

A BRIGHT HOPE
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READINGS

FOR YOU by Walt Whitman

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are.
The sun and stars that float in the open air,
The apple-shaped earth and we upon it;
The endless pride and outstretching of people,
Unspeakable joys and sorrows;
The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see,
And the wonders that fill each minute of time forever;
It is for you, whoever you are –
It is no farther from you than your hearing and sight are for you;
It is hinted at by the nearest, commonest, readiest.
Will you seek afar off?
You surely come back at last,
In things best know to you,
Finding the best, or as good as the best –
Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place –
Not in another hour, but this hour

DON'T TURN FROM DELIGHT by Rumi

Don't turn from the delight that is so close at hand!
Don't find some lame excuse to leave our gathering.
You were a lonely grape, and now you are sweet wine.
There is no use trying to become a grape again.

SERMON

For many years when I was growing up, our family attended summer conferences at Star Island, a Unitarian Universalist conference and retreat center on an island 10 miles out to sea from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Perhaps others of you have been there.

Being on a small island so far out to sea, the conference center struggled to provide many of the services that most of us take for granted. Every year someone on the conference staff would remind us to pay attention to the three kinds of water on the island. There was salt water that was pumped in from the ocean to flush toilets, there was water for washing that was collected from rainfall in two large cisterns, and there was drinking water that was shipped in from the mainland. You needed to be careful not to drink the cistern water, since we couldn't be sure how clean it was, but you were asked not to wash with the drinking water, since there was only a limited supply. So, it was always a bit of an adventure to stay there.

There was electricity on the island, which came from big generators behind the rambling hotel building. But there was one building on the island that was not wired for electricity, and to my knowledge never has been. That was the chapel. The chapel stands on the highest point of the island, a simple stone building with windows on every side and a bell tower with a spire and a codfish weathervane on top. It's a pretty, but sparse place with a brick floor, old wooden pews, a simple pulpit area with two rough chairs and a little pump organ for music.

But each night we were there something amazing happened. As someone began chiming the chapel bell, people would gather in pairs at the end of the hotel porch. There they were handed hurricane lamps with lit candles inside. Then they would walk in silence up the rocky path to the chapel. Bit by bit as people entered the chapel with their lamps and hung them on brackets along the wall that small room would fill with light until with everyone inside and the evening service ready to begin the chapel would positively glow.

Now, at my church, and I expect at yours as well, we have all the modern conveniences. You don't need to worry about what kind of water you drink or wash with. Heat and electric light make our sanctuary a warm and inviting place. And yet for me each Sunday that we gather there, even in the full daytime, is a little like those evening services at Star Island. Whichever service our members attend, as each enters and finds a spot to sit I feel as if that beautiful room is filling with light and warmth.

There is a light that we each carry into the world – bright and strong at sometimes, struggling and a little dim at others – but there all the same. We bring that light – that hope, that courage, that intelligence, that love – into our churches, hoping to be fed and to feed a larger flame. No one tells us we have to come. No one threatens us if we don't. But we come all the same.

We come in the hope that we will find some spark of insight or understanding, some connection with others and that deep sense of wonder within us, that the community we find and the community we help to build will make a difference in our lives and in the larger world.

I know what a big difference our church means to its members because I have heard many of their stories. They arrived tired of the pat answers of other religious traditions, or they were feeling empty waking up on weekends to nothing more than the Sunday paper, or their children were tripping them up with big religious questions that they weren't sure how to answer, or they reached a point in their lives where they wanted to connect with others and to something larger than themselves. They walked into the doors of our church and they found sanctuary, a safe place to be who they are, with all the convictions and the questions that they were never quite sure they could express, and they found acceptance and affirmation.

I expect it is much the same with you. You walked into your church and found challenge in a religious tradition that invited you to bring your full self – your mind, your heart, your ears, your eyes, your hands, your feet – to the work and the play of building of a religious identity among other religious seekers. You walked into your church and you found community centered not in a common belief but in a covenant to walk together in service to truth however it may emerge, to justice, equity and compassion in our own lives and the larger world, to be present in care and concern in the struggles with which life presents us.

It's a process I recognize because I experienced it myself. Though I grew up as a Unitarian Universalist, I pretty much fell away from the church as a young adult. In my mid 20s I had been away to college and returned to my parents' home, unsure what I wanted to do. I went to church occasionally, but more out of habit than commitment.

That changed, though, when my wife, Debbie, and I got married and we moved to Charleston, West Virginia. We didn't especially have church on our minds when we arrived, but we weren't there long before we didn't have much choice about that. We discovered a city in turmoil over religious intolerance. The president of the city school board, the wife of a fundamentalist preacher, was on a campaign to ban from the schools any books that she deemed to be tainted by what she called "secular humanism," which to her mind was anything that wasn't centered in a very narrow reading of the Bible.

