

“The Meeting of Our Truest Selves”
by Scott Gerard Prinster
January 27-28, 2007

Opening Words “Salvation” by Lynn Ungar

By what are you saved, and how?
Saved like a bit of string,
tucked away in a drawer?
Saved like a child rushed from
a burning building, already
singed and coughing smoke?
Or are you salvaged
like a car part -- the one good door
when the rest is wrecked?

Do you believe me when I say
you are neither salvaged nor saved,
but salved, anointed by gentle hands
where you are most tender?
Haven't you seen
the way snow curls down
like a fresh sheet, how it
covers everything, makes everything
beautiful, without exception?

Intergenerational Story

Once upon a time (for all really good stories begin that way), there was a clever young woman named Theodora. Theodora lived in a small village far away, and she raised chickens and sold the eggs, along with herbs she gathered in the nearby forest. She was very well-liked by the people in her village, but Theodora had a secret. She owned a magic mirror.

How did she get a magic mirror, you ask? Well, she had been in the town square, selling the last few of her eggs, when she passed by a very interesting sight. There was a man with a long white beard standing by a table of toys and other unusual things, and Theodora couldn't remember ever having seen him before, and she knew everyone in the village.

“How about something special, young lady?” the man asked her. Well, Theodora didn't really need anything in her life -- she made just enough money for food and firewood and an occasional bit of material to make clothes. But the man's display certainly was... *interesting*.

He showed her a coin you could flip that would disappear in mid-air, and reappear in your left pocket. He showed her tiny seeds that you could pour wine over, which would turn them into

tiny pet dragons, lasting for an hour and then disappearing in a puff of smoke. Very interesting things!

“But what’s this?” she asked, picking up what looked like an ordinary hand mirror. Theodora had seen mirrors before, although they were still quite rare, because only two people in her village knew how to make glass and put silver on the back of it. “Just a mirror... not as interesting as your other playthings, good sir.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” he agreed. “But who couldn’t use a nice mirror these days, hmm?” But Theodora noticed that it was starting to get dark, and she needed to return home and check on her chickens. She said goodbye to the man, and went her way.

But as she walked home, and as she fed the chickens and locked them up for the night, and as she fixed herself a bit of soup and bread for dinner, she kept thinking about that mirror. How funny! Theodora never wasted her time worrying about whether she was pretty enough or whether her hair was combed straight. But all week long it seemed that the mirror was all she could think of.

Well, unbeknownst to Theodora, that man was an evil wizard, and it was an evil magic mirror, too! If only she had known! But next week, when time came to go to the market, Theodora took the money she had been saving to buy some extra chickens next year, and she went and bought that mirror. She was so excited that she didn’t even notice what a scary smile the wizard had as she walked home with it.

As the days went by, Theodora spent more and more of her time looking in that mirror. That wasn’t like her at all! Usually she was very sensible and paid attention to keeping her roof from leaking and the foxes from eating her chickens. But it seemed like that mirror was all she could think of. And, strangely, every time she looked in it, she felt more unhappy about the way she looked. Her hair, which she had always thought was just fine, seemed very dull when she looked in the mirror. So she went back to the wizard the next week, and asked him, “Good sir, since you have so many marvelous things, I wonder if you have anything to make my hair as golden as it used to be. Well, it turned out that the wizard *did* have a potion to brighten her hair, and so she gave him the money she had saved to put new tiles on her roof. And the next week, she returned in the hope that he could make her nose a little less long, and sold her best hens to pay for that special potion. Theodora came back week after week, selling everything she owned, until it was just her left in her empty house. She hadn’t seen any of her friends in months, because she only wanted to look in the mirror, and she had sold everything to buy potions to fix what looked wrong when she looked in the mirror.

Finally, she was reduced to selling her beautiful mirror so that she could buy a magic stone to make her teeth whiter. As soon as the wizard took back the magical mirror, it was like a spell had been broken... because it had! Theodora realized then that all of his potions were just lies, and that the mirror had lied to her, too -- it had only showed one side of who she was. It didn’t show how smart she was, or how fast she could run, or how clever she was at finding herbs. All it had done was to make her unhappy and sell everything to try to find happiness. But as soon as she was back with her friends, and when she went to visit her family in the next village over, she realized that there was nothing wrong with her at all! In fact, the people who loved her were the

best mirror there was, because they all knew exactly what a wonderful person she was. And you know, she never saw that evil wizard again, and to him we say, good riddance.

Reading adapted from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson

“When did you last see your mother?” someone asked me. Someone who was walking with me in the city. I didn’t want to tell her; I thought in this city, a past was precisely that. Past. Why do I have to remember?

“Don’t you ever think of going back?”

