

To Die For

A Sermon Delivered on October 20, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“When you hear that we have the power
to transform the world around us,
what does that mean in your bones?”*

-- Elandria Williams, UUA Co-Moderator

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Call to Worship: by Joseph Cherry.

If we have any hope of transforming the world and changing ourselves,
We must be
Bold enough to step into our discomfort,
Brave enough to be clumsy there,
Loving enough to forgive ourselves and others.

May we, as people of faith, be granted the strength to be
So bold,
So brave,
And so loving.

Meditation: by Monica Cummings

Dear Unknown, Unknowable, Yet Known by Many Names

Keep us mindful that we are all related. That when one of us is ignored and treated with dis-ease, we all suffer.
Today let each of us commit to welcome the stranger.
Let us move beyond our comfort zones and connect with people labeled *different* and pushed to the edges of society.
We can make a difference.
We can transform lives.
We can bring harmony and healing to the places and spaces where we live, work, and play.
Let us keep our hearts and minds open and receptive to the still, small voice that calls us to stand witness for those who cannot stand,
To speak the truth for justice for those without a voice
And to lead the way on the journey toward wholeness for those without sight.
In the spirit of love, compassion and community, let it be done.
Blessed be.

First Reading: by Qiyamah Rahman, a UU minister and feminist scholar, and native of Detroit, whose work has focused on black women in Unitarian Universalism.

Now is the time to call on the memories of the ancestors who thought they could not walk another step toward freedom – yet they did.

It is that time and place to call on the memories of the ancestors who, when the darkness of their lives threatened to take away the hope and the light, reached a little deeper and prayed yet another prayer.

It is that time and place to remember those who came through the long night to witness another sunrise...

Time to remember their laughter and joy, though they had far less, and little reason for optimism, yet they stayed on the path toward a better day.

Time to hold to the steadfast hands and hearts and prayers of the ancestors that have brought us this far...

Time to show them that their prayers and sacrifices and lives were not in vain and did not go unnoticed, nor have they been forgotten.

Second Reading: by Anne Lammott from *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. This is from a chapter on Writer's Block. (p. 179)

I remind myself nearly every day of something that a doctor told me six months before my friend Pammy died. This was a doctor who always gave me straight answers. When I called on this one particular night, I was hoping she could put a positive slant on some distressing developments. She couldn't, but she said something that changed my life. "Watch her carefully right now," she said, "because she's teaching you how to live."

I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I am dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in the way that life is for children. They spend big round hours. So instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?" Then I can read Wallace Stevens for the rest of the morning or go to the beach or just really participate in ordinary life. Any of these will begin the process of filling me back up with observations, flavors, ideas, visions, memories. I might want to write on my last day on earth, but I'd also be aware of other options that would feel at least as pressing. I would want to keep whatever I did simple, I think. And I would want to be present."

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For the past few days our home has been in a state of mild disarray. Leading up to our annual church service auction yesterday, our kitchen table has been covered with a colorful assortment bright red, orange and pink tissue paper and crepe paper, and everything you need to make dozens and dozens of paper flowers. Our living room has been littered with growing piles of bright red paper poppies in all shapes and sizes, and other parts of our costumes, including capes, feather boas and bright green body suits.

To go along with this year's service auction theme – Escape to Oz – we didn't dress up as a cowardly lion or heartless tin man, or any of the other main characters. Instead, we were the poppy fields. You know, the enchanted poppies that put everyone to sleep. (Get it? Minsters putting everyone to sleep...)



Elaine, like many others, sacrificed a lot of time and energy on our service auction preparations. My task was much simpler in comparison. All I needed to do was support Elaine's plans by wearing whatever costume she would end up creating.

I sacrificed my ministerial dignity, putting on a silly costume. My sacrifice involved simply being a little uncomfortable.

* * *

Our worship theme this month is "sacrifice." If you've been to church in recent weeks, you may have heard about the human impulse toward altruism and self-sacrifice, and our efforts to help others. Or maybe you heard Elaine unpack the ancient story of Abraham, who was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac to God, and then, at the last moment, realized that wasn't truly God's wish.

“Sacrifice” isn’t an easy topic. I think it is safe to say your worship leaders and worship associates this month have struggled with it.

There are many different ways to think about sacrifice, both in our individual lives and in the wider world. Scholars say, originally the primary purpose of religious sacrifice was to establish a reliable connection between earth and heaven. It was a form of communication between humans and the holy, between our realm and the spirit realm.

Describing the ancient religious worldview of his elders, the Mande people of West Africa, Adama Doumbia, writes,

“*Everywhere there is sky, there is Spirit.* Spirit has many names, but there is only one Spirit. Spirit is both near and far, as immanent as the earth and as transcendent as the sky. We recognize the strength and power of the Almighty through a thunderous storm; we feel the reliability and comfort of the Eternal with the rising sun; we observe grace and beauty of the Creator in a dancing stream... Our belief that we are all a part of one Spirit affects our relations with one another; the action of one member of the community is felt by every one of us. (*The Way of the Elders*, p. 3)

In the Mande tradition sacrifices are offered in times of crisis, or as part of regular daily devotional practices. They can be an effort to make amends or simply an expression of gratitude.