We had to search a bit, but one Sunday after we wound our way through a run-down part of town, across railroad tracks, alongside the river with a massive chemical plant on the other side we found a tiny lay-led Unitarian Universalist fellowship. Some of the members were a little quirky and the programs varied widely in quality, but as small as it was it was a spark of hope in what felt at the time like a frightening place.

It was the first time that I had experienced directly what an oppressive force religion can be. Having grown up in the university town of Princeton, New Jersey, where a liberal religious voice was an accepted, even respected part of the mix, it was alarming to find myself part of an embattled minority.

Those days at that tiny West Virginia fellowship were an awakening for me. I came to see not only that I could not take what seemed to me sensible liberal religious values for granted, but also that if they were to endure, I would have to take an active role in supporting them.

The story is told that the great Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou was out riding to visit a member of his congregation when he came upon another preacher he knew. The two got into conversation and pretty soon the subject of religion came up. The other man said he could not understand how the Universalists could believe that no one went to hell when they died, no matter what evil deeds they may have done.

“Why, if I were a Universalist,” the man said, “I could hit you over the head and steal your horse with no fear of hell.”

“If you were a Universalist,” Hosea Ballou replied, “the thought would never occur to you.”

The story offers two contrasting approaches to religion that still echo today. For Ballou’s traveling companion, the authority of religion was rooted in fear: fear of punishment for disobeying rules that he felt were laid down by a divine authority. For Ballou, religion was grounded in love, and he felt that if love, rather than fear, guided our actions it would never occur to us to prey on another.

When we live out of fear, we develop low opinions of others. We worry that they might cheat us, hurt us, trick us. We feel we must keep up our guard, have strict rules and be quick to punish. When we live out of love, we value others. We conclude that they, like us, have inherent worth and dignity, that they, like us, have needs, hopes and dreams, that they, and we, are capable of, and even, when given a chance, *inclined* to the good.

The threat of punishments can be made to seem very powerful, but it contains a hidden weakness: it is grounded in fear, and fear never feels right. It eats at you. It saps your confidence and weakens your sense of worth. It deadens your sense of joy. We will do much for love; out of fear, far less.

Some years ago in an interview the writer Annie Dillard talked about how hard it can be to write a book, and she compared it to raising a child. “Willpower has very little to do with it,” she said. “If you have a baby crying in the middle of the night, and if you depend only on willpower to get you out of bed to feed the baby, the baby will starve. You do it out of love. Willpower is a weak idea; love is strong.”

“Caring passionately about something isn’t against our nature,” she said, “It’s what we’re here to do.”

She’s right. Caring passionately about each part of our lives, about the splendorous world we live in and the people and many other beings that inhabit it is what we are here to do. We are capable of fearful and destructive things, but we need not follow that path. There is ultimately no gain, no purpose, no hope there.

Instead, we need smart, committed, hope-filled people gathered in community to strike out in a different direction. We need people who will help set free the light of dreams, of love, of truth in the world: to let them shine, and with them the light within each of us that by itself flickers in the dark but brought together with others glows like a beacon, a bright hope

What I learned at that little West Virginia fellowship is that if I cared about the community I was a part of, I could not just sit by and wait for others to do the work to make it thrive. I needed to be a part of it: to take part in the community and to step up to leadership. As Rumi counseled, I had become sweet wine, and there was no going back to being a lonely grape.

The Reverend John Wolf, former minister of our church in Tulsa, once wrote that we work for our churches because “they stand against superstition and fear. Because the church points to what is noblest and best in human life.” We give ourselves to the work of our churches because, he tells us, they are places “where walls between people are torn down rather than built up . . . where (we all) can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love.”

None of our churches at this conference is a tiny fellowship. We have gathered here leaders of the some of largest, strongest, most vital churches of the Unitarian Universalist Association. And unlike that humble structure hard by the river in West Virginia that my wife and I entered 30 years ago, the churches that we here left behind in our travels to Louisville are beautiful, even iconic buildings that fill us with pride.

Yet, the soul of our churches does not rest not in those magnificent edifices. It rests in you and me and those many hope-filled folks who called, elected and appointed us all, who bid us to come to this place. We, all of us, are the church. It is by our efforts that all the visions we hold for our churches and this faith tradition will be achieved: A voice for freedom of belief, for the liberating force of love in the service of justice, a home for the spirit, and a learning community of challenge and support that helps each of us live authentic lives grounded in deep spiritual understanding.

No one else will do it for us, and there is much to do. For all the good that we have learned about over the past few days that so many of us are doing, in many ways we have only scratched the surface of the need that awaits us.

And so, we gather to stake a claim on a better way of being in the world. And we do it not out of guilt or fear not because we have been forced or threatened. We do it out of loving intent with thought for the best that is in us, that it may increase and awaken the best in others and the larger world.

We take our place in a proud history of women and men over many centuries who have kept this spark of hope alive. In our time, though, as Walt Whitman suggests, the brave and generous people who will make this possible, who will see this hope through to the next generation are not in another place, but this place – not in another hour but this hour.

Go in peace. Go in love.