light
to worship, to consider what is
through the lens of what can be;
to find the music flowing in silence
and the silence flowing in the word
to the end that we grow deeper...together. So

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

Sequence (*in Honor of International Women's Day---a litany: each of these women were either Unitarian or Universalist.*)

Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Women* 1792 and mother to Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*. -----

Judith Sargent Murray, author of "On the Equality of the Sexes" 1790 -----

Eliza Follen, who set up the first Christmas tree in North America-----

Lydia Maria Child, abolitionist, author of *Over the River and Through the Woods*-----

Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women*-----

Dorothea Dix, revolutionary of mental health care in the United States-----

Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross-----

Lucy Stone, suffragist-----

Margaret Fuller, transcendentalist-----

Fannie Farmer, cookbook author-----

Maria Mitchell, astronomer-----

Julia Ward Howe, abolitionist, author of *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, creator of Mother's Day for Peace-----

Susan B. Anthony, reformer, suffragist-----

Emily and Elizabeth Blackwell, physicians-----

Beatrix Potter, author of children's books-----

Frances Ellen Watkin Harper, poet-----

Amy Lowell, poet-----

May Sarton, poet-----

Sophia Fahs, religious educator-----

Lillian Frank, artist-----

let our silence be the form of our thanksgiving

Silence

The names of many other women float inside of our hearts, and men too, people who populate not our shared history, but our own personal history. These let us make present in this place, as we name them aloud or in the sanctuary of our hearts.

Naming

Every composer has a name. Every musician. Every singer. Every note. Every song. Every melody. Every movement of every symphony. Even the rests have names. These names pour themselves into this present moment, and become no longer names, but the relationship we call music.

Readings

The First Reading *comes from the prose writings of the poet Adrienne Rich, whom I have always admired:*

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding, to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.

The Second Reading *comes from Jamison Green, who is a man who was once a woman; his book, Becoming A Visible Man, is one of the best books on the transsexual experience I have read. I met him at our annual Unitarian Universalist conference called General Assembly, last year when it was in St. Louis.*

Identity has often been a powerful organizing tool, but it should not be mistaken for the ideal model of community. Identity is not a rigid, monolithic psychosocial box into which we can each place ourselves, where we'll permanently remain. We are all *becoming* something, and we can strongly identify with different aspects of our lives at different times, or new elements may be introduced into our lives that we must integrate into our identity, such as parenthood, chronic illness or sudden disability, falling in love with a person we wouldn't have imagined being with, or finding a new career. These evolutionary events often draw us into new communities and new identities. The tendency to "fix" people's identities as encompassing only one aspect of themselves, or as being unchanging in their various aspects, is equivalent to expecting a person to only eat apples because he or she was eating an apple when you met.

Sermon

When I was a little boy, my mother wasn't so hot on me reading comic books. She looked upon them and their relationship to my mind, I think, the way she looked upon candy bars in relationship to my teeth...brimming with the dread capacity to encourage decay. Of course, now I can tease her about the sad truth...that if she *hadn't* thrown them all away back then, we'd all be on extended vacations to Tahiti, since I owned first editions of *Spiderman* and *Fantastic Four*, which are worth the proverbial zillions now to collectors. But the other thing I told her then, and still believe, was that I *learned* a lot from comic books as a kid. I learned to read better, for one. I learned the names of the planets, and about the real complexities of good and evil without reference to religious language. I learned about the non-fairy tale quality of life, like the idea non-requited love, since Lois Lane never does get to marry Superman, whom she loves. And, for a 3rd grader, I think I had a pretty good vocabulary because of those comic books. After all, I knew big fancy words like "invulnerable" and especially "identity," which was a very grown up word. Superman, after all, was actually Clark Kent, Clark being Superman's "secret identity."

