

A Spirit of Fierce Unrest

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Many of you don't know, but I did my internship here with Rhys Williams. There were three of us part-time interns when I was here. We called ourselves "Rhys's pieces." And my mentor and minister, Forest Church, was also formed by Rhys. Then, after Rhys died, when Stephen was called, Stephen stepped gracefully and appropriately into the role of mentoring and support.

I do think there is a way in which, when you are an intern in a church, you are always the intern, you can never get too big for your britches which, frankly, is nice. Because it's hard work being a grownup, as an ordained minister or lay leader in this movement, and nice to have places that are always welcoming, that welcome you home with that kind of parent's love. So I want to thank the members of this community for being a part of that.

This community, of course, was part of the group that began to teach me what it meant to be Unitarian Universalist. And I want to tell a story because we mentioned Susan Jackson, a long-time member of First Church, whose memorial service was last weekend. One of my most poignant experiences of the endurance and commitment to values was at General Assembly in Cleveland. I don't know how many of you were there. Every year, as you know, at General Assembly, we often have some kind of protest. And that year it was about the Cleveland Indians because they have that awful mascot and that awful thing their fans do pretending to have a hatchet in their hands.

So we all got ready to line up, and on my Southern side of the family, my grandmother's great-great-grandmother was Cherokee, so I especially wanted to be there. Right before we started, as many of you may remember, it rained. I mean, it rained. And it rained a lot for a long time.

So, my first rule is, whenever you are going to protest, do not wear a white shirt. I was new to ministry, appropriately worried about whether I would make it into final fellowship, generally miserable walking in the rain. Finally, I ducked under an eaves for a while and thought, "You know, is this really worth it? This is kind of silly." Just then a man went by in a wheelchair as part of the protest. And it wasn't an electric wheelchair, it was one where he had to push with his arms, so he couldn't hold an umbrella and he was soaking wet. I had that moment of reckoning and thought, "You know, Vanessa, you need to get your act together and get back out there."

I went about two more blocks and my shoes were falling off because they were so full of water that they couldn't stay on. So I ducked under an eaves again. And who should come down the street, but Susan Jackson who, if any of you knew her, was bent over from osteoporosis and old age. She must have been in her 80s then, with a Boston gentleman in a suit holding an umbrella over the both of them. It was another moment of, "Vanessa, you'd better get your act together and get out there!"

So this congregation taught me a lot about what it meant to be a Unitarian Universalist. And risking this new format for the Minns lecture is a wonderful metaphor for jettisoning the forms in order that we serve ends that I think is at the heart of my remarks.

Let me start with an image from my time here as a student minister. It is Easter Sunday, my first year here, and a couple of days before Easter, I hear of a trip that a few trusted members and staff take, driving a car to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. There they go, to where the church's old and valuable communion silver collection is held in trust, to pick out a few pieces (I'm sure with rapidly beating hearts, given how precious these items are) and drive them back so that they can be present on Sunday morning to bring some of the history into the present.

One of those pieces, I think probably the most valuable, certainly the most rare, is a cup that was made in 1604. It is more valuable than the Paul Revere pieces (Paul Revere was a member of this community, long ago). It's a cup with raised decorations depicting the seas. It was given to John Winthrop's father, who was the head of a fishing company, by the company upon his retirement. It was something that John Winthrop, then son, was given, in turn, and brought with him when he came to this country.

John Winthrop was to become the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. A man who left, in part to escape political and religious persecution, and set sail across those same seas depicted on the cup. He set sail from England to face unknown terrors and challenges—challenges that would include the real horror of the death of one of his sons from illness in the first year. And he did all of this in order to find and make a place where the dream of religious freedom, of covenantal life free of government persecution or social hazing could be exercised. And he brought this cup with him on this journey.

As I recall, the cup, which I was briefly allowed to hold, is heavy. Artistry and human fingerprints fill its every square inch. On the cup are images of roiling seas and coming out of them, at one point, is a large sea monster that rears its head. That's what I remember.

A huge sea monster rearing its head. That is what folks feared that the seas contained. That's what they were ready to face when they set sail across them. Roiling seas and stormy winds that could snap a mast in two and sea monsters big enough to eat you and your boat as an appetizer to start their morning. And it was into these unknown seas that Winthrop and others set sail for a dream of being able to live and believe as their hearts and minds felt called to.

It's hard to imagine such courage. But then you visit Philadelphia and the place where the Declaration of Independence was signed and the guide tells you these men, all men, mostly landowners and wealthy men, signed this document knowing they were committing treason against England. And knowing the punishment for that was—"What did they say," you ask as you lean in closer to listen to the docent—"Evisceration?!" Public disembowelment? Dying in stockyards with your insides out? Rich men, men who could flee, or cooperate and live well, facing *this*? Our nation is full of such stories. And so is our faith.

