

“Building a New Way”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

selection from “Three Dreams in a Desert” Olive Schreiner

Sermon

I had never heard of Olive Schreiner until a little over a month ago. At the Institute for Excellence in Ministry that I attended back in January, one of our guest preachers was the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Olive Schreiner’s words had inspired one of Rev. Moss’ heroes, Howard Thurman, who had compiled some of her writings into a collection and then had them published.

I find it fascinating that a woman born to English missionaries in the mid-19th century could be such an inspiration to an African-American preacher and theologian, grandson of former slaves, born half a century later and an ocean apart.

Learning of her and just a little bit of her life as a feminist, pacifist, and writer, also reminded me that there are many, many people whose names and stories we will never know who have made a way for us in our journey towards spiritual wholeness, justice and transformation.

Even within this beloved congregation with our 154 year history, there are those who have come before us, some of whom we can name and whose stories we can tell, some of whom remain unknown or perhaps forgotten in history. These spiritual ancestors of ours again and again took part in making that track to the water’s edge.

And, I bet that 154 years ago, or 100 years ago, or even 50 years ago, these beloved ancestors would not have been able to imagine the particular banks we find ourselves

on now, or to have guessed that we would still be here building a bridge to the land of Freedom for all.

When we make our own tracks, we don't know exactly who might follow behind us. We don't know what hopes or intentions they might have for their journey. And, similarly, when we are following someone else's tracks, we don't know exactly why they were headed where they were. Yet, the way they made can still help us get to our own destination. The tracks made for us by those in past generations have helped us arrive here in this moment.

It is a moment of challenge certainly. A moment when our fortitude is tested as we experience setbacks in progress for human and civil rights, environmental protections, and peace and safety for all. It is also a moment of great possibility as we collectively have awakened to the necessity of our engagement in protecting our rights, our dignity, and the values that inspire us towards a just and sustainable world.

Even before facing the particular challenges of this moment, this congregation began to envision how our community could participate in a larger story of engagement and transformation. It was two years ago that this congregation adopted a powerful vision statement describing our congregation in the year 2020. This vision makes clear that our mission carried out to its fullest is life-changing. Here are just a few excerpts from that vision:

“We are refugees and seventh generation Vermonters; we have different abilities and gender identities. We are a safe place for people who have experienced deep trauma, including those who experience addiction, homelessness, and mental illness. We all feel equally at home here.”

“As a congregation, we have engaged in serious study of the underlying causes of violence, poverty, racism, and the climate crisis, and the most effective ways for us to act for justice, peace, and environmental sustainability.”

“Spiritual practice and spiritual seeking continue to center our community. Music, dance and art enrich our worship...To accommodate our growing numbers, we supplement our main Sunday service with worship at other times and places.”

“As the climate crisis continues, we are recognized in Central Vermont as a source of moral and ethical guidance. We support one another to make the difficult and urgent personal changes necessary to live sustainably.”

“Each Sunday, we leave worship and return to our homes, our neighborhoods, and our work feeling supported and inspired to be peacemakers, justice-seekers and loving citizens of our world.”

These are the kinds of aspirations that enliven us as a spiritual community. They are rooted in our congregation’s specific mission and also in the values of our broader Unitarian Universalist religious tradition. We have certainly been moving in the direction of this vision since it was adopted, and we still have a ways to go.

I believe that we find ourselves now at the water’s edge like the woman in Olive Schreiner’s dream. The land of Freedom awaits. The land of Liberation, of Sustainability, of Beloved Community. This land awaits as one destination of our collective journey.

And, what we are nurturing here at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier will help us get there. There are many ways that we can see the transformative power of our ministry and values making a difference.

Young people who are growing up in this congregation are taking leadership in their schools in discussions of racial justice and gender identity and equity. Young people who have been raised in our religious education programs and mentored by adults here are living out our Unitarian Universalist values as visual artists and singers and performers, as social workers and health care providers.

Just one example of this - I have had the honor of writing a letter of recommendation for a scholarship from the Unitarian Universalist Association the past two years for one of our youth, Lucy Jermyn who is now a young adult, and who is studying visual art. Lucy is living out with passion our fourth principle of engaging in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning through their creativity as an artist. Their art is truly inspirational as it challenges gender stereotypes and communicates with boldness ways to resist cultural and political forces that degrade our humanity and to imagine new ways of being.

