

## “Religious Longing and Belonging”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

### Reading

Grounded Someplace Deeper, Mark Ward<sup>1</sup>

“Reason is an important tool, sure — an essential arbiter of truth claims about the world. But religion is grounded someplace deeper, where we experience the joy of living and are connected intimately with all that is. Religion is an entirely human experience but one that we get in touch with using some pathway other than intellectual argument. In religion, we seek to address not just what is but also what we hope for and what we dedicate ourselves to. We rely on it to navigate the shoals of love and grief, compassion and estrangement, gratitude and disappointment, and mystery and wonder.

As [David] Bumbaugh suggests, religion deserves reverence; it requires a vocabulary and a theology. This theology demands no intervention of unearthly forces but invites us to open ourselves to different ways of living and learning. It considers “the human” a niche in the vast, intertwined plenitude of being. And just what is our niche? We are fragile, fallible sorts for whom just being is a blessing and love is a polestar.”

### Sermon

When I visited my hometown of Chicago this past August, I experienced two events that illustrate contrasting sides of the story of organized religious life today.

Story One: The first school I attended as a child was part of the local Catholic parish, Transfiguration Church. My son and I went out for a walk in the neighborhood and headed in the direction of the church property a few blocks away from my childhood home.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/grounded-someplace-deeper>

I had heard that the church and school were being torn down, and I wanted to witness the site of demolition first hand. Years ago, the convent adjacent to the school had been sold off to a developer and turned into condominium units. And now, the rest of the property was headed for a similar fate and being torn down to be replaced by future duplexes and condos.

Though I had not stepped foot in either building in nearly 30 years, it was still jarring to peek through the covered, barbed wire fencing and onto the piles of shattered bricks and dust. Here was a site of a religious community that had come to an end, the remaining few faithful scattered to other parishes.

The scene of demolition felt emblematic in a way of my own faith journey which includes an eventual sharp turn away from my Catholic upbringing. Perhaps this is true for you as well. Many Unitarian Universalists arrive into the fold having been raised in other religious traditions. We leave those religious beliefs and experiences in the past - a mass of rubble as we construct for ourselves new theologies and new bonds of religious belonging.

Those who are lifelong UUs may not see quite as dramatic scene in your religious rearview mirror, but perhaps you, too, can notice the significant shifts and changes within this faith movement over the years.

The landscape of religious life has changed dramatically within this country and beyond and continues to change.

In contrast to this experience of witnessing the dismantling of a religious site and community, I experienced something profoundly different attending, for the first time, the Parliament of the World's Religions.

Over 7,000 people gathered in a convention center on Lake Michigan from 95 countries and over 210 spiritual traditions. When I arrived along with thousands of others streaming in for the opening day, we were greeted by the beating of drums, chanting of prayers, a medley of language, and people dressed in a vibrant array of garments and costumes.

The place was vibrantly alive with humanity in its many expressions.

People were there who practice relatively new religious traditions. I would count Unitarian Universalism among these younger faiths. And, there were people there from the world's oldest

religious and spiritual traditions, Hindus, Jains, Zoroastrians, Jews, Buddhists, Druids, those who follow Taoism. All under one roof.

Each day there were hundreds of workshops, ceremonies, and rituals bringing people together to discuss the spiritual grounding for addressing the climate crisis, sharing lessons from interfaith dialogue, grappling with the global rise of religious nationalism, and dancing together for healing.

One of the most powerful events I experienced at the Parliament took place in a large outdoor tent just outside the convention center. Within those makeshift walls, Sikhs from all over the world had gathered to prepare and serve *langar*, a meal offered at no cost to anyone who shows up. *Langar* is regularly offered at gurudwaras around the world. It is an egalitarian meal that engages volunteers across generations in selfless service to the community.

When we entered, we were asked to cover our heads, remove our shoes, and wash our hands. We then filed in and sat down shoulder-to-shoulder and back-to-back in orderly rows on the mat-covered ground. We were each handed a plate and a cup of water. And, volunteers came down the aisles to spoon ladles of dal, rice, salad, and other vegetarian dishes onto our plates.

Volunteers of *langar* are encouraged to recognize the Divine spark within each person who comes to partake in the meal and to treat each person with extravagant hospitality.

Sitting among hundreds of people, being served a simple and filling meal, and joined in a spirit of generosity and love is a religious experience I will hold onto for a long time.

It was a beautiful example of what is possible when we come together in a spirit of inclusivity, hospitality, and curiosity and how religion can guide us toward one another rather than apart.

The parliament was filled with these kinds of moments when the human longing for spiritual connection and the expression of love and grace were made evident.

As the Executive Director of the Parliament of the World's Religions put it, "During those 5 days, we lived in a shared joy for what the world can be when people of faith committed to justice, peace, and sustainability come together."

Religions is often maligned today for the violence and division it causes. And, it is true that too many people justify their quests for domination and power with a belief in religious supremacy.

