

**Deeply Religious: Love is a Verb**

**By Rev. Keith Kron, visiting from UUA**

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**Time for all Ages: Chester's Way by Kevin Henkes**

**Meditation: The Summer Day by Mary Oliver**

**Reading: Faith by Maya Ajmera, Magda Nakassis, Cynthia Pon**

**In our world there are many faiths. We celebrate our faith in many ways. We pray. We chant and sing. We read our holy books. We listen to and learn from others. We cleanse ourselves. We visit our holy places. We observe holidays in our homes or places of worship. We celebrate with festivals. We mark the important events of our lives. We show our faiths through what we wear and through what we eat and drink. We care for those around us and the lives that have sustained us. We respect others, making friends, and building peace. We give to others, and we help those in need. Most of all, we hope.**

## **Sermon**

**The good news is that I never quite got the hang of the Southern Baptist church, but then, like Mary Oliver, I don't know what a prayer is.**

**Twenty five-years ago I walked into a Unitarian Universalist church for the first time. There was no prayer, no hymns praising Jesus, no fire and brimstone. There was a surprisingly less than dapper group sitting in chairs looking at something that was not a cross—and some were drinking from coffee mugs. I was the best dressed person in the church.**

**This is different, I thought to myself. But it all felt honest and real and respectful. And the church at the time was celebrating it's 35th anniversary and celebrated by ending the service by going outside, circling the building, and giving it a hug.**

**Love is a verb.**

**It was the next Sunday where I knew I had found my faith. The service that morning was about abortion. Two women who had an abortion spoke. The minister reflected on his thoughts on abortion. There were no judgments, other than a deep respect that all 3 people had shared honestly.**

**The announcements included a pitch for the new adult religious education class, Building Your Own Theology. I didn't know there was a faith where not was only deviation from the Christian theology allowed, but I could build my own. I returned that evening after the service and began to work.**

**Within a month, I was a member. Within a year and a half I was teaching About Your Sexuality, serving on the Program/Worship Committee, had led a district workshop, was on the church board, and had been recruited to teach a workshop at UU Summer camp. I quickly, like in the children's story I read, had become Lily, or Victor—I'm never sure which.**

**By the time I went off to seminary in 1993, I had been elected to the planning committee for our General Assemblies, been president of the church camp, and served on my church's board for 7 years in a row.**

**Three years in seminary and now in 15th year at the UUA, I've traveled to over 400 Unitarian Universalist congregations across the continent and I've, like any person who pays attention, have learned far more than I have taught.**

**I want to share with you some of the things I've learned in 25 years of being a Unitarian Universalist about our faith. It's not everything but more than enough for one sermon.**

**A couple of years ago while crossing the border into Canada, the customs official asked me what I did for work.**

**"I'm a Unitarian Universalist minister," I said. The customs official said, "I've never heard of that. Tell me about it."**

**For the record, I hate the elevator speech exercise. You might have heard of the challenge. Explain your faith to a total stranger in the time it would take your elevator to climb six floors.**

**I flashed to my first Christmas home after I started seminary.**

**Surrounded by some 20+ relatives and Christmas Eve dinner, someone suggested that I should offer the prayer. I groaned inwardly and refused, saying I really didn't want to and we hadn't had that class yet in seminary. Of course, I didn't see there was no class at UU seminary on how to pray, but I digress.**

**The difference this time was that the customs officer would not only not laugh when I didn't do as asked, but she would also forbid me to enter into Canada.**

**So I jumped in with a short history lesson:**

**We are a combination of two faiths. The Unitarians believed in one God and not a trinity. The Universalists believed all were going to heaven. Both were very progressive and began to work with one another. In 1961, the two faiths merged to form Unitarian Universalism.**

**Today in our faith, you would a wide range of theologies from theists to deists to atheists to humanists to Christians to Jews to Pagans to Buddhists to whatever theology a person built for themselves as long as she or he chose to respect the path of other seekers. Our services come out of the Christian church, though you might see us use words like meditation than prayer, opening words as opposed to a call to worship, and I could go on. We do come out of the Christian tradition that way, but we tend to be a little more unique.**

**In other ways, we're more like Eastern religions in that being a Unitarian Universalist isn't so much about how many church services you go to, but how you lead your life in the world. Do you have respect for all people? Do you believe that all life is interconnected? Do you live and work justice, equity, and compassion? Do you seek truth?**

**I looked at her hoping it was enough. Does that provide enough information about who we are, I asked.**

**One more question. Your church sounds so different from anything I knew of church. I live in Vancouver, where could I go and visit one?**

**I told her of the church on Oak and 49th, that a delightful man and friend of mine, Steven, was the minister of the church, and that services were on Sunday mornings. With a smile she handed me passport, said thank you, and let me enter Canada.**

**One of the most significant things I have learned is that we are a unique culture in North America.**

**This became even more apparent I was training to learn how to lead workshops on racism. I apprenticed watching two Lutheran groups go through the training. What struck me more than anything else was how much they needed to be shamed and scolded, that seeing racism as a sin they committed was a necessary part of the training.**

