

**Who We Are: A Sermon on Unitarian Universalist Identity (and a little about Stewardship)**  
**A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist**  
**On February 5, 2017**  
**By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia**

I was on study leave for two and half weeks but out of the pulpit for a month. And what a month it's been. In truth, I needed the time to grind my teeth, wring my hands, tame the monkeys in my mind, and look ahead. But I'm glad to be back and to be back today. In these wild times there is no other place I'd rather be than with Unitarian Universalists. A month or so ago we shared a reading by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. Among other wise words she said: we (though she was speaking more generally) were made for these times. I'll tell you why.

Now it helps if you understand "who we are". That wasn't actually going to be the title of this sermon – but it's what I wrote down as a place holder in the liturgical calendar and I didn't change it – so it's what our administrator had to work with. Yet, who we are – what our identity is as a movement of faith – is nothing short of amazing.

A beloved professor of mine in theological school, the Reverend Ron Engel, called Unitarian Universalism the Democratic Faith. Now, by that he didn't mean the faith of the democratic party – he meant that we are a faith of the people, by the people, and for the people – and – actually, he meant more than that – but we'll touch on that later. We're fond of pointing to the fact that ours is the religious tradition that influenced our founders. When Ben Franklin was in Britain, he worshipped at the Unitarian Church in London that had been founded by the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey. However, Lindsey was closer to and in correspondence with Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Priestley. We can criticize Jefferson, justifiably, for his failure to extend his battle for the freedoms of white men to all people – still, his language has been used for achieving countless freedoms. Writing to Lindsey in 1802, Jefferson said:

“In the great work which has been effected in America, no individual has a right to take a great share to himself. ... we feel that we are acting under obligations not confined to the limits of our own society. It is impossible not to be sensible that we are acting for all mankind...”

So wrote Jefferson to his friend at a turning point in history – scientific, religious, and political – when people recognized that human reason and experience were constantly expanding, that knowledge could be grasped by virtually everyone, that it was fortune and not divine assignment that made kings, that priests were merely human, and that the soul of no person counted more than the soul of another.

Out of that came the realization that it wasn't a God-Given few who should rule – but that the holy mind of understanding within and among the people must be cultivated, drawn upon, and drawn together to shape what the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer calls a politics worthy of the Human Spirit.

The roots of this faith and of our nation have grown in this same soil – the soil of the enlightenment and the spirit of an ever expanding freedom and equality. But, such democracy does not come naturally to us human creatures. Little, in fact, does come to us naturally – except the desire to survive and, still, most infants have to be taught how to do that. Democracy and freedom, for that matter, have to be learned and practiced to thrive.

When I was very young, a movie came out about Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. I wish that we could claim either one of them... Anyway – I remember scenes in which little Helen would howl, cry, and thrash about breaking things. To the viewer it was noisy

and chaotic. In Helen's head it must've been all silence and darkness. She had to learn language, order, and relationship in order to express herself, thrive, and connect with other people and because of her remarkable teacher, she did.

Unitarianism and Universalism arose in a world that, to me, seems as oppressive as such silence and darkness must, early on, have seemed to Keller before she learned to understand, to see with more than her eyes, to hear with more than her ears. It was a world in which humanity was seen as debased, degraded: incapable of choosing good without the threat of punishment. In spite of or in resistance to that – there were visionary folk who believed in the human capacity to choose good and to have empathy. Channing, wrote in his sermon *Likeness to God*

“the likeness to God... belongs to man's higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind. In proportion as these are unfolded by right and vigorous exertion, it is extended and brightened. In proportion as these lie dormant, it is obscured. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity. It is the resemblance of a parent to a child, the likeness of a kindred nature... divinity is stirring within the human breast, and demanding a culture and liberty worthy of the child of God ...”

