

*"Move through the Maze with This Faith"*  
August 18, 2019  
for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury  
Rev. Heather Rion Starr, Consulting Minister

*"Walk the maze  
within your heart: guide your steps into its  
questioning curves.  
This labyrinth is a puzzle leading you deeper  
into your own truths.  
Listen in the twists and turns.  
Listen in the openness within all searching.  
Listen: a wisdom within you calls  
to a wisdom beyond you  
and in that dialogue lies peace."*

--Rev. Leslie Takahashi  
*The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide (2019), page 55*

PRELUDE

"Summer Etude #1"

Jim Russell

OPENING WORDS

Rev. Heather Rion Starr

Good morning--it is so good to be with you this morning! I have with me this morning *The 2019 Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, edited by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray. This little paperback book has been my muse for this service today, and I invite you to consider getting yourself a copy--or, if you write your name on the clipboard by the door before you leave here today, I will look into possibly making a small bulk order. It's that lovely to have--I wish I could give a copy to everyone I know.

Everything we sing today and many of the stories I will share come from this handy little *Pocket Guide*, beginning with an excerpt from the Forward, written by journalist, writer and professor Melissa Harris-Perry: "These are the words of the ordained and laypeople, the certain and the seeking, the lifers and the newcomers, the beloved and the brokenhearted, the insiders and the rejected, all of whom have found a home in the extraordinary, yet intimate, communities of Unitarian Universalism. Do not expect a clearly marked road map. ...If you are a lifelong UU, like me, these pages will remind you of our deep roots, our fierce commitments, and our continuing efforts. ...The journey is the joy. The companions are the comfort. The work is the faith" (ix-xi).

Come, let us join in this journey together.

\*HYMN OF WELCOME #188

"Come, Come, Whoever You Are"

\*CHALICE LIGHTING AFFIRMATION

*"Love is the spirit of this congregation and justice is its light.  
This is our covenant: To dwell together in peace,  
To seek and speak the truth in love,  
To help one another and celebrate life."*

Adapted

## OFFERING, FOOD OFFERING, and SILENT MILESTONES

*Now is the time in our service when, if you choose, you may come forward and silently place a stone in water to represent your personal joy or sorrow.*

OFFERTORY

"Summer Etude #2"

Jim Russell

SPOKEN MILESTONES

SONG #1009

"Meditation on Breathing"

SERMON

"Move through the Maze with this Faith"

Rev. Heather Rion Starr

I want to start out this reflection with the story of Megan Dowdell. "When Megan was eleven years old, she entered a New England Unitarian Universalist church for the first time on her own. She was invited to sing in the youth choir that traveled among several churches downtown. After one session in the religious education program, she wanted to return...every week. Arriving without her parents, she quickly became an adopted child of the church. A family would bring her along to the church retreat and make sure she had a ride to come serve food at a silent auction or volunteer in the childhood program.

Looking back, she wondered what the members must have thought about this young girl who was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. Of course, what they didn't know then was that her home was not a safe place. She suffered consistent abuse by her father and experienced prolonged periods of silence and neglect. Some might call this *hell*. The weekends, when school was not in session, were the most dangerous times of the week. If there was a task at church I was allowed to do, (Megan writes,) I would volunteer to be there. If there was any community event or speaker, I would beg to go. My church family truly meant safety and survival at the most vulnerable times.

...At the church, I had many positive adult role models who offered appropriate friendship and opportunities to play, learn, and lead. When I was sixteen and beginning the process of coming out as queer, the adult leaders offered me the opportunity to co-chair the Welcoming Congregation task force. The church confirmed for me in repeated ways what God already knew: not only was I worthy of love, but I had love to give. When my brother died on Christmas Day in 1999, it was the director of religious education who picked me up and brought me to her house for the holiday dinner. When I was seventeen, my mother went to apply for a restraining order one Sunday morning, so the youth group advisor picked me up and brought me to the Sunday service. The other single mothers in the church became our network of social support.

And it was the minister who convinced me to get 'real help' for the stuff I'd be carrying with me from an abusive childhood. 'Don't wait until you're thirty and this all creeps up on you.' --I can still hear her candid voice and see her raised brow, as I sunk into the couch in the minister's study. Now, at thirty-two, I know that I was saved by her respectful challenge in a community that was worthy of my youthful trust, in a loving tradition that values salvation as human wholeness and health for the long haul of this life.

She invited me into another part of Unitarian Universalist salvation: a journey away from being consumed by hate or vengeance and toward growth, understanding, and even forgiveness. She didn't ask me to erase or forget traumas that had consumed me but to do the spiritual grief work to forgive myself. Through Unitarian

Universalism, I grew into a vision of family and community that condemns violence of all kinds and releases the desire for retribution that would keep me farther from my own flourishing and well-being.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I cannot claim a God who simply damns those who do bad things to hell. Instead I find myself saved in a community that wishes to build a world of justice, mercy, and compassion for all, knowing I am not the last to need saving" (22-24).

...My own experience with Unitarian Universalism -- and my need for the congregation closest to me -- was more subtle. When I think about my childhood it's of The First Unitarian Church of Portland being a boisterous, multigenerational place where I got to know people of all ages who were not part of my family and witnessed the ways that everyone was encouraged to be themselves and find their niche.

