

## Inspired to Act: Drawing Ethical Strength from Our Sources of Meaning

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You know how it is. Sometimes you just get really angry at someone. Maybe it's someone you know and love but you don't love how they are behaving at the moment, maybe it's a politician who said something unbelievably offensive, or maybe it's someone you know who, if you were being truthful, you wish you didn't know them. Either way, you wind up steamed and it's not good either for you or the other person.

So, this happened to me not all that long ago and I was super crabby, just sitting at my desk at home smoldering. And what should happen but our dogs Max and Butterscotch came right over and snuggled me. Max, who's a Golden Retriever, used his large snout to knock my hands right off the computer keyboard so I could scratch his head. Butterscotch, who's a Goldendoodle, unleashed his giraffe-length tongue and started licking my face. And suddenly I was not in a bad mood anymore. Then a song I really love came on the computer and by the end of the song I was in a tender, reflective, awe-struck, and grateful mood. All of this happened in the course of maybe five minutes: I went from zero to sixty on the happy meter.

Recently I've been attempting to shift our conversations about ethics from grim demand to joyous response to invitation. Today we're talking about drawing strength to live an ethical life from our various sources of meaning, which I am going to refer to today as scriptures.

Now, I well understand that this designation could trouble people for two reasons. First, scripture is often one of the terms found on the list of "baggage" words for Unitarian Universalists. These are terms that have been used to limit rather than support flourishing earlier in our religious lives by frightening us with hell, demanding behavior or beliefs that felt completely unnatural to us, or providing excuses for us to judge other people. And I think scripture is often found on that list of problematic concepts because so many people do use the Bible or the Qu'ran as a tool of violence. It's no accident, for example, that the six or seven biblical passages used to condemn homosexuality are known as the clobber passages by those whom they injure. So, we may be used to thinking of scripture in a negative way, or, at least, as something that does not apply to us.

But there's another reason the idea that a pet or a song could be scripture sounds simply, well, weird. We are used to defining scripture as religious texts, holy writ, or holy books. There might be religious writings that we find meaningful; plenty of UUs are drawn to the writing of the Sufi Rumi, or to the poems of UU Mary Oliver, or to words set to music such as the songs of Peter Mayer or even some of the hymns we sing here each Sunday. Some UUs might even be inspired by the Gospel of Mark or the Psalms or the Hadith of the Muslim Prophet Muhammed. But can a purring, head-butting cat serve as scripture? What about an inspired performance of Barber's Adagio for Strings? What about the ocean at sunset? What does it mean to call these things scripture?

As is so often the case, Peter Mayer has begun to answer this question for us in his song "Holy Now." He refers to a little red-winged bird shining like a burning bush, singing like a scripture

verse. Now, I don't speak bird and so I don't understand what exactly the bird is saying, and I bet you don't either. But that's not Mayer's point. The bird isn't singing a literal scripture verse; rather, the bird's singing itself calls to us as a scripture verse would. It is the beauty and exuberance of the bird's song, its careless joy, its freedom, that most of us find powerful. The bird's singing is like a scripture verse because it moves us and builds up strong, positive feelings within us – the very things that scripture verses on paper are supposed to do.

Following Mayer but expanding on him a bit, I'd like to propose that holy scripture for UUs is whatever evokes truth, power, and meaning for us, whatever calls us forward to greater joy and gratitude and humility and commitment, whatever puts us in relationship with whatever we understand to be the sacred. This certainly could be world religious writings, of course, but it could also be the arts – music, art, dance, theater, non-religious writing. We might find the sacred in nature, in Peter Mayer's little red-winged bird. We might find the holy in our relationships with people, with animal companions, or both. Cats and dogs provide great scripture for me, as does Godspell, Peter Mayer's music in case you had not already figured that out, selected world religious materials, various kinds of non-fiction writing, the ocean, certain neighborhoods in New York City, and a number of Broadway musicals. Among other things.

This way of defining scripture may seem odd but my sense is that it is not completely new to UUism. We have long recognized that truth, power, and meaning have made their appearance across different times, places, and religions. Consider our opening hymn, slightly adapted:

“It sounds along the ages, soul answering to soul.  
It kindles on the pages of every Bible scroll.  
The Psalmist heard and sang it. From martyr lips it broke  
And prophet tongues outrang it till sleeping nations woke.

From Sinai's cliffs it echoed. It breathed from Buddha's tree.  
It thrilled in Athens' market. It hallowed Galilee.  
The hammer stroke of Luther, the Pilgrims' seaside prayer,  
The oracles of Concord one holy word declare.

