

“Love Will Guide Us”
Rev. Hannah Petrie
For the Ordination of Meghann Robern in Nashville, Tennessee
as preached on June 11, 2017

Meghann and her expanding family joined Neighborhood UU Church in Pasadena, CA, my last post, when my ministry began there around 2007. It was the first UU church to which she belonged. When I asked Meghann about any thoughts she had for the sermon, she mentioned love. And I was like, love, got it! That’s not too broad a topic or anything . . . when I probed, here was her emailed response:

The love I am thinking about is the love I felt when I first encountered UU youth, as a tween, and how they welcomed me without needing to know anything about me. Later, when we were pregnant with Prudence, it was that lone encounter that led us to a UU church twenty years later, because I wanted my kid(s) to be like those kids. And, I ended up finding a faith that loved all of me, not just some parts of me in spite of others. And, on top of that, even my sense of call to be a minister, something I had squashed down for decades, was loved into being.

Meghann is a UU conversion success story. She was brought up Quaker, but there weren’t other teens in the Meeting House. Thanks to the Quakers’ wide-open, interfaith arms, she got to visit a UU church (this one), one time in her youth. So, when I hear Meghann’s story, first, I need to congratulate the teens of this fine congregation whom enchanted Meghann – way to go! Maybe some of you are here today, with UU kids of your own now. Second, I also think happily that I was like one of you, too, a cool UU teen once, who planned and led a youth conference at my home church in Deerfield, IL.

And then, I married her and Josh twice, once in Disney Land, where, during the ceremony, I got heckled by Alice and the Mad Hatter, the second time at Neighborhood Church, when her mother, Emmylou Harris, sang, “Love Will Guide Us” from our hymnal.

At the time, we had a young adult group called VOYAGers, which along with many brilliant UU acronymns, stood for Very Old Young Adult Group, a concept I brought from First UU of Austin, TX where I interned. VOYAGers are anyone born in the 70s and 80s – this is how our families became friends, and I’m thrilled she’s honoring her Canadian roots in her first call to Winnipeg. My husband’s side of the family is Canadian, and it’s something else we have in common. PAUSE

Love, Meghann says, is the theme of her ordination and her entire ministerial formation.

Not only the love we tap in justice-making, that inspires us to go the extra mile - a love I am both drunk on / can’t get enough of, and, makes me miserable with fatigue, especially since November. Not only the love Dr. King spoke of in 1956 in Montgomery, in an address titled, “Facing the Challenge of a New Age.” He declared, “We have before us

the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization.”

Not only the love that will get us through the tumult of institutional transformation, to that authenticity of equity and inclusion we are birthing with a long, long labor of love, that we struggle for now. Not only that love, but I’ll return to it.

The love Meghann speaks of is more fundamental, more universally human than that. It’s the love we reach for as soon as we’re born. The need for this love only grows as we develop, longing to be seen and known, as we really are. It was the powerful-when-it’s-done-right, UU, open invitation to covenant and belong, to come, come, whoever you are, that brought Meghann to this adventurous precipice.

I remember that great love I was taught to extend, as a result of belonging to UU congregations most my life.

It’s this centuries-old, particular, Universalist love at the heart of our world-view as religious liberals. Universalists who were radical for declaring all souls are saved.

This kind of love is why I made sure the incredibly awkward transgender woman at a young adult conference I went to when I was 18 felt as welcome as possible, somewhere in rural Michigan in 1991. That, of course she could sleep in the women-only room. This group was 18 – 35 and she was probably in her late 30s. But not only was I not frightened, I knew it was my moral duty to be demonstrably welcoming. To set up my sleeping bag right next to hers so she knew I was not afraid.

This kind of love I learned is why I had a strong emotional response to the homeless and the down-trodden, when I first encountered them as a girl, in the inner-city streets of Chicago. Later, in Seminary, it wasn’t Christianity that taught me this Christian kind of love, it was UU curiosity and responsibility toward a familiarity with all major faiths that caused me to seek and learn the teachings of Jesus, and then, *apply* them, as much and as often as I am courageous enough to remember to, which is never often enough. As it turned out, Jesus the Jew was also a Universalist, it appeared to me, and this universal love that ignited my spirit to serve is the same love that ignites Meghann’s.

This kind of love is why I loved the music of Bruce Springsteen and John Cougar Mellencamp growing up and still do. These bards who sing directly to the plight of the economically forsaken. The “rain on the scarecrow” and “the blood on the plow” for family farmers in Indiana, poor folks, factory workers, black and white - the devastated, rural wasteland of America. Certainly the music of Meghann’s mom [Emmy Lou Harris] has devoted, lifelong listeners who have grown up hard, grown up in an America perhaps none of us in this room knows with any intimacy we can truly claim. But I hope there are some of you here with us today.

There is one peculiar thing about growing up UU – I have much more license to critique us, much in the same way we can critique our relatives. I consider it a gift and a burden, because it means suggesting hard truths sometimes, an honor which risks so much.

In these interesting times in our country, when liberalism, politically, has failed in spectacular fashion, by not enacting a larger vision of inclusion, the question might arise, *what are the urgent tasks of liberal religion, today?* And, where does love, a squishy concept, fit into it?

From the outside looking in, one might ask, why on earth would someone spend tens of thousands of dollars and hours to become a UU minister when many believe liberalism is flailing?

We can find the answer in what attracted Meghann to UU in the first place, in her faith and embodiment of radical welcome. Meghann is a perfect amalgam of the kind of UU minister I want us turning out. Someone who is both urban and sophisticated, having grown up in Nashville and lived in urban centers like LA, but she also has country roots, is down to earth, and brings a genuine, down home hospitality to her ministry. I know Winnipeg isn't a rural area, the population's the same as Nashville. But, it's a fly-over city in the middle of the country, a version of middle-North America. The culture, I imagine, does not resemble LA's.

