



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
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## “For a Time Such as This”

© by The Reverend Marlin Lavanhar, All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma

A sermon delivered on June 25, 2015 at the Service of the Living Tradition

The Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, Portland, Oregon

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### Centering Thoughts

*Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.  
For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews  
from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows?  
Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. Esther 4:13-14*

*O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.*  
Langston Hughes, from “Let America Be America Again”

### Sermon

The last time I had this privilege to deliver a sermon to the General Assembly was in 2008 on Sunday morning in Ft. Lauderdale. (Were you there?)

It was just two years after I had lost my daughter, who died at the age of 3. I remember talking about her, Sienna, ...and how very raw it still was then. She would be 12 this year if she had lived.

I'm going to admit something. Sometimes, even now, when I'm visiting a person from my congregation who's dying, if it seems appropriate I'll ask them,

“When you finally die, if it turns out there really is a heaven on the other side of all this, and you see my little girl Sienna, will you give her a big hug for me and tell her that her mom and brother and I are doing alright and we love her?”

And I've discovered that it doesn't matter if the person is a Humanist, a secular-rationalist, a Buddhist or a Theist...

There is something in the very humanity of that sincere request (from a broken-hearted father) ...together with the humility of facing our mortality ...that allows us to suspend our disbelief. It allows us to let go of our own literalism. So that we can bathe together in the warmth and tenderness of the deep longing and the love that begged the request.

Whatever that is...that sacred place where people can meet...that is beyond belief and that binds us together in our love and our naked humanity...that's the place I want us to go tonight.

Because we are a covenanted people...bound together by a sacred promise.

But I'm not sure we've ever really lived into all of what that can mean. Let's say for instance, I tell you that I speak in tongues. Would you laugh at me and think I'm ridiculous? What if I believe in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God and I read the Bible as a way of deepening my understanding of myself and the world? Can I be a member of your church? I mean, would I really feel welcome?

What if I think God is real and prayer is powerful and ritual is effective? Would your church embrace me? Would you?

Because our churches are based on the premise that there is no test of faith or belief. Which allows us to have an incredible diversity of believers at the table. And yet, I've seen the reactions some people get when they share certain beliefs in our congregations.

This was brought home to me in 2008, when my church welcomed Bishop Carlton Pearson. He's a black, Pentecostal minister who led a mega-church in Tulsa for 25 years and he and his family and many from his former congregation joined All Souls in Tulsa.

At first I thought I was going to lose my mind, because I was so excited. And then I thought I was going to lose my ministry because of all the controversy it stirred up.

It was well worth the challenges and risks because there have been so many great effects. Three months after this all happened, a long time, white member of the church walked into my office one day. He is a staunch humanist, a lawyer, about 60 years old. He said, "Marlin, I want to tell you something that I would have never told anyone in this church and never have.

"I grew up Pentecostal and to this day I still speak in tongues."

I tried not to look too surprised. But I was shocked. I asked "How often?" and he said, "Probably about once or twice a week." He described it as a kind of meditation that allows his mind to rest.

Once I got over my initial disbelief & quietly checked my own prejudices, I was struck hardest by realizing that this is a central part of his spiritual life, and he has spent 30 years in our congregation and has never felt he could tell anyone in our church without being judged negatively and maybe even made to feel like an outsider. And he was right.

I know, because that's how I felt myself initially. Of course, he's the same intelligent, successful, rational, justice-centered man I've always known. It made me bump-up against my own prejudices. It was a pretty stark condemnation of me and my community, that he felt he had to keep his truth, his spirituality, in the closet in order to be welcome in our church. Don't you wonder, how many are hiding themselves and their spirituality within our congregations?

I'll tell you one thing, we'll never grow our churches if they're places where people have to be spiritually closeted.

It goes against everything we say we're about. It's like double speak and Fox News, if we say we're all about freedom of belief, but then we have an unspoken culture that keeps people in spiritual silos. ...a culture that keeps people afraid to reveal their true selves openly to one another. It's double speak to say we are bound by a covenant that allows us to be united without any test of creed... but then we have a culture that makes many people feel their own personal spiritual journey and beliefs don't fit.

And it's equally difficult to grow a church if people also don't feel comfortable admitting their deepest fears and longings... What kind of church is it, that teaches us to act like we do not have deep existential fears and powerful longings. We come scared about losing our jobs, our

health, or about our children's futures, about getting old... or wrestling with our addictions and ways we sometimes feel pulled from our marriages or other commitments.

Our religion is built on a cultural foundation that values people appearing to be self-initiating, self-reliant, empowered, educated, and well adjusted. All of which are fine things. The problem is that most people... including most of us... (including me) are more afraid than we let on. Afraid that a disease or an accident will strike our children down or us. We're afraid of the consequences of terrorism and war, of politicians and religious leaders who seem to devalue gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer lives.

