

"Living Our Unitarian Universalist Story,"  
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
November 6, 2016

*A sermon is meant to be heard rather than read. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

Reading, "The Task of the Religious Community," Mark Morrison-Reed

"The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

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This past week, I attended a retreat for Unitarian Universalist clergy from across New England. There were over 100 of us at a picturesque retreat center in Greenfield, New Hampshire. We had arrived from Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont. Amidst our re-connecting during social time and our earnest learning during the workshop, I was glad to have done two things. One, watch on the big screen with about a dozen other ministers as the Cubs became World Series Champions for the first time in 108 years. And, two, listen to a civil presidential election forum.

Now, depending on how closely you follow news within our Unitarian Universalist Association, you may or may not know that we are in the midst of a campaign for president of the UUA, our broader denominational association. The election will take place at the upcoming General Assembly this coming June in New Orleans. This is a momentous election because, presumably, given the candidates, come June, we will be served by the first female president of our denomination.

On the first evening of our retreat, we were joined by the three female candidates for president. For nearly two hours the candidates sat side by side and engaged in thoughtful discussion of meaningful questions about the sustainability of our religious institutions, our role in the public sphere, and the future of our faith movement.

On the one hand, I was feeling a little worn out with anything having to do with democratic processes. But, this turned out to be a refreshing experience in what has been, in my opinion, a largely negative general election campaign season with little attention to issues of real consequence.

We are just two days away from Election Day. I know many of us are thinking, "Thank you, God." (Or, whatever, humanist, agnostic, or atheist version of that is most appropriate to you.)

We simply need for this election season to be over. The built-up stress and anxiety is almost too much to bear.

While naming that truth, I also want to say how sad this makes me. How sad I am that the current state of our democracy is such that we simply want and need this election season to be over.

It's sad to me because I believe as our fifth principle states that we ought to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. And, I believe that as people on the search for truth and meaning, that is, as religious people, this election calls on us to bring our values into the public square rather than withdraw from it.

Our worship theme this month is story. We ponder the question, what does it mean to be a community of story? This Election Day is critically important in part because we, the people, are part and parcel of our nation's story and our state's story. It is also important because, we are part and parcel of the story of our faith movement, Unitarian Universalism, and beyond the civic duties we hold, we are called to live spiritual lives grounded in morals and values that inform our participation in all aspects of our lives, including our civic life.

So, as we approach this Election Day, I hope that in our desire to just get through it, we can also draw upon the well of our shared faith. Whether you are a Unitarian Universalist by birth or are finding yourself in a UU community for the first time today, the history and principles and values of Unitarian Universalism are available to you. To hopefully, guide you and inspire you, especially in a time when we some of us may be feeling less than hopeful about the direction of our shared political life.

Now, despite my sermon title, it perhaps goes without saying that there is no single Unitarian Universalist story. Our religious movement is big enough and broad enough that there are in fact many stories at play that define who we were and who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Yet, there does seem to me to be a defining character to this now centuries old religious movement.

The Unitarian Universalist story, at its heart, is the story of people who have been open to revelation of new truth and have committed to finding new ways of living based on those truths. It is a story of people putting their convictions into action, especially when those convictions require action for change.

In 1921, the Rev. Lewis B. Fisher, the dean of the Universalist seminar at St. Lawrence University, provided a memorable description of religious liberalism. "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand," he said. "The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move."

The Unitarian Universalist story, with as much multiplicity as it contains, is a story of a people on the move. Moving toward ever emerging revelations of truth and toward the longed for world of justice and wholeness we can create.

The Unitarian Universalist story is the story of King John Sigismund of Hungary who, in 1568, faced the religious divisiveness of his day and issued the first proclamation for religious freedom called the Edict of Torda, paving the way for a religious tradition based in reason and the search for truth.

The Unitarian Universalist story is the story of Lucy Stone who in 1851 was excommunicated from the Congregational church because of her radical

abolitionism and thus began identifying as a Unitarian. Stone was an early activist for women's rights whose eloquence inspired many to take up the cause of women's suffrage including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The Unitarian Universalist story is the story of Egbert Ethelred Brown who persevered despite many obstacles to pursue his seminary studies at what was then Meadville Theological School and to become ordained in 1912. He was the first black person to be ordained a Unitarian minister. He worked hard to establish a liberal and diverse place of worship first back in his home country of Jamaica and then later in Harlem, NY.

The Unitarian Universalist story is the story of James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo who answered the call to join the civil rights movement in Alabama in 1965 and payed the ultimate price for showing up in solidarity for racial justice and equality.

