

# Sweet Grapes

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**G**ood morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is *Sweet Grapes*.

It is squarely in the classic, UU tradition of turning things upside down and inside-out and on their heads to gain perspective. It's an exercise in the fourth of our Seven Principles—the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I wonder how this will go in this crazy time.

You know, I also wonder, sometimes, about joyful laughter. I wonder if it just might be the key to our survival.

Okay. So, weird joke. A duck walks into a bar and he walks up to the bartender and he says to him, real simple, he says, "Hey, man. Got any grapes?"

The bartender was confused...as much by the nature of the request for fresh fruit at a bar that normally serves only beer, wine and hard alcohol as by the fact that a duck was uneventfully speaking English. The bartender gathered himself quickly so as to avoid unnecessary embarrassment and said to the duck politely, "No. This is a bar. We don't have any grapes." At this, the duck tipped his hat as if to say 'Thanks' and he turned and he walked out of bar without speaking another word.

Next day. Same bar. Same bartender. The same duck walks into the bar and he walks up to the bartender, just as he had done the day before and he says, "Hey, man. Got any grapes?" This times, the duck smiles more broadly than he had before. Doubly stunned (both by the strange fresh fruit request and by the English-speaking duck), the bartender hadn't noticed the first time that the duck was smiling. This time, seeing the duck's much broader smile, the bartender took note retroactively.

Sadly (for the duck, that is), the bartender found the duck's smiles unpersuasive. He was not moved by them but rather, the opposite. He was very much annoyed. Once again, the bartender gathered himself to speak. This time, however, he was far from polite. He said, "Listen, here, you lousy duck!!! Just like I told you yesterday, this is a bar. We don't have any grapes. Now, get out of here and don't come back or I'll nail you webbed feet to the floor!!!!" And at this, once again, the duck tipped his hat and

departed without saying anything more.

Next day. Day three. Same bar. Same bartender. The same duck walks into the bar. He walks right up to the bartender, just as he had done the day before and the day before that and he says, "Hey, man. Got any nails?"

The bartender was a bit unnerved by this. In fact, the absurdity of everything was beginning to catch up with him—the strange request, the talking duck, the duck's hat, the broad smile that was growing by the day... These things together with the question he wasn't ready for... He wasn't expecting to hear a question about nails. So, he answered plainly, without emotion. He was matter-of-fact. He said, "No. We don't have any nails."

Then, the duck said, quickly, "Got any grapes?"

**T**his is one of my favorite jokes...and I rarely remember jokes. I forget them almost right away, even when I think that they're funny. I remember this one because my dad told it to me. I don't remember it sentimentally, like, "This was the last, good joke my dad told before he died," even though that's true. That's not why I remember it. I remember this joke because my dad love it so much that he could really tell it without laughing. He couldn't get through it. I was laughing watching him tell this joke to himself...AND I'm pretty sure that he didn't need me to appreciate it with him. I did but that didn't matter to him, not once he was laughing.

I loved that about my dad. I still love that about my dad. His laughter is larger than his life and it lives in me...better than pictures and the stories.

The way my dad's laugh lives in me... So, shall the Bible be. What I mean to say is that I want to embody the sacred word powerfully, like laughter. I want the Holy to be that immediate. I am sufficiently reverent. I am devout in my ways. I'm DEEPLY respectful...respectful enough to be honest about the fact that I think that God is laughing. I'm not personifying the Holy here. I'm not anthropomorphizing. I'm not imagining that God is a person who is laughing, like my dad laughed at the duck joke...the first time he heard it AND every single time he told it, apparently. I mean to say that God is laughing and if we listen, we will hear it.

Now, if you are of the mind or inclination to be put off by this language, by my use of the word *God*, I understand. If it is useful to you, I will share that I think of God in many different ways. Right here and right now, I think of it—I feel it—as "the best in us becoming possible."

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I grew up in a deeply humanist and, I think, a profoundly religious

church. Not everyone felt as I did, of course. And, for me, that's what made it holy. It was not a place of conformity or fear or pressure or anxiety. On the pulpit (the simple, wooden pulpit) were the symbols of the major faiths of the world. The Star and Crescent, the Star of David, the Cross, the Yin/Yang... It was symbolically all of the faiths, even though there are many more symbols than could fit on the beautiful thing. I never imagined that everyone in my church believed the same things that I did. I didn't expect them to. I didn't want them to. I wanted them to believe that which best served their best witness of the world. I didn't imagine a childish advantage state of affairs (i.e., "I believe in Christmas because I really like getting gifts" or something). That is not the meaning of the faith that I knew then and that is not the meaning of the faith that I know now.

The thing that I loved so dearly—and still love so dearly—is that a community of people can come together (even virtually) and encourage the best in themselves and in each other. How do you feel about that idea? Don't you like that idea? Don't we long to see ourselves that strong?

Back in the day, we would have these gatherings. We called them conferences. Youth from all over central and northern New Jersey, New York City and Philadelphia, even from as far away as Tennessee...we'd gather for weekends at a time and take over the church from Friday night until Sunday morning. We would stay awake for as long as we could—drinking too much coffee, smoking Clove cigarettes, learning how to dance, how to sing, how to act...falling in and out of on-my-heart-forever love and writing songs about it that still touch a nerve, forty years later!!

