

I've known the song Spirit of Life,
by heart, for longer than I can remember.
Spirit of life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea, move in the hand,
giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close, wings set me free,
spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

A few years ago, the writer to that song, Carolyn McDade,
told the story of where it came from.

I had heard through the grapevine that McDade
wasn't happy with the way that we often sang it,
that it wasn't about celebration, it wasn't about triumph.

If you listen to the words, you can hear that:
it's a request, a need, a longing.

And when she was asked to tell the story, here's what she said.

She was coming home from a meeting about Central America - this in the early 80's, when the US
government was supplying arms to oppressive regimes,

when people, including nuns and priests and activists were being massacred,

she was coming home from a meeting,

as she had done so many times - a life long activist, she is,

and, as the reporter Kimberly French records it:

. . . what McDade remembers most clearly was the feeling she had. "When I got to Pat's house, I told her, 'I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the door, and I'll be dust.' I was tired, not with my community but with the world. She just sat with me, and I loved her for sitting with me."

McDade then drove to her own home in Newtonville. "I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out. It was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement."

Spirit of life, come unto me.

Rise in the sea, move in the hand.

Come to me, come to me.

It's a prayer, a longing.

It comes out of that place, of feeling like a piece of dried cardboard,
of feeling tired, empty, spent.

That we cannot by ourselves carry the load for one more minute.

Shall we pray about it? Asks Laurel Hallman, my friend and colleague.

Shall we pray about it? And sometimes the answer is yes, and sometimes no,
but the point is not prayer, per se, the technique of communication,
the point is that we need to express our yearning in some way,
that we need to reach for poetry and metaphor and story, ritual and, well, holiness,
something far more deeply interfused, as William Wordsworth put it.

We yearn.

We yearn for renewal.

We yearn for renewal because sometimes we feel like a piece of dried cardboard.

And we need renewal.

A renewal of faith. A renewal of hope. A renewal of joy.

I'll tell you that I was right there; dried cardboard, ready to be blown away

Earlier this week, right there.

I don't usually do a lot of confession from this pulpit,
because I want worship to be about you, and your lives,
and not about me;

But sometimes I break that rule, because I want you to know that this is real stuff.

Sometimes the candle is burning low.

Sometimes it goes out.

I'm right there, yearning for renewal.

Part of my life are good, and parts are really hard.

There are parts of this work, this calling, that I deeply love,
and there are parts that are really hard.

Like Carolyn McDade, sometimes I come home from the meeting on this or that,
and feel like, what was the point of that?

The world's problems seem so huge, and I'm just one person,
and a tired one at that.

I'm yearning for renewal, and I'm feeling like dried cardboard.

So I reached out to some friends.

And I said, how can I possibly stand in the pulpit and preach to these fine people
about a renewal of faith with I'm so in need of renewal myself?

And my friend said, well, that question pretty much answers itself, doesn't it?

You start there. Start by modeling that you, yourself, are sometimes in need.

This is real stuff.

I yearn, and I know that you do too.

We yearn for renewal.

We've all had those dried cardboard moments, haven't we?

Feeling stretched too thin?

No more tears to fall, because we've used them all up?

Frustrated by the injustice of the world and despairing about how to fix it?

Feeling sad because miracles don't happen anymore?

We've been there, haven't we?

Yearning. And we stretch for a language of that yearning, that longing for renewal.

And, because we are Unitarian Universalists,
because we know that language points to the mystery, but isn't it,
because we are suspicious of creeds and easy answers,
this is complicated for us.

Some folks sing, "God, fill me up" - and we UU's, well, some of us can say that,
but only after we clarify what we mean and don't mean by God.

And others of us can't say that at all, are repelled by the concept,
like the woman Rev. Hallman described, who was revived by her horror of the idea of prayer.

We know that language has power,
and so some of us are hesitant to use traditional religious language,
because we don't want to carry a suitcase full of history with us,
when we get down on our knees and plead for renewal.

We just yearn.

We want to be healed by some ancient ministry of stars,
but language is tricky.

For a long time we just avoided the subject all together.

We didn't talk about it; or, we spoke about it in psychological terms -
and not spiritual ones.

We spoke about justice, but less about how to cultivate the spiritual resources
necessary to stay at the work over the long haul,
when things didn't go according to plan.

Do they ever?

Sometimes we even dismissed this yearning as juvenile,
something we had grown out of.

But that began to change a while ago.

Partly, it was women like Carolyn McDade, and others,
who gathered to offer each other healing and comfort and solidarity,
who expressed their yearning for the spirit of life,
lived in community with one another.

They kept their language open-ended, and focused on the heart.

Others among us resurrected the old Universalist story,
of a God of love and mercy, for all people everywhere,
that we were loved without needing to be perfect.

As the culture has become more secular,
the folks who come now to church don't come for psychology -
there's plenty of therapists to choose from, after all -
they come for something deeper, something . . . dare we say, religious.
Spiritual at least.

And some 10 years ago, then then President of the Unitarian Universalist Association
said we needed a "language of reverence."

He, Bill Sinkford, talked about his own long night in the hospital with his son,
and how he reached for that language of yearning, and prayed,
open-ended with language, but prayer, to God, without apology.

And was, by the speaking of the yearning his heart,
by that very act, renewed.

And he encouraged us, whatever our understanding of the holy, the sacred, the ultimate,
to cultivate a language of reverence,
a sense of mystery, humility, wonder, and hope,
in how we spoke about and experienced our lives.

A language of poetry.

And there was a huge controversy at the time;
folks thought he was saying we all had to say God,
but that's not what he meant.

