

## Prelude to a Kiss

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North Universalist Chapel Society

**G**ood morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. It is so good to be together. For those of you who might be joining us for the first time today, I bid you welcome. My name is Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont.

Today is Sunday, November the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I'd like to pause and recognize this important anniversary. Fifty-seven years ago today, on Friday, November 22<sup>nd</sup> in 1963, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy died in Dallas, Texas.

President Kennedy inspired us with his words and with his way—old and young, rich and poor, citizens of all races and ethnicities. He touched something in us. He gave us confidence...and hope. We need these things. He said, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." And he reminded us,

Our most basic, common link...is that we all inhabit...this small planet.  
We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures...  
and we are all mortal.

And he said,

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.

John F. Kennedy was powerful, was wonderful with words...and more importantly, was wonderful in life. Integrity. Thank you, John F. Kennedy. I am deeply grateful for your gift.

It might be worth noting that President Kennedy's rhetorical flourish and poetry was not wholly his own. He worked closely with a speechwriter—a man that he depended on...named Ted Sorensen, an old-school Unitarian from Lincoln, Nebraska.

Welcome everyone. It is good to be together. The title of this morning's reflection is Prelude to a Kiss.

How are we going to get through times as challenging as these?  
Prelude to a Kiss—1

Ellington knew. Edward Kennedy Ellington...or Duke Ellington. He figured it out. Ellington knew just how to save the world...with elegance. He wrote,

If you hear a song in blue  
Like a flower crying for the dew  
That was my heart serenading you  
My prelude to a kiss

His elegance inspires this morning's reflection. He wrote,

If you hear a song that grows  
From my tender sentimental woes  
That was my heart trying to compose  
A prelude to a kiss

Just to hear this lovely melody. It's enough to make you get right up and dance. And when Ella Fitzgerald sings it, this melody is as natural as the rain. I can't remember who said. The idea lifted me off of my feet. It was a melodic idea, the concept that music does its best to retrace the beauty that already lies within us...the idea that it is the artist task or charge or responsibility or challenge or purpose to reveal that inmost beauty...to remind us who we are.

It is so lovely a thing to be able to play that most gorgeous of instruments, the one that resides within us that is—as Stevie Wonder says—tuned in the key of life.

Let's go deeper now. Let us invent for ourselves a new possibility for this Thanksgiving, a possibility that is ours and ours to keep.

I have been a Unitarian Universalist for almost all of my life. The meaning and value of this faith has accrued in me, slowly over time. I am grateful for this. Otherwise, the meaning and the value of Unitarian Universalism would have eluded me a bit. As a faith, we've refused a dogma. In other words, there is no centrally belief or set of beliefs. So, Unitarian Universalists are not required to believe anything. Catholics centrally believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that the Bible is inerrant and that it is the revealed word of God. Historically, Unitarian Universalists have questioned the degree to which this is true, sometimes at great risk and even at the cost of life. This freedom of thought allows us escape from certain kinds of pseudo-religious habits of thought. The upside is that this tends to separate us from those who have mouths full of scripture and hearts full of hate. The downside is that we seldom talk about scripture and scripture can be quite beautiful...

That was centuries ago. Over time, we have stepped away from the deadly drama but we have never surrendered the tradition of raising questions, the tradition of pushing boundaries, the fierce tradition of thinking for ourselves.

It doesn't always happen gracefully. I used to be annoyed by sermons that seemed, cheaply, to turn things on their heads. It seemed like more of a rhetorical flourish than anything more deeply meaningful. Turns of phrases like "broken for good," as in, "Tom's old Mustang convertible used to breakdown every summer, when we took it to the beach. This time, that old clunker—classic that it was—is finally broken for good." To be "broken for good" is broken beyond repair but clever ministers learned to question that, structuring their sermon in such a way that it is not Tom's precious car that breaks but Tom's precious heart. And when his heart breaks, it is not "broken for good" in that old meaning. In no way is Tom's heart broken beyond repair. He is not irreparable. Instead, Tom's heart—which had been too hardened—was broken in such a way that he began to let love in. There's the reversal. Tom's heart was broken for good. Does that make sense?

That was a trend in our churches for a time but I was not open to it. I was annoyed but that was because my own heart had become hardened. I needed the very sermon that was annoying me. There's a lesson, to be sure.

