

**The Sum of Its Parts
Sermon by Gretchen Haley
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
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Reading: The River Clarion by Mary Oliver

1.

I don't know who God is exactly.

But I'll tell you this.

I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone
and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.

Whenever the water struck the stone it had something to say,
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water.
And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying.

Said the river: I am part of holiness.

And I too, said the stone.

And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.

I'd been to the river before, a few times.

Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.

You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.

You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your years.

And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through all the traffic, and ambition.

2.

If God exists, he isn't just butter and good luck.

He's also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.

Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going.

Imagine how the lily (who may also be a part of God)

would sing to you if it could sing, if you would pause to hear it

And how are you so certain anyway that it doesn't sing?

3.

If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics.

He's the forest, He's the desert.

He's the ice caps, that are dying.

He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.

He's van Gogh and Allen Ginsburgh and Robert Motherwell.

He's the many desperate hands, cleaning and preparing their weapons.

He's every one of us, potentially.

The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet.

And if this is true, isn't it something very important?

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and each of you too, or at least of his
intention, and his hope.

Which is a delight beyond measure.

I don't know how you get to suspect such an idea.

I only know that the river kept singing.

It wasn't a persuasion, it was all the river's own constant joy
which was better by far than a lecture, which was
comfortable, exciting, unforgettable

4.

Of course for each of us, there is the daily life.
Let us live it, gesture by gesture.
When we cut the ripe melon, should we not give it thanks?
And should we not thank the knife also?
We do not live in a simple world.

There was someone I loved who grew old and ill.
One by one I watched the fires go out.
There was nothing I could do

except to remember
that we receive
then we give back.

5.

My dog Luke lies in a grave in the forest,
she is given back.

But the river Clarion still flows
from wherever it comes from
to where it has been told to go.

6.

I pray for the desperate earth.
I pray for the desperate world.
I do the little each person can do, it isn't much.
Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves.

Along its shores were, may I say, very intense cardinal flowers.
And trees, and birds that have wings to uphold them,
For heaven's sakes –
The lucky ones: they have such deep natures,
They are so happily obedient.
While I sit here in a house filled with books, ideas, doubts, hesitations.

7.

And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river
keeps coming, touch me, passing by on its
long journey, its pale, infallible voice
singing.

Sermon - "The Sum of Our Parts"

1. Making something new – the Unitarians and the Universalists

Who are we?

I mean, who are we, in this room? What are we to one another, and who are we when we gather?

This is a different, but related question to the other big question we all at one time or another may ask: that is, who am I?

But I want to ask its related cousin this morning.

Who are we?

That is, when we come together, are we just a collection of individuals? Just the sum total of our individual answers to the "Who am I" question? And if we start that way, does something happen over time that makes us more than just (one member in the room's name) + (another member in the room's name) + (another member's name) + (another member's name)...and so on? How might such a thing happen?

Does it change our answer if we factor in that we come together for a *religious* purpose? How might our religious mission shape who *we* are and who *we* are becoming?

Fifty years ago, people like us were wondering something very similar. In stuffy rooms and over dinners, and breakfasts, and coffee, and *other* drinks, people of goodwill and longings began to imagine what it would mean to combine their individual paths into a unified whole.

But let me back up. In reality, the flirtation towards union of these good people began not 50, but nearly 150 years ago.¹ Yes, way back in 1856, people were talking about the possible marriage of the Unitarians and the Universalists.

I mean, why not? By that point, the theological differences in these two strands of liberal Christianity were, as you accountant-types might say, immaterial. Both believed in theological freedom, in the benevolence of God, and soundly affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. They were, in so many ways, serving the same larger purpose, the call of liberal religion.

And based on these similarities, from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, the Unitarians and the Universalists took on all kinds of joint ventures. They cooperated in the publication of a shared hymnal, and in shared advertising and pamphlet production, and by the 1950s, they combined their youth movements into a common organization called the Liberal Religious Youth or LRY.

¹ Much of this Unitarian Universalist history is informed by Warren Ross' *The Premise and the Promise*. I also reviewed the notes I took in my UU History class at Iliff School of Theology in the Spring of 2009, taught by Rev. Catharine Harris and Rev. Tom Korsen.

These joint ventures were a result of their many similarities. Their perceived differences, however, and their *fear* of those differences – well, at least initially, these obscured their sense of a shared purpose.

From the Universalist perspective, the role of religion was to spread the good news of Universalism to all. You may know the words of eighteenth century Universalist John Murray – “Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of you new vision. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” Universalism was a liberal Christian religion, oriented towards reaching *out* to *others*. Their sense of mission also led them to be social reformers, founding Universities and leading the prison reform movement. A mostly rural faith, and firmly anti-establishment, they were a “group” in only the loosest of terms.

For the Unitarians, on the other hand, religion was a matter of *self*-improvement in knowledge and ethical character. They wanted to serve – not so much the needs of people “out there,” but us, the gathered community. They believed in human progress, what nineteenth century Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke called “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” Straying pretty far from their Christian roots by the late nineteenth century, Unitarians relished humanism and scientific rationalism. Yes, urban-oriented Unitarians were the “Boston Brahmins,” claiming a certain elitism, an intellectualism, as central to their ethos.