As I grew older, I began to realize that these comic book heroes were rather emblematic. I began to notice that many of us have secret identities. Parts of us that are hidden, parts of us that are both invisible and unsupported by the outside world. One pretty obvious and powerful example of this is Jamison Green, the author of our second reading. He certainly felt that his *real* identity was male, despite the woman's body of his birth. And he was right. Scientists in several countries have discovered ample evidence in the last ten years that men and women who desire to change their gender do so because of a clear sense of identity in their brain, in a place near the hypothalamus, certain women really identifying as male, certain men clearly feeling they are female. They are *not* at all confused about their identity. They are paying very close attention to what is going on inside them. The outside world IS confused about their identity, however, and often tells them they are wrong. This city council man in Florida I just read about, who just got fired for taking hormone treatments in preparation to become a woman was accosted by a very haughty minister who told him point blank "If Jesus was here, he would want you fired, too." I have to admit, I spent a long time yesterday trying to figure out how I could rather fire that minister, and pronto.

There are other examples. When a man finds himself attracted to other men in a world where the word "fag" is tossed about in locker rooms like a curse, you soon learn that secret identities are best kept just that...secret. When a woman is raped by her boyfriend, and both the interpreters of the law and common social discourse... again, often in locker rooms... suggest that her pain and whole experience is not genuine, and was actually invited by her, you learn that secret identities are best kept... secret. When you yourself know that you are partially of African heritage,

partially of European heritage, and partially of Native American heritage, but that no one outside you sees anything but the African heritage, you learn to keep secret identities secret, and to play the horrible game of either/or demanded of us all by our overarching culture.

The children's story underscores the real complexity of the search for authentic identity, and how it has become a very different game than once it was because of fearful culture. And this business of keeping one's identity secret goes far beyond the obvious situations, especially in some spiritual realms. The single most popular television minister now, a good-looking, warmly grinning young man who's written best-selling books, begins all of his services with the following ritual. Everyone of the 35,000 people gathered for worship in their remade stadium church... that's right, I said 35,000...lifts their bibles and then say in unison: "This is my bible. I am who it says I am." Here a person's secret identity is disclaimed from the get go---"There is only one identity for you, and that comes entirely from outside of you. "Don't feel," this culture says. "And keep your real inside hidden for good."

No wonder Adrienne Rich says: "When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you... there is a moment of... disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing."

Those are powerful words, soundly disturbing, inviting us to grapple with our identities both as individual persons, and as people who are part of a covenanted community like this one. After all, she insists, "it takes collective understanding to resist such a world" not just "individual strength." She is inviting us to look in the mirror of the world and *insist* upon seeing ourselves. Our whole lives. Individually, but *in* community.

Identity questions have always been part of Unitarian and Universalist history. For example, Warren Ross, an historian of our movement, writes that "When Frederick May Elliot assumed the presidency of the American Unitarian Association in 1937, "the institution "had been badly hurt, not only by the depression, but by a loss of mission, even of identity."

Makes sense. Institutions need money to thrive, and there wasn't much during the Great Depression. Furthermore, the Humanist Controversy of the 1920's and 1930's had changed the way some people in the pew viewed their religious home. Many of the words and phrases that had featured in our congregations for some two hundred some years on these shores simply fell by the wayside over the years from 1880 to 1935...things like Jesus the Messiah, God our Father, holy communion, sin and the authority of scripture. New songs hadn't been created yet, so going to church in those days caused an identity crisis in many long time Unitarians...and Universalists. The sermons were full of modern language, but the hymn texts were still largely lifted

from the Protestant tradition. Some of the so-called “old-timers” discovered that the people sitting in the pews next to them were not as much like them any more. Some of them questioned all traditional theology openly. Others were espousing agnosticism, or an utterly scientific approach to religion...if any religious statement can’t be tested by a clear scientific test, dump it. Others were quoting from the Hindu Scriptures instead of from the Sermon on the Mount, or even quoting from ordinary books on psychology right off the library shelves. The once radical 16th century word *tolerance* was slowly giving way to a new word, *diversity*. People simply weren’t *mostly the same* anymore in our congregations. They didn’t share identity.

