

“Intersection”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

Association Sunday

First Parish Unitarian Universalist

Cohasset, MA

October 19, 2008

“Out of the stars in their flight,
out of the dust of eternity, here have we come,
stardust and sunlight,
mingling through time and through space.

Out of the stars have we come,
up from time;

...Earth warmed by sun, lit by sunlight:
This is our home;
Out of the stars have we come.

...Out the stars, rising from rocks and the sea,
Kindled by sunlight on earth,
Arose life.

Thus pondered the late Robert Terry Weston on whence we have come and how we have come to be here. Each of us rose from a speck of cosmic dust. And all this time you thought it was the stork—or enjoyable human interaction, maybe. Well, on that last guess, you’re half right.

As for life itself and how the strands of life wound and found their way across barely imaginable distances of time and space, we’re here, precious specks in the universe of here and now, each of us star-marked. With a little help from the cosmos, earth, air, water, and fire have conspired the miracle that life is, that we are.

So consider, if you will, that each of you is a star-beam. And consider the not too far-fetched premise that somehow you have found your way to this space this morning, this Meeting House, where we wonder and speak and sing about such matters, and grow sometimes silent in reflection and even confusion. We’re here. Our star-beams have intersected.

Why? How?

Well, there's free will. There's also coincidence. There's also chance. But I believe we're here this morning because each of us longs to ponder such matters. Each of us shares amazement at this creation and that we're a part of it. Each of us probably shares amazement that having the gift of life in common, we as humankind have contorted ourselves into a shape that can only be described as a mess. From miracle to mess is our human condition. Not only mess, of course. There's celebration. There's affirmation. There's caring. There's all that good stuff that matters so dearly. We really don't want to be in a mess; we don't. So we seek each other out. We look for a place where we'll be heard and respected, even a place where we have different opinions, different perspectives, a place where we can be ourselves, given the standard of basic civility.

For me, that place is church, this church, this Unitarian Universalist congregation. Here we find our star-beam selves intersecting as we make our way across the trajectory that is our life. We question together; we wonder together; we matter together; and we go forth from this intersection of faith to live the questions, wonder aloud, behave as if every creature alive matters dearly. This is how we live our faith.

But wait, let's coax our souls back into this Meeting House. As Bill Sinkford reminds us:

“In this room there are folks in many different places in their hearts: there are those whose spirits are light today, and those who arrive bearing the sadness of the world. Some are on the edge of adventure, beaming with energy from...a new loved one, new understanding, or a new peace, while others gaze toward the past, and wonder where they will find the strength for another step. Some come today for communion. This may mean connecting through the rituals of worship, or it may be found in a simple conversation over coffee. ... To all these seekers we hold out a shared vision. We say, yes. Come on in, and know you are not alone.”

In this time and space of intersection, we move toward wholeness of heart, mind, and soul. We lean into our larger selves, knowing we're not alone.

Sometimes we come here thinking that it's only we who are so anxious, so overwhelmed with matters intimate and global. At this time of intersection, we discover it's not just us. We realize that we're not alone.

Yet it's not easy being us. It's not easy coming together with folks who question as relentlessly and seek as fervently as we do and come up with such a disarming array of approaches, such a pluralism of perspective, each of us tempted to espouse our approach or our perspective as if it might work for everyone. This is our signal that it's time to listen, time to hear each other's stories, time to open our hearts and minds to how those stories illumine an approach or a perspective that didn't initially make much sense to us. We count on those stories for religious community that matters. Intersection has no meaning if we're only talking about one approach, one path. Dynamic religious community depends upon what we might call "religious traffic," "social traffic" even, "political traffic" even. No one has the final word.

It's the intersection that counts. It's what happens when our paths cross that allows each of us to pass through that intersection so much more intact than we were when we approached it, when we got up out of bed this morning and whined a bit about how wouldn't it be nice to just have a leisurely breakfast, pick up the newspaper, and declare time out. Then maybe we did something as foolish as picking up that newspaper and spouting a quick, "Uh-oh! These headlines aren't what I need. Maybe I'll take myself, even my whole family, off to church after all."

So here we are. Our paths have converged.

But is it enough, just this crossing, just these intersections over the years since 1721 that we've been First Parish in Cohasset, then First Parish Unitarian, then First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset?

We're a congregation in historical motion. We're a congregation learning, sometimes slowly, sometimes reluctantly, that the quality of our religious community, the quality of our religious intersection, is enhanced by being *in association* with other congregations.

Just yesterday three of us from this congregation—Mary Parker, President of our Parish Committee, Ron Wallace, our Treasurer, and I headed to Worcester for the Unitarian Universalist New England Fall Conference. What a gathering of congregations from every state in New England! Imagine roughly 500 New

Englishers, let alone Unitarian Universalists, in the same space for a day of concerted dialogue and worship and discernment about who we are and who we can become. It was moving and powerful. Such are the benefits of religious traffic! You'll surely be hearing more in the days ahead about the ideas exchanged and what can help us at First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset move through this time and beyond it, what can help us at First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset rise into the larger reaches of who we can be as faithful seekers, teachers, justice makers, and stewards of the gifts we are given.