I was annoyed and hardened and needy, just like Tom in the example I just shared. I was annoyed and hardened and needy but that didn't stop me from going to church, especially during the holidays. In fact, this time, I think it was New Years Eve. I went to church for a midnight service to ring in the new year. The sermon began and I was in a mood. Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie was preaching. She was my favorite preacher at that time. I was still living in North Carolina but when I was in Boston, I attended services at the church that she served.

She didn't use the phrase, "broken for good," which would have pushed me right over the line, but she did use the analogy of a car. She explained that some of us are a little broken, driving through life as if it's normal to have a flat tire slowing you down. Then, Rev. Kim upped the ante. She explained that some of us are a little broken, driving through life as if it's normal to have two flat tires slowing you down. You can see where this was going. I was thoroughly annoyed. I was increasingly impatient but I felt like I couldn't leave. I wasn't trapped—not physically, anyway. I just felt strangely compelled to stay. I felt strangely compelled to listen to Rev. Kim drone on and on about cars with one or even two flat tires...which is only barely possible, anyway.

And then, Rev. Kim upped the ante another time. I lost the ability to speak, I was so annoyed. I looked down at my wristwatch, even though I wasn't wearing it at the time. I was trying to figure out how much longer this could go on. And she said, "Some of us are a little broken, driving through life as if it's normal to have three flat tires slowing you down" and I burst into honest tears. I wept. On the shoulder of a friend on my left side and on the shoulder of someone I didn't even know on my right. I blubbered like a baby, sobbing softly, "That's me. That's me. That's me."

What Kim was saying was hardly possible "in the real world," as they say. In the realm of the spirit, however, her far-fetched analogy could not have been more true. It is by pushing the outer boundaries of what can and cannot be that we discover new things about ourselves, new things that we've known for so long but could not admit to anyone, new things that we've kept like precious secrets from ourselves. We discover these kinds of things by raising questions, by questioning things, by thinking for ourselves...and you know what, sometimes, questioning things can be really annoying...but let's trust ourselves. There are landscapes and oceans and mountain ranges and galaxies within us to be discovered. There are cloud shapes and sea shells and atoms and card games... Let's trust ourselves to go a little deeper.

Maybe it's ok to be mildly annoyed sometimes. Maybe that's what growth looks like. Maybe it's ok to push the outer boundaries a little bit, from time to time...just so we can see things in a different way. In the Gospel of Luke, it is written that while Jesus was speaking to the disciples...  
...suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him [asking], "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying [me]?"

Unitarian Universalists like to turn things around sometimes. We have a habit of pushing boundaries so we can see the world anew. I'm not interested in trying to redefine the Gospel of Luke somehow. But I am interested in exploring the possibilities of the kiss in another way.

I recently watched a documentary called *When We Were Kings*. I wonder if any of you have seen that film. It's wonderful. It is the story Muhammad Ali and his fight in Kinshasa, Zaire against the great George Foreman. It's boxing documentary about a world-famous fight that took place in October of 1974.

George Foreman was a seriously powerful man. Strong, strong, strong and so very talented. He was an excellent fighter and he was heavier, taller and, I think, considerably stronger than Ali and he had a longer reach.

Muhammad Ali was a talker, was a poet. He was so spectacular. Half of the fun of the fight took place far outside the boxing ring and long before the bell. He had such a way with words,  
Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.

The things he said were easy to remember. They stuck in your mind. He said,

If you think the world was surprised when Nixon resigned, wait until I kick [George] Foreman's behind.

Like I said, it was 1974. Nixon resigned on August 8<sup>th</sup> of that year, two and a half months before the fight. Taunting Foreman playfully and challenging him with a powerful elegance, Ali testified about his growth, about his development. He said,

I'm better now than I was, when you saw that 22-year-old, undeveloped kid running from Sonny Liston. I'm experienced now. I'm professional. My jaw's been broke. I've been knocked down a couple of times.

Ali trained in every way he could. He said,

I've been chopping trees! I done something new for this fight!!! I done rassled with an alligator. ... That's right. I have rassled with an alligator. I done tossed with a whale. I done handcuffed lightning and throwed thunder in jail. [] Only last week, I murdered a rock, injured stone, hospitalized a brick!!! I'm so mean I make medicine sick.

I still don't know why that's funny...but it is.

