

# **Breaking the Binding Wide Open**

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Sunday, January 21, 2018

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**

Rochester, Minnesota

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## **READINGS**

*A reading from Rainer Maria Rilke,*

*The Tree of Reason by Denise Levertov*

## SERMON

*“This, is the bible”* said the preacher. *(bible is dropped to the floor)*  
*“It is not God.”*

As the leather-bound good book smashed to the floor  
to the dismay and horror to the purest in the pews,  
and to the delight and joy to the quiet protestors in the pews.

As this preacher had had it –  
with literalism and limitations and litmus tests  
on belief, and scripture, and faith –  
as if these stories from generations ago  
were not a living, breathing, changing and shifting and dynamic thing -  
that to be religious or spiritual or part of a community of faith  
asking the largest questions of what it means to be human and alive  
was not a living, dynamic thing –  
that the answers were not all figured out, bound, and sealed.

And as the sound of leather thwacking on the chancel floor  
echoed over the wood pews and passed by  
the seemingly suspicious figures in the stained glass,  
there lifted into the air, the dust from an old book,  
a binding now broken open  
and in the stirring of the atmosphere itself  
possibility and creativity and curiosity  
leaped off the pages  
and into the hearts  
of a people now ready  
to bend their minds and hearts toward something larger –  
something as scary as uncertainty,  
something as comforting as possibility.

There, out from the tattered binding  
now broken open,  
the question began to settle:

*what tattered threads  
are going to hold me  
together?*

*Something is very gently,  
invisibly, silently,  
pulling at me-a thread  
or net of threads*

writes poet Denise Levertov,

*finer than cobweb and as elastic.  
I haven't tried the strength of it.  
No barbed hook pierced and tore me.*

*Was it not long ago  
this thread began to draw me?  
Or way back?*

*Was I born with its knot  
about my neck, a bridle?*

*Not fear  
but a stirring of wonder  
makes me catch my breath  
when I feel the tug of it  
when I thought  
it had loosened itself  
and gone.*

Not fear, but a stirring of wonder –  
pulling at you like thread,  
weaving through you and connecting you  
to whatever sources you find  
to speak to you of wisdom, and truth,  
of inspiration and hope and possibility.

*To search everywhere and anywhere for the meaning of being  
wrote Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs,  
not freedom to believe as we please, but freedom  
to be honest, to question, to investigate, to try...*

In Unitarian Universalism, we have guiding principles which help provide a framework for our beliefs – affirming the dignity of all people, valuing justice and service of our neighbors, remembering our interconnection with the natural world, and encouraging one another in a search for truth and meaning.

The older language of the principles, which some of you may remember, which is now a *free and responsible search for truth and meaning*, used to be a *free and disciplined search for truth and meaning*.

*Free and disciplined.*

*Disciplined* isn't often a word that religious liberals, let's say, like.

It feels like authoritarianism, constriction of free spirits – but put together in harmony with *free*, and *search*, it offers the potential and an invitation for one's search for truth, meaning, and inspiration, to be intentional, mindful – to be done with care as to not disrespect a tradition other than one's own, to be done with reverence for what one can learn from new sources, to be done with humility that none of us has all the answers, all the time, or that our own personal canon of truth or wisdom or revelation is sealed, done, bound for all time and eternity – as if the world and life is not a moving, changing, breathing, living scripture cast in writings, and art, and music, and sunshine.

Sometimes, a free faith leads too quickly into a casual, willy nilly, laize-faire spirituality, to believe whatever you want, whenever you want, as if it doesn't matter – as if freedom of belief translates into freedom *from* belief – from believing anything, free from any faith or any intentional spirituality at all.

A disciplined search calls for something different –  
something truer, deeper, than throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

A disciplined search for truth and meaning  
means taking hold of a source, of several sources,  
and scouring the pages of it,  
immersing yourself in it,  
delving deep into the words  
and the meanings beyond the words  
pulling back all the layers  
until you have delved deep enough,  
studied long enough,  
thought hard enough,  
felt strong enough,  
that the binding of it –  
the casing, the limits, the constrictions  
of the scripture, the song, the science, the service,  
of the text, of the teacher, of the tradition,  
are broken wide open –  
not because it is of no use or meaning to you anymore –  
but because it has offered to you so much wisdom  
that the pages have become torn and tattered  
by how intently and incessantly  
you took hold of it –  
because something about it  
something that was revealed within it,  
took hold of you.

This old bible,  
this old children's book –  
isn't worn from neglect or from being ignored or left on the shelf –  
it's worn  
because it was taken down off the shelf,  
and paged through, over and over again –  
when the soul said, "I need to read this again"  
and the child said, "will you read this to me – again, and again, and again?"  
the book was a catalyst for the relationship with someone they loved.

That's what revelation is like.  
Like flipping the pages, forward and back,  
over and over again –  
reading the familiar words,  
or hearing the familiar harmonies,  
or travelling the familiar path –  
there are writings,  
or people or places,  
that you return to –  
sometimes without even thinking about it with any intention,  
because it is a place that has  
broken the binding of your soul wide open –  
broken the constrictions  
of what caused you despair,  
or fear, or anxiety –  
those places that have brought you,  
revealed to you –  
something true about yourself or the world –  
revealed to you  
some wisdom,  
some truth, some inspiration  
that, while you may have heard, or read, or been there before –  
continues to bring new insight,  
new possibility –  
you unlock something that was hidden  
within yourself or within this world,  
and a light bulb goes off,  
a door is unlocked,  
you level up  
and weave some new thread  
into the fabric of who you are  
and who you want and strive to be.

