

Unitarian Society of Hartford

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We are the Weaver, We are the Web

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Like so many in our denomination, I came to Unitarian Universalism as an adult, my spiritual path a winding journey that has begun again and again. The faith of my childhood was Catholicism, based in 12 years of parochial school and catechism. As a result, I have a profound sense memory of how to ground myself in a religion, organized or otherwise. The venerable Sister Catherine Mary still lives in my subconscious, rising on occasion to ask me to recite the lesson of the week.

“Gail Syring, the first five books of the Old Testament please.” “Um, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, Sister.” “Thank you. And the seven deadly sins?”

My adult mind attempts not to dwell on the fact that without fail I always forgot wrath. It was with this sense memory alive in my body that I set about learning the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. With the zeal of a convert, I practiced “We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The first principle always struck me as the perfect divine mission statement. A profound truth simply put. Moving on to the following principles, it became clear to me that dexterity of my memory in the sixth grade far exceeds my capacity in the present. As a result, the rest of the list began to resemble a mnemonic word salad. “I know there is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, something about the democratic process and social justice, and then the one about the environment.”

Sister Catherine shakes her head as I become tangled in the language and attempt to anchor it in my mind. It was not until I abandoned my perfectionist pursuit of memorization that I was able to breathe in the spirit of the principles, imbuing myself with the power of their intention. I found that the seventh principle had lost the most in my short hand translation. “We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” had become truncated into

a passionate effort to recycle everything and a bumper sticker encouraging the cars behind me to honor our Mother Earth. These are noble efforts, to be sure. They are at least a passing acknowledgement of personal responsibility in the fate of our planet, but include only the barest understanding of the interdependent web. If the focus of the seventh principle is celebrated only on Earth Day, then we become merely stewards of the planet. In that role, we hold ourselves above the multitude of consciousness in and on the earth rather than recognizing that we are but one thread in a brightly hued tapestry. If we see ourselves as responsible only for our carbon footprint, and not for how we walk alongside the rest of humanity, then we lose sight of our part in the interdependent web of all existence. We become blind to the fact that we are all connected, even when we feel the most alone. It is in those moments, when life is struggle and loss, that we need each other to be reminded that life is also tenderness and joy.

I could not have anticipated the acute effect that the news of the shooting at a UU congregation in Knoxville would have on me. It was as though a thread of the Web of Life had been plucked sharply, and its dissonant chords reverberated through the breastbones of people around the world. How do we make sense of tragedy? Especially those that occur at a distance, but feel so very close? How do we repair the rents in the fabric of the web that were torn by the pain of the people directly affected by the violence and that of the man who felt so removed from his humanity that he had to strike out against others? The tenacity of our connection can be miraculous in times of crisis. Immediate efforts to strengthen the threads between us were apparent in the response of the UUA, the more than 600 online condolences left by people of a multitude of faiths on a page designed for that purpose, and the ten pages of memorial events listed by Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country. We are a people who act out of our grief.

The moments I found the most challenging were the ones that occurred after the point of impact. When the tasks that had so efficiently protected me from the emotion of the tragedy were complete, I was left to face myself. I felt like the stock character in every situation comedy that is sent to boil water in the face of an impending birth. I had never before run out of water to boil. I found myself relying on another old sense memory as my favorite childhood hymn began to echo in my mind. Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest. In each word is the resonance of the God of my childhood, the Divinity of my youth. How often did I imagine the powerful arms of a Father God who would cradle me when I was frightened, find me when I was lost, and assure me that even as I was standing before the power of hell, He would be at my side?

I have often spoken of the power of my chosen faith, the joyful homecoming that marked my membership in this congregation. But, as every beginning is precipitated by

an ending, there is still the lingering grief of the abandonment of the tradition that was my birthright. I must continually reconcile my evolving understanding of the Divinity in all things with the release of the mindset that was my solace, my security and my savior. In this moment of deep sadness, I found myself walking through the burning flames with no assurance of my safety and fearing that I would be given no rest.

It was in that moment of despair that I found grace. The hymn opened up for me like a torah, a psalm, a gospel, like an apocalypse! I realized that **we are the interdependent web of all existence**. No matter the nature of divinity in the Universe, regardless of whether we worship at the altar of faith or physics, we, by the very nature of our existence are one. No matter what grief or joy we experience in our lives, there are those who have walked these paths before us. Regardless of the nature of our circumstances, the variety of our experiences or the flavor of our understanding, we can rest in the arms of our ancestors, our contemporaries and our descendants. Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest. In our grief and in our joy, we can fall back into the connected threads of the interdependent web of all existence. Not the diaphanous strands of silk imagined by spiders, but the glorious safety net of each person, standing together in imperfect majesty. Poet Robert Bly lives in this connection with these words: "Something opens our wings, something makes boredom and hurt disappear. Someone fills the cup in front of us, we taste only sacredness."

We are not only the stewards of the planet. We are the weavers and the web, forever connected to each other and to the consciousness of the Universe. We are a priesthood, ministering to each other, filling empty cups with sacredness. L. William Countryman illuminates this mystery in his book, Living on the Border of the Holy:

"In one sense, priestly ministry is the most ordinary thing imaginable. All our lives, we are repeatedly in the position of finding, revealing, explaining and teaching-or, conversely, of being led, taught, and illuminated. Everyone is the priest of a mystery that someone else does not know: how to construct a budget, how to maneuver through the politics of the workplace, how to roast a turkey, how to win the affections of the girl or boy to whom one is attracted. The experience is so common that much of the time we do not notice it at all. We are all constantly serving others as priests of mysteries known to us and not to them. And we are constantly served by those who know what we do not." Countryman goes on to posit: "Perhaps our most common experience of priesthood-and often our most powerful one-is found in friendship."

My friends are my chosen family, much as Unitarian Universalism is my chosen faith. There are no more powerful examples of inherent priesthood than the men and women who share my life, and there are no words numinous enough to illustrate the depth of my love for them. We all have those people in our lives, the ones who love us so well

that our joys are their celebration, our grief their sorrow. We can feel our connection to them in the ether even when they are worlds away. This connection, this energetic thread can be felt through a practice called kything, the art of spiritual presence. First, we center ourselves in our bodies as if preparing for meditation, focusing on the intention, I am present to myself. Then we imagine the face of the person we wish to connect with, for as Aristotle notes in his treatise On the Soul, “the soul never thinks without an image.” As we imagine them, we hold the intention I am present to your spirit. Finally, we make a choice to create the union between our beloved and ourselves an inner reality, we are present to each other.

Close your eyes for a moment, and allow the faces of the precious people who are called to minister to you to come to mind. Notice how simply thinking of them creates a connection, a moment of kything, a spiritual presence between you. Feel the energy rising as our kything expands to include every soul in this room, reaching out through time and space to connect with all existence. This is how the web is maintained, how our connection to all things is renewed and replenished. Our love and ministry to each other invites us to let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within our hearts. Moreover, it allows us to see the face of God in each other, and live.

We are constantly serving each other, lifting each other up, attending to our broken places, celebrating our joys and accomplishments. As we share the mysteries that are in our hearts and minds, we are filled with the mysteries of others. We are the interdependent web of all existence, from which we can never be parted. In that spirit, let us go forth to serve each other in both divine and ordinary ways, and thus in community, to give each other rest.