And for a long time, these differences kept the Unitarians and the Universalists in relatively separate spheres, despite their apparent shared sense of purpose to serve and grow liberal religion.

But then, over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the world changed. The world wars, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the holocaust – all these things made the concept of “onward and upward forever” suddenly seem at the least, naïve, and at the most, dangerously wrong. And then, mainline Protestantism wasn’t talking all that much about hell, and so the Universalist message wasn’t holding as much evangelistic power as it once did.

Both the Unitarians and the Universalists started to worry more about their shared purpose than they did their personal and historical differences. And they started to see how they might need each other, need the ways they were different, if they were to live out their sense of a bigger mission. And so in May of 1960, the delegates of the American Unitarian Association, and the delegates of the Universalist Church of America voted, with an 82% majority, to consolidate and become the Unitarian Universalist Association, which was completed officially in May of 1961.

Forty years later, in 2001, the Rev. John Buehrens reflected: “Unitarian Universalism is only now coming of age as a religious movement that is something new – more than the sum of two faith traditions that joined forces to form it.”² Only in the past decade, and especially as we approach the fiftieth anniversary, are we beginning to acknowledge and explore in a deeper way what it is we have created, what and who we are, more than just the sum of our parts.

² From John Buehrens introduction to Ross’ *The Premise and the Promise*.

Though we are the Unitarians + the Universalists, we are also something else, a new thing, something unpredictable and wholly new, made possible only by our coming together in all our differences.

We are liberal Christians and religious Humanists. And we are also Buddhists and mystics, Jews and Hindus. We are all of these, and we are also something other than each of these things in and of themselves.

We meet in small rooms and seek self-improvement and education, and we march in the streets, and work to transform the world. Perhaps most importantly, we are learning what it means for these two goals – healing ourselves, and healing the world, to be two sides of the same project.

We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all humans, and the interdependent web of which these individuals are all but a part. We are many, and we are one.

Most of all, Unitarian Universalists are a people who believe that the question: “Who are we?” is dynamic, and alive, and that the answer is never complete. We know we are always in the midst of being changed, of becoming, of growing into ourselves, the selves we are not yet, and somehow have always been.

2. The Rest of the Story

When I first heard about this congregation, about Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist, I immediately thought of the story of Unitarian Universalism as a whole.

Because, like our religious ancestors, this congregation decided to embark on a new journey, to bring together two things previously separate and make something combined. I know that some of you in this room may still think of yourselves as “the Glenwood group.” And some of you think of yourselves as “Mid-Valley.” Some of you don’t even know what I’m talking about.

But in any case, I want to suggest that it is possible that like Unitarian Universalism, something new is happening, something entirely new is being created, here among you.³ Despite us being in a math classroom, this is an instance where I just don’t agree that $1+1+1+1=4$. What I’m proposing is that it actually equals a Zebra. Or a Museum of Fine Arts. Or some other surprising, non-sensical thing. A whole other thing.

Which sounds, on its surface, like a pretty good idea. Pretty alluring and exciting.

But there’s something about this coming together, this dynamic becoming, that we haven’t yet faced. And that is: loss.

When the Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated, there was loss. How could there not be?

³ Just for fun, I want to reference here an echo from one of my favorite pieces of the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 43:19: “Behold! I am doing a new thing.”

We all lose something when we change. Even when we are becoming something more, something we want to be, something we believe in, there is – sometimes surprisingly – grief.

Because the force which makes something new and something changed possible, the spirit that we experience in the midst of something new being created – that spirit also makes loss. To re-state a line from Mary Oliver: if there is something connecting us, something moving through us all, a spirit of life – well then, it isn't just "butter and good luck."

The Unitarians can no longer imagine they primarily serve the "Boston Brahmins," who seek the "progress of mankind" above all else, and offer intellectual stimulation as their single focus; and the Universalists can no longer neglect their infrastructure in favor of evangelistic fervor, no matter how powerfully they feel that call.⁴ These are losses, and for the generations who grew up as Unitarians or Universalists, these are real, felt losses.

And whether you were a part of a former incarnation of this congregation, or not, being a part of this new community, and really, being a part of *any* real religious community can also mean you, *all* of you, experience some loss. Some loss of individual freedom, some loss of comfort, some loss of who you conceived yourself to be.

This can be very difficult.

And yet, it is how we – and let me emphasize that word –*we* – together, acknowledge and transform that grief, that loss, that will determine if we are going to become who *we* are called to become.

This is perhaps opposite from what you may expect.

Our greatest potential is not met by acting as if there is no loss. It is not manifested by ignoring grief. It is not created by putting on a happy face for the future is bright. No, our community can live into its new identity only by engaging with grief in a healthy way, by being vulnerable with one another in the midst of difficulty, by acknowledging when there is grief, and – this is important – yet surviving, integrating its presence into our shared story, and accessing together, a new joy.

And all of this must be fueled by our sense of a larger purpose, a profound commitment to our mission, a deep sense of gratitude to our religious inheritance, to those who came before us.

