

You Matter

A sermon given by Joanne Giannino
at the First Universalist Society in Franklin, Massachusetts
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You Matter

How many of you dream at night? How many remember your dreams?
Do you find them useful? Confusing? Amusing? Instructive?

I had a dream Monday morning.

I was waiting to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee,
the committee that interviews prospective UU ministers
before they can be ordained.

(My real appointment is this coming fall.)

In the dream, I walk into a dark-paneled room,
It is softly lit by sunlight reflecting warmly on the wood,
there must be a window,

The committee tells me that they are giving me three more hours to get ready.

I feel ready but say ok, thank you and I turn to walk out of the room.

A man bends over in his chair and whispers to me, I love you.

I am surprised by his comment, and think to myself

“we have got to stop meeting like this.”

I go into the waiting area and when I return three hours later

I realize that I am ready for the committee’s questions

but I do not have a sermon to preach. I had forgotten about the sermon.

Oh, well, I think, I’ll wing it.

I’ve been thinking about why I don’t do much art anymore,
how my ministry has changed since I’ve been in seminary,
so I’ll just start there.

The chalice is ready. I stand behind the pulpit. I wake up.

I woke up thinking, oh, I do have a sermon to write.

This one, for today. I had better get started.

And so my Monday began. I did my usual weekday things,

got my youngest son off to school;

did my spiritual practice of prayer, reading and silence;

and began slogging through the books I had been reading

on coming of age in religious community (in honor of our youth.)

I had already written some things of my own,

but began my usual gathering of learned quotes from learned scholars like

Parker Palmer, Judith Duerk, James Fowler, Paul Rasor...

(some of you know these writers?)

But by 1 p.m. my fingers ached and still no sermon.

What am I trying to say? I asked myself. I don’t know yet. Trust the process.

So, I took a break; made the bed, had a snack.

Then I remembered my dream.

What did it mean? Could it have anything to do with this sermon?

or was it just anxiety over my readiness to be a minister –

in time, by the fall, in front of a committee of real ministers,

real scholars, real preachers, real Unitarian Universalists?
The man bent down and said to me: "I love you."
I love you. Why did he say that? Why now?
Well, I realize that
as I have been watching this amazing process of coming of age
unfold here at FUSF,
and as I have been a part of the process of working with these young people,
these young people, who are so eloquent about who they are
and appear to have such confidence in themselves,
that I am grieving something the religious community of my childhood and youth
did not give to me.
No one said, this is an important time in your life,
a formative time and we are here to help you figure out who you are,
what you are made of, what makes you come alive,
what gives your life meaning and what you might do with your gifts.
No one said, this is our religious tradition, the history of our movement,
and you are now a part of this movement,
your ideas matter, we welcome your ideas
and we look forward to seeing how the gift of your presence
changes who we are.
No one said, we affirm your inherent dignity and worth
and you are a vital part of the interdependent web of all existence. You matter.

And that my friends is what Unitarian Universalism says to its children and youth,
to its young adults, to its adults and elders,
to those who were born here,
moved here, and/or joined here at any age.

My dear spiritual friends, it matters into which community we are born.
It matters in which religious home our parents choose to raise us.
It matters in which faith we choose to commit our lives
when we are old enough to make those decisions on our own.

In the dream, I said, I was ready to meet the committee,
I was ready to answer their questions but I didn't have a sermon to preach.
I had forgotten about the sermon.

A few years ago, when I was a Director of Religious Education
and a relatively new but committed UU religious educator,
I told a close friend, I said,
if I ever say I want to be a parish minister, just shoot me.
I could never be...But it was only a few years later
that I felt myself called to deepen my commitment to our faith.
I entered seminary and then there I was saying I would become a minister.
And now five years later I am just about to meet with the MFC.
I am ready for their questions about UU history,
religious education, congregational polity,

and even my own spiritual practice.
But I forgot about the sermon.
I love you, he said. We have to stop meeting like this.

Like many of our coming of age youth, I am at a crossroads in my life.
Making a learned, even developmental transition,
coming into who I was born to be,
coming into my own voice,
writing and giving the sermon...

Our coming of age youth have spent the last year
intently working towards making and marking a transition
from childhood to young adulthood within this religious home.

Now they have special knowledge of UU history and theology,
Now they are prepared with the experience of putting hands to work
in service to others,

And now they have a deepening understanding of themselves,
through the process of asking with the support of those around them:
who am I?
what gives meaning to my life?
who is it that I was born to be?

They stand ready before us today and over the coming weeks
to be seen and recognized for who they have become so far,
And we stand (or sit) before them to see who we have and will become
because of their coming of age here, with us,
as we are interdependently connected to each other and all of creation.

Each of us come here with something special to offer.
We are called to come. Our gifts awaited for.
And when we arrive, if our native gifts are nourished and respected,
and we have the chance to become our full selves,
our community changes because of us,
and then we are changed, and then we change the group again,
and so on and so on,
each nurturing the other,
self and group in a dance of becoming.

Not all of us had that growing up,
but once we found such a place, we knew we were home.
Some of you are so lucky to have been born here – to have come early!
Know that. Cherish that.

Tuesday morning I heard the cat scratch at the bedroom door.
My husband Russell got up to let him out.
These thoughts came to me.
The integrity of the church called Unitarian Universalism
depends on nurturing the fullness of the individuals who make up its whole.

Our third principle says that we – Unitarian Universalists –
support each other on our spiritual journeys.

We are not isolated beings.

We are individuals embedded in a particular religious culture that chooses
to honor the gifts born in each of us.

The seven principles are no random set of beliefs –

The principles themselves are inherently connected, interdependent
and deeply spiritual statements of our own deeply theological faith.
A deep faith with a long and distinguished history.

Carol (our parish minister) said, last Sunday at a newcomer orientation
for a couple of our newest friends,

She said that Unitarian Universalism is a non credal and non dogmatic faith
with a deeply theological name –

Unitarianism – God is one

Universalism – God is a loving God who delights in the children of creation

I love you

We have got to stop meeting like this

There is a deep abiding love for each of us –

often becoming evident in ways we never dreamed possible in our waking hours –

often becoming evident when we are at a crossroads –

surveying where we come from, asking who am I?

what am I to do with my life? What are my gifts? –

often becoming evident at times when we are confused

and wish we were more prepared for this experience called life –

There is a deep abiding love for each of us – in this fellowship where we are formed

Where our unique native gifts are welcomed, even waited for –

We are so glad you are here

We can't wait to find out who we become because you have arrived!

Amen.