I remember when my friends starting coming out of the closets, nervously sharing...bravely sharing that they were gay or lesbian. And the infinitely shocking news was anticlimactic...because everyone already knew and it wasn't weird. It was normal...to be different. It was normal...to be different. I grew up with that assumption. We were never afraid of who we were. We were never ashamed of who we were. We weren't arrogant or boastful...but we weren't foolish either. We were quirky and hormonal. We were acned and ridiculous but we never gave up on one another and we never gave up on ourselves. And we never stopped joking around. We still haven't stopped. I like that about us. We just keep laughing at ourselves.

One of our old group recently posted on Facebook that the power had gone out in his town. Chris asked if anybody else was in the same boat.

Andrew responded, asking, dryly, "You're in a boat?" I could see Chris fluster in my mind...with my soul-eye. Beautiful man...and so easy to make

good fun of...which is important...because life will hand you tragedy and grief and deep sorrow sometimes. If you prime the pump with laughter, the bad times are just a little bit easier. And sometimes, that little bit is all that you need.

What got us there? And what held us there? And what holds us there today? We discovered our original relationship with the universe. In 1836, a year after North Chapel was dedicated, a Unitarian minister named Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay entitled Nature. In it, Emerson grapples with his great anxiety about what he might have called the 'empty traditions' of the past. He wanted something fresher and more vital. He asked [quote],

Why should not we...enjoy an original relation to the universe? ...why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Emerson longed for first-hand experience. He longed for the marrow of life. He wanted to know Life/God personally. He wanted to meet it face to face...and greet it with laughter. He longed to see the holy in the waters of a lake...in constellations in the heavens...in a flower that was newly bloomed, even though no one was watching.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was passionate about this experience. He even wrote poetry about it! He wrote,

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,  
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,  
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,  
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.  
The purple petals fallen in the pool  
Made the black water with their beauty gay;  
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,  
And court the flower that cheapens his array.  
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why  
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,  
Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing,  
Then beauty is its own excuse for Being;  
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!  
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I never thought to ask; I never knew;

But in my simple ignorance suppose  
The self-same power that brought me there, brought you.

I remember hating his poetry. I remember not liking this poem in particular. In fact, I looked it up. I sought it out to make fun of it...but I love it now... and I don't feel foolish or ashamed about any of that. I'm delighted to be wrong about the things that I don't like. My life is all the richer for it.

We don't have to grope among the dry bones but we certainly can if we want to. Poetry doesn't sound like this anymore. We've gotten better. We've gotten hipper. Thank God. But just like Emerson, we still grapple with our great anxiety about the empty traditions of the past...of which this poem has become a great example. We long for something fresher and more vital.

How are we going to do that? How are we to outrun the past and find the sweet grapes of our time...especially against the ongoing challenges of COVID crisis? I think that we find the sweet grapes by becoming more honest with ourselves. When we are not honest with ourselves, we very quickly end up settling for sour grapes.

Have you heard that expression before? Are you familiar with it? Do you know where this expression comes from? It comes from a foxy tale told by an ancient and famous, Greco-African storyteller whose name was Aesop. Perhaps, you have heard of him. As Aesop tells us:

A Fox one day spied a beautiful bunch of ripe grapes hanging from a vine trained along the branches of a tree. The grapes seemed ready to burst with juice, and the Fox's mouth watered as he gazed longingly at them.

The bunch hung from a high branch, and the Fox had to jump for it. The first time he jumped he missed it by a long way. So he walked off a short distance and took a running leap at it, only to fall short once more. Again and again he tried, but in vain.

Now he sat down and looked at the grapes in disgust.

"What a fool I am," he said. "Here I am wearing myself out to get a bunch of sour grapes that are not worth [leaping] for."

And off he walked very, very scornfully.

There are many who pretend to despise and belittle that which is beyond their reach.

The fox was not honest with himself...and for his own inward dishonesty, he gave lie to outer world. His deeply flawed logic was this:

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Because I cannot reach the grapes I long to taste and be nourished

by, they must be sour grapes.

The fox pretended to despise and pretended to belittled that which was beyond his limited reach.

The fox's was a naïve wisdom but, as we know, there's really no such thing. One is naïve or one is wise. It's pretty tough to be both of these at the same time...because these qualities are antithetical. They contradict each other. They are oxymoronic. And they're just plain moronic...when you force them together like this. Together, they don't make a whole lot of sense. Thus, sour grapes.

I long for the sweetnesses of life. I want to be less like the fox in this ancient story and more like the duck in my dad's weird joke that he loved so much. I don't want to be naïve and stuck in some ancient tale about sour grapes. I want to be the wise one laughing to the heavens and enjoying all of the sweetnesses of life. I want the sweet grapes...and I'm willing to take on a little risk to try to find them.