It calls, and lo! New justice! It speaks and lo, new truth!  
In ever nobler stature and unexhausted youth  
Forever on resounding and knowing naught of time.  
Our laws but catch the music of its eternal chime.”

What exactly is the “it” in this hymn if not the sacred itself? It is the wisdom of UUism that the sacred has spoken and continues to speak, that we find it in the Bible, yes, but also under the Bodhi tree and in Socrates' conversations and in the continued struggles of Christians over the centuries to find truth. And we affirm that there is new justice to be sought and new truth to be found, and our scriptures, whatever they may be, will inspire us to act justly and to seek the truth.

That said, however, an important question still remains: how exactly does engagement with our scriptures, our sources of meaning and power and truth, help us lead joyfully ethical lives? What does that little red-winged bird offer me that changes my life? And here, I think there are three

separate but interrelated ways that our scriptures empower and inspire us to act ethically. First, they tell us both directly and metaphorically how things are and how they should be. Second, they are sources of joy, gratitude, and humility, all of which can inspire us to make ethical decisions. Third, they are sources of wisdom about how to behave ethically. I'll consider each of these in turn.

Scriptures tell us both directly and metaphorically how things are and should be. This is pretty straightforward in the actual holy books of most religions. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible criticize Hebrew leadership for failing to live up to God's commands of justice and kindness, thus signaling both that the world ought to be filled with justice and kindness and that it is not. The magnificent Sufi writer Rumi says there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground, meaning that God welcomes all forms of gratitude and that our creativity in worship is a delight to God. Jesus says that it is the despised Samaritan rather than the socially valued priest that was a neighbor to the beaten traveler and in offering this parable invites his listeners to imagine that the world is profoundly different than they think it is.

Fair enough. But what does it mean to say that nature, or a loving relationship, or a stunning dance performance, tell us how things are and should be? I'll pick three of my own types of scripture to try to answer that question. First, when I gaze out on the ocean, I feel a strong sense that everything is interconnected, that the waters of the continents and the waters of the oceans are part of one large body of water. Then I observe that it is humanity in its frailty that decides where the Indian Ocean stops and the Arabian Sea begins. We do the political dividing, not the ocean itself. We determine where ships may and may not sail legally and the flags they may fly in particular bodies of water. The ocean knows something about the interdependent web that we struggle to learn every single day. And, were we to live up to our own principles, the ocean would simply be one great ocean, shared by the people of the world in the single interdependent web reflected by the ocean.

Second, I began today's sermon with a story about my dogs. One of them, the Goldendoodle, is actually fairly smart but the Golden Retriever could not be called smart by any definition of the term, except possibly by a pathological liar. But what he has, and indeed what both dogs have, is very high emotional intelligence. They are exquisitely sensitive to the moods and needs of others, and while this can sometimes be annoying, such as when one is trying to work, often it is tender and moving. Watching my dogs emote love and concern makes me want to be better at doing this myself, though hopefully without losing my mental capacities in the process. I find myself watching them, wondering what it would take for me to improve my ability to be more sensitive to other's needs, convinced that if a dog can do it I could too.

Finally, as many of you know I find a great deal of wisdom, meaning and power in Broadway musicals. They serve as a type of scripture for me because they show me real life at a remove, stylized, filled with beauty and brokenness but also reflecting reality back in a slightly odd way that makes me think about it differently. Is religion really about an acting troupe wandering around New York City reciting parables and singing cool songs? No, but when I watch the movie *Godspell* I am reminded of how wisdom, power, and meaning are developed in community and specifically in interactions between people with different insights and limits who build each other up. Does life really come down to living in a crappy neighborhood and making

mostly unhealthy personal choices? If you watch either *Rent* or *Avenue Q* you could be forgiven for thinking so, but when I watch or listen to either show I come away with a very different message about how things are: “everything in life is only for now.” And I come away with a very different message about how I ought to respond to the first message: “There’s only now. There’s only here. Give in to love or live in fear. No other path. No other way. No day but today.” With all due respect to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Mahayana sutras*, both of which also offer wisdom, my life is profoundly enriched by the messages of such musicals as *Godspell*, *Rent*, and *Avenue Q*.

