

## To Make or Declare Holy

by Scott W. Kasmire

*[This was part of a Sunday worship service delivered via remote meeting software for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula in Newport News, Virginia. The temporal context is the Sunday morning immediately after a mass shooting in Rochester, New York, and the death of US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.]*

So, take a deep breath with me.

The world and national events we've been experiencing this year are calamitous. The news provides a constant feed of anxiety — and not minor anxiety. Existential anxiety. We watch with clenched teeth as all the comforting certainties of stability come crashing down or become systematically dismantled one by one. It's a visceral tension -- we can feel the tightness in our chests as we worry over what the coming months, and years might bring.

What should we do?

Over the past several weeks, I've been on a book buying spree. Confucian and Daoist philosophical texts, some classical poetry and literature, but mostly Buddhist scriptures. I now have a whole bookshelf filled with sutras waiting to be read. I think it might be my subconscious telling me something: That I'm suffering, and I'm looking for a way to extinguish that suffering.

But the truth is, I'm no Buddhist. For more almost 24 years, fully half the days I've been alive, I've been a Unitarian Universalist. I address you today as someone who fully and thoroughly identifies with our shared religious values — and who has done so for many years.

So what should we do?

Allow me to tell you a story, and read the sermon that I wrote for you. I wrote it in this same time of world anxiety, and I hope you'll find the message useful.

So, let me take you away from the anxieties of the present, back about 40 years to what at least seemed to *me* like a simpler time. I was a child living with my family in a smallish town in Northwest Connecticut.

And I was the most religious person in my family. As a seven-year-old, I took Roman Catholicism very seriously while my parents and siblings looked on with varying degrees of bewilderment. Of the four of them, only my mother was Catholic — on holidays.

Looking back I suspect she sent me to Catholic catechism on Wednesdays after school less out of concern for my spiritual well-being so much as to get me out of her hair. After all, since many of the second-graders in my school walked together from the school directly to St. Anthony's of Padua — with only a brief stop at Murphy's Drug store candy counter en route — my mother didn't even have to worry about getting me there on time. My subsequent devotion to the Holy Trinity and Mother Mary was at best an unanticipated side effect.

And I was *devout*. I dragged my mother to church as often as she'd go. And at Easter time, I was a particular nuisance. It's an entire Holy Week, you see, starting with Palm Sunday and going right on through! There were church services every day! But my mother drew the line: Only Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday — but she did work something out with our neighbors who took me for Holy Saturday.

I don't know why I took so strongly to religion amidst a family whose primary concerns seemed to lay elsewhere. But those who know me now as an adult might observe I haven't changed much. Granted, the Roman Catholic Church lost me in the eighth grade — my only year of Catholic school, not so incidentally.

But my proclivity for a religious approach to life has always remained with me. So at age twenty-three, when I first “signed the book” at a Unitarian Universalist church in Florida, it was with the intention that I would be as *good* a Unitarian Universalist as I had once been a *good Catholic*. That is to say, “devout”.

You don't hear that word, “devout”, associated with Unitarian Universalism very often. Think about the feelings and images brought to mind upon hearing the phrase “devout Muslim”, or “devout Christian”, or “devout Buddhist”. We seem to associate religious devotion with deeply held positions

on theology. Since Unitarian Universalism declines to impose a theological creed, perhaps we don't think the idea of "devotion" applies to our faith. Some don't even allow that the word "faith" applies to our faith. Though I acknowledge in recent years some of our resistance to traditional religious language has been softening.

We are living through an interesting time in Unitarian Universalist history, and it tracks the changing times in world history. I spoke earlier of how keeping up with the news seems more anxiety filled in recent years than it has in decades past; but recent Unitarian Universalism has helped open my eyes to the possibility that my white privilege is showing.

Though I never would before, I now sometimes take "sabbaticals from the news" just in order to maintain some emotional balance. But I now see that being able to do that is *itself* an expression of my privilege. And the fact that I now *know* that, and that others among us now know that too, is evidence that these new messages of these recent times are at least *beginning* to get through to us. But if it wasn't part of my religion, I wonder how much I would be changing on my own.

Consider, as further illustration, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the recent report from the Commission on Institutional Change called "Widening the Circle of Concern". It is the latest report on the extent of white supremacy culture within our religion. I say, "latest", because there have been other reports of this type over the past decades.

But this time it feels like people are being somewhat more receptive to the idea that real institutional change requires many systemic changes, which in turn boil down to personal changes. I know the leadership at UUFP is choosing to face that reality. And various groups within the congregation are working on programs to help people build the emotional and spiritual skills to grow into this new world and to live into covenant more successfully.

It's almost as if we're looking at our own faith development with more urgency in response to these interesting times. UUA Southern Region co-lead Connie Goodbread is fond of saying, "Faith development is all we do; Unitarian Universalism is what we teach; and the congregation is the curriculum". She means *us*, of course, not the Southern Region staff. Faith development is all *we* do.

That may come as quite the surprise, especially if you are used to more of a "New England Society of Unitarian Universalists" model. But this more religious approach is indeed firmly rooted in our history.

