

“Lean on Me”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Bill Withers, the African American soul music legend who wrote “Lean on Me,” our opening song in today’s worship service, was 18 or 19 years old when he was stationed at a naval base in Pensacola, Florida. He was driving back to his home in rural West Virginia on holiday when a tire blew out on his car on a road in Alabama. He recounts that a man came walking over the hill like something out of the movie *Deliverance*. The man said to him, “Oh, you had a blowout.” Withers is nervous at this point. He knows he is a young black man on a country road in Alabama in the 1960s. But, the man walks back over the hill and returns with a tire and helps him change the flat.

Withers recounts this story in an interview explaining how we came to write the song, “Lean on Me.” He says, “Being from a rural, West Virginia setting, that kind of circumstance would be more accessible to me than it would be to a guy living in New York where people step over you if you’re passed out on the sidewalk, or Los Angeles, where you could die on the side of the freeway and it would probably be eight days before anyone noticed you were dead. Coming from a place where people were a little more attentive to each other, less afraid, that would cue me to have those considerations than somebody from a different place.”¹

He wrote “Lean on Me” with a bit of nostalgia and yearning as he made sense of his new environment in the big city of Los Angeles.

Leaning on one another is something we know a good deal about in Vermont where, like in Withers’ upbringing, the smallness of our communities means closer connections with one another and fosters a kind of neighborliness that we come to depend on.

With “resilience” as our theme this month, I invite us to notice and explore how our interconnection and interdependence in community also helps build our resilience.

¹ <https://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/bill-withers>

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Both our Unitarian and Universalist traditions speak to this interconnection and interdependence.

In his 1841 essay, "The Over-Soul," the Unitarian Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds... Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is related; the eternal One. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love."

Unitarian Transcendentalism affirmed this almost mystical sense of inter-relation with all life and the Divine and our unity with this transcendent force.

Our Universalist tradition tells us that we human beings share a common fate. Universalism insists that this fate is ultimately a hopeful one, a destiny of being enveloped in God's universal Love. Universalists also believed that this love needed to be shared amongst and between people.

The early Universalist theologian, George de Benneville said, "The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members."

So, our Unitarian Universalist roots point us toward the profound reality of our interconnection - with the Divine and with one another. This understanding of interconnection also evolved within our Unitarian Universalist theologies to include an ecological understanding and reverence for our connection with all living beings and with the Earth.

Other religious traditions and philosophies also affirm this profound interconnection, and this notion has propelled social movements.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached these words in his final Christmas sermon in 1967, "It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality."

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I think that something in each of us recognizes the truth of our interrelatedness, recognizes that we are part of this network of mutuality. And we know that this relatedness also means we depend on one another. We depend on others to help carry our own load. Yet, living together with the truth of this interdependence isn't always easy.

Reflecting on Bill Withers' moment on that road in Alabama, I am aware of how much hope and also fear must have been present in him in knowing that the person cresting that hill and approaching him could be someone who might save him or might really hurt him.

In the face of these possible outcomes of our dependence on others, it can be easy to put up our defenses. To wall ourselves off. To guard against possible pain. Leaning on one another requires accepting our own limits and vulnerability. It means being okay asking for and receiving help.

This is a hard one for me. I have always been a fiercely independent person. It has always been difficult for me to ask for help, to admit I have needs I can't meet myself, and to allow myself to be cared for. All of these are essential skills in this endeavor of being human.

There are, of course, moments that have forced me to recognize and accept my dependence on others.

One such moment happened when I was in seminary about a decade ago now. The seminary I attended was located on top of a hill. My daily exercise came from biking or walking up that hill for classes. The hill was also used in the wintertime by seminary students and neighborhood children alike for some epic sledding.

After a big snowstorm one day, my partner and I along with a couple friends brought our sleds and sledding tube up to the top of the hill. The tube was a recent acquisition and hadn't yet been christened. My partner figured it would be a chivalrous act to give me the first turn on the new tube. I sat down and he gave me a push.

It took barely half a second to realize the hill was actually quite slick and the smooth bottom of the plastic tube didn't make for much traction. Soon I was sailing at quite a fast clip down the hill. The hill actually had a dip in it and as I went flying up over the dip

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and back down hard onto the hill I could hear some nearby children in unison let out an awe-filled, “Wooooah.”

With a thud I landed continuing at what felt like record speed. Now, the rational thing to do at this point would have been to bail as not too far ahead was the brick fence that marked the end of the seminary property and the sidewalk on the other side. I was panicked, however, and my reptilian brain seized up and I just gripped the handles on the side of the tube more tightly. Before I knew it, I was slammed into the brick fence and ejected from the tube onto the snow in a motionless heap.

I could hear my partner charging down the hill towards me propelled by fear and love.

“Are you okay?” I could hear him asking.

After several long seconds, I nodded. I wiggled my toes and slowly sat up.

