

2) Sermon: A Wider We

Rev. Sarah Lammert:

Last month, in an amazing breakthrough, scientists were able to watch a star explode right before their eyes.

The light was dazzling; the event so rare as to make history.

As the core of a massive star, twenty times the size of our own sun and some 88 million light years from earth collapsed inward, what scientists were witnessing was a process intrinsic to the fact of our own life on earth.

Some of the elements critical to life, such as carbon, oxygen and iron, are actually produced in these thermo-nuclear blasts known as supernovas, then flung across the farthest reaches of space to be incorporated into new planets, stars and living beings.

And so, in a sense what these astronomers were seeing was the death of a star transformed into new life yet unborn: a luminous, chaotic, violent and wondrous event, brimming with potential.

It is not merely poetic fancy but scientific fact to state that we are stardust, forged through the fires of time and evolutionary process into the creatures we are today -- in our case some rather fine looking human beings

decked out in our General Assembly finest, gathered here in the Port of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on this warm June day.

Looked at from the perspective of time and space, we are one with all life in this interconnected, swirling universe; even as we carry around our individual identities with our unique opinions and life stories, our particular joys and our particular pains.

It is in wrestling with this paradox of individual identity and radical oneness – of intimacy and ultimacy if you will -- that I believe the human religious impulse is born.

As we attempt to live lives of meaning and dignity as Unitarian Universalists in our small corner of the vastness of space, I believe we are called in this time, in this Assembly and on this day to hear a larger calling for our faith movement – a calling to embrace what I will term “*A Wider We*”.

Last fall, just as the news of this General Assembly’s challenge with federal port security was coming to light, causing angst and much soul searching among our leaders and membership-at-large about what it means to be an open and embracing denomination in a world of growing fear and exclusion, I had the great privilege to attend a significant rite-of-passage for

our UU fold: the ordination of Galen Guengerich as the new Senior Minister of one of our flagship churches – All Soul’s Church in New York City.

The sermon was offered by Dr. Diana Eck of Harvard University, a leading scholar of comparative religions and the director of the Pluralism Project, which won the prestigious National Humanities Medal in 1998 for its work in investigating America’s religious diversity.

In her address Dr. Eck, herself a Methodist, called on Unitarian Universalists to take seriously our place in the religious landscape of America, saying:

...I believe that Unitarian Universalists have a very important role in this new religious American and the new millennium of the world in which we live. You are, in my estimation, the church of the new millennium. In this era, Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denominator, but the highest common calling...

In a world divided by race and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a church like this, committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor and service to humanity is a beacon. The Unitarian theology, and yes you have one, does not reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but amplifies it, broadens it to include the investigation of the many, many ways in which the divine is known and yet unknown...

The world is in need of your theology.

Unitarian Universalists wrestle with the religious language Dr. Eck employs – words like theology, God, divinity, and transcendence.

Some of us are comfortable redefining such words and employing them freely.

For others it feels at least uncomfortable, and perhaps even offensive to hear such words which may feel devoid of meaning or even harmful given their use in the culture at large.

And so, we wrestle.

We wrestle so much in fact, that we sometimes find ourselves flattened and pinned, paralyzed by our own religious word wrangling, unable to say much of substance at all.

It is time for us to move beyond this.

Perhaps we each need to prepare to be offended, in service of getting our message, our theology, our good news out into the world.

As Annie Dillard once quipped, people ought to wear crash helmets to worship, and ushers should hand out life preservers and signal flares, and lash us to our seats!

We Unitarian Universalists are readers, thinkers and lovers of words.

Let us take some risks in our speaking, use language that is evocative, provocative, creative, and inspiring.

Let us express who we are and what we stand for in a way that makes a prophetic difference in the healing of our world.

Let us touch the ineffable, speak our truth in love, and hear one another, finding that oneness, that unity of spirit, even through our differences.

General Assembly 2008 is poised to begin.

Now that we have celebrated our coming together in the opening ceremony last night, it is time to get down to business.

We will take time during this assembly to talk about the divisions being engendered in the current culture of fear in our nation, of which the Port Security imposed on this facility is but one present example of the myriad ways that civil liberties are threatened by a perceived need for heightened security.

This is an important conversation for us as a faith community, but it is not the only critical work of this assembly.

The Appreciative Inquiry process this afternoon is an opportunity for our committed leaders, lay and clergy, to help define a future vision for Unitarian Universalism to live into – one that is not limited by fear or the failures of the past, but that carries the best of who we have been into a future of our invention.

Tomorrow we have our Interfaith Community Witness: Valuing ALL Families, the featured presentation on justice for immigrants, as well as numerous wonderful workshops, speakers, worship services and social events.

Don't just go racing from one thing to another, although the temptation is great – use this General Assembly as an opportunity to really deepen your engagement with Unitarian Universalism, and to imagine how we might fulfill on our promise for the world.

The world is crying out for transformation – I don't think I need to list the evidence for you – the polluting, the violence, the hunger, the injustice, the turning away from our humanity.

The world is in fact crying out for what Unitarian Universalism offers in the arena of religious life.

We, with our theology of oneness, and our affirmation of the worth and dignity of every being, have something unique to offer in the service of wholeness and healing.

Echoing Vienna Teng's beautiful song *Soon Love Soon*: we need to be that soaring voice in the silent plea, leaping the wide, wide chasm of hate.

Let us articulate a new vision of human wholeness; a new understanding that the fate of one is indeed the fate of the whole.

No other religious denomination stands where we do in terms of our wide embrace.

It is Unitarian Universalist's time to come of age, and to stand powerfully together, setting aside the sometimes petty ways in which we weaken our movement with our love of individualism and our prickliness around religious language.

Part of our challenge will be expanding our ability to include one another's lexicon for expressing what is worthy of reverence.

Generosity in this case has nothing to do with giving money, it is about a way of listening.

If I use the words "Oneness of God" and you prefer "Love of Neighbor" or "Service to Humanity" let us not close our ears and eyes and hearts but open our lens of understanding.

Diana Eck puts the challenge this way:

Refining our understanding of interbeing is certainly one of the great religious tasks of our time.

When the Indian American astronaut Sunita Williams circled the world this last year from the space station, she said through a live

satellite feed innocently, yet profoundly, “It’s hard to imagine anyone arguing down there.”

From one perspective we are that blue planet Earth seen from the distance of space, that beautiful blue planet swirling with clouds. We are down here arguing, riven with conflict and competition and discord, with anxiety, with ambition, fear and flattery. And if there were ever a time that we need to spin out a new fabric of belonging and a wider sense of “we” for the human community, it is certainly now.

Now is the time for Unitarian Universalists to step forward and say something of substance to our nation and world.

It has never been easy for Unitarian Universalists to define the core of our faith – the good news we offer.

But to back away from this challenge is to abdicate the responsibility that our Unitarian Universalist faith has to provide a clear message of hope and love in the fields of human heartbreak, and hurt, and need.

We are called, I believe, to offer a message, a theological one, that says we are each a spark of the divine, a spark of life in an infinitely complex universe, each precious, each intricately connected to the whole.

We are beautiful in our diversity, not in our sameness; and yet we are one.

May the love that sustains you and the peace that surpasses all division be with you as you journey on through this wonderful swirling blue planet we

call home.

Out of the dusk a shadow, then a spark; out of the stardust, life.

To all that is holy, that includes rather than excludes, that creates, that gives
life, that offers healing, I say amen!

May it be so.