The Unitarian Universalist story is the story of those working at the front lines of the Movement for Black Lives within Unitarian Universalism to continue the movement for racial justice and those organizing to combat climate change and to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and stand for indigenous rights.

The Unitarian Universalist story is the story of you and me and others who have engaged in the earnest search for truth, and having discovered that truth, know that we can no longer live the old ways, but must forge new paths.

That story continues today, and on Election Day, and it will continue on Wednesday, November 9th regardless of the outcome.

The Unitarian Universalist story is also a story of being in the struggle even when the struggle has worn us out.

The story of the writing of "Spirit of Life," the beloved hymn that we sing almost every Sunday, is one such story. The hymn was written by the songwriter Carolyn McDade. Most of McDade's music comes from a very personal place and that is also true for "Spirit of Life." McDade had (and still has) a deep commitment to social justice issues. In the 1980s, she was especially involved in the movement to oppose U.S. policies in Central America. One night, she was driving a friend home

from one of those meetings. When she got to her friend's home, she told her, "I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the door, and I'll be dust." Her friend just sat and listened which she was grateful for.

Still with that sense of desperation within her, McDade drove home. She sat at the piano in the dark, and what came out was her prayer.

"Spirit of life, come unto me.  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea, move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close, wings set me free,  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me."

The song made its way into UU communities and when our current hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, was being put together in the early 1990s, there was no question that they wanted to ask McDade if it could be included.

This hymn and the story of its creation is an integral part of the Unitarian Universalist story. It speaks to both our desire to move in the direction of compassion and justice and to be held close with love that we might feel the strength we need to continue on our journey.

Though your soul may be weary, remember that the spirit of life is stirring within us and around us giving life the shape of justice. It beckons us to join with it and with our larger religious community in bringing our story of love, justice, and hope into the world especially on Election Day.

There are two tangible things I want to leave you with that you can do to live into our Unitarian Universalist story today and in the next couple of days.

First, you can join in the larger movement to build power here in Central Vermont for a moral agenda that is working to raise wages and benefits for working people, to end homelessness, and to improve the lives of those most at the margins of our communities. For the past few weeks, our UCM Vermont Interfaith Action committee has made available these nonpartisan voter pledge cards. Many of you

have already signed on - thank you if you have. If you have not yet signed a pledge card, I encourage you to fill one and add your name and your voice putting your faith and your love into action to stand for justice and human dignity. These cards will be joined with thousands of others being collected through Vermont and will be used to amplify our voice at the state house advocating for issues of justice and human dignity. Your completed card can be returned to the VIA table in the vestry.

You can also vote your values this Tuesday (or perhaps before Tuesday if you'll be voting early). Our Unitarian Universalist Association provides a helpful tool for thinking about how our seven UU principles can be put into action in the voting booth. You can go to the UUA website, [uua DOT org](http://uua DOT org) to check out the list of seven questions informed by our seven principles to consider as you decide who to vote for this Election Day.

Lastly, I invite you all to just breathe. Attend to your anxiety and to your aspirations these next few days.

I close with these timely words from Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Belletini. This is his poem, "Election Promises"<sup>1</sup>:

I hear the polls  
are going to be open on Tuesday.  
All day.  
Good. I certainly intend to go to them.  
I certainly invite you to go to them and vote too.  
But today I say the polls are not just open on Tuesday,  
I say they are open every day.  
Every hour. Even here. Even now.  
Right now, I am going to vote  
for the robin's egg sky,  
the vanilla clouds,  
the purples shadow spreading  
under the ginkgo tree. I am going to vote for tulips and redbuds.  
I am going to vote for love

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Belletini, "Election Promises," *Sonata for Voice and Silence*.

that does not have  
to run in someone else's circles  
in order to be love.  
I'm going to vote the homeless into homes.  
I'm going to vote the uneducated into classrooms  
that teach them in the way they learn best,  
not the way that would be most convenient.  
I'm going to vote the sick into healing.  
I'm going to vote the lost into belonging.  
I'm going to vote, right now,  
for the right to dream of a world  
where the word politics  
doesn't stop me in my tracks,  
and where the word honor still  
has a few good meanings left.  
I'm going to vote right now  
for the power of free people  
to actually be free,  
no matter who they are,  
no matter who has abandoned them.  
I actually am going to vote for love.  
I am going to vote for truthfulness as the norm, not the exception.  
I'm going to vote for a world that doesn't vote for killing, control and swagger.  
I'm going to vote for you.  
I'm going to vote for me.  
Right now. Right here. Silently. But for real.

May we use the power of our vote  
our choice  
our will  
to bring love and justice and healing  
into the world.

So may it be.