

## Tongue-tied – Words & Wonder

Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, September 17, 2017  
All Souls Church, New York City

The poet John O'Donohue wrote:

*“All that is eternal in me  
Welcomes the wonder of this day,  
The field of brightness it creates  
Offering time for each thing  
To arise, and illuminate...”*

From time to time, it is worth it to ask yourself: why am I here? You could mean, “Why am I alive?” or “Why am I here on earth?” but I mean – why are you here – at All Souls? Why did you wake up this morning, get dressed and ready, and make your way here to spend this hour in this place, in just this way?

I hope a part of it is because you come to be among friends, to, as our unison reading this morning described, “to be assured that [loved ones] surround us, to restore their images on our eyes.” This is a beautiful and powerful thing, to be sure.

But there are many places to be among friends, and church is not the only one. Indeed, if friends are all you want and you like to sleep late on the weekend, church isn't even the *best* place for that.

We Unitarian Universalists don't always like to talk about it, but most of us come because there is a different hunger and a different need we are longing to fill. It is to magnify our capacity for wonder. It is to hear the words and music that lift us beyond the ordinary, set the speed of life aside, and to “offer time for each thing/to arise and illuminate.”

Coming to church is a spiritual practice, just like meditation or Sufi dancing, yoga or praying toward Mecca. It is to make space for the contemplation of that which is eternal in you and how it welcomes the wonder of the world. It is our common meditation on beauty, truth, the Good that we can find and the redeeming power of Love. A week without time for these is a hard week, indeed.

On a slightly different note – perhaps you have heard that Apple is releasing a new iPhone. “The Apple iPhone X is a new smartphone from Apple that was announced on September 12 and will be available for order on October 27. The iPhone X will feature an all-glass design with 5.8” Super Retina display, the A11 Bionic chip with Neural Engine, Qi wireless charging and an improved rear camera with dual optical image stabilization. iPhone X delivers a new way for customers to unlock, authenticate and pay using Face ID, enabled by the new TrueDepth camera.” (Apple website)

Now, I do not know what most of that means because I am an Android user myself and have never been an early adopter of new phones. But a lot of people are excited, I guess, and apparently plenty have over \$1000 to spend on a new phone. I have lots of things I could say about that but that would be a different sermon and this free ad for the Apple phone is about something else. It is a little meditation on the “i” in iPhone. Some say it stands for “internet.” Others, for “individual.” This phone is yours, and the technology is leading toward ever-increasing specificity toward the particular user. Hey, with the X, you can *pay for things with your face*. Watch me not launch into a sermon about facial recognition ID. No, the X is all about that i.

Unitarian Universalism, for a large part of its modern history, has leaned into an “i” identity as well. Our great and Universal faith in humankind means we do trust that each person may come to understand truth in their own particular way, but it has never meant that we expect each to do it alone. Finding the Good or the Right in any society in which we live is a common endeavor – we need one another. Even more than this, to live our values in a culture set against them, we need the strength that comes from working together, standing, emotionally speaking, together. We need the encouragement of people who trust us in the work, but travel with us on the journey. iChurch is a poor model. We are the Church – together.

Indeed, one of the most powerful things I have ever heard in Unitarian Universalism is when I heard the Rev. Sue Philips, the regional lead for the New England region, say:

Our congregations are voluntary associations in that members and friends participate according to their conscience – no one is compelled by creedal requirement, eschatological fear, or priestly mandate to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation. But we are nonetheless called to engage in religious community. Whether by individual conscience, justice-seeking community, or by God, Unitarian Universalism teaches that we are called to create beloved community *in community*. Our theologies may differ about what or who is calling us, but we are united in a belief that we are part of an interdependent web of existence. This call, wherever it comes from and however it manifests in our individual lives, is that which compels us to come together. **There is no such thing as a Unitarian Universalist by themselves.** Our faith is practiced in covenanted community. It is a bold thing to claim that people cannot really be Unitarian Universalist by themselves. Let me draw a parallel. In our tradition, congregations ordain ministers but only the Association can admit ministers into fellowship. A minister who is ordained but not fellowshipped may call themselves the minister of that specific church, but they may not call themselves a Unitarian Universalist minister. The individual church claims that minister but the larger movement does not. In exactly the same way, a person can claim Unitarian Universalist beliefs. But if they are not a part of a covenanted community they have not been claimed back. Our faith is practiced in covenanted community. Individual beliefs may constitute spirituality but they are not religious. They are not Unitarian Universalist. [1]

