

What Is the Center of Unitarian Universalism?

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching. Personal Reflection by Courtney (printed after sermon)

Hymns: #1003 Where Do We Come From? #86 Blessed Spirit of My Life #1028 The Fire of Commitment.

Special Music: vocal duet, The Gift of Love (Hal Hopson); piano, Let this Be a House of Peace (Jim Scott); This Little Light of Mine (Spiritual, arr. Moses Hogan)

Sermon

Two weeks from today, the Reverend Nancy Palmer Jones from San Jose will be our guest preacher, and she will be leading a workshop on that Saturday morning. You can learn more at the Connections Table, on the website, or in the Weekly Message. She'll be coming here as part of our series of sermons entitled Finding Our Way to the Future: The Purpose and Promise of Unitarian Universalism. Today for my part I'd like to reflect on the center of the UU tradition.

Some Unitarian Universalists, especially ministers, have worried out loud about whether this religion has a center and whether we can name what it is. In the late 1990s, when I was a new minister in the UU movement, there were conversations, lectures, essays, and arguments dealing with the question about whether we have a religious or theological center and what it might be.

In this country, Unitarian Universalism goes back nearly two and a half centuries. After all that time, we have transformed ourselves into a broad movement with a variety of religious perspectives. This embrace of pluralism in the UU movement could be why some people fret so much about defining our theological center. These worries have tempted some UUs to stress only one dimension of our heritage and insist that it must be our center. For example, a number of UUs have argued that God must be the center. After all, our faith emerged out of Christian heresies about the nature of God. Along with the Universalists, the early Unitarians said the Jewish and Christian scriptures made it clear that human beings were made in the image of God. But unlike their Puritan Calvinist neighbors, they said this divine image gives us worth, dignity and freedom. While human beings can cause terrible destruction and cruelty in the world, we are not inherently depraved. We are lovable because we are created by divine love. This is a powerful aspect of our heritage, but it's not the only part.

Many other UUs have argued that our center was found in Humanism and the practice of ethical but non-theistic religion. This approach goes back to the middle 1800s but Humanism really caught fire in many of our churches in the 1920s, and it was a dominant theology for decades. Humanism celebrated the use of reason, scientific discovery, artistic expression, and intellectual discussions in UU congregations. Religious humanists proclaimed the goals of human flourishing and equality and a world at peace. To do this they saw no need to refer to Divine influences. The existence of God was not relevant, not necessary, and probably not a good idea. Given how much repression of the human spirit had been caused by traditional religious organizations, this was a refreshing antidote. Human reason, human love—that's enough. This is also a powerful aspect of our heritage.

Yet to argue that one of these theological threads has to be our center and all the other ones ought to stay on the sidelines is to forget something important about our UU fabric. *We don't have a creed.* Nobody has to agree to a confession of faith or any other set of beliefs to become a member of a UU church. To be sure, in matters of conscience and faith, we can talk,

learn, ask questions, and challenge one another's ideas, but there's no forcing of beliefs. This is why we affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. When all the strands are connected in our UU fabric, it makes us rich, spiritually.

In our tradition, it is the connections that make a crucial difference. Whatever else might be at our center, our tradition has always been about relationships. Maybe our center *is* relationship. Consider the Universalists. In making the case for universal salvation—for no hell, in other words—they argued that the Divine is a loving parent, not a cruel one or a fickle one. If all people around the earth are children of the same God, then we are all kin, all family. In other words, whether we like it or not, we are stuck with each other. As one Universalist preached in the 1800s, if we're going to be together in heaven, forever, we might as well learn to get along while we're here, now. We are related. Relationship is key.

Now consider our Unitarian ancestors. In the early 1800s, they rose up within the congregational churches of New England. While they broke away from orthodox theology, the Unitarians retained the congregational form of governance. This goes all the way back to 1648. In that year, leaders from a few dozen churches held an assembly in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The document they wrote and ratified over several days of their meeting is called the Cambridge Platform. We still follow much of what it laid out. Simply put, it means that each congregation is free to make its own decisions, including its choice of lay leaders and ministers. No bishop or hierarchy exists to make these decisions, and the state is not allowed to make them either.

In this form of governance, a congregation consists only of people who join it voluntarily. When Reverend Lucy and I have the opportunity to witness the signing of the UUSS Membership Book by a new member, we explain to the member that, by joining the congregation, they become *part of* the congregation. They enter into relationship with all the other members. They enter a covenant.

The Reverend Alice Blair Wesley is a UU minister who is an expert on our place in the congregational tradition. In a series of lectures given 23 years ago, she said the spiritual center of the congregational tradition has to do with covenant. A covenant is like a set of promises that individuals make to one another. It outlines the common values and aspirations of people who join freely in relationship with one another. It says: This is why we are together; this is how we will treat one another.

We are not a church with a creed, we are a people in relationship who work out our shared goals and values together. As you may have read or heard earlier, next Sunday after church we have our first reception entitled *Getting to Know UUSS*. Representatives of a number of UUSS committees will explain briefly what they do. They will tell you some of the ways we live out our covenant in volunteer service to the congregation. We hope you can stay for it, next Sunday. Childcare will be extended to make it easier to attend.