The reason I bring this up is because never before had I seen Ali so scared. Foreman was... He was tremendous. I've never seen anyone punch as hard. I'm not a huge boxing fan but I know that I'm right about this. He was tremendous. And he put the fear of God in Muhammad Ali. I'd never seen that before.

I thought that Muhammad Ali was going to get destroyed...and I knew the outcome of the fight before I watched the film. That's how powerful George Foreman showed himself to be. I thought I Ali was going to get crushed. I thought, if fortune served him, the best he could do was get saved by the bell. And that idea led me to a rhetorical flourish of my own, a turn of phrase that forced to look at things in a new light. In a song called Prelude to a Kiss—5  
God on Our Side, Bob Dylan sang,

For many dark hours, I've been thinking about this  
The Jesus Christ was betrayed by a kiss

And when he sang this, Dylan was referencing that passage from Luke that I shared earlier in this reflection (or similar passages from one of the other Gospels). And like I said, I'm really not interested in trying to reframe the story as it appears the Gospel of Luke in any way. I think that it's just beautiful as it is. I am interested in exploring the possibilities of the kiss in another way. It is already possible to imagine what it is and what it means to be betrayed by a kiss. In fact, it is not necessary to imagine such a thing. The story has been recounted the Gospel retellings for 2,000 years. My question is this: Is it possible to imagine what it is and what it means to be saved by a kiss?

I came across a stunning example of this. I came across the story that was the inspiration for tracking down that song by Duke Ellington (sung by Ella Fitzgerald) that, in turn, became the inspiration for this reflection. It was a TED Talk, actually, delivered by Simon Sinek about six years ago. I will need to quote him somewhat extensively. As he explains,

Captain William Swenson recently was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions in 2009.

On that day, a column of American and Afghan troops were [charged to] protect a group of...Afghan government officials, who [were] meeting with...village elders. The column came under ambush... Captain Swenson was recognized for running into live fire to rescue the wounded and pull out the dead.

What was remarkable about this day is, by sheer coincidence, one of the medevac medics happened to have a GoPro camera on his helmet and captured the whole scene on camera. [The film] shows Captain Swenson [rescuing a wounded soldier]. They put him in the helicopter, and then you see Captain Swenson bend over and give [the wounded man] a kiss before he turns around to rescue more.

Where in the world do people like this come from? What was the journey like? How did Captain Swenson come to be so fantastic? How did he prepare? What got him ready? What was his prelude to that kiss?

It's a beautiful story—a story of courage and valor, a story of grace and gratitude. And it ennobles us...and if life were simpler than it is, our choice would be quite clear. If we were genuinely interested in knowing what it is to be betrayed by a kiss, we should as Jesus...or Judas...or at the very

least, we should ask Luke...or Mark or Matthew or John. Any of them would know. But this knowledge is not the end of our genuine interest. And if we were genuinely interested in knowing what it is to be saved by a kiss, we should ask good Captain Swenson or the Afghani government officials who he rescued...or at the very least, we should ask the helmeted, medevac pilot with the GoPro camera. Any of them would know as well but once again, this is not the end of our genuine interest. Whether it is that one is saved or that one is betrayed by a kiss is a rhetorical flourish, is poetry. It is not the end of our interest but rather, it is the means. This kind of language is the means by which genuine interest is satisfied. It is the vehicle that we use to get to our meaningful destination, not the destination itself. What we truly seek exists beyond the flourish and beneath the poetry. So, let's go deeper, deeper than our words.

Muhammad Ali did not beat George Foreman in the ring by being a masterful poet. He went deeper. He trained his body and trained his mind for something better. Boxing was Ali's vehicle. He had his eye on a higher prize...and we need that high prize now...now, as things are getting a little harder.

In South Dakota, things have gotten really hard. A scene at one of the hospital was doubly tragic. [quoting]

...emergency room nurse Jodi Doering says she's treated many patients who deny that COVID-19 is making them ill even as they're hospitalized.

She went on CNN to talk about it. She was upset.

Courageously (even heroically), she shared the whole hell of it quite clearly. She said,

Their last dying words are 'This [cannot] be happening. [And this cannot be] real.' And when they should be spending time FaceTiming their families, they're filled with anger and hatred. And it just made me really sad the other night. I just can't believe that those are going to be their last thoughts and words."

