

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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## Inherited Liberty

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At the opposite end of the year from this brown, dark world and coming winter, in the beginning of April next year is the Jewish holiday of Passover, commemorating the escape of the Jews from Egypt, the exodus from slavery into freedom more than three thousand years ago.

In my family, we clean the house, dress in our best, and set out the table. Josie will use her nicest sippy cup, this year I'm sure, and her most elegant brightly-colored plastic spoon.

At this meal, we read the Haggadah, the Passover order of service booklet, each guest reading in turn, and we retell the story of the exodus. But it's not a history lesson.

In the Seder my family does each year, our thanksgiving for freedom and our rededication to the cause of freedom are inseparable. And so we go around the table, each person reading in turn:

“The struggle for freedom is a continual struggle, for never does mankind reach total liberty and opportunity. In every age, some new freedom is won and established, adding to the advancement of human happiness and security. Yet each age uncovers a formerly unrecognized servitude, requiring new liberation to set the human soul free.”

And the next guest continues: “In every age the concept of freedom grows broader, widening the horizons for finer and nobler living. Each generation is duty-bound to contribute to this growth, else our ideals become stagnant and stationary.”

Again a new voice continues: “The events in Egypt were but the beginning of a force in history which will forever continue. In this spirit we see ourselves as participants in the Exodus, for we must dedicate our energies to the cause there begun.”

That Passover Seder – the ritual meal – is a remembering and a re-covenanting. It is not merely the recollection of a moment in history when people moved towards freedom, it is the rededication of ourselves to that cause. It is the recognition that the freedom passed down to us does not remain freedom unless we ourselves participate in it, embody it.

This is not just a Jewish confession of faith, it is a Unitarian as well. Edwin Beuhrer, who wrote the words of the hymn this morning – minister of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago in the 40s and 50s and 60s, wrote: “we sing now together our song of thanksgiving... rejoicing in life that enfolds us and helps and heals and holds us, and leads beyond the goals which our forebears once sought.” The goals of our forebears call us to transcend them.

I am reminded of the story of a woman who was arguing with her family across the Thanksgiving dinner table, advocating to her family about equal marriage right for same sex couples – the hundreds of rights denied. Her father was upset, he pulled her aside. It was not how he had raised her, these were not his values. Where was she getting this from? “I got this from you,” she told him, “you taught me to stand for equality, you taught me not to be less than anyone, you taught me respect for the law whose aspiration is equal protection for all and you taught me tireless work to make that hope real. These are your values I am living.”

In every age, some new freedom is won and established, adding to the advancement of human happiness and security, yet each age uncovers a formerly unrecognized servitude, requiring new liberation to set the human soul free.

This is a Universalist confession of faith as well. It is same vision of Clarence Skinner, when he wrote that “Each generation must win for itself the right to emancipate itself from its own tyrannies, which are ever unprecedented and peculiar. Therefore those who have been reared in freedom, bear a tremendous responsibility to the world to win an ever larger and more important liberty.”

*Therefore.*

I love that “Therefore” it’s so simple, but so powerful. He says the mere, bare fact of our freedom brings with it a great responsibility. There’s nothing else besides that fact of our freedom that brings with it the requirement to rededicate ourselves to bringing that outward.

Sometimes people joke about how UU’s can think whatever they want, do whatever they want, a “Prairie Home Companion” version of Unitarian Universalism. But no, this faith does make demands on us. And they are not demands to “keep on doing what you’re doing” they are not demands to “do whatever you feel like doing”

They are demands that say: in spite of what you want to do, in spite of what is easy, or comfortable, or fun to do, in spite of your own desires, it is not for us to turn away from those things that are painful to think of, it is not for us to ignore the things we’d rather just pretend weren’t happening – whether they are half a

world away or half a mile away. We have a religious, human responsibility to face them.

To whom much has been given, much is required.

I first heard that phrase as the signature line on one of my professor's emails in Divinity school. Turns out they had copied it from Jesus. Without attribution! To whom much has been given much is required. I have to tell you my first thought was skepticism.

It's a hard thing to hear. Some of you probably have left churches because they told you that you had a "religious responsibility" to do some crazy thing or another.

I didn't like it because it sounded like a demand: you have to do x, y, or Z. get out there and do it. And you should feel bad and guilty if you're not. I don't know about you, but I don't take orders well. I don't know about you, but sometimes, my reaction is to do just the opposite. "make your bed" "I'm going to leave it unmade." "Eat your vegetables" "I'm not going to eat any of them." "Go help other people." "Forget other people" I think there's some of the 5 year old in all of us.

But our deepest faith: the common ground we all share, regardless of the form it takes in our own life or our spiritual life, our deepest faith, regardless of the name you give it, or the theology that shapes it, or the wariness with which we approach it, our deepest faith calls us to compassion and engagement. Calls us out of ourselves.

Some days I can will myself into doing good things, into being more focused on others than myself, but not every day, and almost never in times when things are really rough can I think myself into being different. I have to *do* something.

It's part of why I have a problem with the "power of positive thinking." When I was little, I tried to think myself strong. I thought to myself: my muscles are growing. I did not get any stronger. Has anyone tried to think themselves thin? I'm still not a skinny guy. Have you tried thinking yourself happy when you are in the midst of a divorce, or thinking yourself sober if you struggle with drugs or alcohol. "Happyhappyhappyhappy"

You can't think yourself thin, it takes action, and spiritual action is no different. You change yourself by *doing* things that change yourself.

You can drop your loose change into the Guest at Your Table box every night.

