

“The Good Life”

Unitarian Church of All Souls

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This week brought the news of the death of the visionary imagineer of Apple, Steve Jobs. Although he had been ill for many years, his death was a surprise to many of us who took his technological genius for granted as a part of our daily lives. His vision was to make a difference in the world through his company—to increase human connection, interaction and innovation through technology. To accomplish this, he lived his life and managed his company in an extremely simple and streamlined way, almost obsessively attending to only what he deemed important. He was a bold risk taker, a tireless innovator with dreams that reached beyond corporate competition or success. "We're here to put a dent in the universe," Jobs was quoted to say on more than one occasion.

Indeed- "We're here to put a dent in the universe," all of us, to contribute positively to this world to the best of our abilities, perhaps not through our technological genius, but each in our own unique way. I feel blessed to serve this congregation at this time, to partner with you and a dynamic staff team in shared ministry. The possibilities are nearly endless. We are, as Galen said last week in his sermon, borrowing from the poet Gary Snyder: "Out in the open, everywhere to go."

It's true, we have everywhere to go together. This is a fitting image for All Souls, as a Unitarian Universalist congregation. We are a part of the free-church tradition which has historically treasured the possibility and promise of a life off the beaten path of religion. The founder of our Universalist tradition in America, John Murray is famous for this pioneer spirit. In the late 18th century, he encouraged the newly forming faith to

think expansively, past its East Coast origins and into the west. There is a famous quote you might recall from Murray: “Go out into the highways and byways. Give the people something of your new vision.” For Murray, his vision was of a faith that proclaimed a loving God for all people—not hell, but hope.

Just as there is promise and possibility with everywhere to go, there can also be challenges. To recall Walt Whitman’s *Song of the Open Road*, “You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here, I believe that much unseen is also here.” Being out in the open can feel exposing or vulnerable—subject to unseen elements or attacks. There may be harsh winds that slow the journey or the threat of fierce weather. If you are with companions, finding a common direction can be challenging. There might be too many places to go and it’s hard to stay together. As hard as you try, there is always the possibility that you might lose someone along the way. Sometimes, you run out of gas. Other times, you run out of patience with your company. I think Walt Whitman knew of these potential perils when he wrote *Song of the Open Road*. He offered an assurance of love and good will to his fellow travelers:

I give you my love, more precious than money,
I give you myself, before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Whitman’s invitation is simple enough, asking to join with others in a common search for truth and freedom in the spirit of love at a time of great promise and possibility in our nation’s history.

So, too, our congregational ancestors began their earliest expressions in a simple yet powerful invitation to journey together in shared religious community. Unitarians draw our origins from the Cambridge Platform of 1648, the foundational governing document for New England congregational polity still relevant for churches today. Our congregational ancestors were fundamentally opposed to creeds, and proclaimed independence from the

Church of England. Authority derived from individual religious experience and individual congregations governed themselves. What bound congregations together and to one another was the practice of entering the covenant, consent to a mutual promise or sacred agreement. Each church had its own covenant—some lengthy, with detailed governance structures, some very short. My favorite early church covenant is very simple-to “Walk together in love.” This covenant seems perfect for the wide open journey of faith, with everywhere to go. The Unitarian Universalist minister and historian of covenant Alice Blair Wesley expands and interprets the covenant in this way:

We pledge to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. The spirit of love is alone worthy of our ultimate, our religious loyalty. So, we shall meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we will yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what these ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn or remember them, together.

Love was an early organizing principle for our faith, the fruit of gathering together to practice and share the teachings of the Gospel. To be a true church, however, required organization—a mutual agreement to walk together in a particular way and towards a particular vision of religious community that encouraged freedom and mutual love for all. While individual authority was still honored and upheld, covenantal consent inspired the organization of power toward the health and well-being of the whole religious body. Love was not simply a way of being together, but a call to be love’s steward and champion in building institutions that served those within and outside of their walls.