And indeed, identity comes from the Latin word “idem” which means “same.” So it’s easy to understand why people confuse sameness with identity. But Jameson Green’s words from the second reading are insightful here: “Identity has often been a powerful organizing tool, but it should not be mistaken for the ideal model of community.”

And it was precisely *this* insight that began to restore a sense of identity to the Unitarians and the Universalists after the great Depression, especially after they merged in the sixties to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, of which this congregation is part.

But what sort of identity can we authentically claim as Unitarian Universalists? This at first seems like a hard question to answer, because, since Frederick May Elliot was fretting about his Unitarian identity crises back in 1937, things have grown only more complex, not less, more diverse, not more uniform. Women, for instance, in the 1970’s suddenly realized the insight of Adrienne Rich: “When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it,” *that’s* when there is that “moment of....disequilibrium,” I mentioned earlier, “as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing.” Unitarian Universalist women looked in the mirror of Unitarian Universalist history and did not see themselves... just Mr.Emerson, Mr. Parker, Mr. Channing and Mr.Ballou. They didn’t see Susan B. Anthony, or Mary Wollstonecraft. When they sang our songs, they didn’t sing about themselves, but about Man and Him and Father. They didn’t see ministers who were women in the pulpit...or board members around the table...in those days, there were hardly any. And no one saw open lesbians, bisexuals, gay men or transgendered persons in the pulpit either...or in the pews...or in our case, purple chairs. Or as board chairs. Or teachers.

The Vietnam war changed things too. Originally, back during the first World War era, when certain ministers like John Haynes Holmes in New York criticized that particular European war, they were condemned by their fellow clergy and most lay people in the pews. But by the time of Vietnam, most of our ministers and most folks in the pews had clearly moved toward questioning the reasons of government leaders

for espousing certain wars. Had our identity as a movement changed? Developed? Shifted? Transformed? Were we no longer us?

This question of identity is not trivial. When I interview candidates for our ministry while sitting on our Unitarian Universalist credentialing body, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, this issue comes up a lot.

Why? Because to attend one of our churches is not necessarily the same thing as having a Unitarian Universalist identity. Some folks come to our congregations and are so excited by the openness they find here that they immediately make plans to become one of our ministers, within a year of joining the congregation.

But because we do not have either a creed or a baptism, because we do not offer folks any equivalent emotional experience to the evangelical acceptance of Christ as Savior, the idea of identifying oneself as a Unitarian Universalist may take some time. It's not enough to say "I think I was a Unitarian Universalist before I came here." No, before you came here, you may have been a freethinker, or a free spirit or a spiritual progressive, or whatever, but to become a Unitarian Universalist usually takes some time.

And it takes making at least two significant commitments.

One, it means committing to make oneself vulnerable over the years to our history, our culture, and our particular manner of self-government.

And second, it means committing to engage deeply with others within the congregation and association. It means listening to others carefully, and really getting how your individual spiritual outlook cannot reasonably be born in isolation, but only in engaged community.

And in some ways, number one...familiarity with Unitarian Universalist culture and history, *informs* number two, deep engagement in the community; even if that means real conflict. For example, back in the late nineteen sixties, many denominations joined together to confront racism, and the deeply disturbing violence in Selma and other places. We were not alone.

Our small association's member congregations sent a large proportion of their ministers to Selma, and the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association recessed their meeting in Boston, and each member flew down to Selma and reconvened the meeting there, a very moving gesture, to be sure.

But painful racialized views of the world are hardly confined to small cities like Selma or areas like the American South. So, black Unitarian Universalists tried to

form a group to address these issues within our own ranks. Their goal was “black empowerment” and therefore, it was only to be circle of African American Unitarian Universalists. This didn’t fly with other Unitarian Universalists, who formed another group, composed of both black and white Unitarian Universalists. The conflict between these two groups was fierce. It was a difficult time in our history. But it was our history, no one else’s. And in hindsight, each group had good arguments, both of them rooted in Unitarian Universalist principles of justice and fairness. In this particular case, no one was able to find a way to resolve the conflict, and that has been a hard lesson in our history. And so I am now convinced that the process of growing a Unitarian Universalist identity needs to incorporate such divergent opinions in a wide embrace, to recognize that blame and hurt can have no final place among us, and that people who honestly see the world differently from you can equally share Unitarian Universalist identity.