And when things settled down,
it began to happen.

Naturalistic atheists spoke about the sense of wonder and awe and community they felt
when they stood upon the shore, under the stars,
how each pond with its blazing lilies is a prayer heard and answered lavishly, every morning,
whether or not you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not you have ever dared to pray.

The theists among us spoke of the love of God,
how they prayed and yearned and felt that presence in their heart.

Unitarian Universalists who were following the paths of Buddhism, Paganism, the Sufi tradition,
and other wisdom ways of being in the world,
all began to speak about their own languages of reverence;
their yearnings for wholeness and healing and hope,
their feeling of being dried cardboard, sometimes,
and needing the spirit of life - however understood -
to come unto them.

And folks spoke about when they did feel that renewal of faith.
When they gazed upon infinity and heard the waters roar.
When we felt an inner flame that fiercely burned our tears,
and rose from bended knee to meet the asking years.

I've been feeling like dried cardboard,
But I know that renewal will come.

In time; you can't force it.

I know some of the things I need to do to set the stage;
reaching out to friends, that's one of them.

I was deeply renewed by the spirit journey group facilitators meeting Thursday night:
people shared deeply, their hunger for the better life,
Singing, that's essential. I've got to sing.

I need to take sabbaths. A day off.

I haven't in a while, because of things that keep coming up,
and that's not good practice. It's really important,
for everyone, to have that quiet, sabbath time,
because in the midst of a life that's as complicated as everyone else's
when time is running down and urging us on,
we need to take off our watches -

put away our phones -

and lie on the hammock,

time out of time,

and let the taking of sabbath time renew us.

And, as part of that, perhaps, or other time,

we need to get out into nature, that always helps -

like Shiraz said in her chalice lighting,

this place, water, sky, earth, this is so often where and how we are renewed for the journey,
as Wendell Berry said,

when despair for the world grows in me,

I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty
on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things,

the presence of still water,

for a time I rest in the grace of the world,

and am free.

And I need to pray.

To express my yearning, in the language of poetry and metaphor.

And in time, renewal of the spirit, renewal of faith, will come.

And it was this kind of thing that we Unitarian Universalists began to talk about.

Our yearning, our experiences of renewal.

And we spoke in a vocabulary of reverence.

And because we are committed to theological and spiritual pluralism,

because we are committed, as a matter of integrity,

to the idea that there are many ways to approach and express meaning,

and each of them has something worthy to say,

and none is complete,

because of that,

as we spoke of this yearning, this renewal,

this sense of hope,

we did something remarkable.

We created for ourselves a new theology of incarnation.

A spirituality of immanence.

I don't know how to describe it, the narrator of our story said,

but it went from being here to being everywhere.

It wasn't just part of me anymore . . . it was now a part of everything.

We went from a time when holy water was rare at best,

to a time when we had to hold our breath,

for we were swimming in a sea of it.

It used to be a world half-there

Heaven's second rate hand-me-down,
but we walk it with a reverent air
Cause everything is holy now.

I play a video of Peter Mayer singing this song
at every new member class.

Thank you, Ron, for singing it today.

I want you to know that this is our theology.

This sense of how everything that is reveals, shows,
is a sacrament - a visible sign in the world -
of the holy, the wonder of being and living.

It's not about God or not God, I want you to hear that clearly.

It's about a wide-open language of reverence.

A sense of awe, a sense of oh, my, wow.

That we do yearn, we seek, we long,
to be connected and renewed and inspired -
and it's right there.

The holy isn't gone from the world, its everywhere
miracles happen every moment,
if we open our hearts and minds -
our friends, music, sabbath time, nature, poetry -
these things are each a sacrament,
a visible sign of the holy in the world.

Each one.

Everything is holy now.

I know there are moments that don't feel like that.

And suffering, and pain, and injustice, is real.

But even in these places there is holiness, there is compassion, and solidarity,
and mercy, and truth, truth is,
even weeping is a sacrament,
an incarnation of what is more than this.

What I'm trying to show you today is that the journey of Unitarian Universalism:
to renew our sense of faith, our use of poetic, spiritual language,
open-ended metaphors,
to develop habits like sabbath, and prayer, and to sing together with gusto,
to have reverence;
this journey is the wider manifestation of the individual journey:
it's the journey I've made before and will, I trust, make again.
It's the journey Bill Sinkford made from his son's hospital room to the pulpit.
It's the journey Carolyn McDade made from the meeting about central america to the piano.
It's the journey I've seen so many of you make in your own lives,
from a place of trouble, sorrow, to a place of hope, solace, and peace,
from dried cardboard to living water.
Each spring, we celebrate renewal, as life comes back;
but I want you to know that you can be renewed in the fall, too,
you can enter sabbath, and reach out to one another,
and read some good poetry,
and pray, if you want to,
and walk in the woods, and see the red and orange and yellow,
and the still water, and the running water,
and be renewed.
Open yourself to be renewed,
open your heart to all that is holy everywhere, every-now,
open your self to life and love,

even in your sorrow and grief, your fear and pain,
for this too shall pass,
and life is a gift, not a project,
and the holy is there, is now, however you see it and feel it and name it,
right there,
so trust, it will come,
the renewal of spirit, of faith, of life,
in time,
open yourself and prepare for it,
it will come.

And when it does,
rejoice, and be glad, and share your good news in this world,
which needs evermore to be renewed as well,
just as it is in our own lives.

May it be so, and may we be held
in the embrace of what is beyond our names,
and yet, yearned for, and felt, in our hearts.

And let us sing.