

Renew Our Resolve

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Every year, there are the jokes about Unitarian Universalists and how we take a break from church in the summer. Last summer, in Minnesota, after the long brutal winter, it was true—the first hot days of summer, the pews were empty, and everyone seemed to be out attending the church of the lakes, with their spiritual practice of trout fishing.

We are a people that worship nature as a sacred space just as we venerate our sanctuaries. Our transcendentalist past long ago made us nature worshipers, even in the urban environments we inhabit. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.”

Nature can also teach us about the practice of connecting to the sacred, about allowing our bodies and spirits to delight in the beauty of creation. Poet Mary Oliver writes: I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields.¹

Unitarian Universalists know that nature informs our spirituality and enriches our lives and have formed partnerships with retreat centers, where seekers and learners experience a serenity of place in which to learn and deepen their faith. Last week, religious education professionals gathered for the week on Ferry Beach in Maine, and next week many will gather on Star Island including leaders from All Souls.

¹ Oliver, Mary. “The Summer Day,” *New and Selected Poems, Volume 1*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

My guess is that many of you here have sought refuge and sanctuary on sea or lakeside shores as of late. Being “idle and blessed” is a true delight and if you are anything like me, you revel in the opportunity to do so whenever you can. When I look around this morning, however, I am reminded that the sanctuary of this church matters, especially in the summer. You have come this morning seeking something, a different kind of refreshment than the cool waters of the Atlantic or the warm sand beneath your toes. Maybe you are visiting and seeking a new community in which to grow and share your gifts. The room is full and we are here, together, to worship and to commune with one another.

Inside the cover of the All Souls order of service, it is printed:

In the experience of worship, we gather to contemplate the mystery of God, interpret the wisdom of religion, and explore the insights of science. Our purpose is to awaken our sense of the sacred and renew our resolve to transform ourselves and our world.

At All Souls, we unite each Sunday on a common faith journey, bringing our different gifts and needs to the congregation as we transform ourselves and our world.

Several years ago, in a speech at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, then President and United Church of Christ minister Rev. Scott Colglazier made an interesting point which resonated well with Unitarian Universalists in the audience. He spoke of two ways of doing church: the church of answers and the church of journey. In the church of answers, he said, members derive meaning from learning and conforming to a set of doctrines, creeds and traditions. In churches of journey, the member derives meaning from the path of exploring ideas, rituals, symbols and wisdom that moves individuals and communities towards deeper self awareness and connection.² Unitarian Universalists, I would argue, tend towards the journey end of the church continuum, which brings its own gifts and challenges.

² As adapted from Gibbons, Rev. “Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up.” First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, MN, March 22, 2009.

One of the challenges of being a journey-oriented church is that we can sometimes lose track of where we are and where we are headed. As we explore, even the wisest among us can lose track along the way. Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, legendary liberal theologian and pastoral advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, wrote often about his need to continually re-commitment to his spiritual journey. In his well-known piece, an excerpt of which Cory read for us, he writes about the process of getting lost on the journey,

Little by little, there crept into my life the dust and grit of the journey. Details, lower-level demands, all kinds of cross currents -- nothing momentous, nothing overwhelming, nothing flagrant -- just wear and tear.³

His antidote for losing track of the path: calling to mind the “moments of high resolve”, “full-orbed, glorious, and resplendent. In the moment of its fullness,” he wrote, “I was sure that it would illumine my path for all the rest of my journey.”⁴ For Thurman, these moments acted as beacons, guiding him gently back to renew his commitment to his purpose.

“keep fresh before me my moments of high resolve, that in good times or in tempests, I may not forget that to which my life is committed.”

Can you recall a moment about which Rev. Thurman spoke, that guided you gently back to your purpose on your spiritual journey? Particularly, if you have been here before, can you remember a moment at All Souls. Was it a moment in worship, in community, or in service to others? What did it inspire you to do? Love someone boldly? Sing out joyfully? Volunteer to serve food to our guests at Monday Night Hospitality? Teach Religious Education? Sign the membership book and become a pledging member? Become a leader?

These moments can serve as reminders of our purpose –that to which our lives are committed--and why we seek a church community in which to journey

³ Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

⁴ Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

with others. They encourage us to sustain practices that then enrich and encourage us. Like stars in the night sky, moments of high resolve assemble into constellations guiding us along the way. The task of the journey-centered congregation is to help inspire and organize these moments of high resolve into a developed spiritual life, to help lay the path for one another through opportunities for practice, community building, leadership and service.