*but reason in such excess was tyranny*  
writes Denis Levertov,

*and locked us into its own limits...  
it is toxic in large quantities...  
it was meant to be milled into fine powder –  
just a pinch at a time.*

I think it is true  
that objective facts and statistics,  
certain aspects of science and reason and logic,  
can provide immense truth and wisdom and insight.  
God knows we need science  
and the park service  
and facts  
more than ever in the current public discourse.

And I think we need it so much  
because the best science, and gathering of facts and statistics,  
the best aspects of reason and logic,  
lead us to something deeper –  
and the best scientists and science  
lead to larger questions –  
they reveal to us something about ourselves,  
something about what it means to be human,  
what it means to live, to die, to love, to hope, to dream, to despair, to weep.

Sometimes  
we need a fuller, larger realm of possibility  
to put into our hearts, our minds, our souls,  
these largest, deepest, questions of life.

We need to search everywhere and anywhere –  
science, the arts, logic, reason, wonder, beauty, mystery, awe –  
to make sense of it all, to measure it all –  
*in daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee.*

Because there are too many absolutisms  
that bind and constrain possibility, and wonder, and mystery,  
where we might otherwise find truth and something revealed to us –

there are absolutisms and literalisms that constrain and constrict one's soul –  
absolutisms based on interpretations of poetic scripture as literal facts –  
absolutisms based on reason and logic that leaves out mystery and wonder –  
absolutisms of the existence or the non-existence of a God, or Spirit,  
as if people were believing or disbelieving some standardized definition.

Sometimes, it is the intangibles –  
things that are hard to explain in a tangible, logical, clear way –  
love and music and joy and beauty and hope –  
sometimes the very things we can't explain, are the very things that make life  
worth living – that break the binding open into deeper mystery and possibility.

Similar, to the phrase from the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in the Netflix series  
*the Crown*:

*...who wants transparency when you can have magic?  
who wants prose when you can have poetry?*

Many of you know that this church was founded,  
in 1866 in downtown Rochester  
at the location of the current Plummer building of Mayo Clinic –  
as a Universalist Church,  
before the merger between the Unitarians and Universalists.

For decades, the church was known as *Grace Church* –  
celebrating a liberating theology  
proclaiming a radical belief – that all people were beloved of God.  
You couldn't sin bad enough for God to condemn you to hell –  
people may hate you, but God wouldn't.

The traditional document which explains the basic tenets of Universalism  
was the Winchester Profession of 1803 –  
you may have noticed these words, cast in iron,  
near the restrooms in the hallway by the front entry here in the church.

They say, in part, in traditional Universalist language,  
*We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a  
revelation of the character of God...*

There is an important word here – especially important in 1803.  
That the scriptures contain *A* revelation of the character of God.  
Not **THE** one and only revelation, not even **the best** revelation  
but **a** – one letter that changes the meaning – that reveals something about their  
entire system of belief and theology - implying that what they called God,  
what others may call love or justice or hope or beauty or wisdom or truth –  
that the nature of that is beyond what is bound in the traditional scriptures alone.



This language, over 200 years old in our church's tradition,  
consciously chose a broadening of the scriptures –  
celebrating the old liberal religious phrase that we'll sing as we close today –  
*revelation is not sealed* -  
that truth, wisdom, God, or Love, or Beauty cannot be contained  
to words that were written by one person, for one context –  
that the truth about life had to have a larger binding than only that.

This language also opens up, or reveals, a truth –  
that while they don't contain all the answers or the only truth,  
they *do* contain a truth and a revelation about life and love and meaning –  
like a thread woven within it.

The words are not infallible. There are no absolute, sealed, truths.  
But neither does any other text, or experience, or perspective have all the answers.

What a lovely and challenging invitation –  
to engage the discipline or searching for the threads,  
woven through different times and cultures,  
woven through different texts and traditions,  
woven through different teachers and prophets  
and moments and movements –

creating a brilliantly beautiful fabric  
large enough, strong enough, wide enough,  
to hold many stories, many songs, many prayers and practices –  
woven together to provide glimpses, threads,  
of a wisdom large enough to hold us all.

When you break the binding wide open –  
you break open your own absolutisms – true as they seem –  
you break open the limits  
of what you, or your past, or the society  
have placed on what is possible  
in love and life and meaning and purpose –  
something is broken open within you  
when you imagine beyond the limitations,  
and you take the threads,  
and believe and know that they are more than mere scraps  
and you are disciplined enough

to search everywhere and anywhere for *a* revelation of truth and love.  
What limits on wisdom, love, truth still constrain you?  
What is holding that binding together?  
What happens when it breaks open?  
What has happened when it has broken open?

What are the threads in your own hand –  
what threads have you received from others –  
and what practices are helping you  
weave together a fabric of insight and truth and mystery –  
strong enough to hold your deepest questions?

Here's a thread:  
*walking the dog, or journal writing, or doing dishes, or a shared meal –  
those moments in the day that make your heart at home -  
they aren't just nice –  
those are common, living prayers – they are spiritual practices.*

And here's a thread:  
*the music, or poem, or path that is most meaningful to you,  
that nourishes and heals your heart,  
is not just nice –  
it is sacred, living scripture.*

And here's a thread:  
*even in your perfectly human imperfections, you are beloved.*

This church can't give you all the threads.  
But together, we can learn how to weave.

Amen.