

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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## *No Extraordinary Power*

The Reverend Victoria Safford

\$2.00 two dollars

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*The first reading is adapted from Bill Bryson's Introduction to his book, A Short History of Nearly Everything.*

Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy, I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize.

To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriguingly obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialized and

particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence.

Why atoms take this trouble is a bit of a puzzle. Being you is not a gratifying experience at the atomic level. For all their devoted attention, your atoms don't actually care about you -- indeed, don't even know that you are there. They don't even know that *they* are there. ... (It is a slightly arresting notion that if you were to pick yourself apart with tweezers, one atom at a time, you would produce a mound of fine atomic dust, none of which had ever been alive but all of which had once been you.) Yet somehow for the period of your existence they will answer to a single overarching impulse: to keep you you.

Whatever else it may be, at the level of chemistry life is curiously mundane: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, a little calcium, a dash of sulfur, a light dusting of other very ordinary elements -- nothing you wouldn't find in any ordinary drugstore -- and that's all you need. The only thing special about the atoms that make you is that they make you. That is of course the miracle of life.

The bad news is that atoms are fickle and their time of devotion is fleeting -- fleeting indeed. Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours. And when that modest milestone flashes past, for reasons unknown your atoms will shut you down, silently disassemble, and go off to be other things. And that's it for you.

Still, you may rejoice that it happens at all. Generally speaking in the universe it doesn't, so far as we can tell. ... You have also been extremely -- make that miraculously -- fortunate in your personal ancestry. ... To get from "protoplasmal primordial atomic globule" to sentient upright modern human has required you to mutate new traits over and over in a precisely timely manner for an exceedingly long while. So at various periods over the last 3.8 billion years you have abhorred oxygen and then doted on it, grown fins and limbs, laid eggs, flicked the air with a forked tongue, been sleek, been furry, lived underground, lived in trees, been as big as a deer and as small as a mouse, and a million things more. The tiniest deviation from any of these evolutionary shifts, and you might now be licking algae from cave walls or disgorging air through a blowhole in the top of your head...

... Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result -- eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly -- in you.

Welcome. I'm delighted that you could make it.

*The second reading is from the poet Adrienne Rich, from her poem "Natural Resources:"*

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
 So much has been destroyed  
 I have to cast my lot with those  
     who, age after age,  
 perversely, with no extraordinary  
     power, reconstitute the world.

### No Extraordinary Power

I wonder what it was like to be out on the street on a Sunday in the middle of May in Boston, 1870, hurrying home from church, perhaps, and to be inadvertently swept up in a crowd of mostly women and their children, straining to hear a speaker on a makeshift stage.

*In the name of womanhood and humanity,  
 I earnestly ask that a general congress of women,  
     without limit of nationality,  
     may be appointed and held  
     at someplace deemed most convenient  
 and the earliest period consistent with its objects,  
  
 to promote the alliance of the different nationalities,  
 the amicable settlement of international questions,  
 the great and general interests of peace.*

Julia Ward Howe was a dedicated abolitionist (it was she who wrote the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the anthem of the Union army), but like hundreds of thousands of women and men around her from both sides, her spirit had been nearly broken by the devastations of the Civil War, and when news came from abroad that war had broken out again, in Europe, she could scarcely believe it. How could the imaginations of presidents, parliaments and congresses, the imaginations of great nations, be so small? She called for a great march through Boston, called women especially to come, and called it Mother's Peace Day.

*Arise then...women of this day!  
 Say firmly:  
 "We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies.  
 Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,  
     for caresses and applause.  
 Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn  
 All that we have been able to teach them  
     of charity, mercy and patience.  
 We, the women of one country,*

*will be too tender of those of another country  
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."*

*From the bosom of a devastated Earth  
a voice goes up with our own. It says:  
"Disarm! Disarm!  
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.  
violence [does not] indicate possession."*

*As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil  
at the summons of war,  
Let women now leave all that may be left of home  
for a great and earnest day of counsel.*

What would it have been like to hear her deliver the Mothers Peace Day proclamation? Adrienne Rich, a poet in our own time, writes:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save, says the poet:  
So much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who, age after age,  
perversely, with no extraordinary  
power, reconstitute the world.*

How do you decide with whom to cast your lot? I wonder how many souls were saved that day, and how many people went by clutching their children more closely, shaking their heads at another idealistic Unitarian woman blowing off steam on a street corner. How many decided right then and right there, or on the way home, or early next morning, to cast their lot with this notion and this woman, who perversely, with hardly any power, claimed her ground, which was then and still is now, new ground? Julia Ward Howe was intelligent and well-read, articulate and talented, but she was not wealthy or famous, or influential, or male, and her husband (also a Unitarian) often forbade her to speak publicly or to write or even to go out to meetings. She had no extraordinary power, hardly any power at all, and yet there she stood, on a day in May, perversely and persistently, demanding, inciting, imagining the reconstitution of a damaged, violent world.

How do you decide what story to inhabit, what ongoing epic tale your own life is unfolding in?