Instead of seeing humanity as lowly, inert clay, Unitarians advanced a belief in a creature who required guidance, education, freedom, and respect to reveal the better angels of our nature. The Universalists rejected the idea of a vengeful, punitive deity and, instead, testified that in the presence of guidance, education, freedom, and love humanity would choose the good. 18<sup>th</sup> century Universalist and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush, wrote: “A belief in God's universal love to all his creatures, that he will finally restore all of them that are miserable to happiness, is a polar truth... It establishes the equality of [humanity]”

These are remarkable and deeply religious assertions. I give thanks for the time, at 15 years old, that I stumbled upon this faith – through the friendliness of my high school friend Marian Kerr – whose father was president of the Pennsylvania ACLU at the time.

This is not a faith about God or not God; an afterlife, kind of afterlife, or no afterlife; not one teacher or another teacher; not about any one book over all others – all of those things help us to understand faith in individual ways. I suggest that they're each the finger pointing to the moon and not the moon itself – they're the clothes upon the body of spiritual understanding.

Last year I was traveling with my husband. We were often in crowds or had to find one another at a distance. He took this bright orange jacket and, boy, did he ever stand out. In dim cathedrals and on distant paths at low tide, my eye could find him – easily and joyfully. The orange jackets of our spiritual expressions are like that – the way that *what is ultimate* has been revealed in different places, at different times – to people in one era or another, in one corner of the world to another, in languages, music, rituals varying and diverse revealed to mystics, poets, composers, artists, prophets, teachers, scientists, and every one of us here.

Religion has always been about the nature of the human soul – the nature and possibility of human being. Who and what am I? Who and what are we? What draws us together is that through and beyond all of our gloriously different expressions and understandings of the divine – we share as sacred the understanding that love, learning, justice, and interdependence can make this world into a heaven and the lack of those things – or the failure to recognize them, into hell.

There's another aspect of the democratic spirit in Unitarian Universalism: an equality among our perspectives. More than that, in Unitarian Universalism, at its best, there is the idea that it is in the presence and interplay of these perspectives that the truth is revealed.

I think that I've mentioned before that, when I was a youngster, my parents gave me a book on the world's religions. Secular humanists that they were, they might have thought that

this book would help me in my journey as a young skeptic. The book showed me how deep, vivid, and how dear are these stories around the world – and how powerful their messages. Unitarian Universalism celebrates that: it celebrates the good, the just, the beautiful, and the compassionate as they shine through the human spirit in all its forms.

Our houses of worship exist to cultivate, propagate, promote, celebrate, and proclaim these things in ourselves, in future generations, and in the wider world. And we actually do it every Sunday and as often as we can around the week. We open the world of thought to people of all ages, welcoming questions, exploring together, holding the world as sacred text. We shape minds and hearts to live deeply, love proudly, act compassionately – not to repeat a shared creed but to be vigilantly free and ever responsible – two keys to democracy.

In Worship and Religious Education for all Ages, we learn to articulate our own insights, understandings, and viewpoints and to listen to and respect the insights, understandings, and viewpoints of others. This is the central art of democracy – the art and practice of true exchange. This is what we teach and strive to practice in our houses of worship. Our faith was born hand in hand with the spirit of human freedom and dignity, with the idea of democracy over aristocracy, plutocracy, or oligarchy.

The time-honored freedom of the pulpit allows me latitude, so I ask you to forgive me if you feel differently about our current politics, but this is no time for silence. Adlai Stevenson, confronting the hypocrisy and fear mongering of the McCarthy era, in 1951, said: "When demagoguery and deceit become a national political movement, we Americans are in trouble... all of us." Today, we need folk of integrity, honesty, compassion, and courage – more than ever.

From our congregational polity – which means that no one outside this congregation makes decisions for this congregation – to our structures of governance, to transparent processes of decision making, we practice the art and spirit of democracy.

In 1983, our Unitarian Universalist general assembly voted to add our 7<sup>th</sup> principle. When my instructor, Ron Engel, spoke of the democratic faith, he expanded it by calling it an ecological democracy, where citizenship is understood to include all of life.

In 1965, Stevenson said: "We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserve of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and I will say, the love we give our fragile craft." When this congregation voted to become a Green Sanctuary, 6 years ago, that was a commitment to a deeper democracy.

