

To Stand Up To Your Friends

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I am many things, religiously and spiritually. I am a raised and ordained Unitarian Universalist, I am a baptized Episcopalian because of my grandmother, I went to a Quaker high school and I hold on to those practices, I count myself a Unitarian Christian - I think Jesus was an important moral teacher and the resurrection is...complicated, or a powerful metaphor, but as a UU I am free to wrestle with my doubts and my faith and nobody is going to kick me out. This is important - Unitarian Universalists are not all or even mostly Christians, but some of us consider ourselves that way. I don't have a relationship with a personal, intervening God - but all my favorite hymns are about God and I think prayer helps me live a better life. There was a time when I was a declared humanist, but my faith was untested. There was a time when I believed in the fundamental goodness of human beings but I have to confess to you that I am, at best, a despairing humanist. I am a doubting humanist. At best, I think, I believe in the possibility of human goodness but also I see around me, around our city, all around our world some overwhelming evidence to the contrary. We hurt each other. We do violence to each other. We are capable of immense harm and callousness to harm.

You know Come, Come, Whoever You Are? Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving - our is no caravan of despair, come, yet again, come. Perhaps you know that there is a line in the poem that we have taken out, though it is sometimes sung as a descant - come, come, whoever you are, though you've broken your vows a thousand times.

It is one thing to imagine the heartbreaks outside our walls. It is another thing to call ourselves to account, the small ways we hurt and disappoint one another, inside our walls. This is not a church full of perfect people and I am not a perfect person or a perfect minister. And if I have not yet managed to disappoint you, then soon I will. It is inevitable, it's just what we are like. I speak not about any particular situation that has arisen - I am frankly trying to remind you that while it's all good here, during what we call the honeymoon phase, that we are going to disappoint one another in ways large and small. And I am encouraging you, when that day comes if it hasn't already, to call upon your courage, to stick it out, to offer your story and your perspective to me or to leadership in the spirit of generosity and repair.

Of course, the flip side to that is that you must be assured that your story will be received in the spirit of generosity and repair.

And so, a story: when I was in high school, I did not go to parties where people's parents weren't home. I did not drink underage, though I did make it very clear to my parents that I was making my own moral choice and that my decision had nothing to do, whatsoever, with their strictness and their rules. But I made my choices known to my friends.

And I remember the day when my friend sat me down in the basement of my parents' house. We drank tea from chipped painted mugs on the green couch and she told me that she

respected my choices, but sometimes the way that I expressed myself felt very judgmental to her and to our other friends. She felt like I judged her, thought less of her, and was unwilling to listen to how she felt because I was so convinced of my own righteousness, of my own moral clarity. Though she didn't cite it specifically, I am sure that it was our youth group covenant and the safe environment the adults provided for us to explore our own beliefs, choices, and relationships that empowered her to speak up to me. It is so hard to tell someone whom you know cares for you that they are letting you down, that they are hurting you, that they are making you feel small. It is easier to have a fight and to make someone an enemy than it is - for many of us - to gather the courage to say something hard in the context of a loving relationship or a friendship. And I began to practice, from that conversation onward, receiving messages like hers as a gift.

Because someone telling you that you have hurt them and they wish you would do better is offering you the opportunity to change. Someone telling you that you're hurting them is betting on you, that if you knew what harm you were causing you would cut it out. It is a gamble, always, especially when we are coming from a marginalized identity, to tell someone that they are harming us - and when we do it, we are making a statement of faith in that person or that church or that group or that friend or the strength of that relationship.

And yet - any commitment is a risk. Any commitment, any meaningful endeavor, any promise, any new grand venture carries within it the seeds of heartbreak. This is why we make vows in front of other people at our weddings - because it is hard to keep them! This is why there are vows of ordination, as well, and this is why we as a faith tradition have chosen covenant instead of creed. We have chosen agreements about behaviors - we have chosen to try to be our best selves - and we know that sometimes we fail.

This is why we recite the mission of our congregation when we kindle our chalice flame - because it is work to connect, to care, and to create loving community, and we don't always do it well. I am not saying this only about you (115 or so people) or about us. I mean people. People in general.

And actually, the history of Unitarian Universalism and the theological and philosophical disagreements that resulted in our denominations has mixed history about the human tendency to fail, to disappoint, to fall short. Unitarian Universalism has been divided, a little, on this front. We have waffled a little on being a people of failure. Some of this has to do with white, New England, educated elite cultural bias - how could people with probably a million combined PhDs who basically invented Harvard possibly fail at the small task of being our best selves? I'm being a little snarky here - the 19th century brought with it the industrial revolution, changes in technology and medicine, massive advancements not unlike the printing press or the computer - and so the history-writers and the history-makers, the authors and the thinkers, the leaders and the respected intellectuals were all swimming in this water of a progressive, positive cultural trend. Onward and upward forever! Human beings are making progress! We strive! Life is, in fact, perfectable, if we just invent the right things and buy the right things and learn the right things and think the right things.

Our Unitarian forebears began to reject the doctrine of original sin. The early 20th century humanists began to gather in groups and build a movement declaring that people can be good without God. That God is not the end-all be-all, or the source of morality, and that we have free will and choices and we can do better. And we, as a denomination, have incorporated all these teachings to equip us and empower us to face the challenges of our age, to preach love in the face of hate, to chart the way forward for progressive religious people.

But. But. Somewhere along the way, in our struggle to articulate an inclusive and empowering theological vision - we went from "God loves all human beings," which if you don't believe in an active and a loving God is hard to relate to, to "human beings are fundamentally good," which sort of misses the point. In our attempt to translate and include and make our conversation about what is holy wider and more relevant, less dogmatic, we lost something fundamentally and crucially important. We went from "we are worthy of love" to "we are good." And that thinking, that embedded theology, has left many of us completely astonished when we are faced with our own wrongdoing.

We have tried to side with love and justice in our history as a movement and sometimes we have succeeded and other times we have failed. We are so called to try to do the right thing in the world that we are sometimes preciously astonished when we ourselves do wrong. And this can make it difficult for us to grow and change. We have focused so intently for decades on being the people who have the correct ideas - on like-mindedness.

Any commitment is a risk. Any commitment, any meaningful endeavor, any promise, any new grand venture carries within it the seeds of heartbreak.

So what if we got more comfortable with failure? What if we understood ourselves as beloved, and worthy, and very, very messy? Would we find more courage that way? If we knew we were going to disappoint one another in a thousand ways, large and small, would we surrender the illusion that progress forever and ever is possible? Would we be a little more honest?

In a meeting a few weeks ago where parents, youth, and Cindy and I were discussing the possibility of a youth group next year, the question came up "Does it have to be a church youth group?". Yes, for all sorts of boring reasons like all adults supervising minors must be background checked, I said. "But also," Michelle Lee reminded us, "We do religion relationally." The reason why a youth group here is different, from, say, a group for teens at the Y, or at a school, or even a group of friends, is the fact that we're creating a specific space for people to practice being human together, practice being UUs together, practice treating one another in accordance with our worth and dignity, work so hard at doing right by each other AND, when we fail, which all of us do or have or will, we practice making apologies and making repair.

Though you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come. May it be so, and amen.