This point is related to my concern that we no longer see, truly *see*, the rural wastelands of North America, where, in some parts, like North Carolina, there is literally the excrement of swine sprayed over black neighborhoods, because this is the cheapest way for hog factories to dispose of their waste.

We don't see the images of despair, of a "Make America Great Again" banner, hanging tattered, on a dilapidated country road-side stop, where I am tempted to say fraud is the last hope, but in fact is desperate prayer. Where lethal drug overdoses are scourging younger generations, the dearth of meaningful work likely a factor. Maybe no one in this room knows what it's like to be forgotten like this. I sure don't.

I've heard that liberals make up only 20% of America. The feeling from the conservative end, and so far their success confirms this, is that our tendencies toward secularism, political correctness and politics-as-religion are too thin to appeal to the masses we would like. Maybe it's because conservative faiths more consistently and rigorously ask the deeper questions about religion, and though we may not care for their answers, we need to ask those questions too, and ask them more often. Questions like, *Who are we, most deeply?* And, *How should we live?* So that, *when we look back, we can be glad we lived that way?*

I hope Meghann and all of us UU clergy present today consider how to successfully minister to our more rural brothers and sisters. Where are our pilgrimages to the rural communities in crisis? No, we UUs have to go all the way to New Orleans, Haiti or to Mexico before we can wear our badges of righteousness.

When will we own up to our more dominant, Unitarian legacy of snobbery? White supremacy might be considered a form of snobbery, but snobbery is a wider umbrella than color. Snobbery discounts a lot, lot more people, the kind of people there are more and more of residing, on this land of our ongoing, democratic experiment.

I sometimes suspect our fixation on certain areas of identity politics is a way to avoid talking about our own economic privilege, the bigger, deeper cause of white supremacy. In the Gospels, Jesus mentions money 14x as often as he mentions love.

What does all this tell us about our urgent tasks as religious liberals?

Our first urgent task is to ask the universal religious questions, with an open heart. If anyone should have license and the ability to distill the most critical questions about how to live, it ought to be us. But we must ask in a way that connects and forges relationship, and a truly, socio-economically diverse and beloved community. We UUs are very good at putting out the welcome mat, but our next step toward authentic inclusion is to make the atypical UU stick, which includes making space for people of many backgrounds to hang their hats for the long haul.

In the same paragraph that I quoted Dr. King from earlier, he says, “This love might well be the salvation of our civilization.”

He contends,

“There is still a voice crying out in terms that echo across the generations, saying: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them . . . that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.”

He says,

“. . . the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends.”

Our second urgent task is to *apply* this knowledge, guided by this love therein – a love that enables us to *see* the world as it really is. Having seen it, we are guided to act in the world in ways that transform us and those around us - so when we look back, we can be glad we lived the way we did. The Rev. William Barber, our living MLK, just showed us how this is done on Friday, by leading over 30,000 people of faith and conscience in protests in North Carolina. William Barber is our urgent task-master exemplar.

Our urgent task is to be led by the love that says, all are called, all are anointed, and then, *to live up to this*, to what it takes to live our lives with such sustained integrity, devotion, and impact.

Is Unitarian Universalism strong enough, potent, and compelling enough, as it is now, to facilitate and deliver on this?

That's our third urgent task, to ask this question, with courage.

We know the first UU Church of Tulsa has asked, as they begin their capital campaign to move from an affluent neighborhood to one much less so. We need more bold leadership like this. We should heed the message of Michael Tomasky of New Republic.com, who wrote the article, "Elitism is Liberalism's Biggest Problem" a few weeks ago. He says,

"The chasm between elite liberals and middle America is liberalism's biggest problem . . . And bridging the gulf is on us, not them. A person can still be 'on the team' even if they think the minimum wage should be raised only to \$10. Or don't consider the placement of a crèche on the courthouse square for two weeks in December a constitutional crisis, or haven't figured out how they feel about transgender bathrooms. If we don't find a way to welcome them, they will go to the other side."

I applaud recent efforts of UUs to dismantle white supremacy – long, are we overdue, to offer leadership in the ongoing, festering aftermaths of African slavery that America has never truly addressed, certainly not as South Africa has and Canada currently is with Truth and Reconciliation efforts with Native Canadians. May we as clergy and laity together have the courage to bring white supremacy into focus.

But if you take anything home today from my sermon, take this. Let's *also* take time to ask ourselves the difficult questions around what liberal religion is *not* doing, and has rarely done well since our Universalist roots, which is to act in service of humanity as *one body*, so that we help this body become more *whole*.

Whenever you feel your righteous fervor flair up, ask yourself: am I looking thru a worldview of us vs. them? We are *one body*. We are all Earth-seed, as Octavia Butler had us know. "We are flesh---self-aware, questing, problem-solving flesh. We are that aspect of Earthlife best able to shape God knowingly."

Dr. King spoke of redemption, and redemption never comes easy. Its possibility starts with awkward and stumbling steps, with the love that guides us to try new things, to see things through eyes we've not yet considered.

Every religion is flawed. We don't need to over-analyze and flog ourselves, that's not our task. Our task is to keep it simple. To ask such essential questions about how to live. For in the end, it's not the achievements that make a life well-lived, it's the relationships we built, the "Earthseeds" we planted, on the by and by, that blossom long after we're gone, showing all whom we loved, *how* to love.

Meghann, I know you will demonstrate this love to transcendent effect in your professional ministry, this wondrous love, that will guide all whom you guide, higher and higher.

