

**Find Your Greatness**  
**Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist**  
**March 11 2012**

**Reading - We Have Not Come to Take Prisoners by Hafiz**

We have not come here to take prisoners,  
But to surrender ever more deeply  
To freedom and joy.

We have not come into this exquisite world

To hold ourselves hostage from love.

Run my dear,  
from anything That may not strengthen  
Your precious budding wings.

Run like hell my dear,  
From anyone likely  
To put a sharp knife  
Into the sacred, tender vision  
Of your beautiful heart.

We have a duty to befriend  
Those aspects of obedience  
That stand outside of our house  
And shout to our reason  
'O please, O please,  
Come out and play.'

For we have not come here to take prisoners  
Or to confine our wondrous spirits,

But to experience ever and ever more deeply  
Our divine courage, freedom, and  
Light!

**Sermon - Find Your Greatness - By Rev. Gretchen Haley**

We were just three hours in to the 3 day long conference on excellence in Unitarian Universalist worship, and I was feeling already done.

I know, at some conferences, that would be because the first 3 hours were so dreadfully dull, or irrelevant.

But that wasn't what wasn't the case this time. It was the opposite. Those first 3 hours were so amazingly rich. So overwhelmingly worthy. I couldn't imagine how anything else could compare. A year later, I'm *still* trying to sort out all that those few hours asked of me, asked of *us* in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, in our living out of the Unitarian Universalist faith.

There were two featured speakers at this conference - hosted by our Mountain Desert District in Golden last April. One from within Unitarian Universalism - Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister at All Souls in Tulsa, Oklahoma, our largest congregation - and one from outside our tradition, Kay Northcutt, a Disciples of Christ minister and professor and respected scholar of homiletics.

It was Kay who held us that first afternoon. Held us, grabbed us by our insides, and invited us to become - ourselves.

Eventually, the conference would see attendance of lay leaders, religious educators, and ministers from across 7 states. That afternoon, about 40 of us were gathered in a room with Kay. And there, she bared her soul, and as we found out later, risked her body, and spirit, all to tell us that we mattered. That the world needs us, that we are, in her view, the hope for a seriously messed up - broken- world.

No one says this to Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay leaders. We certainly don't say it to each other. We spend time picking apart what we aren't doing well enough yet, the ways we fail to deliver, and we fret together about how small our movement is, and how we don't really matter, and might never. And definitely people outside our tradition don't travel hundreds of miles, overcoming a debilitating and life-threatening illness to stand in front of a room of us and say: you are mosaic-makers, bone-carriers. You are the hope of the world.<sup>1</sup>

You should've seen our faces - we were like - who? *us*? You sure you got the right room?

Kay outlined for us many of the things she saw in us that made her believe this. I'll share just a few with you:

- We have an unquenchable thirst for justice.
- There is room at the table for everyone.
- We hold an intimate connection with and longing for mystery

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<sup>1</sup> I offer gratitude and acknowledgement to Rev. Vanessa Southern for her reflection at the recent Minns Lectures, as I did not have this phrase written down, and re-encountered it again when I read her piece, and remembered again just how powerful it was that she gave us these images.

- Our principles and values - which, she said, offers offer us a great opportunity for personal and congregational reflection on vocation - that is, who we, specifically, are meant to *be*, which is not the same as, though it can help us decide - what it is we are meant to *do*

After she went through her list, she said, the good news I want to offer you is that this potential - it's right here, in all of you, I can see it. It's there. You are the hope of the world.

But the bad news is - you don't seem to see it in yourselves.

And then she told us how growing up, whenever she and her sister would leave the house, her mom would yell after them. She'd call out, girls. Girls, girls. Find your greatness.

And then Kay looked at us. And she said: Find your greatness.

Find your greatness.

What does it take for a people to discover, and then live into their greatness?

What does it take for a diverse people to discover what it is they are particularly called to be, and do, in this time, and this place? Not someone else's greatness, some other community's call, some other person's path and possibility, but our own. The limited, beautiful thing that we alone can do to save the world, to save ourselves

What does it take? Hard work. Especially hard because it's not hard head work. It's hard heart work.

Stumbling, falling. Experimentation. Creativity. Listening, failing to listen, hurt feelings, forgiveness, recovery. Clarity through messing up - no straighter path, I think.