We each began as stardust. Stardust by itself is good maybe for a little light—actually an infinitesimal speck of light. But when we find ourselves here and alive, when we stretch our souls into beams of light, when we intentionally come together with other religious seekers, then something extraordinary happens. We discover that our specks of stardust kindle into a larger light. We discover that our beams of light intersect in ways that make us each the richer in discerning what our lives are all about and can still be about. We discover that the light that we kindle Sunday after Sunday—here and in over a thousand Unitarian Universalist congregations in this country alone—ignites into a flame that is the essence of that which burns in our flaming chalice, symbol of the dynamic truth, the luminous love, that we are about in this faith that we share.

What makes it possible? Each of you makes it possible by showing up, by letting your light shine, by sharing your resources so that you can stretch into your larger self. Each of our congregations makes it possible by coming together at intersections such as conferences that are above all about conversations that matter, worshipping together across the habits of how we worship as individual congregations, and discerning and acting together so that what emerges is an intricate web of activity made possible by an association of interdependent congregations.

This is our Unitarian Universalist Association. This is not some edifice on Beacon Hill. This is the flaming chalice that is ignited by each individual, each congregation, each district, each child, each person who walks into a Unitarian Universalist church hopeful, hopeful for a sanctuary in which she or he matters, hopeful for a community of loving listening folk who say through our deeds, “You matter. Whoever you are, you matter. Welcome!”

Now we have one, at least one, sticky problem. Excuse me, challenge! It comes to mind through the story told by my colleague Kathleen McTigue. And it hinges on the notion of spirituality and discipline. Spirituality is that term that

tends to evoke a quick nod of complicit wisdom when we hear it cited. Some of us are even inclined to say, “I’m not really religious; I’m spiritual!” To which I say, “Oyveh!” because that notion commonly carries a very light backpack. Specifically, being spiritual without being religious holds an easily implicit assumption that I’m not accountable. It’s about me and my spirit and the Spirit of Life, and that’s quite enough, thank you very much. So folks who want only spirituality tend not to return when they’re tapped on the shoulder in coffee hour, let alone when they’re reminded in the Meeting House that the spirit of our faith calls us to act differently in the world.

Discipline is another matter. Discipline often goes against the grain of progressive thinkers such as we fancy ourselves to be. Thus, Kathleen’s telling of the folk tale of the “saintly Brother Bruno.” Engaged in solitary prayer, he was rudely interrupted by a frog. What did he do, but lean out the window and tell that sub-human specimen to pipe down. The bullfrog went instantly mute. Then Bruno’s conscience began to gnaw away at him. Maybe Bruno’s own prayer hit God’s ears like the “arrogant croaking of another frog!” Bruno was not ambivalent for long. He again leaned out the window, and bid that bullfrog to “Sing!” Soon a grand chorus of bullfrogs was singing a full-throated anthem. And Bruno learned to pray.

Bruno discovered that the human spirit is not the only one that counts. Bruno discovered that his conscience was more accountable than he’d counted on. The only thing that has me worried is what the bullfrogs thought of Bruno’s prayers.

Spirituality, however, that amorphous notion that carries as many gossamer threads as a cosmic spider web, glistens, simply glistens, in caring religious community.

And so do we. Our spirits soar; our souls awaken; our minds open wide, when we know it’s not just about us. Individually, congregationally, it’s not just about us. It’s about the miracle in which we find ourselves asking, wondering, worshipping, praying, learning, making justice, being awake and attentive, and greeting new beams of light even as we bid farewell to old stars, ready once again to become stardust.

For me, religion, this religion that we know as Unitarian Universalism, shines with the fire of countless stars when kindled in the chalice that is our Unitarian Universalist Association. Some call it the UUA. I call it OUR UUA.

How can we not support this amazing convergence of stars, this amazing intersection of light beams that we are, as individuals and congregations? Together, in association, we can grow and learn and touch one another. We can “nurture our spirits and help heal our world.”

I ask this morning that each of you give as generously as you can to support our Association. As your minister, I’d love to give more, but you can count on me for \$100 from my personal account and \$100 from my ministerial discretionary fund. Let’s give what we can, and know that our chalice will burn all the brighter because we do so.

...Out the stars, rising from rocks and the sea,
Kindled by sunlight on earth,
Arose life.

At this morning’s intersection of light and life, know that I love you,
stars all. Amen

Souces:

Kathleen McTigue, on spiritual discipline, in *Association Sunday 2008 Organizing and Worship Resources*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2008.

William Sinkford, on in this room there are folks, in *Association Sunday 2008 Organizing and Worship Resources*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2008.

Robert T. Weston, “Out of the Stars,” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 465.