



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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### “Stake Your Claim” a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson on October 14, 2012

Before I came here, I was the assistant minister in North Andover for three years. One of my responsibilities was leading Coming of Age, a year-long program for ninth graders, in which each youth is paired with an adult mentor, and they explore the big religious questions. We met about twice a month to talk about the nature of God, about good and evil, about death and dying, about spiritual practices and worship and serving others, and about UUism--our history, principles and sources.

I loved working with those youth and their mentors. For the session about God, I put together a list of quotations that illustrated the different ways people understand and talk about God. Here's one from Martin Luther: “What your heart clings to and relies on, that is your God.” And here's one that I have tacked up in my office, from the little book Children's Letters to God, by a boy named Neil: “Dear God: How do you feel about people who don't believe in you? Somebody else wants to know. A friend.”

One day, one of those youth called me up, and asked if he could come and talk about God and theology. When we met, he started by apologizing, saying he knew I was busy and he wouldn't take too much of my time; that I must have more important things to do. I said, “Are you kidding? I can't think of anything more important today, or that I'd rather do. I think any minister who got a call from a teenager wanting to talk theology would jump at the chance.”

The church is a place where we can have those conversations about what we believe, about what we give our heart to. Where else are you going to do this? I hope Sunday morning is one place this conversation happens, but I hope it's not the only place, because it's kind of one-sided--I get to do most of the talking! We need places to continue the conversation. Our small groups--spiritual direction, knitting from the heart, and small group ministry--are one place and classes like the one Sally and I are leading that starts this Thursday, called Articulating Your UU Faith, is another.

One thing I discovered in working with those 9th graders in North Andover was that their adult mentors were at least as interested in the questions as the youth were. Maybe even more so. Again and again they would tell me, “I wish I'd had the chance to start thinking about these things when I was their age.” One of the mentors was so excited about this that she suggested that we develop a Coming of Age program for adults--we could call it “Coming of Middle Age,” she said.

But then one of the youth observed that the acronym for Coming of Middle Age is COMA. Which may be how our teenagers see us anyway!

Over time I noticed was that it was easier for these adults to jump into this work when they were doing it to help a young person. One of them admitted, "It would be harder to say yes to this, if I was doing it only for myself. I'd be more likely to think I was too busy or not worthy of taking that time for myself." Sound familiar to anyone?

It's easy to put off doing this work, wrestling with these big questions, because they are not easy ones to answer. I tell the youth in our Coming of Age program here, "It's easy to say what you don't believe. And that's not a bad place to start. But then tell me what you say yes to, what you give your heart to, what you put your hope in, what you are willing to ground your life on."

This is what I want you to hear today--the importance of doing your own religious and spiritual work. I hope we will have a long conversation about this, because it's one of the most important things we can be doing here.

We are a different kind of church. We have this "many paths" approach. We don't assume that everyone here believes the same thing or sees things the same way. And we believe this is a blessing.

But it comes with a price. To be a good Unitarian Universalist, you have to do your own work. You have to be able to say, "This is where I stand." You have to be working on and working out your own theology. But you don't have to do this alone. You shouldn't do it all alone. And that's what I want to talk to you about today. About doing this work, engaging these big questions about God, good and evil, and death; about spiritual practice and service. No one here can tell you what to believe. It's up to you to find the answers. It can be hard work, but it is some of the best work you'll ever do.

The German mystic Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us to focus on the process as well as the product. He advised a young seeker, "to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves.... Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

The point is, to engage with these big questions. Not to avoid them, or put them off. This is not just an intellectual exercise I'm talking about. Life happens, sad and bad things happen to everyone, and you need something to hold on to when faced with loss and disappointment and betrayal.

What you need, especially in tough times, is a spiritual toolkit. A way to articulate your faith. Resources to draw upon when things are hard. Practices that help you to lead a more whole and happy and helpful life.

Good religion gives you both roots and wings. It grounds you and it sets you free. In her poem, "When Death Comes," Mary Oliver writes,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

I hope you are developing a spirituality that puts you in touch with amazement; that helps you to take the world into your arms. Mary Oliver continues,

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened  
or full of argument.  
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I hope you are developing a faith that is life-giving, grounded in what you can't help but believe. That will sustain you through the dark night of the soul. That will provide you with companions for the journey.

One danger of our liberal religious tradition is that the freedom we have, to explore far and wide, to sample from a diversity of religious and spiritual offerings, that freedom can keep us from ever moving from the shallows into the depths. What I know is that you have to ground yourself somewhere, if you want to go deeper in the spiritual life. You have to find practices and companions that feed and sustain you. Some of us are grounded in the Christian tradition, others in Buddhist or Pagan practice. Many of us are putting together a theology and spirituality that is a hybrid of what nourishes us. But can you yet articulate yet what that spirituality is? Can you tell a friend or coworker what it is that you believe? Can you say what gets you through hard times?

The image I want to leave with you with comes from the settlers who moved across this country in search of land and opportunity. When they moved across the prairie, when they found a place they wanted to settle, they marked the boundaries of the land they wanted to claim by driving stakes into the ground. They literally "staked their claim." They didn't say, "this is an nice area, and we'll wander around and try this spot, and then another, and another." No, they picked one spot, and staked their claim, and began to build a life there, in that particular place.

That is what I encourage you to do. To resist the temptation to be all over the map, to move beyond saying, "this is what I don't believe." To do the work so you're able to say, "this is where I stand."

When our Coming of Age youth are struggling to articulate their own faith statements, I say to them, "You are not carving this in stone. Over the course of your life things will happen that will cause you change your perspective and ideas. Tell us where you stand right now."

Likewise, to stake your theological claim doesn't mean these things will never change. A healthy and living theology is bound to evolve over time. But it has to start from somewhere. It has to have boundaries and limitations. Alexander Hamilton said, "Those who stand for nothing will fall

for anything.” In this church you have the freedom and the responsibility to make your own search for truth and meaning. I challenge you, this year, to work on articulating your own faith. That class that starts this week could help!

It matters what we believe. It will determine where we will stand, and for what, with whom. So tell me, where do you stand? Where do you stake your claim, and what do you hope to build there? What you give your heart to, and put your faith in? Let’s be a community where we live these questions, and together find our way toward the answers.

Amen.