And what are these sweet grapes of life? The sweet grapes are the clusters of thought that, taken and enjoyed one at a time or as a whole, nourish our lives and leave us wiser and better off. At one of the youth conferences that I was telling you about, one of those weekend-long gatherings of young people from the tri-state area and sometimes, from as far as Tennessee—I've got to say, when the pandemic is over, we should put together one of these—anyway, at one of the youth conferences that I was telling you about, I ended up crashing in Harold's office. It was the prime spot. It was cherished and highly prized.

Of course, Harold was Rev. Dean, the minister of my home church. His office had great energy. It was absolutely filled with books. I opened one and the hand-written inscription read as follows:

I believe in the creative power at work in the Universe. I believe in the mystery of life. I believe in the divine in every person, in the possibility of a better world and in the lasting effects of all my actions. I believe in the redemptive power of love, in the increase of knowledge through the use of reason, in the respect for my own thoughts. I believe in honoring those who have fought for new ideas and I believe in the reverence for all that is true and good and beautiful.

This was signed—Reverend Harold R. Dean, 1954. These were some very  
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sweet grapes.

Unitarian Universalism has come to embrace what it calls The Seven Principles. These are sweet grapes too but they are part of a tradition...not a tradition of the calcified, dry bones of the past a living tradition that magnifies that which is beautiful and good, dignifies that which is honest, life-sustaining and true. These sweet grapes may seem unattainable sometimes. And this is good. They make us really stretch. They may seem unattainable but they are not unattainable. We just can't give up our reach.

I couldn't help myself. I spent a good bit of time this week listening to the SCOTUS Confirmation Hearings for Amy Coney Barrett. It has been so interesting. She sees things very differently than I do but conflicts about her views are not at the center of the current crisis. Our integrity is at the center. The blocking of Merrick Garland in 2016, President Obama's choice to replace Justice Scalia, is at the center of the current crisis. As you may know, the reasoning that was championed by the Majority Leader at the time was that the hearings would take place too close to a presidential election. In 2016, we were nine months out.

Quite obviously, we are not now nine months out. We are voting now. Yet, those same officials who argued one way in 2016, are arguing different way now. It's hypocritical. It lacks integrity and the Common Good pays the price, no matter views Judge Barrett holds. When this hypocrisy is presented by Democrats and independent Republicans, these good people get shut down. The Republicans get dismissed as wayward traitors to the party... even though they are absolutely right. Democrats get dismissed. They are seen as whining about sour grapes but it's important that we remember... This is not the meaning of "sour grapes."

"Sour grapes" doesn't translate crassly. It doesn't mean, 'You guys lost so you can shut up now.' "Sour grapes" refers not to the fruit that is left behind but to the fox who foolishly and falsely forecloses on that which is beyond him. Those who defend honesty and integrity do not judge and foreclose in this way. For this, they are neither foolish nor false—quite the opposite. Regardless of their parties, they reach for the sweetness of life. On the other hand, those who judge and foreclose, those who are less careful with their integrity may just be both foolish and false. It stands to reason. It's only logical.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was one such independent Republican. In the Civil War, he fought for the 20

<sup>th</sup> Regiment of MA. He was a graduate of Harvard Law, a Boston Unitarian and for thirty years (from 1902 to 1932), Holmes was a Justice of the Supreme Court in the United States. Despite the hardships that he suffered in life, it still seems to me that the sweetness of life was well within his reach.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was very wise. He said, "[The mark of a civilized man is his willingness to re-examine his most cherished beliefs.](#)" He said, "[My right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.](#)" And he said, "[I like to pay taxes. With them, I buy civilization.](#)" This is particularly interesting in light of the disturbing tax history of the current president. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes believed that...

[The provisions of the Constitution are not mathematical formulas having their essence in their form; they are organic, living institutions transplanted from English soil. Their significance is vital, not formal; \[Constitutional provisions are\] to be gathered not simply by taking the words and a dictionary, but by considering their origin and the line of their growth.](#)

This begs the issue of originalism, providing an ethical context of more than a hundred years. Justice Holmes said,

[The history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable.](#)

With wisdom as deep as this, we can imagine a future that is compassionate. And lastly, he said,

[If I had a formula for bypassing trouble, I wouldn't pass it around. Wouldn't be doing anybody a favor. Trouble creates a capacity to handle it. I don't say embrace trouble. That's as bad as treating it as an enemy. But I do say, meet it as a friend, for you'll see a lot of it and had better be on speaking terms with it.](#)

In this regard, Justice Holmes has much in common with Georgia Rep. John Lewis who implored us, saying,

Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.

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Let's get ourselves on speaking terms with some good and necessary trouble



Let's get ourselves on speaking terms with some good and necessary trouble, neither embracing it nor treating it like a mortal enemy. Let's treat trouble as one would a distant and difficult friend. For trouble is a teacher. Trouble creates the capacity to handle it...and that's no joke.

I wonder, sometimes, if joyful laughter might just be the key to our survival—the laughter that live within us, delivered by the people we've known and loved...the laughter that contains touches the sacred... I don't know. Maybe I'm too optimistic but I believe that joy will see us through. I believe in sweet grapes!! I'm very serious about it. Okay, so a duck walks into a bar... The point is this—driven by the very hardships that break us down, let's keep laughing! Let's keep finding joy.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.