This understanding of sacrifice doesn’t easily fit into the economic categories of our modern lives. Adama Doumbia explains it this way, he writes: “When we make an offering or sacrifice, we give up something that has significance in our daily lives. [This teaches] us the value of what we have and what we are able to share. We learn from our offerings and sacrifice the true meaning of our blessings.” (p.19)

The ritual of sacrifice itself is communal. The animal offered is shared with everyone in the community.

Sacrifice isn’t aimed at increasing our wealth or well-being, quantitatively. Rather, it’s intended to create a qualitative change – not in the world around us, not even in the realm of heaven – but a transformation within ourselves. Sacrificing something is a time-tested practice that deepens our appreciation for our many blessings. Blessings we too easily ignore, overlook, or take for granted.

* * *

We Unitarian Universalist don’t generally sacrifice animals in our religious rituals. And yet every one of us makes sacrifices. Those of us who are parents make countless sacrifices for our children. We make sacrifices for friends and family members, and people we love. And sometimes we make sacrifices for strangers, and causes we care about.

Sue Ellen (our Worship Associate) spoke this morning of the sacrifices she has made for the sake of people living with mental health challenges, helping them overcome social stigma, helping them be truly seen and heard, as the real people they are. Sue Ellen makes herself vulnerable, and sacrifices for the sake of her faith: her firm belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Sue Ellen's sacrifice reminds me of the power and importance of our faith, especially in these troubled times. As my colleague Scott Alexander put it so well:

In a world with so much hatred and violence, *we need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* In a world with so much brutality and fear, *we need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*

* * *

Think about it: what is so important in Unitarian Universalism that you would be willing to sacrifice for it? This is the question that was asked at this year's UU General Assembly Elaine and I attended in Spokane in June.

What would you be willing to sacrifice for your faith? It's not a trivial question. It wasn't asked casually, but rather as a central focus of our gathering. You see, in recent years we have increasingly come to realize that though our seven principles sound wonderful, and look good on paper, we have not always been doing a very good job practicing what we preach.

We have been talking about the worth and dignity of every person, and still our congregations are predominantly white. We say we seek justice, equity and compassion, and yet we struggle to understand the realities of white supremacy in our society, and in our congregations.

At the GA Sunday service, my colleague Rev. Marta Valentín spoke powerfully about our struggle. She said,

“As a Latina with skin in the game for thirty years, I observe the changes our faith tradition is undergoing, and note that those not paying attention continue to perpetuate old narratives like: “Nothing has really changed it just looks different.” Or, “People are withholding their money because they don't like the direction we've taken.”... For decades, we Black, Indigenous and People of Color have spoken up many times about how exclusionary our faith can be, even as Unitarian Universalism swears, we are the most inclusive. We have all said hard and harsh things to one another in pursuit of that better, truly equal, truly just, life-saving world we know can exist for ourselves and for seven generations to come. And we are all so tired. All of us know we must do better. But are all of us willing to *be* better?”

Our congregations today are predominantly white. That's a fact. We may be predominantly white for years to come. And middle-class, and well-educated, and able-bodied, and heterosexual. That's not the problem. The problem is when we act as if *all* of

us were white, and that anyone who isn't, is invisible. The problem is when some of us are pushed to the margins of our communities, ignored and treated with dis-ease.

Are we willing to do better?

Marta Valentín says,

“Some of us may not know what it means to live with a disability, but we make sure that those who do not only have a place at the table, but that they can get into the room. Some of us may not know what it means or how to use the appropriate gender identity or pronoun, but as we develop relationships there is clarity.”

The leaders of our movement are asking us to think deeply about these questions. They are asking us to sit down together and ask one another: What is so important in UUism that you would be willing to sacrifice for it?

They are asking us to each speak from our own experience and perspective, and to listen to the experiences and perspectives of others. They are asking us to resist making assumptions about one another, and expect and accept that questions may linger.

If we are willing, we can do better.

I am a white, heterosexual man, an American citizen. As such, in this society, I am granted remarkable power and privilege. I have long taken my identities for granted, and lived in blissful ignorance. And I am only slowly coming to understand that this is a big part of the problem. ... But I know I can do better. I can listen. I can learn. I can try to do things differently – even if it feels uncomfortable. Even if I am clumsy.

* * *

This church is a place, where we try to do better. We try to change ourselves, as we strive change the world. We try to create a circle of support for each and all. A circle of safety where threads of our life stories intermingle, touch, and interweave a fabric of support. A crazy quilt of rich detail honoring torn and tattered pain; all colors and shapes of experience.

We come here to grapple with difficult questions, questions of life and death, of love and justice. And we want straight answers, so we can really participate in ordinary life, fully present.

May we be bold and brave enough
To share the blessings of our lives.
May we turn circles of strangers into circles of friends.
That we ourselves may be transformed
By our vision of justice, and the spirit of love.
So be it. Amen.