

Who's in Charge Here?

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
January 23, 2011

*A stream flows down the mountainside, beautiful and strong,
confident in its power to overcome all obstacles that stand in its way.¹*

We who identify as Unitarian Universalists are the inheritors of a long and rich tradition of religious liberalism. For generations, we have been a voice asserting the power of the human spirit to make a difference, to grow and learn and change ourselves, to change the world for the better.

Back at the beginning of the 19th century, our Unitarian ancestors broke away from their Calvinist peers who were saying, human beings are hopelessly flawed and weak. The Unitarians said, no, look at all the good things we can do if we put our mind to it! Where their peers said, we must trust in the inscrutable mercy of God to save us, the Unitarians said, we have the power to make ourselves good enough to be *worthy* of salvation. They called it “salvation by character”—an expression of faith that if we follow our conscience and work hard to shape ourselves into the best people we can be, we will be OK. We will be safe in a deep and ultimate sense, held in that force which gave rise to us and to all things—maybe not safe in every way here on earth, because we all know that’s not guaranteed,

¹ The story of the stream and the desert is a Sufi teaching story. Margaret Silf has retold it in her anthology *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World* (Pilgrim Press, 2003).

but deeply safe in the end.

This is a faith I still share, and I believe you do too.

But a hundred years after those first American Unitarians,
we began to discover a shadow side

to our faith in human strength and possibility.

What happened, in a nutshell, was this:

All through the late 19th and early 20th centuries,

religious people were on fire with the possibility of social reform.

They saw so much suffering around them—

they saw people living in terrible poverty and oppression.

They heard the Gospels calling them to make real
the kingdom of God on earth.

And especially for the Unitarians who had begun to question
whether the God of the Bible was really out there,
salvation wasn't just about the afterlife.

Salvation was something that could happen here on earth,
through the power of human effort and human will.

Those reformers believed they had the power to save the world.

They drew on the faith of the Unitarians
that people could earn their own salvation.

Only now they believed salvation was here on earth.

They believed they had the power to save the world.

If enough people worked hard enough,
we could end poverty.

We could end oppression.

People would no longer suffer at one another's hands.

And what a beautiful vision this is!

That passion for social justice, that dream of a better world,
has inspired us from that day to this.

It's given us the courage to accomplish amazing things.

Think of how our society treated people of color
a hundred years ago,

women, members of sexual minorities, disabled people.

We've come a long way,
fed by that passion and faith in our ability to change the world.
I hope we will never lose it.
Yet it comes with a shadow, and the shadow looks like this:
What happens when the world *doesn't* get saved,
at least not right away and not entirely and maybe not enough?
If suffering persists, as sometimes it does for all our trying,
does that mean it's our fault?
Did we not try hard enough?
If we have the power to change the world,
and the world doesn't change,
is it our fault?

*The stream flowed on down the mountainside,
leaping and skimming around the trees, over the rocks.
Then one day it came to the edge of a desert.
The stream flung itself at the desert.
But its waters simply disappeared,
swallowed up by the immensity of the sands.
The stream tried again and again,
but each time its waters disappeared into the sand.
The stream was enraged, baffled, completely at a loss.*

There is something deep in our religious culture
as Unitarian Universalists
that makes many of us want to believe
we are in control and in charge of our lives.
We strive to be good at things, on top of things,
under control, efficient,
good stewards and responsible managers.
We *like* being in charge.
True story:
Once upon a time, I was out window-shopping
with a dear person in my life who shall remain nameless.
She really didn't like how the mannequins were dressed

in one of the stores. She thought their outfits were quite ugly,
and she started talking
about how she could pick out much better outfits to display.
Then she paused, considered, and said,
“You know, sometimes I think
people should just put me in charge of...everything!”

Haven't we all been there?
We want to believe in our good sense and our rightness
about how things should be.

And we want to believe that if we make smart and virtuous choices,
life will reward us by doing what we want it to.
We want to believe that if we organize our lives responsibly,
all will be well, always.
No problem will ever be too big
to be managed and dealt with using human ingenuity.
For many of us, this is an article of faith.
It gives us comfort. It helps us feel safe in the world.
It inspires us!

Yet, when we stop and think,
it's perfectly obvious that a whole lot of life is out of our control
and is certainly *not* always doing what we want it to.
I have a friend who has been struggling with a health issue,
a condition that isn't debilitating or life-threatening,
but it is chronic and distressing.
She hasn't been getting better, despite all her efforts.
I spoke with her recently
(and I have her permission to tell this story),
and she told me what is even more stressful than the illness itself
is her feeling that she ought to be able to fix it.
She's realized her mindset all along has been,
maybe if she did more research about cutting-edge therapies
or took the right herbal supplements,

or maybe if she did more positive visualization exercises,
or swore off caffeine or sugar or high-fructose corn syrup forever,
she could fix it.

