

## Renewing Fellowship

Far beyond the grasp of hands,  
or light to meet the eye,  
past the reaches of the mind,  
There find the key to nature's harmony  
in an architecture so entwined.  
Like the birds whose patterns grace the sky  
and carry all who join in love expanding,  
The message of peace will rise in flight  
taking the weight of the world upon its wings,  
In the oneness of ev'rything.

"I feel fat. I'm out of shape. This new way that we're living, it's literally change my body. First, I gain weight and then, I lose it...but I gain and lose in brand new places. My chest and my belly get plumper but my waist is withering away. I had to drill new holes in my belt last year to keep my pants from falling from my hips. My body is changing and I really don't know why. Not just yet. So, I went on a few diets. I tried an exercise plan or two. But I always gave up or gave in. It turns out that I'm not a joiner in that way. I'm not all on board. I'm not on the train. I need to go my own way...and so, I try things and then, I turn away and go off in my own direction. I like the poetry of 'oneness' but I'm skeptical. I see the holes in things and then, something breaks in me and I turn away." End quote.

This story is one part fiction and one part autobiography. I do feel fit and out of shape...and I'm vain enough to believe it. I am gaining and losing weight and I do feel out of shape and I did drill two, new holes in my belt last year and everything...but the stuff about not being a joiner isn't really true. It isn't even "true-ish," as the new House Representative out of New York's 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district might say. Are many of you keeping up with this? George Santos, the Republican representing northern Nassau County on Long Island and northeastern Queens...George Santos, if that's even his name, just lied his way into Congress—lied about his education and his upbringing, lied about his professional life and even lied about his own mother's death.

Tragically, I guess, his mother died on several occasions—once in Manhattan, in the South Tower on 9/11 in 2001 and then, again a few years later after a long and arduous battle with cancer. And if you're like me in your thinking and right now, you're trying to make sense of all these things, you should also know that records show that she was not in the South Tower when tragedy struck and that she wasn't in New York City back in 2001 but was living in Brazil at that time. My bitter "true-ish" joke is a play on something that Santos said in real life, whatever "real life" is when it comes to him. Santos, who is Catholic, claimed to be Jewish. He claimed that his Jewish grandparents fled the Holocaust, fleeing from Belgium in 1940, even though published reports say that they were born in Brazil, before the Holocaust. When confronted with this, Santos asserted that he never said that he was Jewish but, rather said that he was "Jew-ish," which made great headlines in the press.

All of this is to say that it's just so important to be honest in life...and being in community helps to keep us honest. It keeps us grounded. Even when everything around us is completely falling apart, we can pull things back together and keep moving forward. A former colleague and poet, the late Ric Masten wrote a poem called A Friend. He wrote,

if you're like me  
even though  
you're not quite sure of the question  
you keep looking  
for the answer  
and every now and then you bump into  
someone who is looking good  
looking wise  
so you tag along behind 'im  
picking up the punch lines  
thinking  
hot damn  
this one's gonna get me home

and if you're like me  
you go along with 'im  
'til they say something stupid  
do something human  
and the whole thing  
goes off the edge of the table  
and shatters like a lamp

sometimes  
when it matters enough  
you try to put it back together  
and what you come up with  
is far from perfect  
but a whole lot easier to live with

and then if you're like me  
you go out  
looking again

Faith is like this sometimes—bright and shiny at first, shattering sometimes, more beautiful after the recovery.... Unitarian Universalism is like this. It's not quite sure of its question but searches fervently for the answer, the one that's great enough to take us home. It reaches for the heavens and seems likely to get us there until it says something stupid and does something human and falls and shatters like a lamp.

I'm 57 years old. I've been a part of this faith for half a century now...and I've seen it shatter many times, time and again...as many times as I have shattered in these last fifty years. And yet, for reasons that I know deeply, I have always

gathered the pieces. I have always repaired the breach—no matter the risk, no matter the cost. My sense of beauty, my sense of love...it drives me. It always drives me. It is the deepest gift I know in life. Now, I say that as man without a partner and without a child but had I them in life, this drive would still be my deepest gift...because it would drive me to provide for them, to see to their safety and their well being, to see to their growth and prosperity and to see their journey as deeply interconnected with my own.

Do you feel this passion in life? How does it come up for you? Do you feel it about your work or about your family? Do you feel it about your spiritual journey or about the journey of your heart? Do you feel it about the journey of your soul? For...

Far beyond the grasp of hands,  
or light to meet the eye,  
past the reaches of the mind,  
There find the key to nature's harmony  
in an architecture so entwined.