Four and a half years ago, when my daughter was 8 years old, she heard Ann Reed (\*) sing her song "Heroes" for the first time in person. (The second time will be this morning.) It was at the memorial for Paul and Sheila Wellstone and the colleagues who died with them. She was in third grade, and she was electrified by this tribute to women whose names were familiar to her, many of whose stories she'd heard here at church and others in our house all her life. I think that night when the crowd fell silent to listen to one woman singing, she understood that her weird parents are weird *on purpose* (-- well, not entirely of course... there are some things we just can't help... but mostly our weirdness is deliberate --), that we had chosen long ago to cast our

lot with a particular community of hope, a specific tradition of struggle and hope, and she saw that it was large and old, diverse and strong tradition. How have you chosen your heroes and your history, and what world have you chosen to inherit, and cherish, and pass on?

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Meridel LeSueur was a great Minnesota writer. In the 1950's she wrote a tribute to her parents who had been radical progressives at the turn of the century. It's the story of how she herself came to be the way she was, and what it was like growing up with them in a dangerous time.

*Their glory was that they wrote, taught, spoke and pointed out the enemy. Their glory was that we lived a wonderful life and never knew it was a hardship or martyrdom or a task. We belonged to a great multitude of men and women in the Midwest and the world who in fires of struggle commit themselves to a mighty contest. We were never alone. Some people say it was a hard way to live – I say it's the only way to live, committed to the peoples' struggle.*

*... My mother's family were Christian democrats, abolitionists, defenders of the Indian. Her father was a brilliant lawyer on the Lincoln circuit, probably and anarchist... My grandmother was the daughter of an Iroquois and an Irish rebel, who was also a friend of Robert Ingersoll and whose father was a big shot in the Presbyterian church; they were itinerant preachers also, a great and varied root.*

*In 1917 my mother Marian married Arthur LeSueur. His parents had rowed across the English Channel after the failure of the French revolt in 1871, and rowed back again at night with leaflets. They came to Minnesota and broke the potato market and followed the paths of the losers, the evicted, the farmers foreclosed by greedy bankers. My father took the seeds of his radicalism from two events: he watched his father horsewhip the banker who had taken their land, and he later revolted against religion by calling upon God in the middle of a field to strike him dead if he was up there. Arthur went on plowing, an agnostic the rest of his life.*

*These people were like many pioneer crops, a great and wild root, through dark conceptions, wild migrations, like the wheat that came to the prairie, conduits of light and bread  
Converging, luminous, alive, we emerge out of ancient seed, migrating in love and solidarity...*

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(\*) Singer songwriter Ann Reed provided all the music for this Sunday service.

What great story are you living in? What's your history, and your chosen history? How did you come to be the way you are? Who mothered you, and fathered you, companioned you along? George Ella Lyon, poet from Kentucky, has a piece about her own beginnings, called *Where I'm From*. (She calls this style of writing "random autobiography," and teaches it in workshops around the country.)

*I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.*

*(Black, glistening,  
 it tasted like beets.)  
 I am from the forsythia bush  
 the Dutch elm  
 whose long-gone limbs I remember  
 as if they were my own.  
 I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
 ...  
 I'm from the know-it-alls  
     and the pass-it-ons,  
 from Perk up! and Pipe down!  
 I'm from He restoreth my soul  
     with a cottonball lamb  
     and ten verses I can say myself.  
 I'm from ...  
 fried corn and strong coffee.  
 From the finger my grandfather lost  
     to the auger,  
 the eye my father shut to keep his sight.  
 Under my bed was a dress box  
 spilling old pictures,  
 a sift of lost faces  
 to drift beneath my dreams.  
 I am from those moments--  
 snapped before I budded --  
 leaf-fall from the family tree.*

It reminds me of an image used in teaching meditation, the image of a living tree. When you do this exercise you center yourself, steady your breath, let distractions dissipate, and imagine yourself to be a living tree, grounded, tall and sturdy. You imagine that, and then try to imagine the roots of this tree, the roots of your life, down through your planted feet, running underground, holding you upright, holding you in place against wind and drought and infestations. Thick, gnarly ropes of old bloodline, and all the feathery strands and intricate, slender capillaries anchor you to earth with their complex system. (These are your relatives, your childhood teachers for better or worse, the books you read, the stories you heard, the habits you learned, early orientations of the heart.) You hold that image, and consider next: *What nourishes this living tree? What helps it grow?* and then move from these to questions about foliage and fruit: *What's green and young and in bud for you now, no matter what your age? What's coming to full flower for the first time this spring?* and also: *What old leaves or dead branches have you cast off, not needed, not life-giving anymore?* They lie all around you, on the ground, quietly sifting back into soil. And finally, near the end, you are asked to imagine the fall season of your life, and what seeds this old tree will produce and then scatter: *What will you leave behind? What lives will continue, in part because of you?*

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You know, we live the lives that we're given. We live out the life given us by grace, by chance, by luck of the draw and bad luck of the draw, by circumstance, biology, genetics, geography, evolution, destiny and fate - and we live the lives that we make, the weird and noble lives that we construct on purpose.