She could fix it if only she found the right fix.

In recent days, my friend has started to feel the bitter downside
in that faith in her power to fix everything.

Because what does it mean if she's tried and tried
and it's not fixed?

When I spoke with her,

she told me with anger and frustration in her voice,

"I just want everyone to know my being sick is not my fault!"

I asked her, "Sweetie, who thinks it is your fault?"

Tearfully, she answered, "I guess I do."

But one day the stream began to listen to the words of the desert.

"Let yourself be taken up by the wind and carried across."

"But I'm afraid!" said the stream.

"I know," said the desert. "But it's the only way."

I was so struck by the photograph
on the cover of your order of service today.



It comes from an online photojournal
of an ordinary family's road trip to Yellowstone Park one summer.²
The caption they gave it reads,
"Who's in charge here? She is!"
(That's a female buffalo, for those of you keeping score.)

This could happen to anybody.
Maybe you've got a fancy SUV with four-wheel drive,
just what the commercials promise us
is all we need to conquer the great outdoors.
Maybe it's even a hybrid!
But I tell you what: no matter what kind of vehicle we have,
whether an SUV or a bike or a scooter or our own two feet,
nothing is going to prevent the occasional buffalo
from plunking herself smack in the middle of the road.
And we move at her pace or not at all.

Now, I am well aware that meeting an actual buffalo is quite possibly
one of the coolest things that could happen on that road trip.
But it's another story when the buffalo turns into metaphor
and takes the form of an illness,
a loss to grieve,
a disappointment,
an injustice.

So what's your buffalo in the middle of the road?
Where is your desert too wide to cross?
No matter how hard we strain and strive,
sometimes life is going to hand us all a situation
where we are not in charge,
we don't have the power to control it,
we can't bend reality to our will,
and what are we going to do then?

² Image from <http://roadtrip.cornick.us/?p=2420>.

How do we save ourselves from hopelessness?

No matter how hard we work for what we believe is right,
there are going to be times when justice eludes us.

What are we going to do then?

How do we keep going?

How do we save ourselves from guilt and despair?

The stream listened to the words of the desert.

“Let yourself be taken up by the wind and carried across.

Allow yourself to be changed.

Trust that on the other side you will become a river again.”

*The stream surrendered to the arms of the wind
and was blown across the desert.*

It’s scary to realize how much of life is not in our control,
as much as we wish it were.

It’s scary to look around and realize

how little we humans are in charge of all the forces and the powers
that shape our lives on this earth.

But wisdom rises up to meet us in this place of fear and distress.

Parker Palmer reminds us that we don’t *have* to be responsible
for making everything come out all right.³

Yes, we do what we can.

We do the best we can.

But we don’t have to do it all.

Each of us is one of *many* people all doing what they can,
doing their best too,

and, miraculously, sometimes their best is better than ours!

We don’t have to make everything happen all by ourselves.

We get to rest when we’re tired

³ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 88–89.

and trust that other hands will take up our work
until we're ready to come back again.
We get to allow ourselves to be carried—
by each other,
by the wind,
by the spirit of life that is always available to refresh and restore us
if we can just let ourselves rest and take it in.

And maybe the way the wind takes us
will be better than the way we thought we wanted to go.
I think of Sylvia Boorstein's words:

“I have no idea whether this [thing], which I resent,
is actually a good or a bad thing in the long run.
I can wait to see.”⁴

I hear this in dialogue with Parker Palmer's insight
that so often,

We want to organize and orchestrate things so thoroughly
that messiness will never bubble up around us
and threaten to overwhelm us....
[But] chaos is the precondition to creativity:
...life itself emerged from the void.⁵

My wish and prayer of aspiration
for you all and every person on earth
is that in times of joy and in times of trouble,
we do our best,
we do what we think is right,
and keep an open heart for whatever comes.
And may whatever comes be a gift and a blessing,
whether or not it is the one we think we want.

⁴ Sylvia Boorstein, *Happiness Is an Inside Job* (New York: Ballantine, 2007), p. 28.

⁵ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 89.

Because my sneaky faith is that life is smarter than we are
and life does a better job of running itself than we could ever do.
So what can we do
but do our best,
do what we can,
and keep an open heart?

Those early Unitarians who taught us to trust ourselves,
to trust our power to do good and make a difference,
to trust that our choices mattered—
they knew we could never control everything in this world.
No one can.
But they looked to the immense power beyond themselves,
for which there are as many true names
as there are hearts that beat and minds that soar—
they looked to that which we in this time and place so often call
the Spirit of Life and Love
and trusted that when they had done their best,
it would be enough.

*So the stream which flowed so bravely and beautifully down the mountainside
was carried across the desert in the arms of the wind,
and on the other side it fell gently to become a new stream,
flowing once more toward the infinite waters of the sea.*

So may it be.
Amen.