In the last 9 years, this congregation has formed partnerships with too many community organizations to list here – but enough so that we know that more and more people have been touched by this amazing faith. We've formed partnerships that are generous and gift giving – but even more than that – are creating new relationships and wider community. From moving furniture, to fixing and serving meals, to decorating for Cinco de Mayo to showing up at jails, on picket lines, in marches, in interfaith worship, at vigils, and even lobbying in Springfield, you have stepped out into the larger democracy.

And we're going farther all the time. I am so glad to be here because we are stewards of a hopeful future – a future where the hope is not in something or someone beyond us – but in us and in our loving work. This hopeful future is what we make here. But, here does not happen by itself – like democracy – it has to be chosen and made over and over.

It takes space, good space, hospitable, warm or cool, dry, clean, and filled with resources.

From our audio-visual sound systems, our invisible pumps and furnaces, door fobs and cameras, to our bright kitchen, welcoming classrooms and our choir space, offices, our unique

and beautiful grounds, and our spring and summer garden, and this sweet sanctuary – we make countless things happen. You can see a small sampling in your blue insert. But there is so much more – as you stretch to become more alive, more engaged in the world as well as in this place.

Over the last two years, we've built a strong and creative staff team and because of that team, remarkable things have been and will be happening. We are still engaged in the process of Beloved Conversations on Race and in the Black Lives Matter Initiative. We are strengthening our relationship with Palatine Partners in Our Community. Brainchild of our incoming Board President, Christine Organ – we're hosting a Love Your Neighbor Vigil at 7pm on February 15 – to build stronger community connections and strengthen our local sense of democracy. In the early summer, our Coming of Age kids, adult chaperones, our visionary Director of Lifespan Religious Education, Jules Jaramillo, and even I will be taking a Living Legacy journey around landmarks of Civil Rights history in the South and of our own landmarks in that history. We are beginning Family ministry and Full Week Faith to create more resources and opportunities for people of all ages to grow their Unitarian Universalism here and at home throughout their lives.

We have expanded music in worship to include the Peace River Band. We are piloting a children's choir soon – at the request of our children and with the multi-age experience of our gifted Music Director, it should be a wonderful experience for all of us.

We are working on expanding our online presence to include a YouTube channel and have tiptoed into blogging and Instagram.

Our intern minister will be leaving in June, but we'll gradually be building up our capacity to give back to our faith movement by hosting interns 6 years from now. And in the meantime, we will be able to provide some study time to the minister and more funds in our capital reserve.

Being stewards of a hopeful future takes vision, but it also takes commitment: of time, talent, and yes – treasure. For some years, we have set hopeful goals for our budget – but still below our needs and our building, our staff. Still, we have struggled to meet that smaller budget and all that we do is limited by that. Perhaps we haven't communicated enough about what is possible if we can meet a real budget – that fits a congregation and a space of this size. And still, we have gradually grown our staff so that now, provided we sustain this level of staffing, more and more amazing and powerful things can happen.

I could not have imagined this present moment, but I cannot imagine a time when Unitarian Universalism and this congregation were more needed. Just as I am glad to be here now, in recent weeks more people are arriving here – seeking a space of sanity, compassion, dialogue, support, integrity, spiritual depth, responsible freedom, and respect for the human spirit. We are a beacon in the present and we will be blessing to the future. How well we will do that is in your hands – in your time, talent, and treasure.

We are planting free, deep, and wise spirits to grow into the future; we are cultivating our own spirits to be equal to our times. That has always been and will always be our calling. We were made for these times – forged in the same crucible of history that has forged this moment. How fully we can answer is in your hands, in your time, talent, and treasure.

As your minister, I ask you to think about your stewardship of our calling in this faith – a calling that sees, affirms, grows, and asks the best of us – a calling to steward our hopeful vision of the future. I ask you to answer that calling with greater generosity than you had imagined. I ask you to steward that vision with all your heart as I will with mine. We were, in truth and history, made for these times.