A criminal justice system that devalues black and brown lives... Or border-guards who devalue immigrant lives. Or people who devalue Muslim lives. Or certain religions that devalue women's lives. Or corporations that devalue the earth or that turn everyone and everything into a means to a profit. Or that technology is going to rob us of our humanity. Or that we can't beat this depression, or survive another surgery. We're scared we'll be a burden to our children. Or will lose our minds before our bodies. Or our bodies before our minds.

If coming to church means putting on our Sunday face and hiding all of this from one another and presenting a façade of self-reliance (well, pardon me Mr. Emerson) but who wants to go to that church?

I realized that if coming to my congregation means pretending that you don't have any beliefs or longings that fit outside of a narrow, mostly, white, middle-class, progressive norm... Then most people probably don't want to attend my church... Because that's not a church as much as it's a spiritual and emotional closet.

We need to have a coming out... in this Association.

As our culture has been learning, coming out is not just for LGBTQ people anymore. We need a coming out in our association for those of us who are poor... or immigrants, military veterans, Christians... Theists... Republicans... and more.

The problem is that despite all our inclusiveness, in many ways, we still have a fairly spiritually and emotionally closeted culture. And it's not just about not being welcoming to certain outsiders; it can be pretty lonely and sometimes painful even for insiders.

Do you know the original Cinderella story? Not the Disney version, but the original Grimm fairytale? In it when the prince's courtiers come looking for the one who fits into the glass slipper, the step-sisters each try desperately to fit in. The first one cuts-off her toes and the other her heel to try to fit in. Imagine the pain of trying to stuff a bloody foot into a glass slipper. It's painful to cut off parts of oneself in order to try to fit in... whether it's a slipper or a church.

But if we're not careful, that's exactly what we end up doing when our culture sends people into closets... in order to feel like they belong. We say our churches are places where people can bring their whole selves, but I'm not convinced that's always true. We can change that! I'm hoping we will.

I'm inspired by the story of Queen Esther from the Hebrew Scriptures. The story begins when the king of Persia sees Esther, a gorgeous and charming young Jewish girl who captures the king's heart. Esther is an orphan who was raised by her cousin Mordicai, who warns her not to mention to anyone at the court that she's a Jew.

Esther follows his advice (and hides her truth & her religion) and is soon crowned queen of the empire. Although Mordicai spends a lot of time socializing at the king's court and people know that he's a Jew, they don't know he's related to Esther or that she is also a Jew.

One day Mordicai raises the wrath of the king's corrupt chief officer, Haman by refusing to bow down before him. Haman clearly has some anger management issues and in his fury he convinces the king to let him announce a royal decree to kill all of the Jews in the empire.

Upon hearing this Mordicai tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes. Before long we find Mordicai standing at the gates of the palace telling one of the court eunuchs to let Esther know what's happening to the Jews.

This is what I love about Bible stories. You just don't find stories like these anymore. Here we have what amounts to a Jewish gentleman standing around in a burlap sack, covered with ashes and hanging-out in the center of town talking with a eunuch. I don't know about where you live but we don't see this too often in Tulsa.

I'll never forget at my colleague and classmate Rev. Laurie Affaut's ordination. When Dr. Ibrahim Farajajé, Profesor from Starr King, used this same Bible story and made the point that in their cultural context eunuchs were transgender people who lived outside of the male-female binary of their times. And he used the story of these trans-ancestors to remind us how throughout history there have always been folks who have transcended their culture's gender norms and have played important roles in the work and salvation of society.

In this story, the eunuch takes Mordicai's message to Esther, telling her that she must implore the king to intercede on behalf of the Jews. Esther tells the eunuch to relay back to Mordicai that, "if any person (even her), enters the royal presence in the inner court without first being summoned, there is but one law which applies: that person shall be put to death, unless of course the king extends the golden scepter to the individual, and only then may that person live. And more importantly, Esther says, "I have not even been summoned to see the king for 30 days." In other words, she's worried that she may have fallen out of favor with the king and this would give him the perfect excuse to do away with her.

Mordicai is not just asking her to serve on a committee or something... he's asking her to put her life on the line. But when Mordicai is told what Esther has said he sends this reply, "Do not imagine Esther, that because you are in the royal palace, you alone of all the Jews will escape. If you remain silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance for the Jews will appear from another quarter; but you and your father's family will perish. Perhaps it is for just such a time as this that you have become queen?"

Esther heard the reply and found the courage to go talk to the king. She says, "in defiance of the law, I shall go to the king; if I perish, I perish." In the end, the Jews were saved because of Esther's courage and her religion was saved because of her willingness to reveal her truth. She saved her people with her willingness to be vulnerable and to risk rejection.