Alice Blair Wesley has paraphrased those very old, early congregational covenants in this way:

We pledge to [travel] together in the spirit of mutual love. The spirit of love is alone worthy of our ultimate loyalty, our religious loyalty. To this end, we shall meet often to learn and take counsel concerning the ways of love. We will grant religious authority to our own understanding of the ways of love, as best we can figure them out, together.

Alice has noted that even though differences of culture and philosophy separate us 21st century people from our congregational ancestors of nearly four centuries ago, they understood their religion was about living by the spirit of love and care, in a community.

You know, as I was at my computer this weekend, typing this part of the sermon, I hit the paste key to insert something I'd cut from another spot. Something else appeared unexpectedly, out of place. Has that ever happened to you? What appeared was a line from a draft of the pastoral prayer I delivered this morning. It said: "For all those we know who are dealing with a medical crisis of their own or of a loved one, we extend our loving wishes for healing and prayers for strength." It popped in there! But really it wasn't out of place, because I was writing that in a congregation based on covenant, it is expected that people will extend care and love to one another.

It is clear now to me that the center of our faith *is* love. Love is what lies at the center of a covenant—whether between individuals or within a community. Love is the value that reminds us of our connections, our blessings, and our responsibilities as human beings. It is love which makes us long for a world that is more just, fair, safe, and free. Dr. Cornel West has said: "Justice is what love looks like in public." As we show up, give, work, speak out, and write letters and cards, it is love which motivates us.

Love calls us to the practice of empathy. It reassures us with gestures of kindness. The spirit of love *is* at the center of Unitarian Universalism. It's been there since it drew our religious ancestors into communities of covenant, since it inspired them to proclaim that we are all part of one human family.

It can be easy to take the word *love* at a surface level. It has a warm sound and it's easy to say: *Love*. Yet putting it into practice is not easy much of the time. As Courtney said earlier, to love takes us into uncharted territory. The journey can include feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, frustration, and loss. Whether it is a marriage, a friendship, or a spiritual community, the practice of love includes bearing witness to another's life. It means holding space for discomfort or disagreement in our relationships.

When an enthusiastic newcomer wants to jump right in and join the church as a member early in their time with UUSS, Reverend Lucy is known to give this advice: Be involved, hang around, get to know us until you are disappointed about something at UUSS. And if you still want to stick around in spite of that disappointment, then you know this is your community. That is why covenants exist. Love is a spiritual practice because the spirit of love is harder to live by than it is to say.

A covenant among members of a congregation is a pledge to openness to one another and openness to the spirit. In the historical words of Alice Blair Wesley, "We pledge to [travel] together in the spirit of mutual love... We will grant religious authority to our own understanding of the ways of love, as best we can figure them out, together."

A covenant can connect not only individual people within a congregation, it also connects our congregations with one another. UUSS is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. We choose to join with 1,047 other congregations for mutual support, and to promote shared values. This coming June, at the next General Assembly of our UU Association, delegates from congregations like ours will vote on proposed revisions to the official statement of our UU Principles and Purposes. These are listed in Article II of the Association's Bylaws.

The last time we revised Article II was in 1985, and we still use those Principles. They include words which are demanding and inspiring: words like *freedom, compassion, dignity, spiritual growth, justice, inter-dependence, democracy*. But missing from them is the short word *love*.

The Unitarian Universalist Association's Board of Trustees appointed the volunteers to the Article II commission and gave them their charge. The charge says there is no required format for the new principles and purposes. There's no magic number of them; they don't even have to *be* numbered. But no matter what else it looks like, the revised Article II should put *love* at the center. For a year, the Article II commission asked for input from leaders and congregations across the country. It held conversations at the General Assembly last June. Recently the commission released its report and proposal for the new Article II language. This is part of the proposed new language:

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline/ of Love. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are: Interdependence, Justice, Equity, Generosity, Pluralism, Transformation. At the center of them, and uniting all of them, is Love.

(May we see the slide, here and on Zoom?)

On the slide is a graphic designed by Tanya Webster, from a UU congregation in San Mateo County. In case you aren't able to see the image, in the center of the slide is a chalice with an overlay of the word *love* over the flame. Six outstretched arms create a circle around each of the core values. They form a six-petal flower shape. Each petal is a different color. Clockwise they are Interdependence (in orange), Equity (in red), Transformation (in purple), Pluralism (in dark blue), Generosity (in teal), and Justice (in yellow).