The Reverend Kendyl Gibbons at the First Unitarian Church in Minneapolis, MN writes: "Every point on the spiritual path has its own validity, but there is a direction to it; if we are doing it right, we progress -- not toward finality and certainty, but nearer to those qualities that fascinate and inspire us when we find them in others." ⁵ Gibbons calls the sum of those qualities to which our reading spoke to as "spiritual maturity", a developmental goal towards which our faith journey can aspire.

Spiritual maturity has had a lot of attention recently in denominational life. At the Annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly meeting in June, our denomination's President Peter Morales mentioned spiritual maturity as a necessity for growing strong congregations in the coming years. ⁶The concept originates from the work of developmental psychologist James Fowler, who introduced the religious world to his model of the stages of faith from birth through death. Unitarian Universalist minister Kendyl Gibbons has used Fowler's work to craft a body of work on spiritual maturity for our denomination. Her theory: that moving towards spiritual maturity is the purpose of our congregations and the goal of faith development. The task of the religious community is to cultivate these qualities within ourselves such that we are better equipped to serve and transform our world.

⁵ As adapted from Gibbons, Rev. "Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up." First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, MN, March 22, 2009.

⁶ Morales, Peter. "General Assembly President's Report," June 25, 2011.
<http://blogs.uuworld.org/ga/2011/06/25/report-of-the-president-of-the-uua/>

Rev. Gibbons explains in a sermon entitled “Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up”:

I want to suggest that in fact there is a quality of spiritual maturity which is distinct from physical, intellectual, or emotional maturity. It involves attributes of compassion, integrity, awareness, gratitude, connection, humility, acceptance, and trust. People who are spiritually mature are engaging and challenging to be around; they are at peace with themselves, and by their presence, they call others to be their own best selves.⁷

As Unitarian Universalism moves toward models of religious education that encompass a life-span approach to faith development, it is worthwhile to consider growing and maturing spiritually as a purpose for our congregation and for us as individuals. Our UUA President Peter Morales believes the future of our faith lies in this question, and I am inclined to agree with him. I think it is a key to growing leadership, articulating our faith and widening our welcome to make our congregations more inclusive and diverse.

Here at All Souls, I do notice a spiritual maturity that radiates. I hear in sermons a theological depth that inspires and informs action. I witness so many luminous “moments of high resolve,” a constellation of which encourage me in my work as a minister and a person of faith. I am grateful to serve a healthy congregation which values cultivating the qualities Gibbons mentions-- compassion, integrity, awareness, gratitude, connection, humility, acceptance, and trust.

So as you have heard my thoughts, what might spiritual maturity mean to you as a purpose for your journey? How might it inspire you to live and act in the world? What qualities would you like to cultivate and how might you like to grow your soul? How can you imagine deepening your connections and how can All Souls serve you? What new ways can you imagine serving All Souls in the upcoming year?

This upcoming year is an exciting time to grow as a member of this community. As there have been for the past few years, there will continue to be transitions. The new Director of Religious Education, Taryn Strauss, will begin to serve, with new ideas for faith development and an invigorating leadership presence. We hope to soon hire an executive director that will help to organize and

⁷ Gibbons, Rev. “Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up.” First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, MN, March 22, 2009.

work with the board, staff and congregation to continue to fulfill the Plan for Strategic Direction. Members are talking about how to continue to strengthen social justice commitments, how to widen welcome and hospitality, and how to imagine a more intentionally diverse community.

In addition to existing opportunities, there will also be new ways to get involved at All Souls that can help you deepen your connections and your spiritual life. Small group ministry will begin in September with opportunities to join church-wide efforts to build intentional spiritual community. Young Adult Connection groups will also be beginning to deepen connections within the young adult community through creating safe and inviting spaces to get to know others. There will be opportunities to learn through Adult Education programming, to study Unitarian Universalist history, to build intergenerational community, and to deepen spiritual practice.

It is the midpoint of the summer—equidistant from June and from September. These times of summer are bitter sweet, when we revel in the lingering evenings, the joyful city energy and the weekend getaways of summer, while simultaneously looking ahead to fall. It is a perfect time to take stock of our lives, to pause, enjoy, and play, refreshing ourselves before we tumble back into the busy-ness of the fall. May this time in our lives provide an opportunity to renew our resolve to transform ourselves and our world, connecting to our purpose on our journey of faith. In this liminal time between church seasons, keep fresh before you those bright moments of high resolve, forming a dazzling constellation to guide you along your journey.

May it be so, and amen.