

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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## A Crooked, Wide Way

The Reverend Victoria Safford

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**  
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*The first reading is adapted from Sarah Vowell, writer, commentator and radio editor, from her book, The Wordy Shipmates, a history of the Puritans in New England*

Once I decided to devote years of my life deciphering the thoughts and feelings of the dreary religious fanatics who founded New England nearly four hundred years ago, I was often asked at parties by my fellow New Yorkers the obvious question, “What are you working on?” When I would tell them a book about Puritans, they would often take a swig of the beer or bourbon in their hands and reply with either a sarcastic, “Fun!” or a disdainful, “Why?”

I would never answer with the honest truth: namely, that in the weeks after two planes crashed into skyscrapers here on the worst day of our lives, I found comfort in the words of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. When we were mourning together, when we were suffering together, I often thought of what he said when he spoke aboard the *Arabella*, carrying bedraggled pilgrims from England to New England: *We must delight in each other, make other’s conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the world, our community as members of the same body.*

More than anything, it was a declaration of *dependence*.

In the days following the attack, I watched citizens patiently standing in a very long line. They were waiting to give blood... We were breathing sooty air. The soot was composed of incinerated glass and steel, but also, we knew, incinerated human flesh. When the local TV news announced that rescue workers sorting through the rubble in search of survivors were in need of toothpaste, half my block, having heard there was something we could actually do besides worry and grieve, had already cleaned out the most popular brand names at the corner deli by the time I got there. We were members of the same body, breathing the cremated lungs of the dead, and hoping to clean the teeth of the living.

The English Puritans had affection for the Old Saxon word, “weal.” It means wealth and riches, but it means welfare and well-being, too. On the *Arabella*, Winthrop tells the colonists they must “partake of each other’s strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe.”

I thought about this in New York City more than 300 years later.

*The second reading is from the organizing statement of a Unitarian congregation in New England, adopted May 3, 1863*

Respecting in each other, and in all, the right of intellect and conscience to be free, and holding it to be the duty of everyone to keep mind and heart at all times open to receive the truth and follow its guidance, we set up no theological condition of membership, and neither demand or expect uniformity of doctrinal belief; asking only unity of purpose to seek and accept the right and true, and an honest aim and effort to make these the rule of life. And recognizing the brotherhood of the human race and the equality of human rights, we make no distinction as to the conditions and rights of membership in this society, on account of sex, or color, or nationality.

## A CROOKED, WIDE WAY

In the city where we used to live, they repaved the roads one year, ripping them down to the original cobblestone, draining water, pouring tar, jack-hammering through sidewalk concrete to make curb cutouts, rolling it all smooth. It took weeks - felt like years - and on the very last day, early in the morning, the painting trucks drove down the new black street, marking bright white and yellow lines. Lots of neighbors came out that day, including me (with a three year-old who loved every aspect of this work), and including our neighbor who lived two doors down. In her house dress and slippers she walked slowly out to the edge of her yard, looked all the way down the road one way, and all the way down the other way. She shook her head and said to no one in particular, but loudly, as if to the entire city and the Gods of Road Construction, "Tsk, tsk. Not very straight." There were lots of people out that day, some looking at the new road, but most heading downtown for the annual Gay Pride parade. It was a beautiful day; thousands of people on foot, on bikes, were coming in to march, and it happened that just as my neighbor stepped out to make her inspection, two women were passing by, arm and arm, pushing a baby carriage. Without missing a beat, without even stopping, they caught that remark, "Not very straight," and one laughed over her shoulder, "That's why we love it here!" And my neighbor caught that ball right where she was standing, held it in her hands for just a moment, then nodded her head and smiled and said, "Yup."

I like to live where the roads are not necessarily straight, the painted lines a little wavy here and there, a little bit off center. I think this is why at some point shortly after college I found my way into Unitarian Universalism, this religious road that is in no way straight or narrow, but crooked and wide, with many exit ramps and surprising entrances, many divergences and interesting intersections, lots of curves and switchbacks, and very few dead ends. I was looking for a wide and open road, one that I could map out for myself, and I think that I was looking from the time I was a little child.