Benjamin Rush, my namesake, Universalist in faith, signed up for treason when he penned his name to that document, and he stayed in Philadelphia also to tend to those sick and dying of yellow fever risking

the same sickness himself. Life and Death, in these stories, hanging always in the balance; values with sharp teeth and making fierce demands on them.

De Trinitas strapped to a martyr's leg, Calvin lighting the fire. Arius and Origen voted out at early church councils; heretics forever after. Such zeal!

I went this year to the first-ever Conference for Excellence in Ministry in Asilomar, California—a nice place to contemplate excellence! It was put on by our own Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. I arrived late due to a delayed flight the night before. I was wearing the same clothes I'd worn the day before when I left New York. I arrived in the main hall, mid-way through the keynote preacher's sermon.

The preacher is Kay Northcutt, a preaching professor, not a UU. She is a phenomenally gifted woman, in her early 50's, I'd guess, beautiful, radiant, and very sick, it turns out; very ill. The week before the conference I hear it took a team of doctors a week to get her healthy enough to make the journey safely. She came, I am clear now, not because she is a woman who maniacally keeps her commitments, but because she had something she needed us to hear. *Us!*

Here is what she said:

"You are life-savers," she says to the 400 ministers in the hall that morning. "You are mosaic-makers called to put broken bit by bit—creating patterns of beauty and meaning out of pain and loss. You are bone-carriers, like the Israelites, who lifted the bones of their ancestors and took them out across the boundaries into the desert. Bones are heavy things," she says, "but what you inherit from those who come before is rich, so make sure you carry them with you."

Life-savers, mosaic-makers, bone-carriers.

In the small class gathered afterwards, for those of us lucky enough to be in her seminar, she said, "Did you hear me? Did you hear me say that YOU are the hope of the world?" It is this that she has come all this way, that she has made so much personal sacrifice to say.

Kay, you should know, ministers to a small congregation of folks outside the bounds of larger love in Tulsa where she lives. They are recovering drug addicts, gay and lesbian folk, homeless families, and many Sundays when they arrive at church people gather across the street to meet them hurling insult and rocks. These are the people she *loves*. And the people she needs the world to protect. And people like them *everywhere* need someone to protect when she cannot.

Earlier in the sermon she tells a story of her mother sending her and her sister off to school each day. The two, knowing what was coming, would apparently try to get out the front door as fast as possible, but inevitably their mother would hear them leave and rush to the front door, throw it open, and yell across the front lawn to her daughters, "Girls!" she would yell. "Girls," as they looked back anxiously. "FIND YOUR GREATNESS!"

Which was how Kay ended her sermon to us.

“Unitarian Universalists,
Life Savers
Mosaic Makers,
Bone carriers,
Find your greatness!”

The group that heard this sermon knew what you and I know also—what we have said here today—that we are a movement in trouble. That we UU’s are a religion growing sometimes by small numbers each year, sometimes not, but against population growth we are losing ground. That we either have to find our greatness again, or prepare to shut our doors. Or preside over a slow drain to irrelevance?

UU layperson and church critic Mike Durall says, “Churches seldom die from taking risks. They expire from becoming complacent.” And G.K. Chesterton said, “Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.” Risks and fire are what you and I have to be on the lookout for. Risk and fire, because there is no more room for complacency.

Years ago, I put a banner outside our church. It quoted Helen Keller, who said, “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.” Last week, as March Madness came to a close, I put up another banner. This one said, “Religion is no spectator sport.”

However, I have been thinking about it and I think what I really should put out there, what’s really the truth is, yes, religion is not a spectator sport, but that actually religion is an *extreme* sport. Leaning into our fears, pushing boundaries that get in the way of the Spirit Lived Large and True, this is big, it is exhausting, it is a high stakes faith. It is scary and it is exciting.

More and more what I think you and I need is to demand that we reclaim *a spirit of fierce unrest*.

I know some folks are worried about business practices creeping in, consumerism creeping into the way we talk about membership, and I am with folks on that. However, I actually think we need to find an uncompromising *entrepreneurial* zeal for the Unity of Humanity. And how about a *strategic plan* for the Boundless Embrace of God’s Love made manifest—a plan, mind you, with deadlines and accountability and how about hiring a staff to track our progress!

I think we need to dream no small dreams. To risk wild experiment, to put absolutely everything on the chopping block, *everything* that doesn’t seem to be serving our commandments to live our faith boldly. *Everything!* Buildings, music, style of worship, outdated pseudo-dogma, habits of the heart, pieces of liturgy, standards we hold ministers to, demands we make of members, giving patterns.

Marilyn [Sewell] touched on two of my favorite ingredients for keeping a movement small and ineffective [in her talk] last night. You really don’t need more if you just have these two.