And that's what you and I can and need to start doing more of. Being courageous and real... with each other...

Who knows, you may be here for just such a time as this. I believe you and I are here and are uniquely called for this moment. And that "now's the time" for you and me to step out and stop being so afraid of one another and of our own truth.

There are a lot of things that people are closeted about in our congregations. Military service, Christian theology, immigration status, class background, gender-identity, political leanings... the love of prayer... having spent time in prison... mental illnesses, so many things. I'm willing to bet that most of us have something about ourselves that we would be scared to tell

the people in our congregation... but that if we did tell and we found they still love and respect us, it would be incredibly healing for us and would free others to do the same. Now that sounds like a church I'd like to attend!

A place where I can be held in love for who I really am and despite what I believe or don't believe.

I'll confess, I spent the first five years of my ministry apologizing to God nearly every Sunday when I came home for the ways I failed again to share honestly with my congregation how important my relationship to God is to me.

And I was the minister, yet I was scared to be fully open about my own walk with God and about my own practice of prayer.

I've continually pushed myself to be honest with my congregation.

This year, in a sermon, I even apologized to other white people in my church for the ways I have not always been able to hold them very well in their struggles with the transition we've been going through as we've become more diverse.

I realized that I have had great training, in and out of seminary, teaching me how to be a white ally to people of color and a straight ally to LGBTQ folks, but I have never received any training on how to be a white ally to white people who are struggling with the painful work of overcoming deeply ingrained ideas of white supremacy and privilege.

That's been the hardest part of all the changes for me... because when I see white people who seem like they are resisting or not understanding the need to do the work, it hurts and I get scared, because I think, if these progressive, open-minded, justice-centered, smart, wonderful people aren't willing to do what it takes, than who will?

And in my fear and pain, I have not always been a good or compassionate leader. But when I admitted my own fear and struggle, instead of trying to pretend like I had it all figured out, shifted everything.

It allowed others to talk more freely about their own fears and mistakes. And more and more of us stopped hiding from one another.

And, since this is a service for ministers, including many new ministers, I want to say that it took me a long time to tell my church about the problems I had in my teens with drugs. And about the difficulty I've had as an adult reclaiming my tears after years of holding them in. But as I've begun to teach and preach from my mistakes, rather than always talking about my successes. It has made a huge positive difference.

Each of us needs to find the courage to be real about telling our truth. And ministers, we need to lead the way... and many of you who have gone before me have shown me the way... I'm just a slow learner... with layers of ego that I'm still trying to peel off.

And I see something in this new generation of ministers that seems almost hardwired to authenticity. And that feels like a great sign of hope! I believe we are each here, and are meant to bring all of who we are, for just such a time as this.

And it matters because what we're about... this covenanted faith, is an extraordinary contribution to religious life in America. In fact, it's an incredible development in the history of human social evolution. I do not think America can ever be the country it can and must be, if Unitarian Universalism does not become what it needs to be. And I don't think humanity will ever become what it needs to be until we, or some other group, achieves the promise that this covenanted tradition offers.

So, while we've created a whole conference this year on the idea of discovering the "New Way"... I want to propose that it's not a new way that we have to live into. It's that we have to finally embody the fullness of the proposition which is the old way. We have yet to fully embrace the promise of our democratic, covenantal tradition.

Langston Hughes has that incredible poem. Let America be America Again. In which he describes the ideals of our country and he says, "That's never been America to me. Let America be America again... the America that never was but still can be."

I feel that way about Unitarian Universalism. Let's let Unitarian Universalism be Unitarian Universalism again. The faith it never was yet, and yet can be. Let Unitarian Universalism be the tradition it never has been... but yet must become.

A faith for the free. Not a faith for a small sliver of the mostly, white, middle-class NPR listening audience. But a true faith for the free... all of us... of every color, culture and kind. We've never been that free... but let us pledge tonight that Unitarian Universalism soon will be.

We can and must redeem this faith... Not by changing it... but by living into it... in a way we never were able to before. Can you imagine that God, or the Goddess or Gaia or the spirit of love, the Universe... however you name it, may have put you here, among us, for just such a time as this? I can!

But then again... I said that tonight I want us to suspend our disbelief... To see if we can find a meeting place where our broken-hearts and our humanity can come together and bathe in the tender understanding of love's possibility.

So that we will truly love beyond belief. Amen.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Do you hide your spiritual beliefs from others at UUFA? If so, what prevents you from being your authentic self?
2. How do you feel or respond when someone shares a belief or practice that's different from your own?
3. At such a time as this, how can we UUs more fully live into our faith and principles?
4. Imagine you have been put here to save Unitarian Universalism. What would that look like?