I grew up in a liberal Presbyterian church, but I know that many in our congregation and in our movement as a whole have come out of places where children grow up feeling that fencing the spirit matters more than nurturing the soul; where moral questions, spiritual questions, and wonder are constrained, contained, confined; where the Holy is defined, but not allowed to be imagined. *Exclusion* is the premise of these one, true churches, where creedal tests sort sheep from goats, and believers are exhorted,

*Enter you in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads to life, and few there be that find it.*

Some are saved and some are not, and we'll tell you where you stand. And yet this very passage, clutched tightly in the hands of the orthodox for centuries, for millennia, bears a certain irony. It comes from the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew, one of the most beautiful, generous, gentle statements of inclusion, among all the radically inclusive things Jesus ever said. Like so many things he said, this image of the narrow gate has been lifted and twisted out of context, but what he seemed to be saying was, "*Come in*. There are a thousand easy ways to exclude and to judge, to control and manipulate and hate, but if you would choose the way of

love (which may be a harder way, perhaps), then come, and be at home.” In this, our tradition (at its best) is maybe not so far from the good news Jesus was trying to convey. All are welcome, even the crooked, even the wayward, those who walk on roads less travelled on purpose, even the strays and those who’ve lost their way.

**We are bound together here not by creed, but by covenant.** What we believe, or believe in, one by one by one, matters less than how we behave, how we will be together, as a people. What matters is the plane of conduct where we agree to meet. *You need not think alike to love alike*, said Francis David, centuries ago, which is not to say there are no creeds and no convictions here - there are many, maybe an infinite number, and they are tested in practice, lived out (we hope) as much as spoken. What matters more, from the standpoint of the institution, is the *covenant*, the way that we will walk together, the principles that bind us. “Freedom of belief” is one of them. “Compassion” is another, what the Buddha meant by “lovingkindness,” which was not all warm and fuzzy, sweet and simple, but difficult and complicated, a deliberate orientation of the heart, defying logic, sometimes, defying common sense, and sometimes defying even rules of justice, when mercy hovers as an option. We wrestle with these principles together, and in so doing may discover, each of us, what we believe most deeply about God, or mystery, or love. An old hymn says, “Revelation is not sealed.” We evolve our faith together.

**We are bound by covenant.** That statement from an old New England congregation is a good example of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian bond of union.

*Respecting in each other, and in all, the right of intellect and conscience to be free, and holding it to be the duty of everyone to keep mind and heart at all times open to receive the truth and follow its guidance, we set up no theological condition of membership, and neither demand or expect uniformity of doctrinal belief; asking only unity of purpose to seek and accept the right and true, and an honest aim and effort to make these the rule of life. And recognizing the brotherhood of the human race and the equality of human rights, we make no distinction as to the conditions and rights of membership in this society, on account of sex, or color, or nationality.*

That one, with its explicit emphasis on gender, race and class, was more radical than some. Most of the earliest organizing statements of the Universalists and Unitarians were very similar to those of the Congregational churches from which they had all broken away. The creeds had changed –Unitarian beliefs about the nature of God, Universalist beliefs about the nature of human beings - but the idea of covenant had not. *We covenant to walk together*, they said, *in the faith and order of the gospel*, even if that gospel was a radical interpretation of Jesus’ most radical message, even if by “order” they meant the chaos of religious pluralism. *We need not think alike to love alike*. I remember early in my first ministry in an old New England congregation, two old sisters who’d been born into that Society approached me on a Sunday. They didn’t like change, they said. They weren’t sure that they liked me, or what they called my “point of view.” One of them said, “Just remember. I have outlived all of your predecessors, and I will probably outlive you.” (“*and your little dog, too...*”) She was a lifelong Republican, a lifelong agnostic, she’d worked for the State Department and for the American Unitarian Association, and she’d survived all kinds of politics, all kinds of so-called religion, in that venerable pulpit. She had never left her church, no matter how insufferable (in her humble

opinion) all the ministers had been. And in the end Auriel did outlive me there; she died shortly after we moved here. Over ten years we developed a fierce, respectful love for each other, and what I loved in her most was her love of that church, her commitment to the congregation, no matter what, her fidelity to it, the covenant she kept with those people and their history and the free faith tradition that they stood for.