What does it take for any one of us, let alone a whole group of us, a group who've promised to walk together in the ways of the Spirit - to not just find that greatness, but become it?

A willingness to grow, and change. A lot of us think it takes tenacity - and it does. But just as much, it requires letting go.

It takes a good plan, and a willingness to throw the plan out and start from scratch, a lot. It takes time. And money. And, a sense of our human limits, and at least a drop of wisdom to honor them. Or, as one of our hymn tells it, "suffer thy limits." There's a reason we sing that at song at ordinations, those occasions where our earnest ideals are most likely to make us feel that time is infinite, and *we* might be too.

More than all of these maybe, finding our greatness, and then living into it, takes a sense of humor. Taking it all most seriously, but not taking ourselves too seriously. Remembering, This Too Shall Pass -

and not just the things we don't like. The things we love, and that we think define us to our core. This too shall pass.

And more important than all of these still - and where Kay was encouraging us to start that afternoon last April, is that we must first have eyes to see, ears to hear. Eyes to see what our lives are already revealing we are capable of, ears to hear the story that is stirring already within our souls. Because that story is the seed of our particular calling - our mission - our greatness. It's not out there to be found. It's in here, within each of us, amongst all of us.

This is one of the hopes of the appreciative interviewing process that Trina and Sue described for you earlier. That through conversations together, we could reflect on the story that is already here, the beauty that is already within us, and then grow into this positive core. *Appreciate.*

This is a different approach for many of us problem-solving, critical-thinking Unitarian Universalists.

We can break things down like nobody's business, right? We are after all overly represented with folks with graduate degrees - and you know what kind of brain-washing happens there.

No, seriously. In our personal lives, or when thinking about the world, we're really good at analysis, and rational critique. But - sharing stories of what touches us, what holds us together, what stirs us at our core.

This is often uncharted territory.

And inevitably, as we began these interviews and called them "visioning," many of us wondered how this would actually turn into anything resembling a "vision." How could we figure out the way forward if we didn't know what was *wrong*, or what was *missing*?

We had to grow new eyes to see, new ears to hear - and the good news is, we did. The Visioning Team kept the process moving forward even in the midst of some of that confusion, and doubt, not to mention the real obstacle to finding our greatness - what I have learned many of you call "Powder Days," or "Ski School," but what I call "low attendance." But we did, overcome, all of this.

As Trina and Sue summarized, the process helped weave together an already-existing and yet newly growing story, the story of this congregation's shared greatness.

There were stories about Circle Suppers, about singing on Sundays, about silence. Many of you talked about the blessing it's been to be here at Third Street, in the Calaway Room, what a perfect fit it has been for us since moving from Bridges last summer. And with gratitude you considered the care and time it takes to set up for services an increasing number of Sundays this year, creating together this place for new and old friends, a sanctuary.

There were tales about serving dinner at Extended Table, about gathering in small groups to learn together - at Fellowship Sundays, and in Bright and Spirited Path, these times set aside for growing in Spirit, and tales about kids asking to come see their friends at church.

You remembered the Peace Corps celebration in September, and that that moving moment when the alumni stood up, and when Claire and John offered their stories. I still get chills. And many of you remembered the Blessing of the Animals up at Colorado Animal Rescue - I'll confess when I think about it, I mostly think about that goat and the guinea pig. But then I remember the sky, and the sun, and all of you, and guests from the community, celebrating our pets, and their and our place in the web of creation.

Of course our story was especially vibrant in the celebration we offered at Winter Solstice. With this place overflowing with kids and adults, and music, and the puppet show, and then that bonfire. For ourselves, for our community, that night, we didn't just welcome the light, we became it.

Many of you shared in your interviews how much it meant to get a call when you were sick or had been gone for a while, or to be the one calling. And others shared how surprised they were to be trying out spiritual practices, and what a blessing they'd found it to be bringing things home from Sunday into their every day life.

And then two last things I'll share from these stories - well, they aren't anything any one of you could've shared because they require looking at the whole - but they are my favorite parts. First, to see members at all giving levels supporting a ministerial fund, helping to build that foundation for a full-time minister. This in addition to plate and pledging contributions that brought our budget to over twice what it had been a couple years ago. It is such a clear commitment to making it last, like Sue talked about.

