

We gather to know...or we gather to wonder...or we gather to make our peace with the secrets of life. Not everything is revealed us right away. These things take time.

What do you think about secrets? Can you keep them? I can keep some. I can't keep others...not when someone is at risk. So, it's a mixed bag with me. How is it with you? Before you answer, let's refine the search. Let's define what we mean by "secret." This can mean different things. It can mean some sensitive or embarrassing thing that someone share confidentially. These secrets can sound like, "Oh, my God. I didn't pass the bar again this year" or they can sound like "Help me! I think I'm falling in love with someone." These are personal secrets. These are not the kind of secrets that I mean. I mean the sacred kind of secrets about the mysteries of life and love. In the Book of Psalms (25:14), we find the verse that reads, "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear [God], and [God] will make them know [God's] covenant." In the Gospel of Luke, we find that passage that reads, "For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light." And in Proverbs, we discover the teaching that states, "Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed. These are the secrets of life and love...according to the theologians.

According to the artists, it's much the same. For the artist named James Taylor, "The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time." It was simple for him. It was easy. Any fool could do it. And for him,

The secret of love is in opening up your heart.

It's okay to feel afraid, but don't let that stand in your way.

Cause anyone knows that love is the only road.

How is it with you? Can you keep the secrets of love and life? For these are the secrets the help us feel brand new.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, July the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is GA-ther with a capital GA. As you know, each year, Unitarian Universalists from all across the country gather together for an annual conference called General Assembly or GA. We gather to handle—as best we can—the affairs of our living faith. This year, we gathered in Pittsburgh and truly incredible things took place. And why do we gather? Because when we gather well, in the presence of mystery, something within us all can be renewed.

“Hey, man! I’ll meet up with you on Thursday, on June 22<sup>nd</sup>,” I said in the atrium of the Convention Center in Pittsburgh. “They’re starting up at 12:30 in Ballroom BC. You can join us earlier and grab lunch if you want. We’re meeting at Primanti Brothers”

I love having lunch in Pittsburgh because it makes me feel younger inside, like before I went to high school. I like that time...and now, I miss it. I miss its hopefulness. I miss its innocence. Before I went to high school, life was pretty idyllic. My major problems were mostly about fitting in. I wasn't “popular” but I had lots of friends...on student council and on the baseball team. I wasn't insecure but I still had trouble fitting in...for lots of reasons, really...for reasons that revealed themselves over time...for reasons that are still revealing themselves...

Pine Brook was the name of our school. I learned how to ski from two of the teachers—Mr. Weber and Mr. Fischer who, looking back now, may have been gay.... Great men. And Mrs. Sachowich who was smart and so kind. And Mrs. Regalato who taught us how to sing in Spanish. I suppose they taught history and math and what not but those are the things I most remember.

And I remember this time in the cafeteria when one of my classmates put potato chips right in their sandwich! I tried that once with the sandwich that my mother made me and it was delicious and it was so fun because my sandwich became so crunchy.

Crunchy sandwiches make kids smile. Now, even just the memory makes the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade kid in us so happy. That's why I love having lunch in Pittsburgh...at Primanti Brothers. At Primanti Brothers, they put French fries in the sandwiches. It's the adult version of the thing we did before we went to high school. It's fun sitting in a room full of adults, eating sandwiches that make us feel like we were still fourteen years old.

So, guess what! I renewed a friendship when I was there...and not just any friendship. I renewed a friendship with a woman named Betty-Jean Rütters-Ward. Betty-Jean is a Consultant. She is a Research Scholar at the Starr King School for the Ministry and she is an Assistant Professor for Transformative Leadership at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. She lives in Brooklyn. She travels and she does a lot of things online. At General Assembly things year, she led an interesting workshop. It was called Empowering Young Leaders and Building Multigenerational Community. I was excited to attend this workshop because of North Chapel Brave Light Youth Exchange Project.

For those of you who may not know, the Brave Light Youth Exchange Project is a multi-year, grant-funded initiative that developed out of an ongoing conversation that began right here, at North Chapel. Judy Williamson, who was on the Board at that time, and Chris Bartlett, who was chairing it, brought together a task force to explore how North Chapel might be use in the Upper Valley with respect to the needs of children and youth.

So, I went to this workshop with bells on to see what I might learn, to see what might be useful to our Project. The workshop was scheduled for the 12:30-2:00 slot. They advertised it as follows:

This interactive workshop will inspire and equip you to build dynamic social change efforts across the generations. Learn from Unitarian Universalist history and theology, hear from young leaders and their allies, identify opportunities for multigenerational partnership in your local communities, and vision for our future with UUs of all ages.