What covenants do you keep? What promises?

The old Unitarian and Universalist covenants in New England, and later in the west (“the west” being New York State, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and eventually Iowa and Minnesota) were based on old Congregationalist covenants, which were based on Puritan covenants. Sarah Vowell is an unlikely advocate for the Puritans: she’s a cultural critic for National Public Radio and a bit of a wild child there, but her book, *The Wordy Shipmates*, is an intelligent and affectionate glimpse at these ancestors (even if she does refer to them as “dreary religious fanatics” – which they were). She quotes John Winthrop in particular, the first governor of Massachusetts, the one who wrote so famously about the “City on the Hill:”

*Now the only way to avoid ... shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace...*

It was, as Sarah Vowell remarks, a profound declaration of *dependence*, delivered on a pilgrim boat in 1630, 150 years before Jefferson drafted a different declaration. The Puritans, in caricature, come off as so mean-spirited and cold-hearted – which they absolutely were - but the covenant, the compact, insisted on radical love. The promise, that they would be bound together, that they would bear one another’s burdens as their own, that they would delight in each other and subvert private interests for the public good, laid the foundation not only of the new American church, but the new American republic. Vowell notes rightly, that “when the time came for statehood, the citizens of Massachusetts did not become a state, but a Commonwealth,” loving *the old Saxon word “weal.” It means wealth and riches, but welfare and well-being, too.* They were all in this together, in this earthly life, all in the same boat, even before they got off the boat. They wrote in their constitution: *The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people... for the common good.*

This, says Sarah Vowell, is what she thought about in New York City eight years ago this week, as she joined her grieving neighbors in caring for the living and the dead. It is the original foundation, not only of our church, but of our country, this idea of commonwealth, of diverse and varied people who’ve come ashore from diverse and varied ships, with diverse and varied opinions, bold and humble, and various beliefs, voluntarily bound by this longing to walk together, not alone.

It's why the debate over health care now, which has hardly even risen to the civility of debate at all, is such a rankling frustration. Nothing the president has said, nothing in the modest concept of a "public option," sounds anywhere near as radical, as socialist, as communist, as frankly basic and decent, as the Puritan John Winthrop on the foredeck of the *Arabella*: *the care of the public must overshadow all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy, doth bind us. For it is a true rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public. ... We must bear one another's burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren... it is the only way to avoid shipwreck.* Would that Senator Baucus had said it so well in his compromise bill this past week. Would that president Obama would say it so forcefully. Would that Governor Pawlenty would speak to us so patriotically, and so poetically. I heard one writer this week talking about a new book on American health care, for which he did research in 190 countries. T.R. Reid, from the *Washington Post*, said that he came to frame the issue through three questions: **How** do those countries that cover all their citizens manage to do it? (This proved fairly simple to explain, and in most cases, fairly inexpensive.) **Why** do they do it? (These answers, too, were easy – in almost every case, there was some kind of basic moral premise, a national ethos or cultural character, underlying every public policy.) But for his third question, still open and bleeding like a wound, he could find no answer: **Why would the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the planet not want to ensure basic health care for its people?** It would seem that something essential, some defining, golden, element is missing from the conversation, that some beautiful legacy, some aspect of our nation's character has been lost, or maybe just misplaced. It is the covenant, the sacred promise by which we would join hands, across our differences, across our circumstances, and walk in the light together.