Part of why Guest at Your Table is such a good thing for us, and not just the people it serves, is that it gives the opportunity every day for a month, for six weeks, to practice a spiritual practice of generosity. Better to put in a little every day than to write one check – you can always count it up at the end of the month and write a check then. Put something in every day. It doesn't matter whether it ten cents you put in there every day or ten dollars. You put in what you can afford. It's the practice, the day in day out practice, the work of putting your faith into action that will transform you, that will transform us, that will transform this old world.

This isn't about guilt, it's about justice. Our tradition has always looked to justice. Two hundred years ago, the great Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou knew this when he wrote: "if any of the human race be endlessly miserable, the whole must be, providing they all know of it; for, reasoning from that spirit of benevolence which is necessary to a conformity to the principles of holiness, I prove it impossible for a well-disposed man to see another in misery, without bearing a very sensible proportion of that misery."<sup>1</sup>

"I prove it impossible for a well-disposed man to see another in misery, without bearing a very sensible proportion of that misery." It was clear in our kids this morning. Seeing the inequity in the two tables set up here in front, not a single one said: "this is right, this is just, leave them as they are." Not one. Not one said, "oh I feel terrible about all this, but whadayagonnado?" They very simply and forthrightly said: this is not just. We should not divide things up this way. And so they evened it out.

The spirit of benevolence is alive and well.

It is not a spirit of guilt or shame, it is a spirit of compassion and justice that moves us and moves our hearts.

And it's not just alive in our kids.

This month, many members of this congregation have been volunteering at Project Home. It's a cot shelter, meaning, it's a place where people go to sleep over night. A safe, clean, comfortable place to go when there is nowhere else to go. Families – mostly mothers and their young kids – stay four or five overnights (they are elsewhere during the day) before they can move to the Ramsey County Family Service Center, and then on into more permanent housing – housing that 90% of them find within a month.

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<sup>1</sup> A Treatise on Atonement, 1805

Churches in the area participate in this – they open their doors and Project Home staff brings in the supplies and the training and the process. Volunteers welcome guests as they arrive in the early evening. They are hosts. Volunteers spend the night themselves, so that someone is here for the guests. Volunteers fix a simple breakfast in the morning before the guests leave. We'll host the families here in March. We're volunteering to help and we've inviting them here as our guests for a month in the spring, because it is an action we can take that is within our power, that is well within our resources, that can make a real difference in the world.

I hope that as we look towards hosting Project Home guests here this winter, you, your whole family, will take an opportunity to be of service. To practice, to all practice together, that spirit of compassion.

I'll tell one more story and then we'll sing a little...

I went to college at Tufts University and studied religion and philosophy and at the time, both of those departments were housed in the old buildings of the Crane School of Theology. Crane was one of our Universalist seminaries – closed in 1968.

The inside is a combination of creaky, dark wooden floors from 1891, linoleum classroom floors added in 1972. On the walls hang large oil portraits of solemn-looking 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist ministers with extravagant facial hair. Those guys sideburns like nobody's business. I have sideburns, but I have nothing on these guys.

Not on the walls, but pervading the place, haunting it, is Clarence Skinner, Universalist minister, writer, dean of the Crane School of Theology for much of the 1930s and 40s. He is completely forgotten at Tufts now, maybe in the wider world too: no one else has contributed to the Wikipedia article I started on him! But his words, like so many of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears, have a fire that still burns a hundred years later. Skinner was shy, withdrawn. He had one close relationship, to his wife Clara, with whom he had no kids, but he had a deep mystic's relationship to all people. A vision and a love and a compassion that pulled him out of himself.

The first lines of his 1915 book begin no less ambitiously than the following:

“How to transform this old earth into the Kingdom of Heaven—that's the primal question. For thousands of years sad-eyed men [and women, I'd add] have looked upon this greed-broken world, yearning to gather it into their great healing love.”

Clarence Skinner – the greatest Universalist minister of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Such soaring optimizing, that immense vision which says nothing less than the complete transformation of our social, economic, justice system is the ultimate goal. He’s right. It is our goal.

I admire Skinner’s courage and conviction. I admire his desire to turn this old world into the kingdom of heaven, but I also know:

He was writing before the First World War, when technology proved as efficient at killing as it did at saving lives.

And he was writing before the great depression, when capitalism proved itself as capable of failure as of success.

And he was writing before the Second World War, when we discovered the machinery of the state can be harnessed to the genocide of 6 million people as easily as it can be an engine of progress.

He was writing before the nuclear arms race, when our best and brightest scientists gave us instantaneous perfect annihilation as easily as they gave us instantaneous perfect communication.

So I admire his courage, his vision, his goal, but it seems today so much farther than it was when he wrote nearly a century ago.

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.”

The Exodus from Egypt was more than three thousand years ago, and here we are, still fighting against the new tyrannies that appear in every generation. “The struggle for freedom is a continual struggle,” we say during Passover, “for **never** does mankind reach total liberty and opportunity.”

In that Haggadah story I hear Clarence Skinner’s optimism and hope. I hear Hosea Ballou’s Spirit of Benevolence calling us onward. I hear Edwin Beuhrer writing a Thanksgiving hymn that weaves our gratitude into our call to action. I hear Oscar Romero telling us that “It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision... we cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.”

It’s like the story of the kid throwing starfish back into the ocean. High tide had come and washed up tens of thousands of starfish along the coastline. And here comes a little kid, tossing them back in one by one. He’s gotten ten feet down the

beach in the last hour. His mom's packing up to head home, and she asks him, tenderly: why are you doing that, there's tens of thousands, what kind of difference can you possibly expect to make. He's determined. He picks up another and throws it back in: I made a difference for that one, he said.

In every generation, there have been those who responded simply, faithfully, that though they were not required to finish the work, they were not at liberty to quit.

In this season of thanks giving, we affirm that to give thanks is to acknowledge our own responsibility. We commit ourselves to do what is within our power to do, and do it well

May we practice this with grace.