Something deep within us is violated...when we cling more desperately to rhetorical flourish than we do to life itself. This is not the meaning and the value of poetry. This is profanity, in the very deepest sense of the word. This is the antithesis of faith...and it engenders the polar opposite of heroism.

Prelude to a Kiss—Z

In the TED Talk that I mentioned, the one about Captain William

Swenson, the military officer who saved Afghani officials with a kiss, the presenter Simon Sinek further explained [quote],

I've had the great honor of getting to meet some of these [people] who we would call heroes, who have put themselves and put their lives at risk to save others, and I asked them, "Why would you do it? Why did you do it?" And they all say the same thing: "Because they would have done it for me."

It is difficult to overstate the value of a sentiment that is as tender and as gracious as this one is. Heroes can find beauty in a broken world. Captain William Swenson is heroic. He can find beauty in a broken world. And nurse Jodi Doering is heroic. She can find beauty in a broken world. And you and I are heroic, both in mundane and spectacular ways. Very often, the mundane and the spectacular are one in the same.

The act of protecting and preserving the spectacular—that which is best in us and that which is highest—is very often spectacularly mundane. Eating well, sleeping enough (and deeply), being in community, finding daily joy... Few of us live life constantly on the mountaintop. In the good life, there is constant work involved—the cooking and the cleaning and when there is time, the meditation...and then, after the ecstasy (as they say), the laundry. The mundane and the spectacular are one in the same. Or, perhaps more accurately, they enable each other. They co-create themselves and one another...and so do we. Thank God. Really, I thank God that we truly are AND we are in such loving hands. It's spectacular...and we express that in such seemingly normal and everyday ways...so everyday that the miracle seems normal to us...and it almost is. I think of this beloved community, in all of its joy and sorrow.

I think of lovely Bill Forster, who lost his cat of more than seventeen years. It's heartbreaking but also so beautiful to have loved so hard and so well. And I think of Donna Durgin and her beloved Ed who had the joy of spending time with our family on the west coast—in Washington and Oregon—before the recent spikes and travel restrictions...Kris and Jason and Sarah... It sounds like you had fun. And Anne Marinello who is and remains so deeply hopeful and so deeply heartfelt for the healing of our country and offers peace to all of those who have been suffering.

And Sherry Belisle who has talked with our beloved Ginny Christy who is a joyful 97 years old, still playing bridge online and doing well. Contact Sherry for contact information. I think Fran Lancaster has it as well.

Prelude to a Kiss—8  
Sherry is also present to the health challenges of Meredith Tracy, a person

she knows through her connections with a youth choir years ago



she knows through her connections with a young man 7 years ago.

And Peggy Kannenstine whose dog, Bugsy, died. The loss is enormous but there is a new dog in her life. Duchess. And if I'm not mistaken, Buggy is Duchess's great uncle.

And I think of Mary Blanton who got to spend two weeks with her daughter, Lucy spend two weeks with me. It has been so wonderful to have her company and hugs. ...of Anne Dean who extends a prayer of healing for her dear Ellyn who recently lost her partner, Elizabeth. And I think of Chris and Barbara Bartlett who were delighted some time ago to welcome Maya Lynn Bartlett into the world and into our family. Maya is the daughter of their son, Andrew and his wife, Kristin out in Michigan. The whole family is overjoyed.

In an essay called "What If You Felt Loved," my friend and colleague, Rev. Meg Barnhouse wrote about an exchange of letters between two dancers—Martha Graham and Agnes de Mille.

Agnes de Mille wrote, "I was bewildered and worried that my entire scale of values was untrustworthy... I confessed that I had a burning desire to be excellent, but no faith that I could be. Martha said to me, very quietly, 'There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is or how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.'"

I wonder how Martha Graham and Agnes de Mille would have danced to the music of Ellington and Fitzgerald.

If you hear a song in blue  
Like a flower crying for the dew  
That was my heart serenading you  
My prelude to a kiss

With grace, for sure...but I hope also with gratitude, with thanksgiving...for when times are challenging, that's when we need it most. We need our elegance. We need our courage. We need our grace and gratitude. In order to dance to the heroism of Captain Swenson and nurse Doering, we need to do just what Martha Graham had asked of Agnes de Mille. We don't need to judge ourselves. We just need to keep the channel open.

Prelude to a Kiss—9

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

Prelude to a Kiss—10