One is to just doubt authority and so tie the hands of any lay leader or staff member so they are sclerotic, at best, in their ability to execute on anything in a manner that channels efficiently and with momentum their passion and conviction. That is one way to keep a movement small or you can do the other. You can, in fact, liberate people to execute on dreams, but then you can give just 1½ percent of

income or maybe a little less, if you like, because then there will, in fact, be no resources (for staff or infrastructure or programming) to execute on any of it, or at least to do any of it well. This has been our congregational formula for mediocrity for far too long.

When we have that great rummage sale, I am putting those two things out in the trash. I think I would only recycle them if I could take some of that fear of authority and balance it with an equally compelling unrest to actually do good in the world, so that these two rub up against each other powerfully. And I think I would want to take that awkward protectiveness of our own money which sometimes we treat as more precious than our own naked bodies, and pin it *incessantly* against requests that our money go where our values are. Ask so much that we risk annoyance and then ask some more, and refuse to feel shame when asking. Treat generosity among us like kindness—a muscle to be stretched—and do some serious physical therapy on it. Call parsimony what it is and step up ourselves around generosity so that we have no hesitation to ask others to live as we live.

It is time to yield to that rightful call to raze the overgrown cult of the “me” over the “we.” After all, how can you and I be Unitarian Universalist and put Me above We. Are we not about the interconnection of all in one and a love that knows no limits? Aren’t you and I part of the great WE that we are called to serve with our lives?

I think it is time to declare a moratorium on mere caretaking of our communities. To ask congregation by congregation to find and serve its greatness or shut its doors... *but find its greatness*. Find and find and find again its greatness. Explore what High Demand Life among us looks like because my experience is that *this* is what people come to us looking for.

Chris Hedges, in his book *War is the Force that Gives Our Lives Meaning*, says the natural human pull to war is that war is so vital, so ironically alive as an experience. He says that is because in war the costs are clear and dramatic. In war, on the battlefield, your life matters moment-to-moment and is on the line for what matters.

We, who so desperately want a world without war, he says, we cannot do away with that human desire to live so fully alive that makes war so compelling generation after generation. We cannot do away with it, but *we can compete with it*. We can create a vision for a life of faith that is as compelling, and channel the human desire for sacrifice and for clear and present meaning toward life.

We can and must make our case more compelling. As compelling as it was to John Winthrop and Rush and all of us who have poured our lives into communities like this one. Poured our wild and precious lives into *this*!

Tony Jones, pastor and member of the Emergent Church Movement, writes in his book *The New Christians*, “It would be no stretch to argue that God’s radical love has burst through the crust of human institutions at regular intervals for the past six thousand years.” Is it ready to do so again? I feel and hear the rumblings.

Whenever we have too domesticated our faith, this faith of the prophets and adventurers of the spirit, made it safe and easy, the plates start to rub up against each other and the ground beneath us rumbles. As it should. Religion is meant to be an extreme sport, if ever there were one. High stakes, life and death. Because, in fact, how we play *this* game matters. How we play *this* game influences the outcome. It matters who loses this game.

So, who is going to lose?

Will the poor lose or the children? Will the planet lose or gay and lesbian teens? Will the old lose or the nations who cannot fight off dictators? Will the uninsured lose or democracy? Who will we stand and watch lose?!

Our next call to greatness has to have its seeds in that set of questions, and in a stubborn refusal that just wells up in us; this righteous anger that takes over when we say to ourselves, “No! You know what we say ‘no’ to? To the letting of blood and sweetness and hope.” Because when we know where we feel despair, then we become clear about what our mission is, don’t we?

Tony Jones also wrote, “...the church was never the end, only the means.” There was the transient and permanent, Parker said, and woe be to the person who mistakes the one for the other, the form for the enduring substance and call.

We can talk band-aid fixes and programs as we so often do at conferences we attend, but I think what all of us have been talking about is that it all starts somewhere deeper. That is one of the precipitous pieces that I am hearing. Our re-visioning starts when we ask and answer:

What is our greatness? What is our greatness, in this day, in this age? Where is the place where we set about knitting the world back into a unified whole? Loving the world and its hurt places, where do we focus our efforts at resurrection?

To do this, I think we need nothing less than to reclaim that spirit of fierce unrest, unleashed by people who know life is either a daring adventure or nothing, who build congregations that (as far as I can tell) have no bleacher seats and no time for spectators. People who will face the roiling seas and real or imagined dragons, to carry themselves and their people to a land of milk and honey, of promises kept where there is no room for small dreams.

Once and again, may this people be us. And the world blessed in the wake left behind our sailing ships. Because what if the preacher is right and we are the hope, bent over and soaked with rain, in our stubborn refusal to let go of our love for this world and the call of this faith?

May the fierce unrest that runs in our blood break through the crust of our institutions once more.