

## *Dedication*

Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill

Sunday, May 19, 2024

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People often ask me about the rites of passage we celebrate in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition - and with good reason, because they are remarkably similar to and yet different from those same rites in many other faiths. I cherish every one of those differences. Our rituals are designed to reflect the values and commitments of the UU faith, as well as tailored to the individuals for whom and with whom the ceremonies are conducted.

Every time I celebrate a memorial service, someone not familiar with Unitarian Universalism expresses their delight that the service was tailored to the identity and gifts of the person who died, created with care in collaboration with their loved ones, rather than being a stock program off the shelf. Likewise with weddings – each is unique, created by the couple who are committing their lives together in the presence of their circle of beloveds.

So when people ask me about baptisms, I explain that the ritual of child dedication is our own UU approach to welcoming a child into religious community. We do not baptize a child to wash anything away, because we do not believe that a child needs to be cleansed of any sin or impurity. We dedicate the young persons among us with a rose, symbol of love and beauty, distinct from every other flower just as every human life is unique. And we invite that human life, like a rose, to unfold in beauty, creating its own unique human life story. We use water, not to purify and cleanse, but to unify the child with all of life, as we say, “Water is the stuff of life, water connects all living things, all of humanity. The rose is dipped in water to symbolize your essential connection with all of us in this community.”

And we make promises: the parents dedicate themselves to the loving nurturance of the child; family members and beloved friends pledge their caring support and guidance so that this child and their family may thrive. Today, I asked you, all of you in this assembly, “. . . do you promise to freely and wisely love these children and youth, to offer them your steady presence and best selves, to nurture and sustain them and their families as they learn and grow and change together?” And you the congregation, accepting the children and youth into beloved community, responded, “We do.” As a faith community, you dedicate yourselves today to support the beautiful unfolding life of a young person in the nurturance of this church family. A beautiful thing.

Dedication. I suspect that most of us do not pay much attention, day to day, to noticing what we dedicate ourselves and our lives to. Some people, I think, just go about their business, doing what must be done to care for themselves and others, to put food on the table and a roof over their heads, meeting the challenges of daily life, doing what is expected of them, surviving or thriving as their lives roll along. Our life story may unfold before us, taking its own course; we may not need to feel we are directing events or dedicating ourselves to a specific outcome. We simply allow each day to arrive as it will.

There are some remarkable examples in the history of humanity, however, of people who actually have dedicated their lives to a clear and compelling purpose. Among the most outstanding examples is the woman most universally known as Mother Teresa, called Blessed Teresa of Calcutta when she was “beatified” by the Catholic church in 2003, and then canonized into sainthood by Pope Francis I on September 4, 2016.

I heard a lot about Mother Teresa as I was growing up, which probably has something to do with my age – she was born in 1910, just 5 years before the birth of my own parents, so she was of their generation, and she influenced the culture in which I was raised. And then there was the fact that I grew up Catholic, and Mother Teresa’s life work was definitely in the context of her Catholic faith. But there is a lot to draw our attention, no matter who we are, when we look at the life of this charismatic woman - a woman who professed complete humility and at the same time commanded the attention of popes and presidents, world leaders of many nations and faith traditions. Whether or not we agree with her theology, her political positions or some of the ways she carried out her work, the fact remains that she was a remarkable and highly influential figure on the global scene.

There is a book that was written after Teresa’s death, created from her letters and other writings, titled *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. I read the book some years ago, because I wanted to know more about this woman who was so completely unshakable in her commitment to her path in life. Even when she felt disconnected and abandoned by her God, she continued to do her work in unrelenting dedication, never telling anyone but her closest mentors about her sense of loss and abandonment. I wanted to understand more about her sense of calling into her work, about her experiences of connection and of isolation, and perhaps most of all, I wanted to understand more about her complete and wholehearted dedication to the task she identified as her mission in life.

A mission in life. A purpose that calls and compels us. Dedication to that purpose. What might that be about? It begins, some would say, with our story. As performance consultant Jim Loehr writes in his book, *The Power of Story*, “Your life is your story.” Understanding our lives as story, telling ourselves our own stories, helps us navigate our way through life because our stories provide structure and direction to our lives. “If you are human,” Loehr continues, “then you tell yourself stories. . . consciously and, far more than not, subconsciously.” Our stories impose meaning on the chaos of our lives, bringing a sense of order to the rough and tumble of events that can feel random, outside our control.