**I also watched what happened when the same training was tried on Unitarian Universalism. To say it backfired, would be an understatement. In fact, we kept trying and kept getting nowhere. We**

**actually set our work against racism back some years by trying to be Lutheran in our efforts.**

**Interestingly, leading a training for the Quakers was similar in that shame didn't work for them either, but they were different in that had an even harder time seeing that they couldn't just work on racism without working on themselves. They wanted to fix racism in others even more so than we do and were less likely to see their own piece in the systematic nature of racism.**

**So I have learned how unique we are in the religious world.**

**Yet while we are different, within Unitarian Universalism we are far more like Chester, Wilson, and Lilly than in being different. In fact I can lead a training pretty much anywhere in the country in any UU congregation regardless of size and hear the same questions, whether it's in San Francisco or Williamsburg, Anchorage or Miami, Phoenix or Boston.**

**A year ago I visited the Dallas church, a church of some 1200 people and growing. It was one of the most loving and friendliest places I've ever been. I watched after the service, the ministers of the congregation go up to a church member and say, "that person over there is new. Go and talk to them." And the member would without questioning why.**

**I wondered how they were able to do this, because I had not seen another congregation do this, especially a large congregation. But then soon after I learned some of their history that explained their culture. John Buehrens, former President of our denomination, tells this story about the church in Dallas where he formerly served:**

**During the Great Depression, the church closed its doors for a time. When it reopened, in a rented hall downtown, it put a sign outside: "All are welcome." One Sunday, the fellow who'd been hired to clean the hall asked the minister, "Do that mean me?"**

**Assured that it did, the minister then had to face the fact that no church in the city at that time was racially inclusive. He had the Board pass a resolution that this one now was. Only to find that the chair of the**

**hospitality committee, a woman from the Deep South, who had married a Unitarian from the north without much changing her regional racial prejudices, she was not only opposed but given to muttering about it. Other members came to the minister saying that she had to be removed from her sensitive position.**

**“No,” he replied, “we must simply tell her to be welcoming to everyone; then we must try to love her all the more, till that changes her heart.”**

**I could tell that moment had pervaded the culture of the congregation. Culture of a congregation does seem to matter. As an example, I can now tell after a congregational visit, if a congregation has been served by a minister with an alcohol problem.**

**Here’s another example. I saw a congregation that was unlike any other Massachusetts congregation I had preached at. It was friendly. And chatty. To newcomers.**

**I discovered in working with them, unlike nearly every other Massachusetts congregation, that this congregation had more people**

**who had moved into the area, that 60% of the congregation was from somewhere else. Often when I do a workshop in a Massachusetts congregation 2/3 to 3/4 of the congregation has lived in the area most of their lives.**

**I see this most often in the success of ministers. Does a minister know the culture and geography of a congregation that she or he is moving to? Does she or he understand that being a UU in Texas is slightly different than being a UU in Georgia or in Central California.**

**That's another reason for the success of the Dallas church. The new minister who grew up in greater New York City and whose first congregational settlement was in Boston, loves the Dallas UU culture. He says how incredible it is and how fortunate he is to be minister in a congregation where people really need their faith, that the conservative nature of the South and Texas makes being a minister very rewarding.**

**Culture does matter. Geography does matter.**

**Dallas may spread the gospel of Unitarian Universalism through feeling good, but in reality we do our best evangelism through social justice work. Whether it's a Standing on the Side of Love event, marching in the Martin Luther King, Jr. or gay pride parade, or supporting the Muslim community as we did so often all over the country after 9/11. When we speak our values, so many people realize they are not alone, that there is a place that will have their back. As a brief aside to that, the Muslims in Knoxville rallied to our side after the shooting in our church over a year ago.**

**I realized I had learned that when I was in Salt Lake City over 10 yrs ago.**

**It was a year before our first General Assembly there. I had gone to work with local congregations to figure out how to do a public witness event in support of b/g/l/t people. I walked off the plane and into baggage claim where I was greeted by a huge sign that read, "Welcome 1998 Southern Baptist Convention." It was starting that day.**

**I arrived at my hotel and the desk clerk asked me if I was there for the convention. When I said no, she breathed a visible sigh of relief. I asked her about that.**

**She told me she was a Mormon and that the Baptists were bringing over 3000 people to walk the streets to try and convert Mormons to Southern Baptism.**

**Later that evening I was walking to a restaurant to meet with some UUs from the local congregations. Two men were following me. They introduced themselves and were disappointed to learn that I was neither from Utah nor Mormon.**

**When they asked why I was there, I told them I was a UU minister and that our General Assembly was to be in Salt Lake next June. I was here to do some advance work.**

**After a pause, one said, "I don't believe I've heard of your religion. What do you all believe?"**

**I paused and said, “Well this isn’t going to translate well.” And I explained briefly UUism. They began asking me about Biblical references and I reminded them this wasn’t going to translate well but we kept trying.**

