

People of the Place

Sunday October 16, 2011

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“O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!” Edna St. Vincent Millay

Call to Worship

As surely as we belong to the universe
we belong together.

We join here to transcend the isolated self,
To reconnect,
To know ourselves to be at home,
Here on earth, under the stars,
Part of the mystery,
Linked with all beings.

As surely as we belong to the universe,
we belong together.

By Margaret Keip (adapted) (UUA Worship Web)

Reading

This is an excerpt from writer Sharman Apt Russell’s essay entitled “All You Need is Love” about her home in New Mexico.

Love of place opens me to the beauty of the world, which can be found everywhere, city and suburb, desert and rainforest. A world full of places that people love.

Love of place makes me feel larger.

When I open to the world, the boundaries of self, my worries and fears, what makes Sharman happy, what makes Sharman sad, the particulars of childhood and family, talents and flaws, that day in high school, this new pain in my knee

—
all of it diminishes against the lift of land, colors, and cliffs.

I'm as big as this view, five miles wide.

I'm as powerful as the gathering storm, but also calm.
 Time passes. Seasons turn.
 The river floods and changes everything, and then everything changes again.
 No worries. No flaws. Nothing is untoward.

“People of the Place”

A colourful nebula – a cloudy gathering of stars and gas - on that wall. An intricate image of the atom – the essential seed of life – on that wall.
 The macrocosm and the microcosm.

If we were at The Charles Street Meeting House in 1955 Boston, with Minister Kenneth Patton, we would be gathered between the universe and the earth.

I have always liked the image of sitting between the nebula and the atom, humankind held between the smallest and greatest within the universe. Part of an infinite and fantastic whole.

Unitarian Universalism embraces diverse spiritual perspectives. With no creed, many spiritual perspectives are welcomed. We all know this.

We have no sacred text. We honour the individual search. Humanists and pagan. Jewish and Christian. Meditation and mandalas. Prayer shawls and yoga mats.

Diversity. We cherish it.

But it can also be confusing. Ask 5 Unitarians to define Unitarian Universalism and you will receive 7 answers. We can be very hard to explain. Even to ourselves. It is so much easier to say what we are not.

We don't dare speak for the whole, because we know our spiritual perspective might not fit someone else. So we speak for our individual little piece. Our little patchwork square.

A square of blue. Another of red. Some green. Purple stripes. A paisley pattern. No two the same. Some of the colours clash. Others contrast beautifully. A jumble of colour.

We appreciate each patchwork square. We're glad for all the colours. We don't want red feeling bad for not being blue. But sometimes we forget that the patchwork squares are stitched together.

Each square, whether it be blue or red or paisley, is part of a quilt. Each square contributes to the strength of the whole. Adds to the collage of colour.

We value the multiple spiritual perspectives in our congregations.

Our multiple perspectives share a common ground. Our diversity is held within a larger unity. This too is obvious, we know we are Unitarians. It says so right on the front of the building.

But what does it mean to be Unitarian Universalist? We no longer uphold the unity of God or universal salvation, the two doctrines which define our name. We are no longer Christian, although we have inherited many worthwhile values from that religion. Loving our neighbor. Seeking justice. We have much to be thankful for.

Christianity is oriented to time. Augustine, a 4th century theologian, noted that Time was linear and urgent as God moved steadily towards his goal of the Kingdom. To be oriented to God is to be oriented to the future, to eternity. Christian hope lies in God's promise of "more than this life". Christianity shook off the Jewish ties to place, to the land, to become a religion that travelled. Original sin. Redemption. Resurrection. They can happen anywhere.

But Unitarians are not focused on eternity. This is a located religion. We are people of the place. Not in the sense that we are like Judaism, with ties to a sacred land. But we are a tradition that is entangled in the world, in the physical. The mystery is as much down here on this earth as it is out there beyond the stars. We honour the dark as well as the light. We know both are found, within us and in the world.

Being oriented to place is about being alive in this moment. In the here and now. Living in this particular place, urban and suburban Toronto. Living in this present time, of financial distress and cool technology. Being present to our own experiences, both good and bad.

Whether you are a pagan, who sees the earth as divine, or a theist who experiences God's loving presence, or a humanist focused on social action, all of

us focus on the here and now. Where we are matters. We know, through science, through spirit, that we are entangled in the web of life. We have a common ground.

Our diversity is held together by the unity of our orientation to the here and now.