I was honored and inspired to join with some of you over the past few weeks in public witness joining with our neighbors at Christ Church to proclaim with our presence and our signs that “Black Lives Matter” and on one occasion creating a presence right here on the corner of School and Main Streets in the rain as children were getting out of school. One of our youth from UCM, a fifth grader, joined us with her own homemade sign for the better part of an hour. She told me it was the first time she had ever done anything like that. I trust that it won't be her last.

And, a small but committed group of UCM members have been part of efforts through Vermont Interfaith Action to raise awareness of poverty and homelessness, gathering with other people of faith in strategy sessions and meetings with legislators to organize for changes in policy that get at the root causes of the inequalities and economic hardships faced by many in our community.

There are also many more stories that none of us may ever know and impacts we may never see that are possible because of this community. The person - who with the connection, love, and presence felt in this community - lives through another season of depression and loneliness without acting on their suicidal thoughts. The young person, who having been formed and nurtured in this congregation, pursues a vocation of Unitarian Universalist ministry. The person who, cast out from their religion of origin because of their sexual orientation, finds a spiritual home in this welcoming spiritual community and affirmation of their inherent worth and dignity.

Our engagement in our shared ministry and our nurture of this loving community make this kind of transformation possible.

And, as we look out on the horizon, we also know that the landscape and the context in which we engage in our shared ministry is changing.

The vision this congregation adopted two years ago has taken some of these changes and uncertainty into account.

Yet, what the last year and more has shown us, is just what an unpredictable and destabilizing time it is we live in.

As a broader national and even global community, we are out in the wilderness without many clear signs of how to make our way home. Instead, we are needing to build a new way. To recognize one another as lost. To trust that we have the resources and gifts amongst us to not only survive the wilderness but to lead ourselves towards a more hopeful future.

This is what inspires me about Unitarian Universalism and this congregation. It is our capacity to hold this space of uncertainty by leaning into what we know to be true - that a new way is possible - while also leaning into one another, because we know we can't get there on our own.

As we begin our Stewardship Drive in support of our budget for this coming church year, I hope that we will all keep this greater purpose in our hearts. We have some ambitious goals for the coming church year to expand our Director of Religious Education position to full-time, to add an additional staff position dedicated to fostering deeper connections between our members and friends and the congregation, and to add an additional Sunday morning service to welcome all those who are drawn to the spiritual nourishment that our time of worship offers.

These goals are made in recognition of both the changing needs within our spiritual community and also the changing needs in our broader world that shape why and how we carry out our mission.

The track we have made together and that our ancestors and elders have made ahead of us have led us to this water's edge. To take the metaphor a little bit further, we need to make sure that this bridge we're building together is well-suited for the conditions that we now find ourselves in. The priorities contained within our proposed budget have been carefully thought out to maintain and further develop the strongest and healthiest congregation possible as we journey together.

To support the expansion in our staffing and our programs, we are aiming to grow our budget by about 17%. My spouse, Jared, and I, make our pledge each year together, and we will be increasing our pledge by 17% which is a quarter of my proposed salary increase for next year. This is a stretch for us, but we believe in this congregation and the direction we are headed together, and we are grateful that we are able to increase our pledge in this way.

However you are able to support this congregation with your generosity, in whatever amount, know that it is deeply appreciated and makes a difference. It is our collective resources gathered together that make our vision possible.

The dream that Olive Schreiner wrote of ends with these lines:

“And I dreamed a dream.

I dreamed I saw a land. And on the hills walked brave women and brave men, hand in hand. And they looked into each other’s eyes, and they were not afraid.

And I saw the women also hold each other’s hands.

And I said to him beside me, ‘What place is this?’

And he said, ‘This is heaven.’

And I said, ‘Where is it?’

And he answered, ‘On earth.’

And I said, ‘When shall these things be?’

And he answered, ‘In the future.’”¹

Heaven on earth may seem but a far off dream.

But, with our full engagement and our commitment, it may yet be a possibility.

It probably will not be realized in our lifetime, and certainly not through the ministry of our congregation alone.

But, we can do our part. We can join with the ten thousand times ten thousand feet that beat the ground flat and make that track to where a bridge can be built.

Together, let us make a way to that land of our dreams.

¹ “Dreams” in A Track to the Water’s Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader, edited by Howard Thurman. (Harper & Row, 1973) p. 56.