



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Another Way, Part Two,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on February 17, 2013

On the first Sunday of the new year, I preached a sermon called “There’s Another Way.” I said if there are changes you want to make in your life, if there are longings you have been meaning to listen to, if you wonder “Is there something more?”--that yes, there’s another way. A more openhearted, courageous way. Not necessarily the easiest way, another way is available, and possible.

That day I was talking about choices and change on the individual level. I said, “Let’s start by each doing our own work.” That day I shared with you the idea of choosing a word for the year, a word that would help remind you of who you are and how you want to live in the coming year. The word that came to me, the one I’m holding close, is “faithful.” That’s my hope and my desire these days--to be faithful. I understand that word faithful as having almost nothing to do with what you think or believe, and everything to do with how you act. Being faithful means being true to your self and your own particular calling. For me, right now, being faithful means paying better attention, being more fully present--not sleepwalking through life. I’m pretty sure it means saying “no” more often. Even disappointing you sometimes. Horrors.

I know some of you picked a word. Do want to share it? Want to say aloud what your word is for this year?

Yes, there’s another way to live, it’s always available, waiting for you to see it and choose it, if you will. It begins with a dream or a longing, and takes shape as you start to know what you have to do, and you begin. This is soul-saving and soul-satisfying work, and it’s what gives me hope for the future. That if enough people will do their own work, our world will become more peaceful and more just.

But it’s not just work just for us as individuals. Today let’s look at this on the institutional level. The truth is, the groups we gather in, including families and churches, are more than just the sum of their parts. As systems, they have their own personalities; power to help and to heal, and also to harm. Most days I’m grateful to be part of the institutional church. This is an interesting and exciting time to be a parish minister, when the religious world is in the midst of so much change. And I feel blessed to be here, in this particular place, with you.

But the church doesn’t have the best track record when it comes to change. There is something about human institutions that resist needed growth and adaptation. This is nothing new. In the

book of Exodus, do you remember what the Israelites did after Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt? They complained! They said, “We’re hungry! The food stinks here in the wilderness! When are we going to get there, to the promised land?” They even said “It was better when we were slaves back in Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

I love those words that were our first reading this morning, when God speaks to Israel through the prophet Ezekiel, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Eze. 36:26). For God, this is about being in relationship. “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (36:28). But I wonder how the people responded. Don’t you think they might have said, “Not so fast, God. We need think about it”?

Do you know those jokes about how many UUs or Baptists or whatever it takes to change a light bulb? Well, there’s one that transcends denominational differences. How many church people does it take to change a light bulb? And the church folks answer, “Change? Change?”

But that’s what I want us to engage today. To take this idea of another way, and apply it to our church. Is there another way we could be living out our faith? Are there better ways to be welcoming people, and going deeper and serving the wider world? Are we being faithful?

Two weeks ago, on a Saturday morning, your Board of Trustees had a mini-retreat. Sarina, Yolanda and Kate shared what they’d learned at a district workshop on “Revitalizing Your Congregation.” Early on, we acknowledged that there are good things happening here already. And there is more we could explore and try--ways of being church that could make us more accessible and relevant to younger generations, for example.

I have visions of us being like a little seminary, with all kinds of cool classes on everything from the Bible to world religions to spiritual direction to interfaith dialogue to organizing for justice. Here’s an idea for this spring--a Saturday workshop on spirituality and fly fishing! I have a vision of us being more connected to our neighborhood and to our city, helping this part of Haverhill to be safer, greener, more beautiful and more helpful to those in need. I have a vision of us as a congregation with a reputation, so that people say, “If you’re working for justice, or serving those in need, you want those UUs at your side.” And to some extent, this is already true. Many of you are already known in the wider community for your work and witness.

Right before Christmas we received a check for \$1000, made out to the church. I didn’t recognize the name of the donors, and in the subject line they had written “food pantry” so I wrote a note to the people whose name was on the check, saying thank you and asking about their intentions for that money--where we should put it. Here’s what they wrote back:

“When my wife and I made the donation to the UU food pantry, we simply wanted to support your church’s efforts to provide space for the pantry. So please keep the funds for yourself--use it to support your operating expenses, roof, whatever -- just keep doing what you’re doing. I was talking to a longtime Haverhill resident about responding to certain situations of people in need.

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<sup>1</sup> I’m grateful to my colleague, the Rev. Cheryl M. Walker, for her telling of this story, which inspired me to share it here.

He said that ‘you can always call the folks at the UU’ to help. I think that is a great testament to the impact you and your church are having -- being the hands of Christ, reaching out to others.”

Yes, we are doing good things already. But I say we have only started. I’m thinking it’s time now for us to pick up speed, and be more focused, and more effective. But that is up to you.

I gave you a glimpse of my vision. If I had to sum it up, I’d say I dream of us as community of liberation and transformation. A place where we lift up and empower and inspire individual lives, and, in the fullness of time, we help transform our corner of the world.

But this isn’t my church--it’s yours. What do you dream of, and what do you hunger for here? Say it out loud now, if you will. And please, come and share your hopes and dreams for this church at our “heartfelt conversation” in a few minutes.

One thing I know, is that we are better together. We need one another. My colleague Mark Morrison-Reed says, “Alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.” E.E. Cummings said “I carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart).” That poem is on the back of the bulletin, if you want to take it home.

We need one another. We need a community. You know this, don’t you?

Next Sunday we’ll welcome new members here. Joining the church means you’re ready to commit yourself to this community, to be in covenant with one another, to be part of our mission to grow spiritually, put our words into action, and leave the world better than we found it.

At its best, this church helps you to become yourself, to find that way that is your own. I am always glad when people decide to join the church because I do believe we can make a difference in your life, and I celebrate with you when you are ready to make this commitment and take this step.

But to make a difference, in individual lives and in the wider world, we need to be a strong and vital community. We need you, if we are going to be a community of liberation and transformation. So I ask those of you who haven’t joined the church--have you thought about it? Are you ready to make that commitment? If so, let me know! And if you want to explore this, have a conversation about it, now is the time--this week. Let me know, ok?

Some days I despair for the church. I wonder, “Is there a better way to help people and change lives? Am I a fool to think we are going to help heal and transform our world?” Sometimes I feel like I live at the corner of streets named Hope and Despair.

We live in a culture afflicted by violence and trauma. We live in a country that seems to care more about freedom than justice. That is enamored of, even addicted to, the pursuit of wealth and comfort. And yet, this country of ours is still full of good and decent, hardworking and well-meaning people, isn’t it?

When I find myself over on Despair Avenue, someone or something always helps bring me back over to Hope Street. One of you, a letter in the mail--messengers from that source of life and love.

This church reminds me, and I hope it reminds you, that there's another way. A way of living more fully, uncovering your light and letting it shine. A way of becoming who you were born to be, and helping others to do the same. A way of sharing your light with a world that hungers for it.

Every Sunday we say "Love is the doctrine of this church." This morning Claudia sang, "Give yourself to love, if you is what you're after. Open up your heart to the tears and laughter and give yourself to love."

That's what we are about here, being open to that great Love, and sharing it with one another and with the wider world. It's easy to speak of love in the broad sense. Everybody is for love. The hard part is to live out our faith and our aspirations in our daily lives. To make of them something particular and real.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, there's another way. Part one is acknowledging that. Part two is getting on with it. As individuals, and as a community. So I ask you, what do you want to do? What do you intend to do with this life, with this opportunity, you have been given? And what can we do together--here, in this place and this time?

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> In her poem, "When Death Comes," Mary Oliver writes, "When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real."