But scripture’s value is not limited to telling us what is or could be. It also puts us into positive mindsets by evoking joy, gratitude, wonder, humility, and other such responses. Take Peter Mayer’s music. I cannot listen to his song “Holy Now” without falling into a state of gratitude and, usually, tears. It’s the same with many of his other songs: the seamless integration of moving music and thought-provoking lyrics brings me joy or, better, leads me to joy and invites me to drink deeply of it. My visits back to my hometown New York City, however dirty and greedy and complicated the place may be, wash me with bliss. All I have to do is walk down Seventh Avenue from 16<sup>th</sup> Street toward Greenwich Village and I’m in heaven, provided heaven can have that much trash on the streets and so many really cheap pizza joints. And coming home to the animals at the end of a work day is always an experience of peace, especially when Sandy, our tawny tabby cat, comes over and licks my fingers and purrs loudly enough to be heard in Kansas. And all of these positive states of being – gratitude, joy, bliss, and peace – have a further effect on me. They make me more willing to make ethical decisions, not out of a grumpy sense of obligation but because what else would I do when I am so damned happy?

But there’s more. Sometimes scriptures do more than just invite us to a good world and put us in a mind to want to be there. Sometimes they provide us with guidance about how to live in that world. Consider our lovely words of welcome today, from Unitarian minister Robert French Leavens: “Holy and beautiful the custom which brings us together in the presence of the Most High: to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones in absence, to give thanks, to make confession, to offer forgiveness, to be enlightened, and to be strengthened.”

These are powerful actions we are invited to take: facing our ideals, remembering our loved ones in absence, giving thanks, making confession, offering forgiveness, opening to enlightenment and becoming strengthened. If we do these things, we are likely to grow as human beings and to want to be our best selves in the world. But these are not always the easiest practices to develop, let alone maintain. How should we pursue them?

Let’s take forgiveness, which I have found extremely difficult to offer, especially when I think the other person doesn’t deserve it. Which is pretty much always. Fortunately, I have found wisdom about forgiveness in several sources that I encounter as scriptural. For example, following guidance found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, I’ve prayed for the well-being of people who I was not yet ready to forgive. Is this fun or easy? Absolutely not. Does it make me a sucker? Well, maybe. But hey, it’s something to do. It’s a way to get started. Buddhism has a wonderful loving-kindness meditation which I’ve also used. It is basically a set of blessings, starting with oneself: May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be happy. Then it goes on to use the same blessings directed toward someone

about whom we feel positive, then toward someone about whom we feel neutral, which might be someone we don't know, then toward someone with whom we are having a difficult time. This might be the person we are not yet ready to forgive. Then we offer the blessing to ourselves and the other three people we've already considered. Finally, we offer the blessing to the whole universe.

Taking these kinds of actions might not be exactly equivalent to saying to someone, "I forgive you." But they soften us and remind us of our own best intentions and sometimes leave just a little crack of space into which our willingness to forgive can slip.

One more story about how to forgive, which comes from a musical. The blockbuster hit *Wicked*, which re-imagines the relationship between Glinda the Good Witch and Elphaba the Bad Witch, reaches its final dramatic moment as the two witches, once sworn enemies but now best friends, are saying goodbye for the last time. Glinda is convinced that Elphaba is about to die and wants to make things right before that happens. Elphaba actually has a great plot up her sleeve and is not about to die at all but can't let Glinda know that. In this context, they sing a lovely song together called "For Good" to show their appreciation of each other. As the song reaches the bridge, Elphaba sings, "And just to clear the air I ask forgiveness for the things I've done you blamed me for," to which Glinda's response is, "But then I guess we know there's blame to share." The bridge ends with them singing, "And none of it seems to matter anymore."

Yes, I know; this is a Broadway musical, not the Gospel According to Matthew. But here are some lessons that one might rightly take from the song, especially in its context in the musical: Ask forgiveness if you think you might never see the other person again, and specifically ask forgiveness for things that you admit having actually done. If someone asks your forgiveness and you think you might never see them again, forgive them but don't stop there. Ask for forgiveness yourself in return if you've done anything that might need forgiving. Acknowledge shared blame. And see if you can make a joint forgiveness experience out of it. It might make your friendship stronger.

If we let them, our scriptures can tell us about the world, both the world we have and the world we should have. If we let them, our scriptures can infuse us with wonderful feelings and the energy to turn those feelings into good works. And if we let them, our scriptures can even instruct us in how to carry out some of those good works. Are we ready to find our scriptures wherever we find our truth, meaning, and power? Are we ready to encounter the sacred in the myriad of ways the sacred may appear? Are we ready, in fact, to be scripture for other people, to let the sacred shine through us? If so, we have some wonderful opportunities ahead of us: opportunities for wisdom, for delight, and for being part of what makes the world a better place. May we take up these opportunities with passion and joy. Amen and blessed be.