Silly question. There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back. I’m always thinking of going back. When Lot’s wife looked over her shoulder, she turned into a pillar of salt. Pillars hold things up, and salt keeps things clean, but it’s a poor exchange for losing your self.

“When did you last see your mother?” I don’t know how to answer.

The wind blew, and my shoes got darker and damp as I slithered past the town hall, Christmas pine radiant, crib courtesy of the Salvation Army. It had begun to snow again as I reached the bottom of our long stretchy street. I wished I’d brought gloves. The last few flags and suddenly I’m outside my front door again. The parlour has a leaded window, so no one can see inside properly. I can see shapes though, and I can hear what sounds like *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*; it sounds like it, but in the background there is the distinct rhythm of a samba. In the parlour I find my mother sitting in front of what is best described as a contraption. More interestingly, she is playing it.

“Hello, Mum, it’s me.” I put down my bag and waited. “What have you done with the piano?”

“Oh, I’ve gone all electronic now. I like to keep up with the world.”

I went over to inspect the contraption. It was enormous, with a great flourish of a music stand on the top. There were two keyboards, and a row of different coloured knobs and buttons, with things like “Spinnet” and “Xylophone” printed on them.

“Listen to this spinnet,” my mother commanded, and tinkled out the first verse of *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*.

“It’s very atmospheric,” I had to admit.

“Oh, it’s more than that, I’ll show you.” And for the next half-hour she demonstrated the contraption. *We Three Kings* with and without snare, *We Three Kings* with and without flugel horn and bass ensemble.

My mother was treating me like she always had; had she noticed my absence? Did she even remember why I'd left? There's a chance that I'm not here at all, that all the parts of me, running along all the choices I did and didn't make, for a moment brush against each other.

Families, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own; she had a thread tied around my button, to tug when she pleased.

Reflections

Come, whoever you are, to this community of welcome and wisdom. Come, wanderers, hungry to craft your life into a journey of meaning. Come, lovers of leaving, weary of a life lacking intimacy. Turn away from the paths of meaninglessness and despair. Come, yet again, come. The hymn we just sang (*Come, Come, Whoever You Are*), written by my colleague the Rev. Lynn Ungar, uses the words of Sufi poet Rumi to call us together as a people who are cultivating a special kind of relationship with one another.

Four and a half years ago, in my first sermon to this congregation, I spoke about the importance of reinvigorating American culture with authentic relationships and about the value of our then-rather-new Chalice Group program. Now, looking at my next few months as I transition from this ministry to my doctoral studies in religion and science at the University of Wisconsin, it seems appropriate to bookend our years together with what I believe is the most important message I have to share.

We live in a culture where relationships have become disposable, and I want to speak with you this morning about sustaining connections that don't simply dissolve when the going gets tough. One example that comes to mind is the relationship between minister and congregation. At some point, it becomes clear to every congregation that the minister they called, who perhaps looked so good on paper and seemed to hold so much promise, is in fact not quite perfect. In the same way, every minister realizes that the congregation he or she is leading is also less than perfect, and both have to come to terms with their disappointment and make their peace with what is actually possible between a completely human congregation and their completely human minister. It's a good lesson in what relationships must look like if they are to survive in the real world, and this lesson was one of the most vivid memories from my ministerial training. One of my internship supervisors in Cleveland, the Rev. Midge Skwire, told me about the rewards of being in sustained relationship with that congregation: to look out at their faces each weekend and know the joys and burdens that each of them was carrying in their hearts, to know how each of them would respond to the sermon she was sharing with them. On the next Sunday, I looked out at that congregation with new eyes and was shaken by the raw truth of her insight. I knew whose marriage was unraveling, who kept a secret bottle in their glove compartment, who was carrying the weight of deep shame, who had just come back from their oncologist with a clean bill of health, and so on. They had shared these things with me freely, as their student minister, *despite* my clumsy, imperfect work with them, and the significance of that trust hung between us each week and gave real meaning to all that we did together.

Just as that congregation had trusted me with the precious weight of their lives, I want to thank you for trusting me with yours. There is nothing a minister wishes for more than to spend our years with a congregation who lets themselves be known, warts and all, and stands by their minister, warts and all. As easy as it is to let disappointment move us to give up on each imperfect person and each flawed community, I believe that the success and health of this congregation has been due to your willingness to stick by it and its leadership, even when the sailing is not smooth nor the weather perfect. I want to say more about one type of robust and lasting connections, which I call *covenantal relationships*.

I had the pleasure of speaking at West High School last week in both sections of their “Bible as Literature” course. Each year that I do this, the students express considerable curiosity about Unitarian Universalism, because it’s clear that there’s something distinctive about this movement, a way of doing things that is different from their conventional understanding of dogmatic religion. Especially because this weekend we are welcoming people signing our membership book, I think it’s worth repeating what I told those students about who we are.

