

Let the Sunshine In
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Good Morning. It is with deep gratitude and joy that I stand before this congregation. I am grateful for the Rev. Matthew Johnson's invitation to worship with you today and to finally experience the magic and beauty of this congregation that he's been bragging about all these years. It is also a great privilege to represent our shared Unitarian Universalist Association. And so I also extend my thanks and gratitude on behalf of President Peter Morales and the whole UUA for your hospitality in having me here this morning.

This morning, there could be no more fitting a theme than resilience to be my guide. For resilience, truly, has been and continues to be a lasting quality of our religious faith. It is a principle that underlies all of the other principles that we hold dear, those principles which call us to dig deep to our roots, to find strength in them, in

order that we might say yes to life, grow our wings, and launch into the sky of immense wonder and possibility. We Unitarian Universalists, we who were born of heretics, of questioners and people of conscience, we proclaim across this country and throughout the world a resilient message that love is indeed the greatest force in the universe and that we are all called to bless this world through our words and actions, as individuals, as a religious community, and as a wider religious movement. And so I pray this morning that with the few words I am able to share with you, that they might be a small extension of that love we hold dear, and that they might embody in some small way that blessing we hope to be in the world.

As I said, the theme of resilience is on point for what needs to be said today. I feel called to talk about the relationship between resilience and our interdependence as a religious people and movement. But first, I'd like to

share just a little about myself and how I came to be with you today. As was mentioned earlier, I grew up as a UU in Milwaukee, WI, and I recently graduated from Chicago Theological Seminary. I feel lucky to be able to work for the UUA remotely in East Lansing, where I live with my wife, Hattie, who is attending law school at Michigan State University. While she pursues her professional development, I get the privilege to take the road less travelled by working for just a few years at the Unitarian Universalist Association prior to serving our movement in a congregational setting.

Truly, what better a vantage point is there to learn about the progressive power and potential and promise of our interdependence as a faith tradition? I might travel one week to San Diego, the next here to Rockford, IL, and everywhere in between I am given the opportunity to see the invisible threads that hold us together as a religious people, a people who covenant to uphold certain

principles to make the world more meaningful and just.

I've been thinking a lot about these invisible threads lately.

And I've realized that one of my jobs, wherever I go in my work as a stewardship and development staff member of the UUA, is to try and make these invisible threads visible, to call us all back towards the heart of our faith, that we are at our deepest essence... one, that we are interdependent. And what I have learned is that for a lot of people, including myself at times, it is a hard spiritual practice to remain mindful of this interdependence. It takes a certain level of resiliency to hold strong to our values and beliefs. Because, so many things in society and our daily lives try to drive us apart, they try to create divisions between us that silence us or at least distract us from even exploring our similarities or discovering a path toward greater justice and peace. But whether for innocent or nefarious reasons, these divisions cannot

overcome the true pull we feel towards returning to our interdependence.

When I think deeply about our human nature or the nature of the universe, or of our religious movement, it is really hard to come away with any conclusion besides an overwhelming feeling of awe about this interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. This awe, this feeling of clarity that comes to us when we glimpse ever so briefly at an alignment of all that is, or at least of all we can see or sense before us, this feeling is powerful. And it can be either comforting, or it can be scary, or most often both.

We cannot deny it. We are relational beings, we can see our part in the relational nature of the universe, as well. Whether you take a Newtonian perspective or follow the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, interdependence is compelling; it is a worldview that in my opinion makes a lot of sense. Our 7th principle is not some fluff footnote to

appease the environmentalists in our faith communities; it is a radical, counter-cultural proposition that no matter how much we try to create divisions between us, divisions between race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, we have always been, we are today, and we will always be, one. That's why I love Thich Nhat Hanh's beautiful reflection on *interbeing*. I just had to share it in its entirety. This idea that "To be' is to inter-be. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is because everything else is."

Hanh uses this example of a piece of paper to convey that we exist in a relational interdependence with all that is. And he claims that the paper needs the cloud to exist, for "Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper." Reconnecting with our true nature as interdependent beings, we begin to recognize that our 7th

principle not only offers us a radical worldview, but we also are given a blueprint for a new ethic of relationship towards everything in the universe.

And yea, the universe is big, this country is big, even the new MidAmerica Region is big, so let's dial it back a little bit. I'll give you an example from my own life. I have to fly a lot In order to meet with Unitarian Universalists throughout the country to talk about the work we do at the UUA. And I admit I have come to take for granted the magic I once felt about flying, but never have I lost the meaning of those fleeting moments of encountering fellow travelers as we move across our lives together, at 40,000 feet, if for only a few hours. I am an extrovert and so I don't mind striking up a conversation and learning a little bit about my newfound friend.

When I take Thich Nhat Hanh's words to heart, when I truly look into another human being's eyes and see my reflection and the reflection of all that is, it is hard to not

have a feeling of deep care for my fellow traveler.

Sometimes, I have conversations that are superficial and sometimes they go deeper, especially as folks inquire about what this Un-i-tar-i-an Un-i-ver-sal-ism is I am devoting my life to... But every conversation ends with me realizing once again, that my life has been more fulfilled that day because I was able to connect, if for only a moment, with another member and recognize them as a member of our universal family.

