

**"A UU Spirituality For Those Who Are
Not Yet Famous"**

Sermon by The Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
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Readings

My Heart Leaps Up, by Rev. Frank O. Holmes

The history of the Jewish people gives us an impressive example of how the human spirit can find a way forward in what might be assumed to be hopeless circumstances. The temple at Jerusalem, center of the nation's worship was destroyed by the Babylonians, and later by the Romans. After the rebellion against Hadrian in the second century, the very name of the holy city was changed, and Jews were prohibited, on pain of death, from approaching its site. However, the spirit of the Jewish people was vigorous enough so that their culture and faith survived.

The sacrifices of the temple ceased, but the worship and teaching of the synagogue took their place. We are told that, even as Jerusalem was falling in 70A.D., the Jewish scholars opened a new center of rabbinical learning at Jamnia.

In individual experience, too, there is in every instance - a way forward – something worth saying, thinking and doing. Am I unsuccessful in competition? The question is: Will I be a good or a poor loser? Have I said a foolish or bitter word? There is the opportunity for me to make clear my regret, and to say what is wise and kindly. Have I been slighted or treated unfairly? There may be the possibility of acting creatively in terms of forgiveness and goodwill. Even when I am ill, there is the choice before me as to what kind of patient I shall be. The resourcefulness of the spirit is often shown in the dignity and even cheerfulness of those who are in desperate circumstances.

Love what is, as much as the world we wish to be. Trust the resources of life and be blessed by that trust.

Hannah Coulter, by Wendell Berry

The big idea of education, from first to last, is the idea of a better place. Not a better place where you are but because you want to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better, but a better place somewhere else. In order to move up, you have got to move on. I didn't see this at first. And for a while after I knew it, I pretended I didn't. I didn't want it to be true.

But it was true. After all the children were gone, I was mourning over them to Nathan. I said, "I just wanted them to have a better chance than I had."

Nathan said, "Don't complain about the chance you had," in the same way he used to tell the boys, "Don't cuss the weather." Sometimes you can say dreadful things without knowing it. Nathan understood this better than I did.

Like several of his one-sentence conversations, this one stuck in my mind and finally changed it. The change came too late, maybe, but it turned my mind inside out like a sock.

Was I sorry that I had known my parents and Grandmam and the Feltners, and that I had married Virgil and come to live in Port William, and that I had lived on after Virgil's death to marry Nathan and come to our place to raise our family and live among the Coulters and the rest of our membership and our family? Well, that was the chance I had.

And so Nathan required me to think a thought that has stayed with me a long time and has traveled a long way. It passed through everything I know and changed it all. The chance you had is the life you've got. You can make complaints about what

people, including you, make of their lives after they have got them, and about what people make of other people's lives, even about your children being gone, but you mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be somebody else. What you must do is this: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing – give thanks." I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions.

Sermon

This fall, *Smithsonian* magazine celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary by dedicating its anniversary issue to thirty-five people who, the editors believed, had really made a difference. These are people with unique and remarkable vision, people of genuine genius. On the list are Maya Angelou, Bill Gates, Gordon Parks, Steven Spielberg, and E. O. Wilson. These are names that you will probably recognize. Also on the list were two people I have met and know. They are Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry, who are sometimes referred to as our contemporary Emerson and Thoreau. They are powerful writers, thinkers, and environmentalists, who, if not UUs, are at least friendly toward our perspectives and justice orientation. They have spoken in UU churches and we may even be able to claim them as sort of UUs.

This article reminded me of how Unitarian Universalists have for years made a big deal about our prophets, saints and reformers. We make list of famous UUs, like Dorothea Dix, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horace Mann, Thomas Jefferson, ee cummings, and on and on the list goes, One of our members asked recently, what about the non-famous UUs? What about people like the rest of us?