Hope lies in this spiritual orientation of presence. There is hope in our spiritual tradition.

Being oriented to the present, to place can seem like cold comfort in contrast to the promises of a loving God. But even in giving up this most singular relationship, hope is still possible.

Some of us find comfort in being part of the whole. In our connection to nature. Even when we feel knocked down, destroyed by tragedy, bad luck, lousy weather, we are still part of this grand planet. As Russell said in today's reading, we can "open to the world". Whether it is at the top of a cliff or looking out from a high rise window, we can become as "big as the view, five miles wide". Our particular problems diminish when we expand into the whole.

And some of us can find comfort in our particular presence. In our connection to ourselves. I had a friend who told me once that ever since he was small, he was amazed that he was himself. He was this body and not that one. A body that can move, can do things, that can change things. Whenever he is stripped clean by the troubles of living, he can start again from the wonder of his own self. And that wonder brings him back.

Starting from here and now, starting from the place where we live, starting from the bodies we inhabit, we can find hope. We can develop an attitude that embraces life, like the traveller who found good people wherever he was. It may be hard to find, but it is there, waiting to arise, in our connections.

Our spiritual orientation offers hope in many ways.

People need Unitarianism. Our spiritual community can make a difference.

What we say here as Unitarians is not entirely unique. Living oriented to the light and the dark of life on earth is an old approach made new again. And it is an approach that resonates with many people. It is visible in the work of many groups and individuals.

Nature awareness non-profits that teach people how to see like an owl. There is a woman who paints portraits that includes your dna sequence. TEDx talks about gratitude for life go viral. There are blogs, videos, photos, twitter comments all calling for us to pay attention to the world as it is.

This attitude of caring for place, appreciating its wonder is bubbling up all over. More and more voices are speaking. Each one contributes to changing the dominant conversation, the one that says “buy stuff”. “be skinny”. “get more money”. Each voice matters as we talk about “respect one another”. “share stuff”.

As Unitarians, we offer a spiritual community which takes place and presence seriously. Which celebrates diversity. Which honours the whole. We offer a spiritual perspective that grounds us in the here and now, provides hope for when times are bleak, and builds connections between people. Community is powerful.

One person can be a catalyst. But change only happens when others join the one person. We are stronger together.

A patchwork square on its own is pretty, but it won't keep you warm at night. But stitched into quilt, it can stave off the cold for years. The quilt is held together by thousands of threads and a common back.

Our contribution is to offer the warmth and strength of community as people develop new and needed attitudes towards caring for each other and the planet. A spiritual community gives people a place to stand.

Unitarianism holds us together, makes us stronger as we learn a different way of being in the world. **People need spiritual communities like Unitarianism.**

Our task is to develop this spiritual orientation. Now is the time to deepen our place based orientation.

There is high contrast photograph which at first glance looks like a bunch of white and black blobs. There are patches of more concentrated black, an area that is more white. It is very difficult to make sense of it. Abstract art perhaps. But if you hear “dalmation dog” you can see it at once. The dog is right in the centre of the image. Black and white. Obvious once you see the shape.

Unitarian Universalism has spent a lot of years focusing on diversity. So much so that sometimes we don't see our unity. We can't see the forest for the trees. It is hard to imagine a spiritual home that suits both atheists and believers in God. We don't want to alienate anyone who has found comfort here. But we have a common ground that we all can stand on.

In the here and now. In place and presence. In our relationships to all beings. In the way we honour both the light and the dark as part of living.

We are still learning our language. Finding words to replace God and sin and salvation. Trying to find ways to express attitudes of respect and relationship. Words like mystery. Like connection. Let's have the conversation about what it really means to be part of the whole. About what words work, and what words need too much translation.

As well as offering community to others with similar orientations, perhaps we can also offer a spiritual language. A shared language of meaning.

We just have to talk about it more. That shouldn't be so hard. We like to talk. So let's talk about the greater pattern. In finding our common language, we become stronger as a community. By naming our place based orientation we can tell our story. Share our story. **Our task is to pay attention to our common ground. To develop a language of meaning.**

As UUs, we are individuals freely gathered in community to celebrate living on the earth and within the mystery.

We honour both the atom and the nebula.

We cherish our diversity and our common ground.

We pay attention to this place in this time, knowing there is nothing else we can do. Knowing the hope that lies in our bodies, lies in the people we love, the places we care for.

We are entangled in the web. And we are glad.

This is a message worth hearing. A story worth telling.

May it be so.