Our 21st century congregations have achieved more success than our theological ancestors could ever have imagined. Can you imagine their wide eyes at the grand beauty of our sanctuary in comparison to their tiny stone chapels and drafty wooden meeting houses? Their nods to our sophisticated governance conversations and robust board? Their curiosity at all we might be able to accomplish with a congregation of over 1500 members, four ministers, a fabulous religious education staff and a brand new executive

director? Their interest in our new Small Group ministry program, with nine groups meeting to deepen their spiritual lives together? They would be proud that we offer a meal experience of hospitality and dignity to guests every Monday and Friday. They would be awed by the new growth and energy our congregation experiences with every welcome workshop and new members Sunday. We are in many ways, living the good life. There is no doubt about that. But just as our congregational ancestors experienced the challenge of how to create institutions where love can flourish and how to be love's steward in the world, so do we today. It is a tension that E.B. White gestured toward when he wrote: "If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world, and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

As Unitarian Universalists, we continue to be challenged by our desire to savor the good life we have and our longing to save the world—to make the good life possible for others. It makes it hard to plan the day, to say the least. When I speak of "the good life," I do so inspired by the Christian social ethicist Rebecca Todd Peters, author of the book *In Search of the Good Life: the Ethics of Globalization*. She writes from the position of a liberal Christian lay person and a professor of religious studies seeking to explore the moral, social and political role of the liberal church in an increasingly complex global landscape. She uses the phrase "the good life" to signify "social well-being of people as a central moral norm for what constitutes human flourishing."

Todd-Peters writes: "While social-well-being of people begins with taking care of basic needs, it does not stop with the argument that all people have a right to adequate food, clothing and shelter. In addition to our basic physical needs, all human beings are deserving of respect and dignity; these are markers of our very humanity." "The good life" as she defines it is not universal, but rather a set of categories that honor and promote the flourishing of human existence. For Todd-Peters, "the good life" includes "building up personhood" through educational and vocational training such that individuals and

communities can both work and contribute meaningfully to common life. “The good life” addresses and offers healing and purpose in response to the rampant malaise and meaninglessness of a world ravaged by violence and global economic despair. In a world of increasing complexity and despair, people need to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

This week, something has shifted in consciousness in our country. It has little to do with our next presidential election or even with Wall Street. This shift in consciousness has more to do with a larger sense that the good life is increasingly elusive to the majority of our nation. It is not yet well-defined, perfect or palatable. It might be, as author Naomi Klein described it “A wide-open space (as well as an idea so big it can’t be contained by any space) for all the people who want a better world to find each other.” As people of faith, members of a liberal religious institution founded in love and called to be love’s steward in the world, at this moment we are called to consider what our role might be in upholding the flourishing of all life. We can begin to ask questions together: What is our covenantal responsibility and imperative? How are we, individually and as a congregation, inviting and promoting “the good life” for all? How might we be neighbors and partners with all who yearn and strive for “the good life”?

All Souls is a sanctuary for beauty, meaning and purpose in a world badly in need of healing. Each day, we have an opportunity to invite people into our community to share the faith we know is life saving, sustaining and transforming. Even as we yearn for growth and outreach, sometimes we can still be hesitant to share the good life we have found in Unitarian Universalism. We can be bold in our invitation to a community that changes lives and provides a moral compass – a place that offers hope and serves the world, helping to make the good life more possible.

Unitarian Universalism is a free faith that promotes the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe in the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. We can share our faith and values as the

grounding for meaningful social and political participation in our world. We have a rich history and vibrant institutions which contribute meaningfully to the health of our nation and our world- the Unitarian Universalist Association, Service Committee and the United Nations Office. We also might consider exploring new partners, locally and nationally, with whom we can share a common vision for the good life for our faith and our world. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, we have a partner in First Universalist Church as a part of a new program called “Leap of Faith.” We might find ways to link with our global Unitarian Universalist churches- in Africa, India, and Asia, whose bold ministries like Rev. Mark Kiyamba’s in Uganda can offer new meaning to the good life. We can stand firm in our understanding that our faith does call us to support and sustain human flourishing for each generation and generations to come. As this morning’s reading reminded us, “In different times and in different places, God calls out to the people with different messages of hope, challenge and faithfulness.”

We are, as Galen reminded us last week, out in the open, everywhere to go. The space we open into is wide—so wide we can only imagine what possibilities await us. Let us be reminded of our covenant to walk together in love, offering our assurances to our fellow travelers of our continued commitment on our shared future of faith.

Amen.