

## On the Trinity of Promise: Where Are We Going?

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister  
Sunday, June 18, 2017

### Reading

Excerpt from  
*Sacred Ground:  
Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*  
- by Eboo Patel

America has not been a promise to all its people. “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock,” Malcolm X said. “Plymouth Rock landed on us.” Whatever the faiths of the workmen who came to Mount Vernon, they laid their bricks next to Washington’s slaves. We are a nation whose creed speaks of welcoming all communities and whose practice has too often crushed them. But, to borrow from Maya Angelou, the dust was determined to rise, and generous enough to carry the rest of us with. People who knew the whip of the slave master in Alabama, the business end of the police baton on the South Side of Chicago, people who could have easily called our nation a lie, chose instead to believe America was a broken promise, and gave their bodies and their blood to fix it. As Langston Hughes wrote, even though “America never was America to me,” he was still committed to making the promise of this nation real, declaring one line later in his poem, “America will be.”

### Sermon Reflection

For those of you not present the past couple of Sundays and those who are aware of but have not yet been able to catch up with what we’ve been talking about here in our online sermon archive - we have been reflecting on a powerful little collection of essays edited by Frederic Muir titled *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*. This morning will conclude my sermon focus on this work, but it is my greatest hope that as many as possible of us will engage deeply with the reflection this book provides us as we head into a deeper visioning and strategic planning process as a congregation this year; that we will use this work to more deeply educate ourselves about our past in order to more clearly envision our way forward, and that we will use what we learn together to further deepen the dialogue necessary to change the narrative about who we are as a community of faith. For that is the challenge of this book – **it is an invitation to “re-story” who we are** and how we function as a religious community in these times. And as you heard from our reading – this re-storying, this reclaiming and working toward our promise is a work that is both parallel and intertwined with the work needed within our culture, within this country, “people are struggling with and trying to shape the way we have been into the way we could be – a way shaped by exclusivity into a way that is inclusive, from an implicit monoculturalism to an explicit pluralism. Consequently, the era in which we live will be remembered as a period of transition (a turning point) both in the life of our nation and in Unitarian Universalism.” (61)

But why? I can almost hear some of the internal dialogue...but why do we have to change? Aren't we already the "uncommon denomination," (old UUA slogan/marketing campaign) aren't we the people who've figured out how to "do religion" better, to step beyond dogmatic, heart and mind-numbing creed, haven't we (aren't we) more welcoming and inclusive than everyone else – aren't we already what the world needs? They just have to find us! Here we are!

Therein lies much of our problem. Frederic Muir points out that "for several hundred years, Unitarian Universalism has been shaped by a set of qualities – the trinity of errors – that have grown to characterize us. We have deemed these our history and **ignored other qualities that have shaped us**. While the errors of individualism, exceptionalism, and anti-authoritarianism still work in some places (and this may be generational), they are not going to continue to work in this century. We must look again to our heritage for a new direction, for shaping and guiding principles. **Staying within our heritage is important:** We are Unitarian Universalists, which means we have a particular way of being religious and being a faith community. **We subscribe to the vision of Beloved Community as imagined in our Principles.**" (61-62)

"Though he was speaking about the United States rather than Unitarian Universalism, Bill Ivey – an American folklorist and a former chair of the National Endowment of the Arts – phrases it this way: "By revisiting the nineteenth-century origins of a progressive society...liberals can revitalize our values. Once we **resuscitate the poetry of our roots**, filling America's value space with progressive ideas, the basic, time-tested mechanisms of government can do the rest – securing a framework of policy sturdy enough to sustain a way of life more closely aligned with real American ideals." **A trinity of promises can be rediscovered in our roots.** Now is the time to resuscitate our heritage and revitalize our faith. Let us set aside the errors of our ways, speak about the poetry of promise, and build on three aspects of promise." (62)

So, what are these three promises that Frederic Muir and his fellow essayists see as essential to countering the errors of individualism, exceptionalism and anti-authoritarianism? They are Generosity – Pluralism – Imagination. We won't be able this morning to explore in depth all three of these promises, but let's look for a moment at the heart of the matter:

Muir sees "**generosity at the heart of the trinity of promises**. Just as individualism was the lead error from which the other two followed, generosity is the quintessential promise from which the others flow and guide us in this century and into the next. Unitarian Universalism generosity is the core value in our civic and faith life. In our foundational documents, themes of generosity radiate. We are a people of a generous spirit.

Reflect on this for a moment: Can you think of a time in our nation's history, in the history of Unitarian Universalism, in [your] our congregation, or in your relationships when progress you felt good about

was emboldened by the values of **scarcity, stinginess, or fear**? I cannot think of any. Every step forward, every progressive change that has occurred in our nation and our faith tradition has been because of a generous spirit. Yet, as Unitarian Universalists we have missed many opportunities of promise because we have neglected the generosity intrinsic in our faith. When culture – and faith – are shaped by a posture of scarcity, stinginess, and fear, people are reluctant to move forward, to broaden and deepen and share what is best for all. At times like these the trinity of errors maintains control and leads in directions of little value for our future. **And so we acquiesce to a shrinking and static life.** Ironically, it's during such periods that we especially notice those who are living with a theology and spirit shaped by generosity. When we are around those whose spirit is generous, who give of their time, presence, and resources, we leave them feeling refreshed and whole and ready to engage another day; maybe we hope to spend more time with them or even emulate their actions and words. The same dynamics apply to our nation and to our faith. **It's not too late to resuscitate “the poetry of our roots”** and live into what we want to be. We can go back through history and find those who said, “I won't be afraid. I will not live in fear. I will be of a generous spirit. I will sing songs of hope.” As a people of faith, as a nation, this is our heritage, a heritage of generosity and hope.” (62-63)

The trinity of promises – of generosity, pluralism, and imagination – must shape the story we tell about ourselves; the promises are an opportunity to restore Unitarian Universalism.

**“The narrative we tell, the story we rehearse, is critical to who we become.”** I ask you to think about that statement in light of UU affection for telling UU jokes. What are we communicating in that? Sociologist Robert Bellah notes, “Narrative...is the way we understand our lives...Narrative is not only the way we understand our personal and collective identities, it is the source of our ethics, our politics, and our religion.”

“Our identities are formed by stories told to us, about us, around us.”

What do we want our story to be?

Muir claims that “drawing on the rhythms of generosity, pluralism, and imagination, we will shape and tell our story – who we have been and the opportunities we have missed. But let's not spend too much precious time on the past. Let's also tell the story of who we will be; let us share the poetry of our roots.”

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

**Source:** *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Frederic Muir. 2016.