**Then one asked me what kind of work I did for my religion. I smiled.**

**“I’m the Director of the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns.” They flinched.**

**“I’m here to plan an event for next year to support the local bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender community.” They flinched again.**

**They began quoting Bible verses at me, and I reminded them that I had grown up as a Southern Baptist. We could argue about Biblical interpretation and other things, and they tried for a while, in polite a way as they could.**

**“This is my restaurant for dinner. It was nice to talk with you.” I said.**

**They told me they would pray for me. I told them I would pray for them.**

**Deeply religious. Love is a verb. We are at our best when we witness that love to the world around us.**

**Another thing I've learned is that our faith is strongest when we are clear about what we believe—as opposed to rigidly believing what we do.**

**My friend Margaret Beard, the minister in Augusta, GA, refers to some UUs and Shi'ite humanists—people who get so rigid in their thinking that they become, well, let's just say they are not the life of the party. I'll come back to that point later in my list. But the story I want to tell you is this.**

**I had been invited in 1997 to a conference on gender, religion, and sexuality at Vanderbilt's seminary in Nashville. About 40 different faiths had been invited. I found myself on the first day sitting next to John, representing the Church of Christ and Paul, representing the Church of God.**

**We went around and introduced ourselves . When it was John’s turn, he said, “My name is John, I am from the Church of Christ, and we are to the right of the right.” Everyone laughed and he explained how they were to the right of the right.**

**It was my turn. “I’m Reverend Keith Kron. I’m a Unitarian Universalist minister. I am the director of our denomination’s Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns.” I paused for a moment to let the noise settle as John and Paul were noisily scooting their chairs away from me. I went on, “and we’re to the left of the left.”**

**We spent 4 days talking about all things related to gender an sexuality. On the 4th day I was approached by John and Paul and two of their friends, and they told me they’d like to have lunch with me. I thought this will be fun, but I agreed.**

**We started off talking about sports and they were surprised I knew more than they did. Then we got to what they really wanted to talk about. Paul said, “We wanted you to know we’ve listened to you all week. We disagree with nearly every one of your positions. But we also**

wanted you to know, that unlike so many here, we respect you. Because at least you are clear about what you believe.”

I was intrigued by this and thought about it some. It made sense. They valued clarity—even if I saw it as rigidity.

There is something about being clear about what we believe that is appealing and attractive, even seen as leaderly, even by those who disagree.

The last learning I will share that I’ve come to learn in 25 years, or perhaps unlearn is how much of a faith we are, even when others think we are not. As I mentioned in the story from Utah, our faith doesn’t always translate well to others, but it doesn’t have to. It needs to translate well for ourselves.

I think Robert Fulghum, a UU minister famous for talking about learning and keeping things simple said it best when he said, “To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to be mindful. To be mindful is to pay attention. And to pay attention is to sanctify existence.”

**Asking questions about why we are here, what shall we do with our loves, how best do we treat others, and how do we find our place in the larger, wider world—all of these are religious questions.**

**In the reading from the children's book Faith, religions seem to do these basic things.**

**We pray. I've now come to believe that prayer for me is a way to focus my attention onto something—a moment, a person, a situation. I don't have to call on God for that—and as Bob Kimball, the professor of theology at Starr King said when I was in seminary, "I am surprised by how more likely I am to pray if I don't invoke God." I think UU's "pray" more than we think we do—it's just in a way that might be readily recognized by other faiths.**

**We chant and sing. I know as a minister who has to preach a sermon I worship the most during our music. But that's perhaps because I've more often than not selected them and have already read all the verses**

**ahead of time. But we do sing better than we used to and it makes a difference.**

**We read our holy books—for us there are millions of holy books, poems, and quotes. We are very fortunate. Our faith tells us to find them for ourselves.**

**We listen to and learn from others. And we do that pretty well. We can get defensive but mostly we do listen pretty well.**

**We cleanse ourselves. We most often do this by deciding to give something a fresh start.**

**We visit holy places. Perhaps that's why the Mary Oliver poem I read has such appeal for me. Our sacred places are often in places where we live our values.**

**We observe holidays. From all over the planet.**

**We celebrate with festivals. No one does potlucks better or worse than us. My first UU potluck had 7 desserts and a bag of potato chips. But we had a good time and had good company.**

**We mark the important events of our lives—whether it's a child dedication where the congregation dedicates itself to the child, coming of age, becoming a member, a wedding, a memorial service, even joys and concerns—we honor these events always.**

**We show our faith through what we wear—from Birkenstocks and up. Come, come whoever you are, however you are dressed.**

**and through what we eat and drink—back to the potlucks.**

**We care for those around us and the lives that have sustained us. We respect others, making friends, and building peace. We give to others and help those in need. Whether it's the people of New Orleans or a friend in pain, UUs will show up. We are deeply religious. Love is a verb.**

**Most of all, we hope.**

**My hope for you is that you pray in your own way, are clear about what you believe and live that out as best you can. Be deeply religious. And that you celebrate your one wild and precious life and the precious life that is around us. Love. And never forget that love is a verb. That is our way.**