In the Oneness of Everything, the artist Jim Scott reminds us of our interconnection with one another and with the world. And to those that still say, "I'm not a joiner. I go my own way," I say me too. I see the holes in things. I'm not caught up in naïve romance about God and the cross, about love and community, about peace and justice in life. I'm caught in something that's grittier than this. It's so much tougher. It's not ruled by fear. It's not fooled by scarcity. It's not driven by lack or the absence of things. It's driven by something that is much more basic and far more beautiful than this. It's driven by something that is not afraid to shatter on the floor, like a lamp...but does so, time and again...each time, growing wiser in the process.

In a song called Visions of Johanna, an epic ballad from 1966, Bob Dylan writes,  
Ain't it just like the night  
to play tricks when you're tryin' to be so quiet?  
We sit here stranded,  
though we're all doin' our best to deny it  
And Louise holds a handful of rain,  
temptin' you to defy it  
Lights flicker from the opposite loft  
In this room the heat pipes just cough  
The country music station plays soft  
But there's nothing, really nothing to turn off  
Just Louise and her lover so entwined  
And these visions of Johanna that conquer my mind

So beautiful, this entwining... For we reach for such beautiful things in life...and we always reach them...and we always miss them...and we always do just fine. What makes this so? What makes us believe it? What gives us faith enough to trust?

For those of us who believe that the best answer to this question is God and Jesus, I say wonderful. See that it leads you to the truth. For God and Jesus, the truth means healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the weakest among us,

and always praying in private." {the Newsroom, S1/Ep 10}. If this is not your truth, if it isn't true for you but only "true-ish," real faith will shatter and your illusions and I pray you, have access to something gritty enough, have access to something graceful enough to gather up the pieces, to put things back together and to go out looking again...in faith and deepest compassion.

We reach for such beautiful things in life...and we always reach them...and we always miss them...and we always do just fine. What makes this so?

For those of us who believe that the best answer to this question is nature or Beloved Community, I say the same. I say wonderful. See that it leads you to the truth...and spiritual truth is abundant. It is rich beyond all measure.

Now, I wish that the annual church budget at North Chapel and spiritual truth were one and the same. Some people believe that these two things are really one and the same. Have you heard of the prosperity gospel? According to the HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion... Well, actually, according to the HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, the prosperity gospel doesn't exist. There is no entry for "prosperity gospel." It's not really a religious practice. It's a scam that happens in churches. The term "prosperity gospel" is not defined by the likes of HarperCollins. It is defined, however, by the likes of John Oliver, the late-night talk show host on HBO. As Oliver explains,

Churches are a cornerstone of American life. There are roughly 350,000 congregations in the United States and many of them do great work—feeding the hungry, clothing the poor... But this is not a story about them. This is about the churches that exploit people's faith for monetary gain.<sup>1</sup>

The mechanism of that exploitation is referred to as the prosperity gospel. It is a cynical distortion of what the holy word is all about.

The prosperity gospel is a pattern of predatory behaviors among certain exploitive leaders, particularly televangelists. Good people send good money—tens of millions of dollars—because their leaders regularly preach the prosperity gospel. As John Oliver states clearly, the prosperity gospel "argues that wealth is a sign of God's favor and donations will result in wealth coming back to you." He gives a few examples and then says that, "All of this would be amusing if the targets of these messages were not often vulnerable people"—vulnerable people whose lives are hard, whose hearts are breaking, whose spirits are tender, vulnerable people not so unlike you or me, people who seek the warm embrace of something real, people who have not found belonging and who believe they cannot find it except in that impassioned community of strangers on TV.<sup>2</sup>

It is so easy to fall down, so easy to lose one's way, so easy to be convinced—if the timing is right—that we can buy our way to salvation...believing that heaven far above us, high above the clouds of rain. This is why healthy theology is so important. It's so important to have access to the good news. Radical ministry tells us that, "The kingdom of God is within you and is everywhere around you and everywhere you go, you carry a little piece of heaven." The country blues singers say that "All of heaven is buried in the heart." As the Broadway performers remind us,

Flowers of thy heart, oh God, are they.

May they not pass, like seeds, away  
Their heritage a sunless day  
God, save the people

We belong to all of these traditions. Regardless of what we, now, may choose individually to believe (as is our freedom), this tradition of freedom was hard-won, by great effort over time. We inherit a brave history of struggle, of triumph and fiercest witness. And it is this tradition, this history of fellowship that we renew today.