This is the shape of what we are doing together. We are setting aside the time to wonder together at what Love is calling us to do and be, and in doing so, we are *claiming one another*. We are accountable to each other, in a spirit of Love. When people ask me, “What is Unitarian Universalism?” I say, “it is many things, but it is a non-creedal faith where we believe we need not *think* alike to *love* alike.” But my friends – if we do not love alike, then what are we doing here? Love is what has called us into the company of one another.

Emerson said, “Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole.” This includes us. “All that is eternal in me, welcomes the wonder of this day.”

Another verse of O’Donohue’s “Morning Prayer” says:

*“May my mind come alive today  
To the invisible geography  
That invites me to new frontiers  
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.”*

This, too, is the difficult truth of Unitarian Universalism. If you sought among us for the most prevalent theology, it would be process theology. There is nothing simple about process theology, to be sure. But to give it a glancing nod of explanation, it is the belief that God is to the world like a soul is to a body – of it and more than it. God is understood to have two poles – a primordial pole, in which God is eternal, unchanging and not of this world. The other is the consequent pole, whereby God *is* of this world, and changing and changeable. In process theology, we co-create our reality with God – what we do matters, and God cannot change this world without us. God’s very self is in process.

“May my mind come alive today...to risk being disturbed, and changed.”

In some ways, we practice church to seek things that last...to find silence, to be uplifted by music, to engage in ritual and to seek greater truths, together. And in other ways, church asks us to practice a radical openness to being disturbed and changed. If we believe in the life-saving value of Unitarian Universalism – and I do, I’ve seen its power: gay men who don’t jump, young women who stop cutting, people addicted who find encouragement and help to break free – then that means we want people to find us, to know us, to join us – and we must be ready to be changed by that. It is not enough to come and say, “Be like us, do what we do.” This is where we seek to discover who we are together, because who we are together changes when the gathered people change. What we may come to understand as an intercultural community of All Souls is so powerful and it asks of us to risk being confused, uncomfortable sometimes, changed.

Being changed isn’t easy. I remember when I was in college and my best friend, Amanda – we became best friends when we were about 11, we are best friends still – Amanda was at Penn State in the Honors College and she’d ascended to being the head of the key women’s group

there. And I said something like “mankind” in a conversation, and she corrected me. Then I spun out into a long argument about how we had real problems to worry about, and language just was not important, etc. etc. Amanda did not persuade me but she did open that door. I became sensitized to it, and what did change me was listening to disability activists. They were the first to open my understanding to how language privileges and empowers. Since then, many others, including Trans activists and the Black women intellectuals who pioneered intersectional theory, and my long journey within Unitarian Universalism has led me to a different place. The point, of course, is that at first, I felt defensive, and later I felt a little foolish, and sometimes I felt awkward, and eventually I understood that how I feel is not really key. Being openhearted and ready to be changed by the people I meet when they teach me where Love is calling is far more important than being comfortable or never feeling awkward or making a mistake now and again. So... may our minds come alive today, may we risk being disturbed and changed.

I’ve led you down an odd path this morning: the power of wonder, of why we set aside a time in our week to seek what is sacred, eternal, lasting. Then a turn to a reminder that for Unitarian Universalists, this is something we do *in community*. And lastly, even God is changed by what we do together, so our welcoming, open-door faith calls us to be changed by one another. If you ever feel anxious about this part – should we be changed by those who join us? Remember that we laud our great religious strength – that we stand always ready to change our theology should science and reason demand it of us. New empirical truths amend and enhance our religious understanding. So, too, are our communities amended and enhanced by newcomers dwelling among us.

O’Donohue closes his Morning Prayer thus:

*“May I have the courage today  
To live the life I would love,  
To postpone my dream no longer  
But to do at last what I came here for  
And waste my heart on fear no more.”*

May we go and do likewise. Amen. May Love guide us.

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[1] Speech: Congregational Polity & the Myth of Congregational Autonomy. Sue Philips, General Assembly 2015