In the proposed Article II revision, there's a short paragraph about each of the values. For example, one about pluralism which means the co-existence of a variety of cultural and religious orientations. Here's what it says about pluralism:

We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

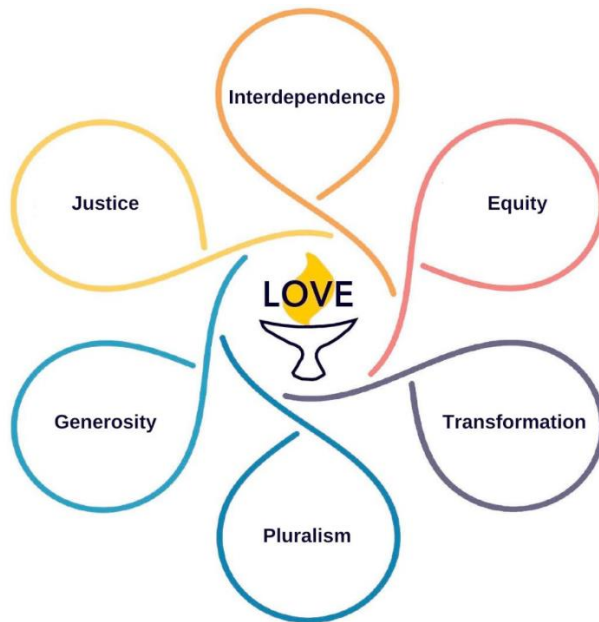
Love is at the center. It is why we do what we do. As I was typing the sermon yesterday on the computer, something else came to my attention. I was copied on email exchanges among the four adult volunteers leading an Our Whole Lives program here at UUSS. OWL is a comprehensive sexuality education program offered in UU congregations. Volunteers make a commitment to be trained and be background-checked. They commit to working as a team over several months to teach OWL. The OWL curriculum values honesty, responsibility, respect, and relationships. By learning those values, at whatever age we might be, we learn to put love at the center of life—love of self and love and care for others. The email I saw was from one teacher to the others. She was unexpectedly going to be out of town for the weekend and was asking if another volunteer could cover her duties. If not, she said she could drive back early Sunday

morning. “Sure thing,” came a quick reply from one of them, along with good wishes for the trip. The others followed suit: “We’ve got you. Safe travels!”

In any relationship and in any community based on covenant, our promises are important. This may seem obvious, but I don’t have to think very long or look very far to remember times and places in my life where promises weren’t reliable or sincere. And just as important as a promise is the willingness to give grace to each other. The spirit of love motivates us to give grace, show patience, practice forgiveness. It calls us to give thanks for one another.

If living with love were always easy, it wouldn’t be a religious value. There wouldn’t be stories about love in action, poems and prayers about it, or hymns about the commitments that love calls us to make. Love is the spirit which helps us to keep our promises. It sustains us when the choices are not easy. When we feel daunted or uncertain, love steadies us. Love calls us into community where we can seek hope, strength, and care. Love calls us together so that we might share these gifts with one another.

The spirit of love holds us up and holds us together. The spirit of love calls us to give thanks for one another. So may we always do. So may it be. Amen.



Personal Reflection by Courtney, Worship Associate

I was privileged to be here last week, when we had Reverend Alex da Silva Souto here as our guest minister. They delivered a very thoughtful homily – if you haven’t heard it, I encourage you to check it out online. For those that did hear their homily...how did you feel? Did you feel encouraged? Inspired? Uncomfortable?

I felt uncomfortable at certain points. But... I also felt a strange feeling that took me a minute to identify – then, I realized that I wasn't *worried* about feeling uncomfortable. That it was ok – even encouraged.

The Path of Love is our Soul Matters theme for February. I spend a lot of time thinking about love – what it means to truly love someone. What I have come to better understand as I've gotten older is that... "loving" means that I am consciously opening myself to being uncomfortable.

I remember when I was a new parent. I was constantly uncomfortable. When I was on maternity leave from work with Rebecca, who is now 10, I remember being terrified to go to the grocery store with her – what would I do if she began to cry in the middle of the store and I couldn't calm her down? This was uncharted territory.

Feeling uncomfortable has continued, in various ways, throughout our parenting journey. Just when we think, "we are rocking this childrearing gig", our kids hit some milestone or developmental change that causes us, their parents, discomfort – whether it's puberty, dealing with anxiety, or even just the constant challenge of having 3 kids - all 3 with very strong, competing, personalities.

I think about being uncomfortable as a wife and partner. Michael and I have been together for almost 17 years. One of the things I have learned to appreciate is how we can have discussions, debates, and yes – arguments. We hold each other accountable and it's not always fun. Sometime, we feel deeply uncomfortable. But that discomfort is a part of the promise we made to each other when we got married – that we would witness each other's journey through life. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Through witnessing, we have also developed intimacy, and longstanding trust.

Over the years, I've realized that my closest friends, and my chosen family, are those who can hold space for discomfort. We can disagree, debate, and recognize that our points of view will never match up. But we can still listen to and respect each other, and understand that each of us has their own truth.

All of these thoughts were swirling in my head as I listened to last week's homily. I was also thinking about how I am a person of privilege. I'm a white person, raised by middle class parents, who took it for granted that I would go to college (and I did). There are privileges from my own life experience that I carry, privileges that sometimes I don't even consider. I am so glad that this community is one that embraces me and my identity – and if you remember from last week's message, there is nothing inherently wrong with any of our identities. But I also love that this community asks me to remember that my identity and experience is just one, and there are so many others with their own rich experiences that I can appreciate.

To appreciate that we are a safe place for many, and to recognize that we can always do more to continue to hold that safe space... that can provoke feelings of discomfort. I think, though, that this awareness, that we are always striving to evolve – as a UU community, and as individuals, this is the most profound expression of love.