And so, I think our religious communities are the best places where we can practice this interdependent ethic of care. We come together perhaps mainly on Sundays, and perhaps other times throughout the week, to practice mindfulness that we are here, both here and here, for a reason larger than ourselves alone. We are held together in covenant in this work of dreaming and envisioning the future for our religious communities and for our society. And I have to congratulate you, you've already got some

of it figured out. You covenant together each week that, "Love is the spirit of this church and reason is it's guide. To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in freedom, and to serve human need; this is our covenant." This covenant will hold you in whatever comes your way, I promise you, whatever challenge, whatever fork in the road, if you hold true to this covenant, to these principles, your ministries and journey will always be as bright as the sunshine.

I have to admit that one of the biggest reasons I was excited and eager to come visit this congregation was to see firsthand who this community was that was embarking upon this discerned and focused approach to imagining their congregation in new and exciting ways. I have heard from Rev. Johnson that you have been experimenting with trying some collaborative ministries with other local congregations. He mentioned you have been trying some simple things at first, perhaps things

you wouldn't necessarily even notice, like aligning your monthly worship themes with four other congregations in the area, exchanging pulpits once a year to bring in distinct, yet still local and thus somewhat familiar UU voices to your communities. I heard you just shared in a beautiful music concert and that you will experiment with a joint worship service on June 14th.

Rev. Johnson said you are even experimenting with sharing the ministerial services of my friend and colleague, the Rev. Schuyler Vogel, with a couple congregations. And we'll see where these collaborations and journeys take you. It's only the beginning. But for now, what I can say with 100% integrity, is Thank You. Thank you. I am so grateful you are exploring your interdependence on a small scale by envisioning what it might mean to have multiple congregations share the same goal of growing Unitarian Universalism in the "stateline area."

And I am grateful not just because you are doing this work, but because the UUs in McHenry are, and in Rockton, and perhaps in Dekalb and Elgin and elsewhere. All of you are modeling, in your own ways, from your own perspectives, a little mathematical equation that I have been toying around with for the last couple years. A quick aside, you see before I went into the ministry, I wanted to be a math teacher and so sometimes I still think about theology or ministry in certain mathematical ways. So this one I am going to share with you is really simple, it's just a little addition problem. I've been thinking about the idea of risk, or risk taking, and how it relates to our congregations and our future. You see, any sort of experimenting or collaborating you might be doing with other congregations can be easily seen as risk taking, since you don't really know what's going to happen, you don't really know what's at stake, what you might lose or maybe even gain.

But my equation goes something like this. When we do some risk taking... in covenant, that pairing makes the risk taking holy. As we talked about before, covenant can hold us through the most challenging times, the times of uncertainty, of adaption, of experimentation. So with holy risk taking, I believe truly, no matter what we do, we cannot fail. When we take risks in covenant, when we try new things and remain committed to our covenant that Love is the spirit of this church and reason is it's guide, etc. etc. we can begin to see that these efforts, that these collaborations, cannot fail, that they will not be in vain, that truly they are towards some unavoidable destination.

I sometimes call this destination liberation, or some people call it Beloved Community, but for the themes of this sermon, maybe we could call it... a full realization and attainment of our interdependence. When we take risks in covenant, they are made holy. And when we do some

holy risk taking together, we cannot fail, but we might, just might get a glimpse of Beloved Community, a glimpse of our nature and perhaps our destiny.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association is deeply committed to supporting our congregations throughout the country, like this one, who are doing some holy risk taking in their unique settings. Truly, this is a time of trying new things, of not losing the tried and true ministries of yesterday, but of complimenting them with new collaborations and new adventures. At the UUA we are doing our own holy risk taking and we hope that together our resilience and interdependence can create greater synergy and success.

We also strive at the UUA to be relentlessly useful, to encourage innovation and experimentation in our local and shared ministries, in order that we might make those invisible threads just a little more visible, and reimagine what it might mean to be congregations in a wider covenant together within our Association. For example,

there is a website and online community of leaders of congregations who are exploring what is often called generically as “multi-site ministry,” and we’ve set up online learning communities to support these initiatives. And the exciting thing is that we are still at the early stages of these days of holy risk taking. It will be communities like yours that others will look to for guidance, for help, for faith to know that this work is possible, transformative, and worth the resiliency. But, again, for our wider movement, for Unitarian Universalism in general, to remain relevant in the 21st century it will require something more than websites and learning communities, it will require something more than better lines of communication and support between the UUA; ultimately, it will require a resilient and shared commitment of all Unitarian Universalists to nurture a spiritual practice of mindfulness of our interdependence, of that truest nature of our individual and shared

existence, both as a congregation and an Association of congregations. As we strive to re-imagine religious community in an ever changing world, we must remember the prophetic words of Thich Nhat Hanh. He encouraged us to not look so simply at a piece of paper, a ubiquitous object that surrounds us every day, but to look more deeply to all that is inside: "time, space, the Earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat."

I do not know what will come from these exciting years of holy risk taking that are before you, that are before the other stateline congregations, and before our wider Association. I do not know what will happen on June 14th, or the day after, or the day after that. But this I do know, when we stay in covenant, when love truly is the spirit of this church, when we remain mindful of our interdependence, when we let the sunshine in, and also when we recognize that the sun was already in us the

whole time, along with the cloud and the river, we will be able to do some magical and beautiful things, perhaps some of those things Rev. Johnson saw were possible all along.

And this magic and this beauty, rooted in these principles of resilience, covenant, and interdependence, will open the doors to practicing and abundant faith, a faith where all is possible, where creativity and resource are boundless, where a spirit of generosity can be harnessed and shown to ourselves, to this congregation and our Association, to our society and our world. And that really is the progressive power, the potential, and the promise of Unitarian Universalism.

May it be so. Amen.