Rather than being a creedal movement, which is generally how Christian communities are constituted, Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal movement. That is, instead of gathering around a set of shared beliefs that each member must profess, Unitarian Universalists are a *theologically diverse* community held together by our promises to one another. In a culture where seekers look for a new religious community as a shopping experience, trying to find one that “fits” who we are, the idea of a covenantal community is an unfamiliar one, but it’s a distinction I want to make sure we understand. When we discuss religion starting with what we believe, we immediately draw a line in the sand that implies that you must be on this side of it, or that side of it. Even worse, when we describe ourselves only by how we disagree with mainstream religion, we’re doing the same thing but letting someone else choose where to draw the line. Rather than approaching Unitarian Universalism with *beliefs* in mind, my colleague the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley wisely suggests that we choose as our starting point an entirely different set of concepts, values like *trust, fidelity, promise, integrity, and love*. Rather than being forced upon us from above like a set of rules, we each covenant freely to walk together in honesty and kindness. This is the nature of the power binding us together – not the authority of a deity or a priest, but the loyalty of each one of us who ties the threads of our hearts to a community of people as imperfect as we are. And, because a perfect fit is never what it was about, these ties survive even as the community evolves, even when the community disappoints us. And the converse is also true: at least as important a truth about covenantal community is that its devotion *to us* continues as *we* evolve, even when *we* stumble. Thinking back to the hymn *Come, Come, Whoever You Are*, I want to note the line from Rumi’s poem that didn’t make it into the lyrics:

Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come.

Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come.

Though sometimes you feel like all you’re bringing to this place is broken goods, though the heart you share with these people is bruised and straining, come, yet again, come.

Though you’ve failed continually in your striving, come, yet again, come.

Though you've been hurt and find it hard to trust, come, yet again, come.

Though you cannot believe in your own goodness and preciousness, come, yet again, come.

You will receive from these people what you are willing to entrust them. Come back to this circle again, and yet again.

These sentiments may sound like platitudes because we have so little experience with loyal, authentic relationships, and it's hard to believe that this kind of faithfulness is even possible. The news is filled with celebrities trading spouses with alarming regularity. Corporations betray their employees' decades of faithful work. Elected leaders brazenly lie to their constituencies, and show no embarrassment when caught in their crimes. Even our religious institutions, supposedly devoted to the highest of ideals, reveal their loyalties to be secondary to protecting their priests and their profits.

Last month, I preached about how the decisions we make often spin out into unintended consequences. One of the examples I decided to save for this sermon is of the unintended consequences of individual freedom. For centuries, Unitarians and Universalists have upheld the worth and dignity of the individual against the forces of the Church, of the collective, of the state, that threaten to stifle us, homogenize us, or dehumanize us. The value and freedom of the individual has been one of the most important ideas we have cultivated as a movement. It has also been one of the most *dangerous* ideas we have ever considered, and some of its repercussions have been disastrous. In our Intergenerational Story you heard about a magical mirror that only showed us one side of ourselves, and the danger of coming to believe that this one dimension was the whole truth. We have become so accustomed to thinking of ourselves as individuals first that we can scarcely imagine anything but this one dimension of our identity. In matters economic, political, religious and cultural, we consider the individual the most basic truth about who we are, and try in vain to craft all our other identities out of this one kind of building block.

Combining this view of humanity with a consumerist economy has resulted in a web of relationships devoted entirely to ever-greater individual consumption and personal satisfaction. But when we've gotten what we craved and are still hungry, when we live in security and comfort and still chafe, when we have access to so much that our ancestors would have considered unimaginable, and we are still restless, what else are we to pursue? A culture of profit, convenience and expediency renders it nearly inevitable that individualism will become narcissism, and more of the same is not the answer. As tempting as it constantly is to numb ourselves with further consumption, a surge of *greater* individual satisfaction and pleasure is not the antidote to radical estrangement. What we hunger for is to hear a story about ourselves different from the one of untrammelled self-interest. What we long for is to be returned to our truest selves.

Being in covenantal relationship is part of what made it possible for humanity to organize ourselves into what we know as civilization, and I believe that it will be this sort of relationship helping us to survive our culture's descent into unabashed self-interest. Historically, covenants

made possible a level of trust and loyalty among people not joined as family or tribe. Instead of devoting ourselves only to those who shared our genetic identity, we gave expression to our rational, curious nature in a web of growing mutual commitments. Out of this fidelity religion became possible; rather than looking out only for ourselves and our own, we broadened radically the circle of kinship to those who exchanged promises with us. Although many of us no longer trust religion as a positive force, I want to underscore that modern Christianity's emphasis on dogma is a *departure* from the covenantal communities of its origins, and that the use of belief as a litmus test was ironically fueled in part by our own religious ancestors' determined efforts to hold up the individual. Again, we are faced with so few examples of relationships that are *not* about individual satisfaction that we can scarcely imagine an alternative. What reassures us that we will not be exploited when we bear our soft spots in a place like this? What reassures us that our contributions will be welcomed gratefully and used responsibly? What reassures us that our efforts at creating an accountable community will be returned in kind? So much is out of immediate control in our lives, but how we promise ourselves to one another and the world is something we *can* commit ourselves to.

