



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“Found in Translation,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on January 8, 2012

The best present I received this Christmas was not wrapped up--it was a conversation. It came the day after Christmas, when our family of four was sitting around, and the talk turned to the homily I gave here on Christmas Eve. My kids didn't particularly like it--hey thought it had too much God and faith in it. This didn't surprise me too much, because in the last year, each of them has told me that they don't believe in God. They kind of like to rib me about this. They tell me I should be more rational.

I might have taken this criticism of my Christmas Eve homily personally, because I want to do right by folks here, especially on that night. People come to church on Christmas Eve carrying so many things, and I want our service to be helpful to them. I have the crazy hope that someone may find their life opened, blessed, even transformed by what happens here on Christmas Eve. And not just on Christmas--I have that hope all the time--that this church community is changing lives for the better, helping you to live happier and more helpful lives.

But I didn't take it personally. So my words on Christmas Eve were too much about God for my children. I told them that was okay--I wasn't preaching to them. I said on that night I was thinking particularly of the people who find Christmas difficult--the people for whom Christmas brings up painful memories of what was lost or what never was, people who wonder if they are worthy of love or happiness, people who have lost hope, because of their difficult lives, that God cares about them.

We had this spacious conversation about the nativity story, about incarnational theology and church and God. At a couple of times in that conversation, I looked at Tracey and smiled, happy that the four of us were in the same room, talking about something I care a lot about. I don't think I changed their minds, and I wasn't trying to. It was like a Christmas miracle! It made me so happy to be able to have this conversation with my kids, because, you know, there are plenty of times when their primary contribution to a talk with their parents is to roll their eyes and look for an escape route. That we were talking theology was icing on the cake.

All this underscores something that, as a preacher, I am constantly aware of--that my perspective and theology is not necessarily the same as yours. I often wonder about you: how do you hear what I have to say, especially when you don't share my particular beliefs? I try to preach to everyone here, to be broad enough in my approach, but I know that isn't always possible.

Our UU tradition welcomes theological diversity. We embrace multiple paths here; we don't think there is just one way. Maybe there should be a disclaimer at the start of every sermon: "I don't expect you to agree with me." I hope the sermon is part of a much larger conversation. I hope we will foster ongoing theological exploration in this community, because that's how we will grow in our faith.

Years ago I had a conversation with an elder minister who said, "What your congregation will expect and deserve from you is a deeply-lived and authentic spirituality." The hope is that by living my own faith life I can help you to more deeply live your own, perhaps be a companion and guide. Not that your faith life is a copy of mine, but that you are working out what you believe; what, as Kathleen Norris says, you give your heart to.

Isn't that why we're here? To each find our way closer to the mystery of life, to be full of awe and wonder, and more deeply connected with one another? One of the main reasons to be part of a community like this one is to go deeper in the spiritual life; that is, to live lives of integrity and meaning and purpose, lives which reflect our aspirations and values.

Spirituality, at its best, is not a solo pursuit. An authentic spiritual search inevitably draws one into community with others. But we don't all believe the same thing! And how could we? We are different people, with different experiences. The question is: are we destined to be like a modern tower of Babel, everyone speaking their different truths, but unable to comprehend one another, unwilling to listen to those who are speaking a different language?

I have a particular theology that I've developed over time. It is centered about my own experience of the presence of God and is grounded in the life of Jesus and the cycles of the Christian liturgical year. It's been shaped by time spent in trout streams and under the night sky and informed by contemporary theologians and poets and, of course, by you.

I wonder about you, especially those who have a different theology and practice. Do you get tired of hearing about mine? I figure some of you must, especially if you are more of an agnostic or atheist.

I know my theology must at least occasionally irk some of you. Some of you have told me so. But what am I supposed to do? I could water it down, so it would be less grating, and I know some ministers who do that. But that would be a betrayal of what that senior colleague said to me: "What your congregation will expect and deserve from you is a deeply-lived and authentic spirituality."

