

“Faith, Reconsidered”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
February 15, 2026

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 Robert R. Walsh, “Fault Line,” from *Noisy Stones: A Meditation Manual*, Skinner House Books, 1992.

Did you ever think there might be a fault line passing underneath your living room:
A place in which your life is lived in meeting and in separating, wondering
and telling, unaware that just beneath
you is the unseen seam of great plates
that strain through time? And that your life, already spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
sent off in a new direction, turned
aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for? ...

Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that’s often torn but always healing. There’s
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

Sermon

In the fall of 2023, I faced a low point. One might even call it a crisis of faith. I sat in a room full of clergy colleagues at a ministers’ retreat feeling very burned out.

We had lived through three years of COVID — the shutdown and constant adaptation — followed by the flood in the summer of 2023. I was exhausted and feeling unsure of my vocational path. I questioned the impact I was having. I remember staring down at carpeted floor,

tracing the pattern with my eyes, wondering if I had anything left to give. Ministry in that moment didn't feel like the ministry I had signed up for.

And I know I wasn't alone in this feeling. People across professions and life paths felt shaken to the core by the pandemic and all the ways it had upturned our lives.

As I sat in that room of clergy feeling unsure and vulnerable, a colleague said something that rang true the instant I heard it. They said that all of us were doing transitional ministry. None of us could expect to be doing "normal" ministry.

All of church life was in transition. Whether we served our congregations for one year or twenty years, all of us were living in instability and unpredictability.

Naming it brought immense relief.

Although that was three years ago and a different kind of crisis, many of the same feelings have been coming up for me again—not about my vocation, but about normalcy itself. It feels like each day brings a new upheaval, a new fault line revealed, another piece of the foundation cracked.

The speed and the pervasiveness of the unraveling are overwhelming.
It feels like we are trying to grieve one loss before another headline lands.
Like the ground is shifting faster than our nervous systems can process.

Many of us are living in a crisis of faith — not necessarily faith in God, but in what we believed to be stable and trustworthy.

At different points, we face these times in our lives when what we had believed comes into question. And we need tools to face these moments of profound spiritual turmoil.

The Christian theologian and contemplative Richard Rohr describes spiritual transformation as movement from order to disorder to reorder. He calls these "the three boxes."¹

Order is the box where life makes sense. It is where we believe things are fundamentally stable.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-three-boxes-2016-12-06/>

Order is when you assume your job will still exist next year.

When you assume your partner will remain faithful.

When you assume that, for all its flaws, your country is fundamentally steady and progressing.

Order is the persistent belief that tomorrow will look roughly like today.

Now, Rohr suggests that this space of order is often too small, that it is built on partial truths or false assumptions. But even if it is imperfect, it feels safe. It gives us a sense of normalcy.

Then comes disorder.

Disorder is when the assumptions crack. When faith is questioned.

It is the diagnosis you did not expect.

The layoff email.

The news headline that brings you to your knees in grief and outrage.

Disorder is when the beliefs we once relied upon no longer hold. It can happen quietly over time, or it can happen all at once.

Sometimes it comes through betrayal — infidelity in a marriage, an institution that fails to protect the vulnerable, another public figure found to be complicit with abuse.

There is a particular pain when disorder comes through betrayal. When something we trusted proves untrustworthy. There's both the pain of the harm being perpetrated and the pain of not trusting oneself when the truth is revealed.

Many of us are feeling this kind of betrayal on a collective level as we witness abuse of power and the stripping away of fundamental rights. And for many, it is not simply a crisis of politics — it is a crisis of belief in goodness itself. A betrayal of an assumed social pact to treat each other fairly and work for the common good.

For some of us, the box of order we once made our home was built on the belief in steady progress — fairness embedded in systems and institutions. For others, that box never felt safe. Some have long known in their bodies that what was called “order” was built upon racist lies and systems of oppression.

And yet whether we trusted the box or not, many of us are now living in a period of great disorder. A rapid unraveling of what we once knew.

And it is not theoretical. It is in our bodies.

The tightness in the chest when another executive order is announced, the fatigue of trying to keep up, the quiet tears realizing that someone you love does not stand on the same moral ground that you thought was shared and actually is not.

And I know not everyone in this room experiences this moment in the same way.

Some feel anger. Some feel fear. Some feel exhaustion. Or, perhaps all of it, all at once.

Beneath all of it, many of us feel something deeper — a question about who we are becoming as a people.

To remain in disorder too long is dangerous. Lingering in disorder we find ourselves doom-scrolling late into the night, numbing out, or believing that nothing we do matters anymore. The shaking up of what we once relied upon to be true can lead to spiritual hazard.

But, disorder can also awaken us. It can open us. It can teach us. It can open the space for something even sturdier to be built.

The movement toward reorder is not about going back to the old box. Reorder is not a return to “the way things were.”

Reorder is a deeper wisdom where paradox can live. Where peace and turmoil, beauty and brokenness, are all present at the same time.