We inhabit the lives we are given, the circumstances, and we live the lives that over a lifetime we fashion deliberately, responsibly, responsively, willfully, creatively, joyfully or angrily, accidentally and awkwardly, with some measure of hope (whether it's justified or not - we go ahead and justify it, randomly proclaim it), some measure of faith or trust (well-founded, or not), and some measure, some huge measure, of love. We live the lives that we're given, and also, and at the same time, the lives that we shape by hand from those gifts.

The religion of a person or a people, your philosophy, your world-view, your moral universe - all of these flow from the way you carry your two concurrent lives, and the emphasis you place on each. If you tend to lean heavily to one side, you may be a person who attributes much to the will of God, or the whimsy of fate, without a great sense of your own agency, and this can play out in a number of ways. You may be someone who often asks, "Why me?" - or, you may be a person who looks at the odds very stoically, the disinterested odds of getting cancer or getting rich and famous, or falling in love or falling off a cliff, the likely probability of things and with equanimity you shrug, "Why not me?" If you lean heavily the other way, away from destiny, convinced of your own powers as an agent of change and your responsibility, you may in fact be a very responsible and powerful person; you may also tend toward grandiosity and arrogance, or be burdened by an over-active conscience dismayed at the close of each day that you have failed, once again, to save the world in time. We live out the lives that we're given, we live into the lives we create, and every one of us holds a deep belief about the balance of these, about the limits and extent of our control. That belief may be spoken or unspoken, conscious or subconscious.

I can remember when at age 8 or 9 or 10 I heard for the first time (or, more likely, saw a program on TV, or maybe a teacher told it, or I read it in a book) the story of the origins of life on earth, and the creation of the planet itself, the solar system and the stars, the Big Bang and the velvet curtain separating us always from the mystery that preceded it. At some point as a middle-aged child I heard some version of the story that Bill Bryson tells so playfully in the introduction to his book, *A Brief History of Everything*, and it made a deep impression. I was an evolutionist from the get-go, an evolutionary cosmologist, and I loved locating the story of life, and my own life story, within the older evolving of rocks and water and air, and as I got older and learned more science, the origins of the very elements. I have a strange theory about this immediate and powerful resonance: I think it was connected to knowing all my life that at the age of four weeks I was adopted. Somehow I heard the universe story as a birth story, and suddenly I had a family tree, a lineage of reliable ancestors I could trace back through generations. That this genealogy stretched millions and billions of years into the past made it no less personal to me; the story gave me a bloodline I hadn't realized I was missing. I didn't connect this as a child at all, but later it made sense to me that the great matter of "Where did we come from? How did we get here?" was related to my very specific wondering, once in a while, "Where did I come from? How did I get here? Who are my relations?" I think that this way of thinking, subconscious as it

was, opened me also, and early on, to a certain kind of theological orientation, deep and wide, open to wonder, and as universal, as *universalist*, as possible.

Over time, of course I came to know that the legacies of biology and chemistry are not our only inheritances, that we are comprised also of stories and memories, “dreams and bones” in the words of one song, family traditions, culture, habits, prejudices, expectations, commitments kept and broken – all manner of facts and lies and history that we are carefully and carelessly taught. What legacy do you carry, by choice and by chance? Where have you come from? Who are your people and your chosen people, your family and your chosen family?

Who are the ones you are grateful for, indebted to, inspired by- famous, nameless – who, by their speaking on street corners, or their tender, defiant singing of hope into grief, by their way of seeing, ways of begin, taught you and teach you still how to be a person? What bloodlines of imagination do you mean to preserve?

Alice Walker, African American self-proclaimed womanist poet, has a poem about her family, and what gets carried on:

*for two who  
slipped away  
almost  
entirely:  
my “part” Cherokee  
great-grandmother  
Tallulah  
(grandmama Lula)  
on my mother’s side  
about whom  
only one  
agreed-upon  
thing  
is known:  
her hair was so long  
she could sit on it;*

*and my white (Anglo-Irish?)  
great-great-grandfather  
on my father’s side;  
nameless  
(Walker, perhaps?),  
whose only remembered act  
is that he raped  
a child:  
my great-great-grandmother,  
who bore his son,  
my great-grandfather,*

*when she was eleven.*

*Rest in peace.  
The meaning of your lives  
is still unfolding.*

*Rest in peace.  
In me  
the meaning of your lives  
is still  
unfolding.*

*Rest in peace, in me.  
The meaning of your lives  
is still  
unfolding.*

...  
*Rest. In peace  
in me  
the meaning  
of our lives  
is still  
unfolding...*

By the truth that we tell, and stories remembered,  
by the choices we make in casting our lot,  
by the uses of our ordinary, extraordinary power,  
the uses of our voices and the uses of our hands,  
by the songs we sing within earshot of children,  
by the ways we hold and heal and hand on the life we've been given,  
every one of us creates and recreates and puts a blessing on this world.

We are surrounded by ancestors and descendants. We should walk humbly, reverently, in gratitude.

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The quotation from Meridel LeSueur is from her memoir, *Crusaders*.