Most of us will not become famous. As Andy Warhol says, we may have our fifteen seconds or fifteen minutes of fame in a life time, but few of us will be famous or even long for notoriety. There a few members of our church who have some claim to fame, and maybe genius. I think of John Swomley, Russ Millin, and Harriet Yeckel. I also know that Sheldon Stahl's claim to fame was being very close friends with Elliot

Richardson; a UU and the only person in United States history to be appointed to six cabinet-level positions.

Fame really though is not the point, when we lift up our cultural leaders and prophetic and courageous figures in history. They are icons of vision and value. They are people whose lives inspire by example, but not just the famous are capable of inspiring by example. Many of our just ordinary lives are examples of courage, vision and faithfulness.

And the point is to be inspired not to live someone else's life, but to live our own lives more courageously and faithfully. Jesus inspires me and many people, but people often make the mistake of worshipping him, of trying to live like him rather than being inspired by his teachings to be more fully alive and more fully themselves. This is like looking at a map and forgetting to take the journey, or like going into a restaurant seeing the menu and eating it rather than ordering the nourishing meal. Don't worship the map, take the journey. Don't long to be someone else, be the best you.

Rev. John Wolf, the minister at All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma for over thirty-five years, was a great minister. Under his leadership, that church grew from 350 families to over 1500 families. He was a truly great preacher. He was often interviewed by CBS's 60 Minutes and NBC Nightly News being asked to offer counterpoint to the televangelist Oral Roberts.

Fred grew up in that church. He went into the ministry. Both he and his parents had the dream that Fred would some day become another John Wolf. Fred was not John Wolf. Fred was an adequate preacher. He was bright but not brilliant. He was good but not great. He was abrupt and overly direct, where

John was socially graceful, as well as pastorally gifted. Fred made a very bad John Wolf. He was in and out of churches. He did okay, but his tenures were not long nor his successes particularly significant. He was fired from several of the churches he served.

Then he was asked to do a short term ministry between a long time settled minister and the arrival of a new settled minister. He was a great match to the situation. His directness was a great asset. He didn't worry about being another John Wolf. He was by definition a short timer. He had nothing to lose. So, he was just himself, and he was just what was needed. After that he was asked again to be an interim minister. Then he was asked to help create an interim ministry program for his denomination and became the granddaddy of interim ministry, setting a model for his own and others' thinking about how to follow long time ministry and minister to troubled churches in transition. He found that his gifts were gifts after all.

We are not always able to see how the struggles are in fact gifts. Our frailties and challenges are not easy to bear, let alone to be imagined as gifts. But, as we accept and respond to the challenges of life, we often find that what is our challenge is also our gift.

There was a rabbi once, called Zuzya of Hannipol. He spent his life lamenting his lack of talent and his failure to be another Moses. One day God comforted him. "In the coming world," he said, "we will not ask you why you were not Moses, but why you were not Zuzya."

Learn from the story: Each one of us should try to be the best that we can be according to what we are able to do.

Think of these as two Rabbi Stories of sorts. A rabbi, says Webster's Dictionary, is a person who settles matters of religious law and defines spiritual truths.

Some Biblical scholars say that Jesus can only be understood by understanding his Hebrew context. He was a Jew, not a Christian. Christians came later as a response to his teaching. He was a teacher and can be called Rabbi. He is one who settled religious and spiritual matters. He did so from a Hebrew and from a liberal religious perspective.

Biblical language was Hebrew, a very concrete and this-worldly language. The Jewish cultural influence profoundly shaped the religion of Jesus and our western culture.

Some think of religion as the contemplation of other-worldly concerns, such as what will happen in the hereafter and of a God who acts from a heavenly realm. However, Jesus' ministry demonstrates a concern for the here and now, for loving our neighbor and ourselves. Jesus' ministry was a ministry that frees, that liberates. The religion of Moses, too, is a religion of liberation.

If we are looking for a deeper spirituality and a time for spiritual development, what might that look like if it were focused primarily on the here and now?

To find that answer, it might be helpful to look at Hebrew and Christian religious influence.

