

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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If Not Us, who?
If Not Now, when?
If Not This, what?

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FIRST READING by *Mara Coyle*, a member of our congregation.

How to be a Good Unitarian

Who shall bear hope, who else but us?
 Who can bear hope back into the world but us,
 you, my other
 flesh, all of us who have seen the face of hope
 at least once in vision, in dream, in marching,
 who sang hope into rising like a conjured snake,
 who found its flower about timberline by a melting glacier.

We must shine with hope,
 stained glass windows that shape light into icons,
 glow like lanterns borne before a procession.

Hope sleeps in our bones like a bear waiting for spring to rise and walk.

IF NOT US, WHO? IF NOT NOW, WHEN? IF NOT THIS, WHAT?

Who will defend religious freedom against fundamentalism? Who will defend and practice religious freedom, and other freedoms, defend and practice tolerance, acceptance, pluralism - against fear, against ignorance, against prejudice?

There are many communities doing that work. This community is one of them.

Who will stand up for human rights and civil rights? Who will speak for marriage equality and gender equality and be wide open to all, celebrating every sexual orientation? What religious community will truly support the worth and dignity of every person as a sacred premise?

Happily, there are many. Ours is one of them.

Who will engage real interfaith dialogue, not out of dutiful tolerance, but out of true spiritual curiosity, with a sense of excitement and humble awareness that no single tradition sits on the franchise of human truth?

Firmly planted in our own conviction and tradition, with confidence and without defensiveness, we are partners with many others in an expanding global conversation.

Who will nurture in our children their innate sense of wonder? Who will instill in our teenagers a sense of joy and belonging, and reflect back to them how beautiful and powerful they are?

We hope they are well-companions wherever they travel, and that many strong circles hold them with respect and love, in safety. We know that our church is one such safe circle.

Who will celebrate with us, week after week, the great wheel of life, through music and art, the spoken word and contemplation? Who will grieve and sing and dance with us?

Who will provide the loving community within which we are reminded who we are, what we stand for, what manner of person we each mean to be, what kind of person we're each called to be?

Suddenly, the questions invite a more specific answer. They seem a lot more personal, and practical: Who will pay our mortgage? Who will ensure fair compensation for Thaxter, Janet, Mary Sue, Jill, John Sisterman, and other paid staff for whose partnership we are so grateful? Who will purchase the markers and crayons and apple juice, the roses for babies, the fair trade coffee we drink, the paper and postage, the insurance, electricity, hymn books, hot water?

Our pledge committee is asking a whole host of beautiful, pragmatic questions, a great basket of questions: If not us, who? If not this, what? If not in this community of seekers and doers, singers and teachers, friends and companions, if not this circle of love and hope, if not with this rambunctious herd of children and adults, then where will we celebrate and mourn? If not this free faith tradition, and this particular place where the ordinary is sanctified and compassion is expected above all, before any other reverent gesture – if not this, then what?

Two thousand years ago Rabbi Hillel offered a slightly different series of questions, beautiful, pragmatic wonderings about what it means to be a person, a person in community, a grateful, glad recipient of the gift of life:

If I am not for myself, who will be? - which is not a selfish question once you unpack it and look in the mirror;

If I am only for myself, what am I? - which is an ethical question, that sets a line between living simply to survive, and deciding to live, whatever your circumstances, deciding *to survive*, in order to become a little more noble, a little graceful, a little more evolved.

If not now, when? If not now, when will we live as we intend to live? When will we say what we mean to say? When will we stop and be grateful, look around and be amazed? When will we forgive ourselves and each other? When will we decide to be brave and open and generous instead of narrow and afraid? If not now, when?

The Pledge Committee's questions carry traces of these ancient ones.

A few years ago, Mara Coyle, a member here, wrote her poem, "How to Be a Good Unitarian" as a kind of counterbalance to very different instructions in religious practice imposed by the church of her childhood. Her list is a good reminder for us of the rules of engagement in this place:

Show Up
Speak Up
Quiet Down. Listen.

Recognize the wisdom around you.
Feel the pain, sit with it, let it go.
Believe, doubt, question, challenge.

Honor the past.
Envision the future.
Celebrate the now...

Be grateful,
remorseful,
forgiving...

Show up.
Speak up.

*Quiet down.
Listen.*

*Let the sun shine in and expose the darkness.
Let the tears stream down.
Throw back your head and let your song be heard.*

*Agitate.
Appreciate.
Congregate.
Consecrate.*

Know that you are not alone.