In other words, there is no singular Unitarian Universalist identity that all can share as far as how we approach the world, the spirit and the ultimate. But even if we are not like-minded, we are all called to be open-hearted, never offering each other that raised superior eyebrow used by people who think they and they alone are right. Our best practice can only be to encourage each other to deeper spiritual growth. Growth that continues to our dying day. Aliveness. Unfinishedness. We are all called to enter into an identity of openness and real give and take, counting community as our refuge. Hey, we’re not even called to be rigidly consistent. Our spiritual grounding, for some of us, might change, or know different stresses from day to day, from hour to hour. When I was first called to this congregation, someone asked me to talk about my personal theology. And this is what I said. I’ve told this story before, but it bears repeating this morning. I said, “When I wake up in the morning, and I see the sunlight streaming over my skin, and I am surprised that I am alive, or that anything is alive, I am filled with all the ancient praises Holy Holy Holy. Thank You. Amen. Amen.” By noon, when I have read the paper and have heard of a thousand horrible deaths, read of lies, deceit and greed, and seen photos of terrified children, I join the ranks of those who say “There is no meaning, there is no hope, there is no Love on high or below.” By evening, when I have talked with those I love, or heard stories from the lips of church members of their struggles, their hopes, their successes, their grief and their generosity, I no longer claim such certainty, and move into the circle of those who say they really and honestly “don’t know.” I am more buoyant, more willing to imagine things not yet seen. And late at night, once my eyes are hauled up to the stars that are quiet, bright and impossible, I return more to my morning theology...except this time, I leave all the words off, and am as silent as the mute stars.

So my personal Unitarian Universalist identity is moving and alive. It’s not consistent from moment to moment. And, I no longer claim my identity in reaction to my past, although I used to. I am no longer an ex-member of another religious group, but I’m

entirely becoming a Unitarian Universalist. My identity is not to BE a Unitarian Universalist, but to BECOME one. Every day. Every hour. Till, I have to imagine, my dying day. As Mr. Green said so excellently in the second reading:

“We are all *becoming* something, and we can strongly identify with different aspects of our lives at different times, or new elements may be introduced into our lives that we must integrate into our identity, such as parenthood, chronic illness or sudden disability, falling in love with a person we wouldn’t have imagined being with, or finding a new career.”

Exactly. Or in short, becoming trumps being. Butterflies look best flying in the air, not pinned into specimen cases. Unitarian Universalists are those people who try to live in such a way that were Mr. Clark Kent to join the congregation, and start on that path of becoming a Unitarian Universalist, he could, at last, pay growing attention to what his real identity was, and live that out here among us, without fear of anyone telling him to put his glasses back on and pretend to be someone he is not. He could look in the mirror and actually see himself...and behind him, 675 strong people, every other member of this supportive, welcoming, and becoming congregation.

Offering

Remembering that every brick and bill that allows this place to thrive was offered by some member or some friend, we offer this opportunity to let our own lives flow into the history of this place, in our time, in our way. The morning offering for the health of this congregation and its shelter will now be given and received.

Psalm of Life

Spirit of Life

you music rising from the trumpet
of my breathing, you castanet of my heart,
you ligament that is the tight guarantee of all sisterhood, all brotherhood,
you deep well offering clear water that quenches
thirst of anyone looking for something behind metaphor, something that isn’t even
something,
something luminous in every stone and star
and child’s eye,
you sun of love that shines through the windows
of our lives, you moon of constant changes...
you, spirit of life. Come. Come unto me.
Come unto us. Come.