The Rev. High Priestess Phyllis Curott, program chair of the 2023 parliament, put it this way: “Today we are all standing at a pivotal moment where history seeks to repeat itself. It is a moment of urgency - an existential global scourge has returned...It is a stark reality that transcends borders, cultures and faiths. A reality that demands our collective action and moral courage. As people of faith and spirit we have a singular responsibility. Here is the truth we must all confront and change. Despots are misappropriating religions to justify the unjustifiable. Tyrants proclaim themselves saviors posturing with religious symbols and exploiting language to affirm their power. And tragically, there are religious leaders who stand beside them and religious communities who cheer them.”

The theme of this year’s parliament attempted to take on this challenge: A Call to Conscience: Defending Human Rights and Freedom.

The original vision behind the parliament saw a role for religious communities in supporting global peace through engagement and dialogue. The historic first convening of the World’s Parliament of Religions took place 130 years prior in Chicago, and it was created as a global platform for engagement of religions of the east and west. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians, and adherents of the Shinto and Zoroastrian traditions met together for the first time in modern history.

A sixteen-person General Committee was charged with settling on a mission and program, inviting participants, and hosting the event. The Unitarian minister, Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones served as the Committee's Executive Secretary, and the Universalist minister, Rev. Dr. A.J. Canfield also served on the committee.

One of the most notable speeches was given by Swami Vivekananda who reflected on the universality across religions. He said: "Every religion is only evolving a God out of the material man; and the same God is the inspirer of all of them. Why then are there so many contradictions? The contradictions come from the same truth adapting itself to the different circumstances of different natures.”

While many people found inspiration in the lifting up of commonality and unity across religions, others did not hesitate to point out how religion had also failed to adequately address the struggles of those being treated as less than human in society.

Fannie Barrier Williams, an African American woman and member of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Chicago, delivered a speech in which she said, “What can religion further do to advance the condition of the colored people? More religion and less church. . . . Less theology and more of human brotherhood, less declamation and more common sense and love for truth, must be the qualifications of the new ministry that shall yet save the race from the evils of false teachings. . . . The tendency of creeds and doctrine to obscure religion, to make complex that which is elemental and simple, to suggest partisanship and doubt in that which is universal and certain, has seriously hindered the moral progress of the colored people of this country.”<sup>2</sup>

Then and now, we want to know that religion can make a positive difference in our lives, including by challenging unjust systems that lead to suffering. If we are going to be a part of a religious community, even this one, we seek evidence that the religion we are a part of can lead to moral progress and also lift us out of our despair.

In this particular moment, religious affiliation has become less important in most people’s lives in this country. In 1998, a survey of Americans showed that 62 percent of those who responded said that religion was very important to them. In 2023, that percentage had dropped to 39 percent. Those who identify as religions “nones” now make up 29 percent of American adults compared to 23 percent in 2016 and 19 percent in 2011.<sup>3</sup>

Jessica Grose is a nonobservant Jew who still holds a strong cultural identity. She says, “I don’t miss shul and have little desire to return, yet I feel a bit heartsick about not passing down Jewish rituals with more consistency for my children.” Ms. Grose is also a writer for the New York Times who wrote a series earlier this year about Americans moving away from religion.

She shared many stories submitted by readers of the changes in their religious identities.

These were stories of people who questioned the beliefs of the religions of their upbringing - Christian, Jewish, Muslim and otherwise. People who couldn’t square their inherited beliefs with

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<sup>2</sup> <https://speakingwhilefemale.co/religion-williams/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

the suffering of the world. People whose connection to a particular religious identity had faded with loss of relationships or vocation.

In all these stories, however, there remained a searching presence and a desire for spiritual connection with oneself and others.

At its best, religion and religious community can be sources of meaning and authentic relationship. In our religious community, we search together and support one another in discovering on our own those sources of meaning and truth. We offer connection, community, and care. We challenge one another to live in ways that align with the north stars of our moral and ethical compasses.

UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed writes: “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.”

We come together as a Unitarian Universalist congregation to practice religion. Not a religion based on creeds. Nor a religion that claims to be the one and only true way of living. But a religion grounded in practices of love, inclusivity, and transformation. A religion in which we continually discover our connectedness and in which we are continually inspired to act for justice as members of a larger community.

And, as Mark Ward writes: “In religion, we seek to address not just what is but also what we hope for and what we dedicate ourselves to. We rely on it to navigate the shoals of love and grief, compassion and estrangement, gratitude and disappointment, and mystery and wonder.”

Despite all the egregious harm that has been done and is currently being enacted in the name of religion, I believe that religion still endures because of its ability to match the depth of the questions we humans have about life and death and everything in between and its capacity for wonder, awe, and reverence.

Together, let us find those pieces of our religious heritages that still lead us toward one another as a human niche in the vast, intertwined plenitude of being.

In the words of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;  
its temple, all space;  
its shrine, the good heart;  
its creed, all truth;  
its ritual, works of love;  
its profession of faith, divine living.

So may it be.