These are excellent instructions for a community of people who routinely proclaim, one by one by one by proud and individualistic one, “I’m not really a joiner.” That’s like the theme song here, and ironically, everybody seems to be humming it, at least some of the time. *I like to come on Sunday, I love the choir, I’m delighted with what my children are learning about themselves and our world in Religious Education, I love the community, but I’m not really part of it. I’m apart, not a joiner* – and yet here you are, and I have seen you – especially lately – joined in grief, thus joined in love; joined hand to hand in work you believe in; you join Janet and Jill every week as they join with 350 children and teenagers; you gathered your will and your imagination five years ago and you’re still joined in the great task of dreaming, designing, painting, planting, cleaning, hammering and now paying for this building... you join the choir, join the kitchen crew and the great community of eaters here, join the volunteers who visit folks in the hospital, who fold the newsletter, who balance the books in the Finance Committee, who march for peace, who welcome a refugee family from Burma, joining your time and energy and money to their struggle to make a livable life in Minnesota.

People say, “I don’t like institutions. I’m not into organized religion.” I used to tell them, “Have no fear – nothing could be more disorganized than this little ragtag operation.” But I don’t say that anymore, because in fact this place is beautifully organized, in an organic kind of wild democracy, organized in such a way, such a deliberately inclusive way, that the community can grow and change, shift and move, be relevant and flexible, evolving, bigger - and also stay the same, through all its incarnations. Some essential things don’t change, certain values, certain principles, certain ways of being. There is an order here, undergirding all

the creativity and cheerful chaos. And here we are – however we feel about joining things -- there's no question that we're here, each of us, because we need a bright, brave, laughing, crying community of faith and hope to hang onto, to hang onto us. We need a story to belong to, a whole set of great stories, and a set of durable, challenging, ennobling principles. We need the song of the soul that's sung here each week, and though we may know the words and even the tune, it's just a not a song you can sing by yourself. As Mara so wisely instructs us, we need to

Congregate.

Consecrate.

Show up.

Speak up.

Quiet down.

Listen.

I read in the paper about a congregation in New York City, the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, where they are writing their own Torah. In Jewish tradition a Torah scroll, containing the books of Moses, the first five books of the bible, must always be handwritten, and this is usually done by trained scribe, a *sofer*, certified by rabbinical councils. A new Torah is copied letter by letter using a template called a *Tikkun*. There must be no mistakes. The Stephen Wise Free Synagogue found they needed a new Torah and, together with their rabbi, the people decided, unconventionally, that they would write it together over the course of a year, every adult and every child in the community, sharing the work, and the honor, of drawing by hand, with pen and ink, the 304,805 letters that comprise a finished scroll. To begin this work, the congregation gathered in a celebration, and the first letter of the first word was inscribed by Helen Margalith, 92 years old: "She faced the congregation, then stared at the immensity of a blank white sheet of unblemished parchment. A scribe sat by her side, holding a feather quill. She tentatively grasped it an inch above his hand. 'Hold it gently,' he said, 'and draw it down toward me, and again, and again,' and the letter appeared, (*bet* – the beginning of *In the Beginning...*) and the congregation erupted in applause." Some rabbis believe that Torah writers must never be children or women, or those who fail to keep the Sabbath, or unauthorized laymen. They should never even touch it. In some temples, people can pay money to have a professional inscribe a letter in their honor. But in this one, every person's mark will be upon it, from the youngest child with a shaking hand, to Mrs. Margalith, with a shaking hand, as if each of them were authorized to make manifest the sacred, to write the holy story of their

common life. [“A Congregation, With Help from A Scribe, Writes a Torah,” Glenn Collins, NY *Times*, 12 Nov. 07]

I love that image. I love that rabbis are debating it, carrying forward an ancient tradition, and that one learned scholar has commented, “They regard it as kosher, so to them it is.” Another one said, “The perfection of having everyone participate is a kind of perfection that shouldn’t be ignored.”

I love that. I love that everyone is authorized, everyone empowered, everyone invited, everyone needed, to make their own essential mark. And so it is here, whether you’ve been in this church since 1956, or just arrived this morning; whether you come in this moment, for whatever reason, with great need (and that’s why you’ve come, seeking comfort, seeking solace, a place to rest and simply be) or whether you’ve arrived, in this moment, for whatever reason, with great capacity to share your gifts. Whether you contribute to this pledge drive the 5% of income that the Board and Pledge Committee have calculated will balance next year’s budget, or whether you can give much more than that, or whether you can give significantly less, hardly matters. What matters is that everyone belongs, everyone’s hand writes a letter in the story. If not us, all of us together - *if not you*, who will own the congregation? Who dwells here, and fills the place with hope and history, hard questions, wild wonder, sorrow and singing? Who consecrates the house with purpose and principle, with laughter and love and real life? If not you, if not us, who?