The story line we generate, and the sense of purpose and vision we identify at the source of our own story, becomes like the compass for our lives, a navigational device that can show us where true north lies even when we are in strange lands, when the clouds cover the stars and we have no fixed reference point to steer our way. When our stories are true, they emanate from a sense of purpose and direction at our center, and they transmit and magnify the light and warmth of our positive core. We might call it purpose, or personal mission, but whatever we call it, that core element is what gives power and direction to our lives, both as a daily commitment and as a vision of a possible future to which we can dedicate ourselves. As Loehr writes, “The only way a story can achieve a level of transformative power is when it supports an unassailable purpose. An ultimate purpose is never small. It is never minor. It is grand, heroic, epic.” It is a sense of purpose and a vision of possibility worthy of our dedication.

The story of Mother Teresa is illustrative. She identified her purpose early in life, and never veered from it. Mother Teresa’s personal mission and vision, her sense of vocation, began with her First Communion when she was just five and a half years old. At age twelve she first identified her vocation to serve the poor, and she left home forever to become a missionary nun at age 18. When she was 32, she took a vow on her honor “to give God anything he asked; never to refuse him anything.” Then four years later, on Tuesday, September 10, 1946, a date she ever after celebrated as her “Inspiration Day,” Teresa was riding on a train through India when she “heard the call to give up all and follow [God] into the slums—to serve Him in the poorest of the

poor. . . [she wrote] I knew it was His will and that I had to follow Him. There was no doubt that it was going to be His work.” And so her answer to that call was simply, “Yes.”

For ten years after that moment of inspiration, she felt the constant presence of God, and heard what she called “the Voice,” directing her to create and lead a new order of nuns dedicated to the work of serving the poorest of the poor in the slums of India. The words she heard in her heart said, “You vowed to do anything I asked of you, and now this I ask of you.” Again and again, over weeks and months and years, the Voice reminded her of her promise and asked, “Wilt thou refuse?” Mother Teresa lobbied the church authorities for permission to undertake the work, and when finally it was granted, she moved out of the convent and school where she had been working, created the Missionaries of Charity and gathered others to work with her in the slums.

And then – and then, the Voice fell silent, and Mother Teresa no longer felt the Divine presence in her mind and heart. Where before she had felt such a joyful presence accompanying her always, such complete confidence and encompassing love, suddenly, as she described in her own words, “In my heart there is no faith—no love—no trust—there is so much pain—the pain of longing, the pain of not being wanted . . . terrible separation. . . I no longer pray. . . [my words are] so empty, for they leave me far from You. — The work holds no joy, no attraction, no zeal.”

Mother Teresa told almost no one about her sense of desolation and loss; she simply poured all her energy and love into the work to which she had committed herself, to build an organization that would serve only the poorest of the poor, those who had nothing, especially those whose illness was so severe that they faced inevitable death. Her emotional night “continued as dark as ever” for the next thirty-five years, though she never mentioned it except to her closest confidantes. As the author of the book says, “in spite of it, or rather because of it, Mother Teresa continued to be a source of light and inspiration to others.”

Now, I suspect that most of us have not had the direct experience of divine inspiration; we may not even believe it to be possible in the world as we know it. Any skepticism and scientific-rational doubts notwithstanding, however, and whatever one might think of the controversy that surrounded Mother Teresa’s work with those in deepest need, I find myself in deep admiration for a person who had such a deep sense of core purpose, such a clear vision of possibility for something that was unimagined before she undertook it. I am amazed to witness such compelling dedication to the work of her life, even after she had lost the sense of connection to the source of her inspiration.

And so I ask, for each of us, what in this world calls to us with power to live into a new possibility, perhaps something that has never been imagined before? To what might we dedicate our lives, our intellect and our energy, our heart and our passion? How do we know where to bring our own unique and blessed gifts to the world? How do we dedicate ourselves to our family, to our work, to cultivating inner peace, to creating more justice in the world? The sense of purpose that we identify at the source of our own story can become like the compass for our lives, a navigational device that can show us where true north lies, even when we are in strange lands, when the clouds cover the stars and we have no fixed reference point to steer our way.

On this day we have dedicated the children and youth of this congregation into the world, a world of stunning beauty, wrenching sadness and amazing complexity. And so for them and for ourselves, as we make our way through this world, I might wish for us each and all that we may find our moment in which our response is simply “yes,” our own Day of Inspiration, in which we know the purpose that powers our story, the vision toward which we live, as we say yes to life, to truth, to love. So may it be, amen and blessed be.

Sources:

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