To offer one's hand in fellowship is a powerful thing and it is so because we are powerful. It's hard to remember this but it's true. We are all truly powerful, immensely so when we stand together. To offer one's hand in fellowship is a powerful thing. Recalling her first, heart-to-heart connection with her dear friend, James Baldwin, poet Maya Angelou said,

I first met Jim when he and I and the world were young enough to believe ourselves independently salvageable. We became friends in the late 50s, just as the United States was poised to make its quantum leap into the future. Just as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and other Southerners were girding themselves for the second "civil war" in 100 years and just when Malcolm X was giving voice to the anger in the street and in the minds of northern black city folks. In that riotous pulse of political fervor, James Baldwin and I met again and liked each other.

She said that, in those days,

Men were supposed to be "men" and women were supposed to be "women" and never really need one another at all. The courage [to extend one's hand and] say, "Will you be my brother?" or "Will you be my sister?" was often lacking. But James Baldwin was a brother! Incredible!!!

Maya Angleou had the courage to extend her hand in fellowship...and so, too, must we...in order to extend the bond of fellowship to those who are formally joining the church today. As I said earlier, this fellowship practice is something that we are renewing—not only because of the challenge that COVID presented but also because North Chapel is rebuilding, recovering after a challenge. Renewing Fellowship is one of the ways we rebuild.

To offer one's hand in fellowship is powerful. It has been ritualized over the years...by Rev. William Channing Gannett in St. Paul, Minnesota back in 1879. William Channing Gannett was born in Boston on 1840 and "was named after, and christened by, William Ellery Channing, the 'founder of American Unitarianism.'" So, he goes back a ways. At 39 years of age, he crafted the Bond of Fellowship that is still in use today. His Bond appears as the insert in your Orders of Service. Would you read his words with me?

As those who believe in religion,  
As those who believe in freedom, fellowship, and character in religion,  
As those who believe that the religious life means the thankful,  
trustful, loyal and helpful life, and

As those who believe that a church is a community of helpers,  
wherein it is made easier to lead such a life;  
We join ourselves together, name, hand, and heart...

I will need your help again in just a moment. I need to share one more concept before I ask the new members to come up to the chancel, the concept of Right Hand of Fellowship.

Some of you may already know this but if you don't, let me just say that the concept of the Right Hand of Fellowship appears in Galatians. In chapter 2/verse 9, Paul recounts the story, explaining that in a humble act of belonging, a hand was extended as a gesture of togetherness to those who previously had been estranged.

Giving the right hand of fellowship was "a solemn act of partnership signifying acceptance, agreement and trust" (footnote, [Galatians 2:9](#), The Amplified Bible, the Lockman Foundation, 2015). To this day, a handshake or a clasping of the right hand or forearm is used as a way to affirm a promise, to seal a deal, to communicate mutual trust, or to enter a partnership.

This is what we are doing here today. So, let us begin. New members, would you please approach the chancel? I would like to ask you and the congregation a few important questions. In keeping with the living tradition most recently articulated by my colleague, Rev. Laura Randall, I say this:

Fellowship Ceremony (L. Randall)                      January 22, 2023

Minister: Today, we welcome into our community these new members, who have chosen to make a commitment to this congregation by signing our Membership Book.

We are so glad to have you here with us and that you have chosen this community to travel with you on life's journey. Will you accept our gifts of fellowship, discovery, and service? Will you offer us your presence and your gifts? Will you engage with us as we seek to create a community and a world dedicated to love and justice?

New Members: We will.

Minister: Congregation, will you welcome these new members with the warmth and comfort of fellowship? Will you add your strengths and talents to the new energy that they bring? Will you share our triumphs and our struggles as our community grows and changes?

Congregation: We will.

Minister: Love is the Spirit of this Church, and service, its law. Our promise is to dwell together in peace, to seek truth in love, and to help one another.

Right hand of fellowship.  
Jenny and sherry follow behind with flowers.

We stand for the true and not the true-ish. We do not trivialize our faith...because so very much depends on it. The right hand of fellowship is a ritual of belonging but the spiritual experience is more than this. For,

Far beyond the grasp of hands,  
or light to meet the eye,  
past the reaches of the mind,  
There find the key to nature's harmony  
in an architecture so entwined.  
Like the birds whose patterns grace the sky  
and carry all who join in love expanding,  
The message of peace will rise in flight  
taking the weight of the world upon its wings,

Welcome to North Chapel. Welcome home. Will you join me in welcoming the newest members of North Universalist Chapel Society

May it be so. Blessed be and amen. Please return to your seat.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y1xJAVZxXg>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y1xJAVZxXg>