And then - on top of the financial shared giving, this year we've had over 50 people volunteer their service - their time, their talent, their heart - for the common good of this community. Last year, I'm not sure we had fifty people to call, let alone fifty who would say yes! This is a congregation that believes in its own capacity for greatness. And is living into it.

We need to hear each other and ourselves tell these stories, and stories like them - all the time. Because we forget, and we fail to notice just how much beauty there is in each of us, just how much good there is amongst us. We forget because the world spends so much time teaching us to be disappointed, teaching us we are not enough, teaching us to not notice, to just keep going, moving on to the next problem, the next struggle.

As Deborah Holder said when she was here a couple weeks ago, the world so loves to throw marbles under our feet. And we find ourselves scrambling and struggling and stuck, unable to connect with all the others around us who might be our refuge, who might be our mirror, who

might be our mosaic makers, able to pick up the scattered pieces and say - what a thing of beauty.

It's not just the world. *We* tend to throw marbles - under our own feet, under each other's feet. We too have been well-trained after all, well-wounded to pass along the pain we've been taught.

For all the goodness within us, for all the joy, you don't have to go far to know, there have also been struggles. There have been failures. Things have not always gone smoothly, feelings have gotten hurt, and words have been exchanged. We have repeated patterns we thought we'd broken out of, and we found our buttons getting pushed in ways we thought we'd moved beyond. We have been well-taught.

I have noticed in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, there is this wall of membership at about 5 years. People become members, enthusiastically, so excited and relieved at our way of doing religion, and then 5 years in, disappear. And when you talk to these people, once close friends who were suddenly gone - they tell stories of being disillusioned - turns out, people in our churches are just as human as anywhere else. Shortsighted and difficult. Stubborn. And I don't just mean the ministers.

And so let's just get it on the table right now, maybe we can avoid the 5 year wall: This community is made up of human beings.

And as one church near me likes to post on its wayside pulpit: people are difficult and shortsighted. love them anyway. Love them anyway. You want to summarize our covenant in three words? Love them anyway. I think that was a Lutheran church, by the way - and so maybe we would add to their sign:

People are beautiful, broken, fearful, fascinating creatures still unfolding. Love them anyway. And with your love, they, and you, will be transformed. Love them anyway.

Remember, we talked about love last month - and I defined it as....faithfulness.

How do we discover and then live into our greatness? Faithfulness. Sticking with it when all of us break our vows a thousand times. Acknowledging when we have been unkind, spiteful, and driven by hurts we thought we'd recovered from. The faithful act of seeking reparation, and forgiveness, for the places where we have broken covenant with one another, where we have not lived up to the promises written on our own hearts. A broken covenant is often more beautiful when reassembled, for the light can shine through the cracks. Mosaic-makers, Kay said.

What does it take for any of us to live into the sacred, tender visions of our beautiful hearts?

What will it take for us to.....To be a truly multi-generational community? To develop rich partnerships with social change allies? To create a shared practice where we set aside time for rest? To strengthen our covenant, and to grow in our diversity? To make it last?

What does it require? Faithfulness. Accountability to a greater whole. Covenant. Commitment.

Commitment can feel like hostage taking, when it binds us to those things which are not aligned with our hearts work. But as the great poet says, we are not here to take prisoners, we are here to surrender more deeply to joy. This is the irony of any right commitment - we bind ourselves up to the practices of our passions, and in doing so, we make ourselves more free. Free to become the selves we yearn to be, free to live into our call as hope for a broken world.

In the coming weeks, you will be invited to make this commitment - starting at next Saturday's party. And whether you've been connecting with this community for a few months, or over a decade, you're all invited. Because unlike other communities, there is no "them" that sets the agenda here, determines the cause, and tells us our dreams. You've heard it this morning - it's *all our own* dreaming, all our own particular call. And just the same, there is no "them" that makes this dream a reality. It is supported through the money we can raise, right here. It is supported through our giving, our generosity, our belief in doing something freely because it is what we are meant to do, our particular piece of saving the world.

Friends, I have been watching. For a year and a half now, I have been listening carefully. And I have traveled miles, left my family behind repeatedly (and they are very cute), given so much time, and energy, and care. And I do this because, I believe you are the hope of the world. I see it. This community has great potential, a great story of possibility. And the task ahead is simply to live into this story. Become the good people I know you to be. Become the transformative, healing community I know you to be.

Friends, find your greatness.

Namaste, and amen.