No, my job, as I see it, is to live my faith with as much integrity and love as I can manage, and trust that, with God's help, it will be enough.

Your job, as I understand it, is to enter into this dance with me, and with one another, and with that Spirit in which we live and move and have our being; whatever you call it, whether you believe in that Mystery at all. To be part of a rich and deep and vital conversation, a conversation

that is not limited to words but includes silence and meditation and art and singing and so much more.

Your job, and mine, is to translate. To listen as best we can to each other, to take those statements and stories of faith and translate them into something that we can hear and use. We need to become religiously multi-lingual, better at listening and better at articulating our particular faith. It's the only way that our diversity will be a blessing, and not a curse.

The only other alternative in a theologically diverse community like this one is to keep our beliefs to ourselves, a religious version of "don't ask, don't tell." But you know that doesn't work, don't you? And it can actually do harm, especially to those who find themselves in the minority. No, we are here to get in touch with our beliefs, what we give our hearts to, and to share our experiences and perspectives with one another.

I want us to be a community where we can name and claim our understandings of the holy, where we can talk about our spiritual practices, our successes and our failures, with honesty and humility. Where we can hear another's story with reverence and respect. Where one person's sharing doesn't stop the conversation, but invites deeper reflection and more sharing.

Joanna Fortna recently suggested that we start offering an alternative to coffee hour, a small group gathering for people who want to talk about what the sermon or the morning worship stirred up in them. I love this idea, and invite you to try it out today. You're invited, after you get your coffee or tea, to join Joanna for a conversation around the table in the Ladies Parlor during coffee hour.

One of my hopes is that our worship will better reflect our theological diversity. I hope some of you will take turns leading our prayer and meditation time. And I hope more of you will share your theology or your faith journey in a testimonial some Sunday. Let me know if you are interested.

I don't see my own theology as fully formed or set in stone. It's an ongoing exploration, and you are a part of that process. More than you know, the stories and questions you share with me continue to shape and inform my faith. I hope we begin to see ourselves as a community of theologians, people actively engaged in making meaning, in articulating what it is we give our hearts to, and letting those understandings inform the choices we make and the ways we live our lives.

In struggling with my own beliefs and doubts, a helpful companion has been Kathleen Norris, author of our reading<sup>1</sup> today. Her effort to reconcile head and heart, faith and doubt, her desire to be both a modern thinking person and a person of faith makes her a particularly useful guide for some of us, and I commend her to you.

What helped Kathleen Norris through her impasse was her life as a poet, in which, she says, "I am used to saying what I don't thoroughly comprehend." She continues, "I began to appreciate religious belief as a relationship, like a deep friendship, or a marriage, something that I could

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, "Belief, Doubt and Sacred Ambiguity," from *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

plunge into, not knowing exactly what I was doing or what would be demanded of me in the long run.”

You don’t plunge into something that doesn’t feel safe or inviting. And you don’t have much of a relationship until you jump in with both feet. I hope you experience this church as a place where it’s safe to share your beliefs and your doubts. I hope we are becoming a community where it’s not only safe, but it’s expected that you talk about your faith and theology and spiritual practice.

I know from experience what a joy it is to find your way back to faith. To struggle with belief and doubt, and come to a sense of clarity and liberation through that struggle. To find new ways of knowing and being. To make meaning from the stories of our tradition and the events of our lives. A particular joy for me has been to reclaim language that at one time was foreign or threatening. I can honestly say that my faith has been found in translation.

We need not be lost amidst the diversity of beliefs and practices that surround us. No, if you are willing to be part of this theological dance, if you will bring your head and your heart, your body and your soul, then you will see that faith is not lost, but found, in translation.

Together let us learn that translating is itself a holy act; that the listening and the speaking, the worshipping and the justice making--these are ways we will be in touch with what is holy and what is real.

Let us be people who know there are many names for the holy. Let us learn the names that are life-giving and liberating so that we can share them with a world hungry for a good word. Let us be grateful and let us be glad for the invitation to be part of this holy work.

Amen.