This is how something new is made possible. This is how we become something more than the sum of our parts.

Being with one another – not because we all like each other (though I hope we mostly do), or because everything is exactly the way you'd personally like it to be, or because it is keeping you in your comfort zone (I actually want to push you *out* of your comfort zone) – but because we are called to participate in

⁴ These are pretty big generalizations I'm making to help support my point. There are many Unitarians historically who were outwardly focused and Unitarians have long been leaders in social justice efforts; and Universalists have been key in solidifying the institutional success of the Unitarian Universalist Association, especially when it comes to bringing into the present the living tradition of Universalism and Universalist ministry.

something bigger than any one of us can envision alone, a sense that we are connected to something larger than ourselves. This is what works the magic, and makes a new thing, a transformed and transformative thing possible.

We don't yet know who we are – Two Rivers Unitarian Universalists.

But I believe, I *know*, because of what we envision together, because we imagine there is something which holds us together in the midst of our beautiful diversity, something more than who we have been without one another – I know we are already more than just the sum total of our history, the sum total of our individual lives, the sum total of our respective answers to the “who am I” question. Already, in this room, it is happening. *We* are happening.

3. Our Proposition: Unity in Diversity

When I was here last month – one of you had a question for me. Without much of an introduction, this individual looked me in the eye, or rather, he sort of, squinted at me as he asked me: *So. Are you a deist?* Which, after some discussion with him, I realized meant “Do you believe in a personified God?”

Without hesitation, I answered his question. I think it's a *great* question and actually the sort of thing we should be talking about *more* in our religious communities. We all have a responsibility – our Principles remind us – to an ongoing search for truth and meaning, and to encourage one another to spiritual growth in our congregations.⁵

I want to encourage you to keep asking these kinds of questions, of me, of one another, of yourselves. This question of God, no God, belief in God, what do we mean by God, and what do we most hold worthy of our deepest service, our most profound loyalty? What is sacred, or holy, or even, divine? Humanism, Christianity. Judaism, Mysticism, and theological claims each of these religious paths hold to be true.

But just remember, as you ask, and as you respond, that the specific *answer* any one of us comes up with is not all that important. In fact, the best thing that could happen for us would be if everyone came up with different answers to the biggest questions, of Ultimacy, of our deepest sense of purpose, and if our answers kept getting more complicated, and nuanced the more we were together. In the language of Robert's sermon from a couple weeks ago, we are best served if we hold and experience all kinds of “truth” in this religious community, and if we share those truths freely with one another in a spirit of holy curiosity.

But if instead, we care more about our *agreement* to these theological claims than we do in our engagement with one another in an ongoing search for truth and meaning, well, we'll be doing what our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors were doing for 150 years before they finally decided to come together as one. We'll be imagining that somehow our differences get in our way rather than help us serve a broader vision.

⁵ I love that part: spiritual growth in our *congregations*; as poet Adrienne Rich would say – “not someplace else, but here.” Don't get your social activism here and then go somewhere else for spiritual growth; it happens *here*.

Who are *we*?

Who are we now, and who are we becoming? Are we, in fact, *one*? And do our differences threaten our unity, or help it? Who are *we*, and are we more than just the sum of our parts?

At its core, Unitarian Universalism is dedicated to the proposition that, returning to the words I used from David Bumbaugh in meditation:

“Beneath all our differences and behind all our diversity there is a unity that makes us one and binds us together in spite of time and death and the space between the stars.”

In a time when the whole country is retreating to gated communities to be with people who just confirm their own beliefs, and watch television news programs that only confirm everything they already believe, and their every existing fear – we have the audacity to imagine, to go so far as to *live out* the proposition that our diversity makes us more unified, rather than less; that being with others who are not like us can make us *more* connected to something grander, and *more* a part of something mysterious, and transcendent.⁶

We are not simply (member’s name) + (member’s name) + (member’s name) + Jimmy + Gretchen + Robert + John Hall + John Hickenlooper + Dan Maes + the Dalai Lama + Lady Gaga + Sonia Sotomayor + President Obama + Glen Beck + our fears + our grief + our hopes + our knowledge + our poetry +keep on imagining. *We* are a people who inherit the complex and diverse dreams of our ancestors. We are a people cooking up fantastical dreams to offer our grandchildren and great grandchildren. We are the accumulation of all of us, the people of today, the people of the past, all of our yearnings and our terrors, all shaken up, and re-imagined. Over time, and space, and the sun, and the stars.

And it is when we work in service of this vision, this shared vision, that we become something grander than we can even yet imagine.

As with our Unitarian and the Universalist ancestors, in this congregation, and in our everyday lives, we strive to live as if we are made more whole, as if we are made more human, as if our lives have more purpose and more meaning by way of being with others who are not the same as we are, who believe somewhat differently than we do, who focus their energies somewhat differently than we do. We live as if we are already more than the sum of our parts. And in our living, we make it so.

Amen.

⁶ I offer credit here to Nancy Bowen who said to me the thing about “gated communities” just a couple days before I was to deliver this sermon. I appreciated the good words so much I put them right to use.