It was lovely. It was beautiful to learn of the triumphs of these efforts over time. It was tough to learn of our failings. It was hard to know what to do. We listened to the formal presentation before breaking into smaller groups. Accompanying Betty-Jean were three other presenters, the eldest among her colleagues was about 30 or 35 years old. Rev. Dr. Gregory Carrow-Boyd, Karishma Gottfried from Union Theological School in New York, Lindsay Caddle LaPointe.... These were young people talking about youth empowerment to a group of older folks who had come out of the UU youth movement themselves.

Bravely, I think, Unitarian Universalism has guided us to a place of deepest hopefulness and deepest dare. By and large, we have nurtured a faith that is committed to growing the soul of every child. This is hard to do. We live in a world in which it is increasingly hard to grow the soul. The soul is tender. The soul is quiet. The soul needs a healthy environment in which to grow. These kinds of things can be difficult to regularly provide for children and youth. These kinds of things can be difficult to provide even for ourselves...and when we cannot provide the for ourselves, it isn't possible to provide this for others.

The most important things is that we connect—strong hands to weak and old hands to young. There is not greater spiritual revolution than this...for inside the lives of young folks is the desire to know how to live well. So often, older folks teach. I find myself doing this sometimes. So often, we reach into our minds and try to bestow information on others. Oh, my God, we're so boring. I'm so boring when I do that. I get nervous because I long for connection, especially with those aren't my age. We're generationally socialized. They all have names—Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Gen Zers, the Lost Generation, Millenials.... We're coded and prescribed, psychologically profiled and evaluated.... We're targeted by corporations and we're marketed to advertisement agencies.... It's hard because the soul needs more than this to grow, no matter how young we are. And no matter how old we are, the soul is tender...and the soul is quiet...and the soul needs a healthy environment in which to grow.

So, one of the things I learned in the youth empowerment workshop Pittsburgh was about the soul-deep value of Vermont. I loved being there with everybody. I loved seeing old friends and colleagues from all across the country...especially now. I just can't tell how important it was that we were together...and not because things went well. In many ways, they fell apart. Hearts were so fragile. Fuses were short. Tensions were high. Spirits were low. And, in time (and with grace), the opposite was true. These COVID years have been difficult to navigate. We saw that clearly in Pittsburgh. We're on a real journey these days. We're on a journey that takes us out beyond ourselves, where we're not prepared to be. And we're awkward there. We're insecure. It's just like it was before we went to high school. In some ways, over all that time, so little has changed.

The poets talk about this irony...about the experience of being older and younger at the same time...and about how normal and confusing all of this is. A poet writes,

I am a woman of heart and mind  
with time on her hands, no child to raise  
You come to me like a little boy  
And I give you my scorn and my praise  
You think I'm like your mother  
or another lover or your sister or the queen of your dreams  
but I'm just another silly girl when love makes a fool of me

True artists can be so very many people—the grown-up woman and the newborn child, the little boy and the silly girl...the mother, the lover, the sister, the queen, the broken-hearted fool...

It's hard to recognize so much in ourselves. We are vast and, most likely, we don't really want to be. We really want to be one thing but we are more than what we want. We want to be good and we want to be beautiful...and we are but we aren't these things all the time. None of us are...and when we find this out, when I find out that I fall short...like all the time...such a great humility becomes available to us. Now, if we

lock to some way we are, some too-narrow version of ourselves, it becomes so easy to fight and so easy to find fault in others.

Back in the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy was good at this. He was good at finding fault in others. Few would describe McCarthy as a self-reflective man. In the throes of his rather caustic anti-Communist campaign, he quoted Shakespeare out of context in an attempt to strengthen his point. Edward R. Murrow corrected him and put things in perspective. Murrow said,

Earlier, the Senator asked, "Upon what meat does this our Caesar feed?". Had he looked three lines earlier in Shakespeare's "Caesar" he would have found this line, which is not altogether inappropriate. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

Edward R. Murrow. Do you know or remember this name? Is his story generational? In other words, do younger folks these days know or remember him?