It was also the only place that almost everyone in my family ever gathered together in the same physical space and sipped coffee cordially--my biological parents had, after 10 years of marriage, divorced when I was a baby, and I had no memories of ever having dinner with them together, so this experience of mingling at coffee hour with my mother and my father, my maternal and paternal grandmothers, my stepfather and my half-sister--it was quietly marvelous to me.

I was raised Unitarian Universalist, which, at least for me, means that I never regularly attended any *other* faith community and never got fully immersed in any other way of thinking about religion or spiritual community. So it's quite eye-opening for me to get absorbed in books like *Educated*, by Tara Westover, which I've just begun listening to, or *Leaving the Witness*, by Amber Scoriah, about her experience growing up Jehovah's Witness, moving to China to be a missionary preacher there, then after much angst, deciding to leave what is called--in that community--The Truth, and everyone and everything she had ever known.

I appreciate Unitarian Universalism in whole new ways when I am reminded of how completely radical it is for so many millions of people--8.6 million adherents of Jehovah's Witnesses, 15 million Mormons as described in Tara Westover's book--compared to our 158,000 or so Unitarian Universalist adults, children & youth. *Radical* to be taught from an early age to think for ourselves, to come up with our own opinions, encouraged to ask questions, encouraged to come up with our own perspectives. *Expected* to keep up with the goings-on in our larger community and world and to cultivate curiosity about and compassion for one another. *Charged* to be self-aware enough to notice the impact that we are having on others and to know when it's time to ask for help, to admit that we're overwhelmed or acknowledge that we're responding out of fear and need to take more responsibility for ourselves.

As our Unitarian Universalist President and editor of this succinct and passionate little volume, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, repeatedly charges us: "This is no time for a casual faith, and we must not go it alone."

When I step back after 15 years of ministry in this faith and read an ostensibly introductory text like the *Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, I am forced to pause and consider this whole endeavor. We are a small but earnest religion with a long, complex history. What *is* this faith worth to us? What *do* we want people to know about it?

Olympia Brown was the first fully ordained woman minister in the United States Protestant vein--she was ordained on June 25, 1863, and went on to pastor churches in Weymouth, Massachusetts, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, among others. I hear her nineteenth century charge resounding in my mind, her call to: "Stand by this faith.

Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. Which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost" (SLT #569).

...And yet so much has changed since 1863 in terms of how we "work for a great true principle," or Seven Principles, as the case may be. I see amongst my West Hartford parenting-peers how impossible it is to work yet another weekly commitment into their lives. I took our 7-year-old to a friend's roller-skating birthday party last Sunday afternoon and when we arrived, right on time because we were coming directly from church, one of the other moms complimented me on my professional dress--and I said simply, well I'm coming from work! This was a perfectly timed birthday party for us! And though this mom has visited our Hartford congregation multiple times in the past, I could tell it was the furthest thing from her mind, that I had work to do on Sunday morning. It is no longer expected of most people that religious affiliation is a part of your life. It's an extra, an optional add-on, and for most families I know these days, optional add-ons are impossible; it's challenging enough to keep up with the mandatory laundry, meal-preparation and endless dishes and trying to keep our kids from spending every free moment glued to a screen.

So I wrestle with this whole concept of multigenerational religious community--I know it is life-saving for some people (like Megan), and I know it feels impossible for others to incorporate into their lives. I long for ways to bring Unitarian Universalism's meaningful message into people's lives more easily, and so I always celebrate our Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalism's online congregation, accessible from anywhere at any time through the internet, with weekly worship services and multiple ministry teams, over 3500 members, and on-demand, on-your-schedule rituals, prayers, and one-minute meditations. Find out more & engage yourself and your far-flung loved ones at: [QuestforMeaning.org](http://QuestforMeaning.org).

And in the hectic rush of our 21st-century lives, there is something especially grounding about a small paperback book that one can truly carry around everywhere and read and re-read. I've been reading this book from the sidelines of swim lessons, these past two weeks, and from the bleachers of soccer camp. I've been reading it while waiting in the grocery checkout line and while singing my children to sleep. There is a saying that "We read to know we're not alone," and so it's all the more important that we think about what and who we are bringing along to accompany us and what and whose words we are sharing with those dearest to us. We can all use a guide in our pockets, and here is one.

In closing, Rev. Thandeka's words from page 1: "So if someone tells you that they know pain, loneliness, loss, fear, and dismay, but does not know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider, deeper, and infinitely vaster than the sorrows, hear these words as a commission. Hear your commission to love, to create community, and to heal. One at a time in personal relationships, ten at a time in covenant groups, hundreds at a time in our religious movement, millions at a time as we take *our* commission deeper and deeper into humanity's heart as a justice-loving people who will transform the world. This is the Good News of our faith"(1).

May it be so.

MEDITATION and SILENCE

HYMN for MEDITATION #123

"Spirit of Life"

\*CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

*"We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth,  
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts, and out into the world, until we are together again."*

\*CLOSING HYMN #1064

"Blue Boat Home"

\*BENEDICTION

In the words of life-long Unitarian Universalist Matt Meyer, who many of you very much enjoyed experiencing as a guest service leader last November: "May we go forward in *purposeful rhythm*, that we may give voice to the melody of our imaginations, the music of our souls, and all the possibilities of a just world as we might together create it."

POSTLUDE

Jerry Phelps