

Freedom as Liberating Love

The results of the November 2024 election have shown that many of our neighbors don't share the same vision of what kind of world we want to live in. Christian Nationalism has been on the rise and democracy is under attack. In this service, we explore how the recently adopted UU Shared Values can help us model a compelling alternative. Presented by Rev. Reneé Ruchotzke, UUA Congregational Life Staff, Central East Region.

Opening Words

https://www.webtoons.com/en/comedy/safely-endangered/ep-751-tree/viewer?title_no=352&episode_no=751



There is a comic strip by Chris McCoy that shares an eternal truth about our humanity. A cardinal and a bluebird are on a branch of a tree and the cardinal says, “Can I help you?” The bluebird says, Huh?” Cardinal: “You’ve landed on my tree!” Bluebird: “*Your* tree?” Cardinal: “Yeah, I inherited it from my grandpa who stole it from some squirrel.” Bluebird “That’s stupid, you can’t own a tree.”

Cardinal “What if I sold it to you at a very reasonable price?” The bluebird thinks to themselves, “Wow, my own tree....”

How often do we have a big T truth that we know in our hearts... “You can’t own a tree!” and then mindlessly change our minds. We displace it with a construct, an idea that we come up with but doesn’t have any evidence, in this case: “I have the right to own nature!”

Religion is one way of meaning-making, of creating constructs to help us understand and to give us purpose in life. At its best, religion gives us a moral compass as we make meaning, often based a sacred text or a particular historical figure.

Unitarian Universalism uses conscience as a moral compass, but conscience in relationship to a community, and responsible to a shared set of values.

Sometimes we humans inherit an old construct and discover we need to *deconstruct* it, because we realize isn’t actually a “Big T” truth. Often this happens while many other humans around us may keep believing. Here

are a few examples of truths that I do not believe but many others still do:

Humans have dominion over nature.

European culture is the pinnacle of civilization, and everything else is backward or primitive.

It's the job of some humans to meet my needs because of their lesser-ness, their gender, color, education level, or economic class.

This deconstruction is deep soul work. It calls us to step out of a sense of self-confidence and into a place of confusion, vulnerability, discomfort, and –eventually – transformation. But it is possible to do so because we UU's do it together. We are not alone.

Come, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting:

Grace Meets Us Where We Are by Gretchen Haley

There is nothing you need to bring with you to be welcome
here

no right beliefs or proof of citizenship

no eternal optimism or clarity of conviction

no boundless courage or endless expertise

You do not need to know what brought you here

Or how you will solve that problem you are turning over
and over and over in your mind

Your bills do not need to be paid and your checkbook can
be a mess

your children may have been up half the night

your hearing aids may not be working & your knees may
be creaking

You do not need to be already perfect—or even half-way—
to belong in this circle where grace meets us where we
are

but does not leave us as it found us*

where love resides in each of us yet is somehow more
than all

where life still pulses and rages and heals and transforms
creating us and this day anew once again.

Closing Words:

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.

— Ursula K. Le Guin

Suggest Hymns:

#131 Love Will Guide Us

#317 We Are Not Our Own

#1003 When Our Heart Is in A Holy Place

#1017 Building a New Way

#1023 Building Bridges

Freedom As Liberating Love

My father was born in a little eastern European county called Latvia. Like Ukraine, it shares a border with both Russia and Belarus, and my dad grew up speaking both Latvian and Russian. As a little boy, he experienced a Russian invasion by Stalin in 1941, then a German invasion and occupation by Hitler and the Nazis in '42. Then, in 1944 there was a second Russian invasion that resulted in over 40 years of occupation behind the Iron Curtain. Luckily, my 8-year-old dad, his 2-year-old sister, my grandparents, and my great aunt fled to Germany, where they were given food, shelter, and work. The rest of my Latvian relatives, lived under the terror of a totalitarian regime, that is, if they weren't killed or sent to Siberia.

When I was growing up, my grandparents and dad never shared stories of what happened with the Russians, just a few oblique comments about how hard it was. I did know that my grandfather lived in constant fear that a KGB agent would track him down and kill him, even in a quiet neighborhood here up in Michigan. Later, when I was an adult, I learned that he witnessed one brother being shot by Russian soldiers, while another brother and cousin were sent to Siberia.

A few years ago, I travelled to Latvia to learn about my family roots and experience Latvian culture. The one thing that struck me was that nobody smiled in public. Nobody smiled.