Reorder might look like the couple who, after a vow is broken, build a marriage that is more honest than it ever was before.

Or, the person who loses a job and, in the unraveling, discovers a calling they never thought they would have chosen voluntarily.

Reorder is a congregation that cannot go back to pre-pandemic normal but finds new ways of being community that are more inclusive and compassionate.

It is faith that no longer depends on everything working out, but trusts in something larger in the midst of uncertainty.

For Richard Rohr, reorder is not a place of permanent certainty but a place of greater spiritual spaciousness where we no longer need the world to be simple in order to remain faithful.

He says that whenever we are led out of normalcy into sacred open space, it will feel like suffering — because it is letting go of what we are used to. Part of us has to die if we are to find a deeper faith and wisdom.

This is possible not because we force it or rush it. But because we learn, slowly, to take the next step — even when we cannot see the whole path.

The movement toward reorder — that space where we can hold both the pain and the beauty and start to form new worldviews more fitting for our times — cannot be controlled. But there are practices we can engage in to support the rebuilding of our faith and trust.

One can start with recognizing that disorder is happening. This coming week, when you notice that tightening in the chest or welling up of tears, you might gently say to yourself, This is what disorder feels like. And then you might ask, what assumption is dissolving?

Another practice is to accept that some former assumptions never fully served us. And, we can give our loving attention to what is happening now — to the dissolution and the uncertainty.

One story that helps to illustrate this comes from Kaira Jewel Lingo, a former Zen Buddhist nun who continues to teach today. At the age of 23, she decided to leave the familiarity of graduate school life in the United States and seek the guidance of spiritual teachers. She traveled to Plum Village in rural France and met the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, whose students all called him Thay.

The simplicity and grace of Thay's teaching and practice, and the rigorous life of the monastic community, filled a place of longing within her. She stayed at the village and was ordained as a Buddhist nun two years later.

After 15 years of living a monastic life all across the globe, doubt about her life path began to appear, and thoughts of leaving became more and more present. This was a period of questioning

the foundation upon which she had built most of her adult life. She wondered: if she wasn't living out her monastic vows, then who was she?

Imagine giving up the only identity you've known for fifteen years and telling your closest spiritual companions that you're leaving.

She writes this about her own process of going from disorder to reorder:

“When I was in the process of deciding to leave monastic life, I was terrified. I had no idea what would come next, and I was giving up security, love, and belonging for a totally unknown future with absolutely no guarantees. Yet I knew I had to take the leap and leave the safety of my life to see what would await me...As soon as I made that first small, tentative step into the unknown, it was as if the earth rose up to meet my foot and supported me. Each step gave me more faith and trust that I could do this. Life was calling to me to keep going, and it continued to support me at every turn, even if I couldn't have seen quite how just one or two steps back. I just kept going. And sure enough, there was a way for me.”²

In order to move from disorder to someplace new, a courageous leap of faith is needed — the willingness to face the unknown. And, this is not something we do alone. We move toward reorder together.

It is in community that we move out of our boxes together by creating a vision of what's possible on the other side of the shattering.

Together, we keep going, looking for those ways in which the earth and community might rise up to meet us and support us.

The reordering work we do together comes in the form of imagining what is on the other side of all this pain and suffering. Singing together even when our voices shake. Offering witness and companionship to one another as we navigate the messiness, as we feel the dissolution of former beliefs and assumptions.

Reordering comes in offering one another spaces of refuge and sanctuary — to be with the grief and also to notice what is emerging.

² Kaira Jewel Lingo, *We Were Made for These Times: 10 Lessons for Moving Through Change, Loss, and Disruption* (Parallax Press, 2021), 110-111.

The poet Robert Walsh writes:

“Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that’s often torn but always healing. There’s
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together. ”

I think back to that room in 2023 — exhausted, unsure, wondering whether the ministry I had signed up for even existed anymore. I remember the relief when someone named it: transitional ministry. Not failure. Transition.

I did not leave with answers. The exhaustion was still in my bones. But something inside me had shifted. Naming disorder did not solve it — but it kept me from mistaking it for the end.

And here we are again. The ground feels unsteady. The losses come quickly. The temptation toward despair is real.

But perhaps this, too, is transitional ground.

Perhaps we are being invited not back to a smaller box, but forward into a deeper faith — one that holds grief without surrendering to cynicism. One that trusts that even when systems crumble, love remains.

The poet tells us to trust the tensile strands of love. A single strand can break. But woven together, they can hold astonishing weight.

Maybe that is what we are called to be for one another now.

Not certainty.

Not easy optimism.

But tensile strands.

Holding.

Bending.

Stretching.

Refusing to let one another fall.

And as we take whatever small steps we can into this uncertain future, may we discover — as so many before us have — that the earth still rises to meet our feet.

That love is still the ground on which we move.

And that even in disorder, we are being led toward something larger than what we can yet see.

So may it be.