

Not So Much
Homily, August 30, 2020
Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer

Trigger warning: sexual violence, cancer, gun violence

You may not come away from this message feeling very good about Unitarian Universalism. I do hope you will come away with important questions about your faith. I am in a place right now where it is admittedly very difficult for me to feel good about this tradition which I've chosen, in which I've invested over \$100k and probably an equal number of hours. A place where I'm asked to be a champion and a defender and a thinker and someone who has drunk the Kool-Aid. But truth be told, I am not any of those things. Really, I'm just a guy who believes in people and the magic of existence and that started long before I discovered Unitarian Universalism and it will last well after the fact if I ever choose to leave.

You may ask why its difficult? Well consider this, I have a regular and robust spiritual practice; I have a deep awareness of the need for self-care and I know how and when to access it. Coming from a background in fitness and wellness, I know what I need to feed my body and what level of activity I require to be balanced. I literally do all the stuff and still in this current moment, I come up short with what my faith often wants to offer me.

The public depiction of violence against black men feels like some kind of blood sport. Certainly, black men are not the only ones killed by police and gun violence and plenty of police sadly die in the line of duty. But being police is a job (one that I would like to see entirely redefined) and being black is neither a choice or something with a union and a salary and the proportion of black men killed to the proportion of society they represent reveals a sickening likelihood; that black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than whites.

The media is trying to do its part to make sure we are all aware of this as an epidemic of its own, yet it comes at a price for those of us who share black bodies either our own or those we are intimate with. We are traumatized by the images. It feels like every 6 weeks or so, we are having to process the orgy of emotion and imagery that

accompanies what can only be called state sanctioned lynching. Its as if lynching was taken out of the hands of vigilantes and placed in the hands of law enforcement. If you want to have a place where you are protected by law to exterminate all the black folks you want, then just pick up a badge. Laws will protect you; no one is going to challenge you; everyone will believe you when you say, "I'm not a racist" and cries of "blue lives matter" will support you all the way out of the court house and into your early retirement with full pension.

But my message today is not about police. My message today is about a lop sided Unitarian Universalist response to the violence that too often has little if anything to answer the real day-to-day, human challenges we face as a society. I've got to ask, are we hiding behind faith in action because we aren't willing to hold on to faith in our hearts and lives? You can make all the calls you want, march in all the streets you want, UU all the votes you want and "side with love" all you want, but where the hell is all that when someone is awake in the middle of the night because they are terrified that they will be assaulted...again? What does all that do when your loved one loses their battle with cancer? And what does Unitarian Universalism say to a man who despite his own deep flaws, is laying paralyzed from the waist down with half of his digestive tract blown to pieces because a cop got nervous? And then what does our uneven faith say to the cop who pulled the trigger, or placed the chokehold, or broke down the door? What is the message of redemption? What is the call to healing both body and soul? Too often, it feels like Unitarian Universalism is just arrogant public relations born of privilege and the word "should".

The tenets of "liberal religion" are about the freedom to interpret faith as one sees fit. Historically we learn that:

Unitarians place emphasis on the ultimate role of reason in interpreting scriptures, and thus freedom of conscience and freedom of the pulpit are core values in the tradition.

In modern parlance, that adds up to our Seven Principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And we are considering an Eighth Principle as well

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

But, personally, I’m missing something in all of this. I miss the gravity of life; and I’ve said it before...where is the love? To get personal for a moment, having been faced with a literal lifetime of justifying my presence in schools, jobs, apartment buildings, stores...you name it, I’m not really compelled to first think about “justice, equity and *bloody* compassion in human relations.” When I look at a federal government that systematically dismantles voting rights and women’s rights to their bodies in ways that uniquely impact people of color, I don’t have a lot of faith in the “right of conscience and democratic processes.”

More and more, I’m aware that an underlying weakness in Unitarian Universalism comes from three words: autonomy, reason and conscience. And too often these are preceded by three other words: “Me, Myself and I”

My autonomy; my reason; my conscience

We’ve got to do better. Unitarian Universalism must mature. If we are going to come through epically difficult and tragic times, and we are in those times right now, we’ve got to get out of our own super-smart, “I’ve got the answers”, “me first” way. The real freedom in Liberal Religion cannot solely be about “me, myself and I.” The real freedom is based on how we are non-creedal, and that we non-coercively agree to covenant as opposed to passively following doctrine. We are free to dig deep into that which sustains the universal human experience. We have in Unitarian Universalism a powerful excuse to humble ourselves not to the false god of “me, myself and I” but to

the reality that is wrapped in one word: “WE.” It is WE that comes from all kinds of different human, spiritual and life experience. It is WE that sustains us.

Certainly, our efforts to engage a diverse experience is no excuse for the “spiritual buffet”, affecting one tradition as the mood strikes us. Rather it is the opportunity to learn more about universal truths reflected in those traditions and experiences. We can learn from Buddhism about a path from suffering; to let Taoism help us understand what it means to be in sync with the universe; to listen to Judaism for what it means to be in a unique relationship with the divine; to recognize how Islam speaks to the human need for both “peace” and “submission” and humility and to let Christianity remind us that “*yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me*”...indeed you are not alone.

As Unitarian Universalists we dig deep, not by *sampling* from the platter, but by holding the platter accessible to everyone and cherishing what it means for all of us inside and outside of our traditions and social locations to be able to taste the full fruits of humanity. This is universalism on steroids. And holding the platter also means that we will feel its weight when tragedy comes, we will burn with its heat when it carries rage and we will be chilled to the core by its sudden loss of temperature and death. Being entrusted to hold this platter of faith, humanity and being is our most compelling reason to feel and feel deeply. Holding the platter is not about I...it is about WE.

Does Unitarian Universalism alone answer my needs for resilience? Not so much. In all honesty I may never do so. But Unitarian Universalism does invite me to find resilience wherever and however it is I need to find it and it lets me do that without shame or judgment or condition. *This* freedom of “liberal religion” to me is *the divine* and it may ultimately be what keeps me in this faith.

Blessed be...and Amen.