Americans have been exposed to hundreds of stories about Hitler and the Nazis. I really had to dig to find out about the experiences of eastern Europe under Stalin. It is horrifying. It is so horrifying that I had nightmares around the time of the invasion of Ukraine. I knew the history of the Stalin-created famines in Ukraine in the 1930s. The Soviets confiscated every scrap of food from the family-owned farms and refused to give them any rations. The starvation was unimaginable. They say that the countryside became bare of any vegetation, and eerily silent because anything that moved was eaten.

What I also learned from my deep dive into life behind the Iron Curtain, is how living under a totalitarian regime was dehumanizing. I recently watched a 2021 documentary titled *Homo Sovieticus*, that illustrated the impact 30 years after the USSR collapsed. It wasn't just being under constant control and surveillance. It was also being forced to deny and denounce one's history and identity. Even a suspicion of one's loyalties could cause utilities to be mysteriously shut off, or a job lost for no apparent reason. People learned to trust no one, which led to isolation, loneliness, and disconnection. And no smiling.

This is why the current political moment in the U.S. is so frightening to me. I notice the markers of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism has a very specific meaning that can help us understand not only the dangers, but how we can respond to it.

We start with authoritarianism, a government where a person or small group of people are in charge without having any accountability to the people being governed. This accountability piece is crucial, and we'll come back to it.

Totalitarianism is authoritarianism that doesn't just stop at the government. Totalitarianism adds in some kind of ideology. It then uses that ideology to control most aspects of human life, such as the education system, what books are available, the arts, the sciences, and the private-life morality of the citizens.

We have a whole class of political leaders and billionaires who have embraced totalitarianism, containing at least 3 ideologies that I am noticing. The ideology of White Supremacy – where black and brown humans have less value. The ideology of Patriarchy – where women's value is based on what they give men and anyone who doesn't fit gender roles is a problem. And the ideology of parasitic Capitalism – which is based in extraction and exploitation rather than in creating things that have their own value.

But what frightens me the most is an emerging ideology that is a Frankenstein's monster that combines the worst of all three of these ideologies: Christian Nationalism.

Let's be clear that there is nothing in the teachings of Jesus that resemble what is coming out the mouths of these men – and a few women. They have rewritten the gospels to glorify guns and conflate themselves with God and Jesus. They are embracing the wolf of totalitarianism while masquerading it in the sheep's clothing of Christianity. One way to think of Christian Nationalism is how it echoes the belief in the divine right of kings, but with some self-appointed “strong man” in charge, instead of the heir of the previous king.

Whenever you have a person or group who claims God is on their side so that they can seize power, it's a theological red flag. Unchecked power gives license to the worst human impulses: to enslave, oppress, deport, imprison, conscript, rape, kidnap, or steal from others. We are experiencing a time where the theological red flags are multiplying.

But there are a lot of shades of grey before they turn to red. It's the grey shades where people can still reconsider opinions. This where we can make a difference in this current political moment. A lot of people think of themselves as “good Christians” but that can mean a lot of different things, especially depending on what church they go to, or what news shows they watch.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not tend to ground ourselves in the teachings of any particular faith tradition. Many of us came out of a Christian tradition but left because we had issues with the theology, or some hypocrisy or inconsistency. Only a handful of UUs have an understanding of the complexities of Christian theologies, so we can't authentically debate heresies.

There are still plenty of real Christians who still believe in the blessings of the meek, and to turn the other cheek. These Christians will continue to preach and advocate for their more compassionate understanding of the gospel, challenging the bumper sticker and T-shirt theology that twists the gospel into "Jesus, Guns, Babies, Liberty." As, the saying goes, we don't have a horse in that race, even if we do have a favorite.

This is the point where I shift gears and start talking about what this all means to us as Unitarian Universalists. Christian Nationalism is a real threat, and we need to have our own response. We UUs have had our own conversation about the center of our faith nationally that touched on some of the same core issues. Even though there were some thoughtful theological disagreements, I didn't see any head-scratching t-shirts or bumper stickers.

Let me start by saying that one of the beautiful things about Unitarian Universalism is that we don't have to tie ourselves up in knots whenever we come to a new conclusion about something. This is partly because we don't have to conform to an ancient text.

