

Fearless: Universalism's Invitation for Us Today

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, Unitarian Universalist Church of Pueblo, March 27, 2011

Join with me, if you would, in an imaginary visit to an America in trouble. Unemployment is shockingly high. People can't afford to buy the things they need or pay for their houses. The whole world seems to be in upheaval. And just a few years ago everything looked so good. Now we are all afraid, and even the community we used to count on is in tatters.

Into this time of trouble comes a leader, a smart, articulate man. And he says something reassuring, something we need to take seriously today: that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

You could be forgiven for having thought I was planning to talk about Obama. Our country and world today are in pretty bad shape, and by some lights we might be approaching Depression-era troubles. But today I am starting with FDR, inviting us to reflect together on fear and fearlessness, and only coming back to our own time and place right at the end.

I've read that FDR ran a non-campaign in 1932, that he did not say much about his specific plans until he was actually in office, and that his famous "fear itself" quote during his first inaugural speech was a way of warming up the country for what would turn out to be a pretty radical set of approaches to restoring America. While all of these things may be historically true, they also may not seem all that relevant to our time. We don't have FDR's pedigree or prestige. We don't run the country; most of us don't really "run" anything. But our Unitarian Universalist heritage gives us justifiable cause for fearlessness, for ourselves affirming that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Today I would like us to think about how universalism in particular enables us to act fearlessly, to go courageously out into the world and heal it, to help others lay down their fears and become part of the solution.

What are we afraid of? And how does universalism in particular help us conquer our fear? Let me start by considering some of the things I think we fear. First and most immediately, we might be afraid that bad things will happen to us or those we love. Those bad things might have to do with other people treating us or those we love hatefully, or they might have to do with larger social structures that really don't care about the well-being of people like ourselves. Bad things might happen because of aging, or an inherited genetic disorder. Bad things might happen because we or those we love belong to a devalued or dehumanized social group. There are all sorts of reasons bad things might happen to us or to people we care about, and if we are honest, we must admit that we ourselves, we alone, cannot prevent such things from happening. And universalism as a way of understanding the world cannot itself prevent bad things from happening.

What else are we afraid of? How about difference? Oh, we talk a good talk in our liberal religious world about welcoming everyone and we really do strive to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people, whether they are like us or not. But most of us have been taught, by our families, by society more generally, or by our own life experiences if we are unlucky, that people who are different from us are to be feared. They are not trustworthy. They may be dangerous. If

their politics are different from our own, we can easily interpret that as meaning that they don't want what is best for us. If their personal values are different from ours, we fear them inflicting those values on us. Our fear of human difference may tie back to our fear of bad things happening to us; we may be afraid that people who are unlike us won't respect us and will have no compunction about hurting us. And if difference is a point of fear, how can universalism address this fear honestly and seriously enough? Isn't universalism too mushy, with its claim that everyone is equally loved? Doesn't universalism ignore the fact that there are some people that perhaps we really ought to fear, those people who are different from us?

Many of us may also be afraid that no matter what we do to heal the world, it will not be enough. We may be afraid that in the end, our actions will be for nothing, will count for nothing; the world will, so to speak, go to hell in a hand-basket. Those who value power over love will win, simply because if one side uses power and the other side doesn't, the side that uses power often wins. We can protest that the inherent dignity and worth of all sorts of people is at stake, and it won't matter; other people, with different priorities, seem to have an awful lot of power and plenty of us feel that it is being used in ways that do not support any of the principles we care about. This fear might make itself manifest in response to local, national, or global politics, but there are troubles in the world that are not reducible to politics, and this fear finds evidence for its reasonableness in a wide range of places. Again, universalism cannot keep those we might consider the "bad guys" from winning, nor can universalism protect us from the policies, values, or priorities that they bring to bear when they win.

If we are brutally honest with ourselves, we might also admit to being afraid that nothing ultimately matters. We might fear that the universe is empty and desolate, that there is no force either for good or evil out there, and that at the end of the day, this is all there is. Now, some of us will protest that this is good news, not bad news: having jettisoned the non-existent God we were forced to worship as kids, we now acknowledge joyfully that all meaning that there is to be made, we have to make ourselves. The universe's emptiness prods us on to create fullness. That works for some of us. But others of us don't feel that way, and might in fact be afraid that there is nothing greater than ourselves on our side. The fear that nothing ultimately matters connects back to the fear that bad things will happen to us, in this case because there is nothing to prevent bad things from happening to us. If the universe is empty and desolate, whatever good or bad things come our way are a matter of sheer randomness, or, perhaps worse, of patterned aggression or ill-intent on the part of other people. And the fear of an empty universe also connects back to the fear that no matter how hard we work to make the world what we know it could and should be, we will fail – because there is nothing to guarantee success. It will all come down to who has greater numbers, who has more money to buy advertising time, and who is willing to be more Machiavellian to succeed, because morals get you nowhere. In an empty universe, nice guys finish last. Period, the end. And if the universe is empty, universalism is an empty claim. It sounds good, but it's useless and even misleading.

Finally, we might be afraid that we don't matter, that our lives are insignificant, that no one will remember us at the end of the day. Oh, maybe one or two friends or family members. But not the world. No, once we are gone and those who loved us most closely are gone, that's it. We wink out of existence and so does everything about us. It will have been as though we were not here at all. And this may in some ways be the deepest fear of all: to feel that we just don't matter. If we

don't have witnesses, if people do not gather across the generations to memorialize and celebrate us, if our photos are not passed down by people who know our names and can say something about us, we may wonder, what is the point then? So what? If we don't matter, what does matter? And what does universalism matter?