Both Jesus and the Christianity we have come to know were deeply influenced by Greek and Roman history and culture, and also by Hebrew culture. As we consider the state of our soul and the nature of our spiritual practice, let's take a moment to

think about what is meant by spirit. In Greek, the word is *psyche*, which we translate into English as soul, or spirit. The Greeks were dualistic, seeing the body as bad and the soul or spirit as good. God is in heaven and the spirit will finally be free when it can be free from the body. Greeks emphasized the ideal from which we get our piety and even pietism, a call to love heaven in the hereafter more than the world of here and now.

But, if we turn to Hebrew, to understand spirituality, we get two words about spirit, *nephesh and ruach*. They mean the breath of God and the winds of God. Wind is that which animates, like shaking the leaves. Breath is that which shows us that life is present. The more spirit that is present the more Life there is, the more vital the situation or person. A spirited person or a deeply spiritual person is some one who knows the "breath of God."

A person who is said to be spirited is one who is very alive. A spirited debate or a spirited talk is one where our juices are flowing and the room is alive. A horse that is spirited is not easily tamed, but after taming is highly prized.

This is the spirit of a true this-worldly spirituality.

In 597 BCE, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, and the Hebrew people were carried off to exile. Among those who joined the long march was a rabbi, named Ezekiel, whose prophetic career was pivotal in the history of Judah. Ezekiel had a vivid imagination. He constantly had dreams and visions of exaggerated proportions. He knew his nation was occupied and in trouble, his temple defiled, and his people captives.

Things were bleak, his nation dead. Then he had a dream. In this dream he saw a valley in which there was nothing but dead bones – symbol of Judah. In the dream, the voice of the God said, “Ezekiel, can these bones live again?” Ezekiel answered, “God, only you know that.”

Then, says Hebrew scripture, the Lord caused *rauch* – the life giving wind, God’s spirit – to blow over the valley. There was a shaking and rolling of bones, the likes of which no vision before had produced; the spirit of God was upon it. When the people of Judah responded to this spirit of God, the result was not that they became more pious, but they became more alive.

So, Hebrew scripture says, if we want to have a stronger spiritual life, be more alive, be fully you – yourself, and even old bones can come to life again. Wherever one meets the spirit, biblically speaking, it is announced by the presence of Life. The spirit is that which gives and affirms life, all Life, even the life that we have.

In Wendell Berry’s story of Hannah Coulter, she says the right instructions are not to curse the weather but to bless it; not to curse our lives or to blame the chances we have had, but to accept the life we do have and to see the remarkable gift that is our life. It is by knowing our own challenges and the courage it takes to be truly who we are, that we come to know life more fully.

I appreciate the ee cummings and Clara Bartons of the world, and I also appreciate the gift of my own life and its challenges. I appreciate that there are people who may not be great scientists or politicians, but they are great at rocking babies in a church nursery, or they may be great at singing a song or two

in church. They may never be famous to more than their family or their church community.

The instruction I am offering is to love the life we have. It is by loving ourselves that we learn how to love our neighbors and our world. The “don’t curse the weather” part of these instructions reminds me of a congregant in Peoria, Illinois. Dick Herm gave the morning agricultural report... No matter the weather, he would start the morning with these words. “It is a bee-uuu-tiful day out today, and here is the morning report

When I first moved to Peoria, it was in the middle of January. I remember hearing Dick on a day that was full of sleet and freezing rain. The temperature was predicted to drop. It did not seem like a beautiful day. I was tempted to curse the weather, but as I went out to my car to chip the ice away and head home, I saw the sky was clearing, the wind getting colder, and the sun began to glisten off of the sleet. It looked like diamonds, sparking with color. The frosted neighborhood did have a special kind of beauty. Yes, after all, I could see it. It was a beautiful day.

Do not curse the weather. Do not curse the life we have, but remember that the life we have is Life, our life. Do not curse the world we have. It is the world we have. If we want more life, love the life we have. Love life, because it is a gift, and for some, a gift of God. The more love there is the more life there is. The more we live the more love there is present.

Love the life you have, even with all that is wrong and frail, for they too are our blessings, for those with eyes to see.

Amen.