Ed Murrow was the radio-then-TV journalism who challenged the fear-based, anti-Communist campaign that was organized by a Senator named Joseph McCarthy who hailed from Appleton, Wisconsin. You've heard of McCarthyism. Joseph McCarthy was the driving force behind all of that. The process of confronting McCarthyism would be an interesting thing to study, especially considering the political state that we find ourselves in today and especially considering the spiritual consequences of the political state. So much of what Edward R. Murrow said back in the 50s still applies to how things are today. Murrow said,

We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law. We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason. If we dig deep in our history and doctrine and remember that we are not descended from fearful men...not from men who feared to write, to associate, to speak and to defend the causes that were, for the moment, unpopular.

Murrow told us Joseph McCarthy caused a great deal of pain. And he asked,

...whose fault is that? Not really his. [Joseph McCarthy] didn't create this situation of fear he merely exploited it, and rather successfully. Cassius was right. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

I think that is one of the most impressive passages in American rhetoric...and for most of my life, it was lost on me. I am generationally removed from Edward R. Murrow. I feel removed from the passions that he fought for. I feel removed from the courage that he possessed...but not when I'm with people who know his story. Not history, per se. His story. I don't feel removed when I am invited to remember the past that we share by the people who were there when things went down. I don't want to be taught a history lesson. I can find that out on my own. I want to know how you felt, if you were frightened back in the day. I want to know how you were moved.

My colleague, Betty-Jean Rütters-Ward, the one who just led the youth empowerment workshop at GA in Pittsburgh... She calls me "the old man." She and I have an interesting history.

Both of us are graduates from the Starr King School for the Ministry in California. We were housemates, actually. Six of us lived together over the course of my three years there. Betty-Jean moved into the house in my second year, in 2006. Once a week, we all ate dinner together. The food was hit and miss but it was always good to share the time. In a dinner conversation, I casually mentioned that I had studied at Tufts University outside of Boston. Betty-Jean laughed and casually mentioned that she had gone to summer camp at Tufts when she was a kid. Guess what! Life is so crazy. I was her camp counselor when she was five!!!

Betty-Jean couldn't believe it! She scrambled for picture to see if she could find me. I was absolutely sure that it was true. I ask her a question to lock things down. I said, "Did you know a little girl named MO." There was an unforgettably red-headed, little girl at camp named Missouri, like the state which abbreviates as MO and thus, her nickname. I figured that if she and I both knew MO, that would lock

things up. I said, “Did you know a little girl named MO.” I thought that she was gonna well with tears. We laughed. All of us did. That was a fun dinner that night.

Betty-Jean calls me “the old man.” She said to me, “I’m forty now.”

I said, “I know...and that “old man” joke is getting less and less funny. I started seminary in 2005 and I left in 2008. Last week was the first time in 15 years that I got the better of her in conversation. Believe me, it was satisfying. It was very much worth the wait.

The point is this: It is important that we gather. There is no more beautiful way to grow. ...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and in consensus, we are held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds.

We need one another so dearly. We need one another desperately. The strong need the weak. The old need the young and time (and with grace) it’s the other way around. The weak need the strong and the young need the old. That’s just the way it really is. This is so between us and it is also so within us. We can rejoice with every part of ourselves—strong and weak and old and young.

We are all so rich and complex. We are all so many different things. The true art of living, the true art of being, the true art of growing in community has its roots being in touch and being aligned with the many parts of ourselves—with the aging parent and the newborn child, with the silly boy and the little girl within us all.

Betty-Jean still calls me “the old man.” Maybe, somehow, she’s on to something. Maybe she was more on to something in 2006 than she can be in 2023...because the irony is fading, because the joke is less funny, because both she and I suffer the same illusion about time. We both believe each day that we are slowing becoming distant from the little child who lives within. I wonder now if we’re wrong about that. I wonder if we’re not deep enough in the practice the James Taylor describes as the Secret of Life. I wonder if we’re misunderstanding the meaning of time. He writes,



Now the thing about time is that time isn't really real.  
It's just your point of view, how does it feel for you?  
Einstein said he could never understand it all.  
Planets spinning through space, the smile upon your face,  
welcome to the human race and isn't it a lovely ride

Now, that's a secret I don't want to keep. And it's also one I'll never tell.  
Not with words anyway. Not because such a thing is forbidden or  
something like that but because words aren't beautiful enough...to  
describe a tempest, to tell the story of a sunrise, to share the secrets of  
the lilies of the field. We can share such secrets wordlessly...every time  
we gather together in faith.

They put French Fries on the sandwiches Primanti Brothers in  
Pittsburgh. I want to believe that they do this to remind us who we are,  
to remind us that it's fun to laugh and that it's ok to cry, to remind us of  
the old ones and the young ones that live inside of us, and to remind us  
that, across the sands of time, we need each other.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.