“Woah. Did you see that?” I could hear the neighborhood children asking each other.

I was okay. Nothing broken miraculously. I walked home gingerly and rested the remainder of the day allowing my partner to make me tea and my cat to snuggle up close. I needed to be propped up, literally and figuratively. To be tenderly coddled in my shaken up state.

For me, it took literally slamming into a brick wall to awaken my humility and ability to surrender to my reliance on others.

Despite the theological roots that point us to interconnection, surrendering into relationships is not necessarily something our Unitarian Universalist faith has been particularly strong at. We have more of the “can do” and “will do” attitude.

Take, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who so beautifully wrote of our relatedness to the “eternal One” in his essay “The Over-Soul.” He is probably most famous for his essay, “Self-Reliance,” in which he argues passionately for the independence of the individual especially in one’s thought and opinions. He also, however, warns that community can be a distraction to self-growth.

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So, yes, there are strains in our religious tradition that lend themselves more towards an individualistic orientation than an interdependent one.

And, I don't think we Unitarian Universalists are alone in this. For many of us who have been taught the merits of individualism, it can feel like we are going against the grain to rely on others, to allow ourselves to be part and parcel of the network of mutuality.

Leaning on and into one another requires humility. As my colleague Rev. Karen Johnston says, humility allows us to experience how we are held within the interdependent web of all existence. Leaning into this web of interdependence requires using other spiritual muscles than the ones we, who have been socialized in American cultural norms, are often accustomed to.

It can also be a challenge to use these muscles of interdependence when we feel like there are so many people we cannot depend on. Collectively, we have lost faith in institutional leaders of all kinds — political, business, even religious leaders. Just yesterday, I learned that Jean Varnier, the much revered founder of L'Arche International, an organization committed to improving conditions for people with developmental disabilities, has been found to have sexually abused women over the course of his 35 years leading L'Arche. He died last year and has been, up to this point, considered a living saint. The disappointment for so many who looked up to him and modeled their lives after his is profound.

In her May 1866 address to the Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention in New York City, free-born African American, poet and abolitionist, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who was active in both African Methodist Episcopal and Unitarian churches in Philadelphia said: "We are all bound up together... in one great bundle of humanity..."²

What an image. To be bound up together in one great bundle of humanity. The thing about this bundle is that **all** of the ways we are human together are included - the ways we love and care for one another so compassionately and also the ways we hurt one another. We are vulnerable in this great bundle. Our interdependence can actually be terrifying.

² <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1866-frances-ellen-watkins-harper-we-are-all-bound-together/>

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I know that many of you are watching and are even involved with the unfolding of this presidential primary season with great anticipation and even dread. It can be exhilarating and also frightening to see how reliant we are on others to enact their agency on our behalf - for the good of others. This shared societal endeavor is one of great vulnerability.

Yet, it is more important than ever now to awaken to the reality of our kinship and to affirm that we are bound together “in one great bundle of humanity.”

It is in these relationships that we provide one another salvific kindness, aid, and support.

The Unitarian Universalist educator and scholar, Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin has said, “Ours is not a confessional faith whereby the evidence of your faith is what you confess to believe. Rather, the evidence of our faith as Unitarian Universalists is in the depth and quality of our relationships. The evidence of our faith is in how we love each other and how we affirm and support each other’s full humanity...”³

Unitarian Universalists have been learning more about tending to the depth and quality of our relationships in recent years. UUs around the country have been working in solidarity with one another and immigrant communities in accompaniment of people who find themselves caught in the dehumanizing conditions of our nation’s immigration policies and systems. This has looked like visiting people in detention centers. Bonding people out of detention centers. Attending court hearings. Navigating the ins and outs of asylum application. Sitting through the bureaucracy of obtaining driver’s licenses and social security cards. And, it also looks like laughter together and celebrating small wins.

Right here in this congregation, you all tend to the depth and quality of your relationships with one another and the broader community in so many ways from talking honestly with one another about the prospect of a shared covenant to preparing meals for members and strangers to offering supportive listening to guests of our Thursday evening Warming Shelter to reaching out for help with rides and support through medical challenges.

³ Proclaiming a Black UU Theology, Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, Harper-Jordan Memorial Symposium

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The 20th century liberal theologian and minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian, A. Powell Davies said, “What are we, any of us, but strangers and sojourners forlornly wandering through the nighttime until we draw together and find the meaning of our lives in one another, dissolving our fears in each other’s courage, making music together and lighting torches to guide us through the dark? We belong together.”

We belong together. To live into this truth, we must see one another as family. We must lean into our kinship. We grow stronger and more resilient as we tend to our relatedness knowing that the quality of our relationships is the evidence of our faith.

With courage, let us keep leaning into one another.

Let us know one another as beloved.

May our love guide us into deeper community and into greater bonds of humanity with friend and stranger alike.

So may it be.

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