Our history is full of questioning: Do we have to practice holy communion to be a church? Do people have to believe in God to be a member? Should women be ministers? Should earth-centered traditions like paganism or Wicca be listed alongside Christianity and Judaism? How do we understand the privileges of whiteness and what does that mean to how we live our lives?

As Unitarian Universalists, to help guide us, when we struggle with questions such as these, we develop our own articulation of our faith, and every so often renew that. We just did so at the General Assembly of 2024.

Then we adopted six core values – shared values – that we use to guide our faith. These core values are Generosity, Justice, Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, and Pluralism. And at the center of these values is the core value of Love – that each one of these values should use Love as a touchstone.

Article II, which is part of our UUA bylaws, includes new, pragmatic purposes that will guide the work of UUA staff like me. These purposes give a little more clarity to the mission of the UUA: to assist congregations, to support

and train leaders and spiritual development, to heal historic injustices, and to advance UU values in the world.

But then the purposes take a bold step by naming in print what many of our prophetic UU leaders have been saying: Our purpose also includes transforming of the world through **liberating Love**.

There's that word Love again, a love that liberates, a love that calls for "freedom from," not the related, but very different word, of **liberty**, that we are seeing on t-shirts and bumper stickers, along with eagles and guns. Liberty is expressing the "freedom to." Let's unpack the difference: Freedom from oppression, not freedom to oppress. Freedom from economic exploitation, not freedom to make the maximum profit. Freedom of expression, not the freedom to silence the expression of others.

The proposal also reiterates our covenant of support between congregations. Instead of naming specific sources – which were transient and never seemed to include the breadth of faith and ethical traditions we draw from – it names the more permanent qualities of the sources that we draw from: freedom, reason, hope, and courage.

Again, these are **particular** expressions of faith that build upon a foundation of Love. Freedom that wishes freedom for all. Reason that is curious and open to changing one's mind rather than held defensively or like a weapon.

Courage that serves the common good rather than the individual ego.

Then Article II takes another bold – and some felt controversial – statement:

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. *(So far, so good. Then it continues...)* We are **accountable** to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the **spiritual discipline** of Love.

Remember when I said we'd come back to the topic of accountability when I was talking about authoritarianism, where people are in charge without having any accountability?

We have seen what happens when leaders are able to act without transparency or accountability. We saw it with Stalin. We have seen it in the tragedy of how the Catholic Church handled sexual misconduct among their priests. We are seeing it in our criminal justice system.

I see accountability as holding the line between the two different understandings of freedom. One is “all humans enjoying freedom” from harm -- harm from the myriad oppressions and isms, and the “freedom to do whatever one wants,” no matter how much those actions harm others.

Accountability ensures that love is grounded mutuality and respect, not on giving without receiving in return.

Accountability encourages each person to take responsibility for their actions. Accountability discourages codependent behaviors like pity or over-functioning. Accountability also calls us to keep our promises, to work through our mistakes, and to accept an olive branch of reconciliation when it is sincerely offered.

When I am talking religion in the public sphere, I always look for or ask about “where are the lines of accountability?” When someone’s accountability begins and ends with the divine, I raise an eyebrow. I once had a boss tell me that – since I was person of faith – I didn’t need a raise for the extra work I was doing because my reward would come in heaven. He was enjoying the freedom to help himself to my labor. Then I enjoyed the freedom from not working there anymore and found another job.

As a congregation, accountability is actually a key part of how we have historically approached our theology. Our pilgrim and puritan ancestors saw the corruption of the bishops and the presbyteries, of how they didn’t stay true to the teachings of the Bible.

In our congregational polity, the individual conscience -- in conversation with others in covenanted community – is the way we practice accountability. You actually can’t just believe anything you want; you need to test it with your fellow sojourners on the path of faith. One person can’t just make decisions for the whole community – not even the minister. Instead, we empower a group of leaders to

look at the big picture and talk things through. For the big decisions, we expect that the whole community will have a voice.

Nationally in our denomination, things work much the same way. We have small groups writing curricula, collecting worship materials, editing hymnals. But for the big decisions – like updating our covenant, principles and purposes, we convene a national conversation and eventually vote.

I am grateful that our faith has decided to do the hard work of working with the tension between individual right and community responsibilities through our new wording in Article II,

As I said earlier, this deconstruction is deep soul work. It calls us to step out of a sense of self-confidence and into a place of confusion, vulnerability, discomfort, but eventually – transformation. But we can do so because we are doing it together. We are not alone.

Amen, and Blessed Be.