

## “The Spaces In Between”

Sermon written and delivered by

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### Reading

Dust by Forianne Laux (<http://www.alsopreview.com/thecollections/laux/dldust.html>)

### Sermon

Karen Armstrong studies and writes about religion. Since she travels a great deal, she gets a chance to talk with a variety of people on planes, trains and taxi cabs. She says that a lot of people express very negative views about religion. They complain that religion is at the heart of all our political conflicts and the cause of centuries of war and hatred among peoples.

It bothers her, as it does me, because, religion itself is not the cause of violence and war. People are the cause--- people who seek power, corrupt the wisdom of the sages, and turn religion into hardened, calcified doctrines used to control other people.

Armstrong defends religion by tracing today's modern traditions to the period known as the Axial Age. From 900 - 200 BCE, four different regions of the world produced the religious and philosophical traditions that have transformed the world:

From China arose Confucianism and Daoism

From India, Hinduism and Buddhism

From Israel, monotheism, which later gave rise to Islam and Christianity

and from the Greek arose the tradition of philosophical rationalism

The religions that were in place before this period primarily practiced rituals of animal sacrifice. “But the religions that came out of those four regions of the world all put morality at the heart of the spiritual life. The only way you could encounter 'God,' 'Nirvana,' 'Brahman,' or the Tao,' was to live a compassionate life of love.” “To become a fully developed human being, according to nearly all the ancient sages, you have to abandon greed you have to abandon unkindness and practice love--not just love for those closest to you but love to strangers and the entire world!

(from [www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com) review of (from Karen Armstrong, The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions).)

It's no wonder, then, that practically every one of the traditions that evolved from those first Axial Age religions have a version of the Golden Rule.

From Confucianism: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you"

From Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man.

From Islam: None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself

and From the Christian gospels: Do Unto Others as You Would have them do to You.

In the centuries since these words were inscribed in the holy books, the Golden Rule has been adopted by the secular world, reduced to a product of mass production, the words are imprinted on wall plaques and charm bracelets.

Detached from the body of wisdom of the original sages, the Golden Rule becomes just another bumper sticker slogan. Separated from mystery, the golden rule falls short of the highest spiritual aspiration, which is love.

Liberal Theologian, Paul Tillich gives us the following beautiful image of that aspiration: “For the other one and I and we together in this moment in this place are a unique, unrepeatable occasion, calling for a unique unrepeatable act of uniting love.”

We need more of this kind of inspiration.

With all that is broken in the human family, with all the ways we turn away from the suffering of our neighbors, with all the ways we treat the earth as if it was not connect to our very lives, we need more of this kind of awareness of the unity of all being—

one that is neither part of a rigid belief system desperately clinging to outdated theologies, preaching fear and separation;

nor one that rejects anything that has any remote connection with mystery, religion, or spirituality.

We need something in between.

People are used to thinking there are only two options:

either superstitious, concretized belief that leads to religious war...

or...

a complete absence of spirituality, trusting only in what can be seen, touched, measured.

It’s hard for some people to imagine the vast space in between.

Unitarian Universalists, join our progressive brothers and sisters of all faiths to hold that space in-between.

That space is free from doctrines that sustain false separation between peoples.

It is free from outdated beliefs that no longer serve humanity

It is a place where we return to the wisdom of the sages.

Those sages call us to a spiritual life where we “encounter 'God,' 'Nirvana,' 'Brahman,' or the Tao,' by living a compassionate life of love.

UU’s have never been interested in an esoteric spirituality.

What is said on Sunday must be relevant on Monday.

And the words that are spoken in worship must match deeds of our hands and feet. Deeds not creeds.

It’s a value that has been passed down to us for hundreds of years. The 19th century Universalist Hosea Ballou is known to have said of religion: “can you reduce it to practice? If not, have none of it.”

The Mission of WUU expresses this yearning for relevancy in our day to day lives. If you’re not familiar with it, it has been beautifully set in calligraphy by Gayle Henion and is hanging on the in the Narthex.

Our mission is in 4 parts, and it implies movement and action as well as reflection.

It recognizes both the primacy of community and the importance of the individual spiritual quest.

The movement and action expressed in the mission are best represented as a circle.

Let me show you what I mean...

[HOLD UP 1st STRIP OF PAPER]

One Part of our mission describes this congregation as people who create an inclusive community where all are encouraged to find their own path toward personal spiritual growth.

It’s an inclusive community of people who are seeking spiritual growth.

[ATTACH 2nd STRIP OF PAPER]

Add to that, the call to embody Unitarian Universalists values in our relationships both within this congregation and with everyone we meet.

It's the way we live out our values in the way we treat our neighbors, in the work we choose to do, and in the activities we get involved in.

It's called walkin' the talk.

[ATTACH 3rd STRIP OF PAPER]

the last two parts of our mission have to do with social justice--one mission to promote religious, racial and social harmony in greater Williamsburg.

[ATTACH 4th STRIP OF PAPER]

and another mission to move us beyond the limits of Williamsburg where we take transformative action to achieve a sustainable and humane world.

[CONNECT THE STRIPS INTO A RING]

Then we come back to this community for spiritual reflection--reflecting on what we saw, heard and experienced. With new insight we ask ourselves how those experiences reinforce or challenge our beliefs, our values, our assumptions. It's also a time to rest and be nourished, to thank each other, to bless each other.