Our white, racist, Puritan forebears also had faith development on their minds. Beginning with Martin Luther, the Protestant idea was to eliminate the two-tier system of religious life. That is to say, there were those folks who led a consecrated life — priests, nuns, and monks — and then there was the rest of us.

For Puritan Calvinists who rejected the idea of salvation by deeds — or more to the point, a rejection of the idea of salvation by religious lifestyle — this two-tier system made no sense, and was corrupt anyway.

But in the Puritans, we shouldn't see this as the abolition of the priestly class. Rather it was the forced *elevation* of everyone else: Making *everyone* live a consecrated life. In a sense, “faith development” is all *they* did too.

Echoes of those Puritan impulses still reverberate in 21st Century Unitarian Universalism. Think about what we are starting to ask of our members in these troubled times:

To live in a covenanted relationship, where we center the needs of the marginalized; where we train ourselves in skills like compassionate communication, conflict competency, self-differentiation, multicultural sensibilities; where we learn the skills and competencies of being intentionally welcoming of people of different races, sexualities, gender identities, and differing physical and neurological profiles.

That's quite a set of religious curricula, and I haven't even named the half of it! To get a real handle on all of this faith development work would take a lifetime of, well... ..devotion.

But what about everything else we do? What counts as “devout”? When you march up to our Fellowship grounds, with a smile on your face, a spring in your step, and a vegan-mushroom casserole clutched in your hands, is there a sense that you are changing the world? Would you call it an act of *religious devotion*? Would you consider yourself living a *consecrated life*?

The word “consecrate” often means “to make or declare holy”. So what, then, would a consecrated life look like for a 21st Century Unitarian Universalist dealing with, say, the year 2020?

One thing is for certain: To consecrate a life, UU's don't become ordained under holy orders with vows of poverty and celibacy. Rather if we want to live a consecrated life, we would do so only by the conscious choices we make every day; by making every act — from mulching our yards to paying for groceries — an act that accords with our faith and our highest values. And yes, that especially includes our intimate lives.

To put it another way, that means being the best available version of our selves every day, everywhere — not just while we're at the potluck or attending a service. Is that what 2020 is calling us to do? It sounds downright Puritanical... and, frankly, no fun at all. But I've been trying it over the last little while, and those times I feel I'm being somewhat successful, I actually have been having fun.

I think that's because the idea pointedly *isn't* that we engage in the exhausting non-stop stressful work of constant “political correctness” and “walking on eggshells” lest we offend someone and thereby become shamed. No. That's not what 2020 is calling us to do. We can safely leave those scarlet letters to our checkered history.

In fact, we're learning to reject that culture of perfection and embrace in its place healthier cultures of self-differentiation and covenant — cultures that allow us to breathe, learn, and grow together.

Self-differentiation is really only self-love. It's about having a strong sense of who you are, having healthy boundaries, and being brave enough to be true to your own code — even when that's socially difficult.

And covenant is about community love: Making promises, doing our best to keep them, and holding ourselves and each other accountable when we fall short. And we *have* fallen short, and we will fall short again, in both self-differentiation and covenant.

But when that inevitably happens, we don't blame and shame. We instead take a breath, look at ourselves with unflinching honesty, and then proceed again, with gentle mercy: Indeed as we move haltingly forward on the path of bravely learning to more fully live our values, as long as we are unflinchingly honest with ourselves, we can also be mercifully gentle with ourselves. But it's that honesty that is the essential prerequisite: One definition of accountability is being honest about how our choices make their impacts, and using that honesty to choose wisely as we impact the future together. That's really all religious devotion can ever call on us to do, no matter what the year.

And it should never be exhausting. When we're doing it right, it's exhilarating, and living into a shared joy, even now: Knowing that as you engage in this ongoing faith development within Unitarian Universalism, or if you prefer, as you further consecrate your life, what you are actually doing is increasing the freedom for each of us to *simply be* — in a community that values your simply being, just as you are now.

And together, inch by uncertain inch, we widen that circle of freedom and joy to include those who never knew us before, and who never could *simply be* before. It is not the Puritan call to a life of unending toil, but rather an invitation to a life of shared fulfillment.

And that maybe sounds all a bit *religious* to you. And we've been burned before by religious sounding words and promises. Some of us have tried before, perhaps in other times or places, to be devout. You might have found the consecrated life to be a sham, or a waste of good years.

But in this moment in our Unitarian Universalist experience we're not worried about other-worldly promises or rewards in the far future. We offer no theological or creedal catechisms on Wednesdays after school.

What we offer instead is a joyous shared reality right now: In this world — even today. We don't have to wait for the Second Coming, the attainment of the Buddhist Awakening, or even the next presidential administration to start living into beauty.

What's required of us in this moment, is only that *we choose it* — with self-love, community love, and being mindful of the impacts of our choices. That's how, in spite of 2020, the Beloved Community indeed begins this very morning — with your simple act of religious devotion.

Because *that's* what we should do.