Now, you might have your own list of personal fears that I have not touched on today, because I've limited myself to some of the deepest existential and social fears that we in this congregation might have. The fears I've discussed are serious business. They can paralyze us, depress us, and keep us from bringing our best selves to each other and to the world. These fears can become self-fulfilling prophecies in which we start inflicting fear on ourselves and other people because it's just safer to assume the worst and act accordingly. And thus it comes to be that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." FDR was a smart man. We really, seriously, must fear "fear itself." For fear itself can leave a trail of destruction in its wake that rivals a natural disaster. It can shatter hearts, pulverize relationships, facilitate violent social upheavals, and turn a country into a feuding, distrustful, snarling media circus while regular people lose their chances at decent lives.

Fear of danger. Fear of difference. Fear of meaninglessness. So much fear. What are we to do? How can we reframe the situation, change the narrative, fear only fear itself and act accordingly?

Enter universalism, the shocking claim that the universe is not empty, that there is a deep mystery that undergirds all things, and even more shocking, that the heart of the mystery is love. This mystery can never really be captured in a doctrine, a slogan, or even a religion. And you'll notice that I am not using the word "God." Historic universalism, in its Christian context, made the radical claim that the God who loved humanity too much to send anyone to hell was the God whose love was revealed in Jesus Christ. And we Unitarian Universalists are descended in part from that Christian strand, reject it though most of us do. But universalism today comes with just as powerful a message and it is available to everyone, not just Christians.

Universalism tells us that even when bad things happen to us or to those we love, there is a basic goodness at the heart of things. Universalism says that we always have the option to stay close to that basic goodness, even when our lives seem pretty bad. We can cultivate gratitude, no matter what. We can reach out to those who love us, in whose love the love of the deep mystery is made manifest, and ask for their support. We can develop spiritual practices that help us draw near to the mystery. When we sing "I Know this Rose Will Open" and really mean it, when we really know our souls will unfurl their wings, even if we have no idea how that will happen, we are acting on the faith of universalism. When we sing "Spirit of Life" and feel ourselves welcoming the spirit of life into our hearts, we know the mystery has taken us into its heart. We may be in pain. Bad things may be happening. We can fervently wish that they were not happening. But if we accept universalism as the deepest truth about how things are, we don't have to be afraid of the bad stuff. It can only hurt us to a certain depth. It can't destroy us. It cannot separate us from the mystery, which at its heart is love. Does that sound Christian? The language comes from our Christian heritage, but it is not in any way reducible to Christianity. We don't have to be Christian or even theist to find our way to the mystery, or to be found by it. The mystery doesn't care what we believe, or whether we believe. That's the whole point of the mystery: it is for all

of us. It is on all of our sides – it’s *for* all of us, not *against* any of us. And it is intended for everyone – it’s for *all* of us, not just *some* of us.

There’s more. Universalism tells us that difference is not to be feared, that since the love at the heart of the mystery is for every single one of us, none of us gets pride of place. We may all have to struggle to live together with our differences, but universalism invites us to see this struggle as one of love, of learning how to love and be loved by people very different from ourselves. Universalism tells us that even when it looks like the bad guys are winning, the story isn’t over, and universalism tells us that the mystery is persistently on the side of love. Universalism tells us that, far from nothing mattering, love matters, and love matters utterly and ultimately. Anything and everything we do matters if we do it out of a spirit of love. Anytime we choose love, we are helping the mystery matter just a little more. Universalism says that the universe is not empty, it is flooded with love, and it is our job to be the physicists of love, to learn how to interpret the particles of love that zing around us every second even when they are not visible to the naked eye. Once we know how to track those particles of love, those waves of love, once we can document them, we will never think of the universe as empty again. And finally, universalism says that we matter. Each and every one of us matters. Each and every one of us is absolutely crucial to the well-being of the world, to the flourishing of our friends, to the healing of the hopelessly pained. Universalism says that when we act out of love, we are doing the mystery’s work. Universalism says that is what we are here to do: the mystery’s work. All we have to do is act out of genuine love. That’s it. That’s all that matters. And it matters more deeply than we can ever know.

Universalism is all about how fear doesn’t get the last word because love does. If we demanded a single phrase that captured universalism, something we could say to a friend while riding an elevator for only a single floor, we might do worse than borrow that overused phrase from 1 John 4:18, perfect love casts out all fear. And forget the perfect part. Human beings are not perfect, though we are fabulous. Let’s stick with the simplest possible version of the claim: love casts out fear. Anytime we act in love, we cast fear out of the picture. It’s a kind of exorcism. The more we love, the more fearless we become. The more we help others love, the more fearless we help them become. If we came to a point of loving ourselves, each other, and the world fully, I think we would find that we were genuinely not afraid anymore. Of anything.

We live in a moment in time that in some ways is horrifyingly reminiscent of the state of affairs when FDR gave that first inaugural speech. Many of us are very afraid and feel entirely justified in being afraid. This is a good moment to remember FDR’s sage advice, and a good moment to remember that we stand in a tradition that offers us fearlessness. If the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, we don’t have to fear it. Let me say that again: if the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, we don’t have to fear it. We can choose courage, today and all days. May we do so, for the sake of the mystery, in the spirit of the mystery, and so that we may take up the work of the mystery. Amen, and blessed be.