Then we go out into the world again.

Ever moving, ever changing, ever adapting our practices to new information.

This movement is the essence of liberal religion—

being open to new revelation,

being willing to let go of old ideas when they no longer lead to a more compassionate life.

Another way to understand the movement of our mission is with this set of questions:

What? So What? and Now What?

The What? is any experience that brings to our attention those people and issues that are hidden or ignored in our society.

The What? is you experience when you work at Old Towne Medical, Avalon, the Food Bank; Faith in Action or Hospice House

The What? is your experience when you attend an All Together Brown Bag discussion or watch a film with the Environmental Stewardship Group.

So What? is the practice of making meaning. We do this in worship, we do this in covenant groups and in small group reflection. It is the practice of Theology—trying to give words to those experiences of profound connection. We ask ourselves, given this experience I just had, what do I now believe about the nature of human beings, the nature of evil, where I find the presence of the divine?

Next we ask Now What? Now that we've had these experience, and reflected on them, what we are called to do, and how are we to act in the world.

Then we go back out into the world. And the circle keeps rolling

Three years ago, almost to the day, Preston and I boarded a plane in Oakland, California and came our here for a week-long visit as the ministerial candidates.

While we were here, we led worship, we met with different groups of congregants, we went house shopping. We were privileged to meet Ted Sheheen and Tom Pugh before they both passed away later that year.

During that week we heard you say that you wanted to [quote] “grow into maturity as a voice and home for liberal religion. we heard you say, “WUUs have yet to fulfill our role in the community”

In order to realize that vision, we felt it was important to first build some internal structures and develop some shared spiritual practices.

And so, for the past several years, we have been putting a lot of attention on church governance and on personal spiritual growth. We’re practicing the holy arts of deep listening, meditation, and study. We’re forging deeper relationships with each other.

We’ve done good work. And we have a ways to grow.

We still have a ways to grow in learning how to communicate in love about touchy subjects.

We still have a ways to grow in reaching out to those on the periphery of the congregation.

This further growth won’t happen if we remain a closed community.

As my colleague Scott Alexander wrote, “The congregation that primarily looks inward for the discovery of meaning, wholeness, service, and spirituality (and does not move out beyond its walls to visibly live its religion in the wider community) will not experience growth and depth.” (in his book, Salted with Fire)

One of the reasons for this is that, as diverse as we think we are, the 250 members of this community are primary white, primarily college education, professionals, middle class, politically liberal and heterosexual.

Not that there’s anything wrong with those things.

But if we only look inward for the discovery of meaning, wholeness, service, then our spiritual reflection, the “So What?” will be limited.

If we lived in a town torn by strife, war, famine, gang violence, poverty, and blatant oppression it would be easy to know our role in the community. We’d be rendering first aid. We’d be feeding people every day. We’d be letting people sleep in our buildings.

But poverty here is hidden and racial discrimination subtle. Violent conflict and crime are infrequent.

So what moves us to be out in the world, traveling to unfamiliar neighborhoods, building relationship with people who are different from us, reaching out across theologies and sociologies? What moves us to share the Unitarian Universalist faith with others?

When we are together to worship, to study, to reflect, to share our experiences of life, we are creating a vision of beloved community. Together, we aspire to live in a world where the human family will wake up to the truth that we are all connected—

to each other,

to the earth,

and to the ultimate mystery, the Ground of Being

But when we leave this sanctuary,

we see people operating under the delusion of separateness--creating false categories that have nothing to with the truth of Reality:

self and the other

worthy, not worthy

saved and damned

loved and despised

We see rampant consumerism, disregard for the suffering of others, and the cavalier destruction of our natural world. We see children in our public schools being lured into Christian groups with pizza, we see people who hold rigid religious beliefs using their positions of power to advance harmful doctrine.

There is disconnect between the things we envision when are together and what we witness in the world  
This is what moves us beyond the limits of our comfort,  
This is what moves us to do things we didn't think we were brave enough to do.  
This is what inspires us to fly.

One Sunday, a preacher said to her flock,  
'Brothers and sisters,  
there's work to be done.  
Great good to be got.  
But first we got to take that first little step.  
And then the second.  
Then we got to walk together, and not grow weary.'  
'Amen,' said the congregation.  
'We got to run together, and not grow faint.'  
'Amen.' said the congregation  
'We got to spread our wings like eagles and fly!'  
'Amen.' said the congregation  
'But' we all know it takes money to fly!  
Silence,  
And then a voice piped up from the back,  
'Then let's walk, preacher!'"

(from Rev. John A. Buehrens, "Roots and Wings: Five Suggestions for the Future of Universalism.")

Today is the official beginning of our Stewardship campaign.  
Starting today, we will hear from this congregation if you want to walk or fly.  
But I will tell you that your board, and your executive team and your minister all want to fly!  
100% of them have turned in their pledges for the new year.  
I have no doubt that this congregation will follow their lead.

You have been generous in sharing your time, your talents, your financial resources.

I know you will extend that generosity into the new year to keep Unitarian Universalism growing in Williamsburg.

Will the congregation say Amen!

AMEN!