My experience of First Unitarian Society is that it has become a very different place in the five years that I've been with you, and I credit much of that transformation to the success of our Chalice Group program. Not only has this small group ministry allowed us to create many more genuine, intimate connections within a very large congregation, it has also given us a different way to understand how we might come together. The members of our Chalice Groups experience trust and respect, participate in deep listening and authentic sharing, and collaborate in service to this community and to the larger world. We hold ourselves and one another accountable to the promises we have made, and make a change in our agreements when we agree that a change is needed.

This issue of evolving together is worth exploring for a moment, because it would be easy to misunderstand me as saying that covenant means *staying in relationship at all costs*. There are times when the nature of a relationship is part of the problem, and we have to step back and take a broader view. There are times when our loyalty to a higher value moves us to dissolve one of our connections, and discerning this necessity is one of the most painful tasks of our lives. Authors Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat recall a scene from the 1981 movie *The First Monday in October* in which a Supreme Court judge arrives home to find his wife packing her things to leave him: She complains that although he is not a bad man, he simply doesn't see her, doesn't feel her emotional needs. He pleads for another chance. She finally pauses and asks him to close his eyes. She tells him that she will not divorce him if he can describe the wallpaper in their bedroom that they have occupied for twenty-five years. He can't, and she leaves.

In a similar way, a woman in the congregation I previously served told me about the years she had spent exploring feminism and establishing herself as a university professor. After all that time and accomplishment, her husband finally confessed that it felt like she had broken the covenant of their marriage by going where he could not follow.

There is no simple right-and-wrong in these stories. Those who have lived in abusive relationships know how harsh the options can be, as do those families in which someone is

destroying themselves with an addiction. Our lives inevitably raise the difficult decisions of which threads we should cut, and which threads we should leave to tug at our hearts.

Covenantal relationships are not about “you” and “I” as disconnected individuals, but about a mutual truth that we share. When I’ve had an amazing dialogue with someone, for example, one of those moments where we feel a real meeting of the hearts, I don’t believe that the sense of depth and awe we carry away afterward is merely a new way of seeing the world outside of us, but is rather the discovery of something fundamentally true about ourselves. In the same way, when I’m knocked out by the beauty and grandeur of nature, and am swept with a feeling that I speak of as religious, what I’m feeling is my heart answering back to the world that I have remembered something true about myself. This truth is how deep our connectedness goes – creation is not merely a web built out of pre-existing, autonomous pieces, but a living interdependence that draws circles of varying size upon itself in order to be able to speak about “I” or “we”. It is in covenanted relationships that this truth about ourselves is recalled and embodied.

Recognizing that relatedness is not merely an option, like whether to have a salad with lunch, but an undeniable reality, we ask then how better to cultivate connections that sustain us and carry us through inevitable imperfections and disappointment. Not surprisingly, covenantal relationships are not received ready-made when we walk into a place like First Unitarian Society; like a garden, they produce a harvest only after a considerable amount of work. It’s no small matter for those of us who like to think of ourselves as self-made and self-reliant to allow others to tie their threads to us, staking claims upon our hearts, and daring to tie our own threads to others’ hearts. But this is how covenanted communities are nurtured and strengthened, in loyalty and persistence and trust, treasures too rare in these days, but in no danger of disappearing as long as we put them to use. To give ourselves over to these relationships is to give up a bit of our unlimited freedom, to sacrifice a bit of our autonomy, to renounce the escape clause that has allowed us to walk away whenever others become boring, inconvenient or challenging, or when we are ashamed at having disappointed those who depend upon us. But we accept this exchange because we realize that the lone individual is just one way of looking at ourselves, and that we are perhaps represented more truthfully as the intersection of thousands of relationships -- some trivial, some life-changing and meriting our deep devotion.

I hope that First Unitarian Society can be a place where you experience trust, loyalty, authenticity and devotion. The threads that bind us one to other come at a cost that challenges our stereotypes of who humanity is, but the reward is that we become another kind of humanity entirely. Come, you wanderer, you lover of justice, you seeker of beauty -- though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, we invite you to tie your heart to this place and these people. Come, yet again, come.