The Puritan ideal had unanticipated consequences. Some people carried notions like benevolence and toleration to their logical conclusions, and had their ears cut off, or their tongues branded, or were thrown in prison or in exile. The Quaker Roger Williams preached absolute religious tolerance, saying: *God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus..., and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls... A civil state should permit all forms of religion, including "the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish (Islamic) or Antichristian consciences ... for all men in all nations and countries"* but for this he was packed off to the wasteland of Rhode Island.

The Puritans were far from perfect. They really were dreary, joy-killing religious fanatics. But even so, the principle of free conscience, free faith, the free and open mind respected and defended by other free minds that might disagree with it, vehemently, is a Puritan principle that endures. This afternoon, when our congregation rises to ordain two of its members to the Unitarian Universalist ministry, you will do so without requiring of either candidate any creedal conformity at all. Kristin Maier and Karen Hering have been tested and tried in all kinds of ways – they have completed the Masters of Divinity from an accredited seminary, they have done clinical ministry in a hospital, agency, or prison; they've been interns in churches, they've written and read thousands of pages, they've been psychologically examined and jumped through all kinds of fiery hoops. Each of them has been asked to prove that she can speak and think theologically; each has had to defend her own faith again and again, convincingly – but

that faith itself, what each one most deeply believes in her heart, mind and soul, is held inviolate. It will not be challenged, corrected, excluded or denied. As we say to anyone who would be a member here, we say to those who would be ministers: Come in.

Twenty years ago, on October 1, 1989, a congregation much like this one stood and said to me:

*We would have you seek the ways of justice and of love.*

*We would have you speak the truth as you know it.*

*We would have you listen always to your conscience.*

Auriel Havron was standing in that congregation. By their will and by their trust was I ordained.

*This is our great covenant*, wrote James Vila Blake, and still we strive to keep it : to dwell in peace, to seek the truth, together, not apart, not separately; to walk together, helping one another not in spite of but precisely because of the crooked routes we travel.

A little more than a hundred years ago, around the time that Blake was writing, W.E.B. DuBois said,

*These are the things on which people think who live: of their own selves and the dwelling place of their parents; of their neighbors; of work and service; of rule and reason and women and children; of Beauty and Death and War.*

These are the things, he said, on which people think who live -- people who choose to live not only a material life but also a transcendent life, a spiritual life, a moral, ethical, religious life, a connected life, connecting head and heart and hands to themselves, and to needs and dreams beyond one's own, and to meanings which may be beyond one's comprehension. A connected life.

*These are the things on which people think who live* – the very things that we gather here to think about and speak about and pray about and sing about, from whatever wide and crooked roads we've travelled to arrive here:

*of our selves, our own souls...*

*and the dwelling places of our parents, and of their parents, and theirs, back beyond memory, back to where we all truly come from, our common home and common human ground...*

*and of our neighbors, however generously or narrowly you may construe the neighborhood...*

*and our work and the privilege of service, the imperative of lives spent out in love,*

*and rule and reason and women and children, and Beauty and Death and War...*

That we choose to think of these things and mourn and celebrate these things and act on them *together*, instead of alone, matters. That we choose to gather instead of living scattered and solitary, one by one, which we could freely do -- this gathering matters. That we choose, each one, to mingle our own liberty with everybody else's in the room, despite the dangers and the risks and the excruciating compromises the gathering imposes, matters. This *generosity* matters.

And because we've chosen freely, the bond that holds us each to each and all together is not a burden for us. It is a holy gift, and it is far stronger than any bond imposed by creed or law, or fear or force or habit, or even by tradition. It is our great covenant, to dwell together. We renew it every week, so there's nothing tired out or worn about it. It is our great call, and our delight, to join our hands and build the beloved community.

As our guest musician, Michael Monroe, sang to us just now,

*Boundaries none, life and light for all...*

*Side by side, we're intertwined...*

So may it be.