

“Hearts of Flesh”
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I have seen what a heart transplant does to a person. It is as if they have been reborn and glow again with earnest and abundant love. As part of our training to become UU ministers we are required to train and serve as a chaplain, as I have said, usually in a hospital. I did this a few years ago at the University of Minnesota Medical Center and was assigned to the Cardiopulmonary unit. That meant we were dealing with hearts and lungs, but mostly hearts.

And I remember the first time I met someone who had received a new heart. It was as if the veil between heaven and earth had thinned and their transcendence became visible. They were teeming with life and love and beauty and awe. It was as if they had become more than themselves. Because in the moment of transplant, part of someone else became a part of them. Someone else’s life and story changed their own, and the encounter created life where there had been death.

The curious thing was that this renewal was something I only experienced in heart transplant patients. Lung transplants did not have this effect, nothing did. Heart transplants were a thing unto themselves. I have never in my life met people who glowed so brightly, as those people who had just received new hearts.

In the reading today, it is the house of Israel receiving a heart of flesh. It is the Spirit of Life removing their hardness of heart and replacing it with her own spirit. She commands the prophet Ezekiel to say to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord God: it is not for your sake that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.”

It is as if the biblical authors are saying, this heart transplant happens because we have forgotten what is sacred, because we have lost our ability to feel. And the capacity to feel is necessary because it informs how we treat people. It is not for your sake, o house of Israel, it is for the sake of all that is sacred in this world. You have forgotten what is holy and it shows in how you’re treating the people outside

your tribe. You have failed to see the face of God in all the people you meet.

Ezekiel continues, still speaking as commanded by God, “I will cleanse you of your idols. I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.”

I think this image is powerful because it is so apt. We know what it means to have a heart of stone, to be unfeeling and unmovable and unkind. We also know that flesh is soft and living and capable of feeling. And in this passage it is clear that the crux of the problem is the Israelites forgetting what truly matters, hardening to the sacredness inside of themselves and everyone else. This is why Ezekiel talks about cleansing them and removing their idols and putting the spirit of God in them.

Part of receiving a new heart is first recognizing our sickness and knowing what ails us. Heart transplants are not done arbitrarily. A new heart has to fit the space left in our chest, match our blood type – it must be capable of keeping us alive.

When I was at Yale I heard the Reverend Jim Wallis speak. He is a public theologian, writer, and activist, and he served on President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based Partnerships. Wallis said something that shifted my perspective. He brought up the idea of our country’s original sin. And I want to pause for a moment to unpack what that might mean for us as Unitarian Universalists. We who, so often, avoid religious language out of fear.

My definition is that sin is a divergence from what is good and kind and loving and moral and tender. So the phrase “original sin” is referring to the first divergence from the good and the moral, the beginning of the hardening of hearts. In his lecture Wallis said that people like to talk about slavery as our original sin in this country, but he disagrees. And I got really skeptical when I first heard this. But then he went to say this: our original sin is the belief that some people are more human than others, that some people simply matter more and some people inherently matter less.

And it was that divergence, that hardness of heart that made the genocide of the

native people of this land possible. It also made the enslavement of African people possible. It made Jim Crow, and police violence, and sexual predators being appointed to high offices, and children being kept in cages at the border, and efforts to remove legal protection for transgender people, it made all of these things possible.

The heart of our nation hardened a long time ago. The systems and structures that we live inside grew out of this hardness, this original sin, this first divergence from all that is good and holy.

This system of conditional worth is also what makes white supremacy and patriarchy so coercively powerful. Because this original sin teaches us that white people matter because of our whiteness and men matter because of your masculinity, and the list goes on.

This lie of conditional worth is the false idol our country worships.

We uphold this system because we've been convinced that our worth depends on it. Whether it is being white, or male, or straight, or able bodied, or wealthy, or cis-gendered, the lie that says some people matter more than others is predicated on everyone agreeing that their worth is conditional.

I have noticed in my life, and I have been guilty of this myself, that as Unitarian Universalists we feel this anxiety to prove how good we are when confronted with injustice. And I want to offer an antidote to that, because half of our spiritual lineage is Universalism, and it is the half that kept me a Unitarian Universalist.

Universalism teaches that no one's value is conditional, that no one is eternally damned, that no one is beyond the point of forgiveness or accountability, that we are all equally sacred. And when we ground ourselves in that belief, if we can feel our heart of flesh, the entire dynamic changes. There is nothing to prove, only work to be done breaking and changing systems that dismiss the inherent and equal and interconnected worth of particular groups of people.

This is not a dismissal of difference, it is a recognition that we are all inherently

sacred and this world treats some people like we matter less, or not at all. And so when we engage in the work of justice making, we must do it centering the needs and voices of the people being harmed, and not our own desire to be proven good.

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people. It is our first principle, it is where our covenant begins. But we must remember that affirm is a verb, it is a thing that we commit to doing.

But we are people of flesh and in the last few weeks and months we have seen profound courage, organizers flooding the streets with loving protest, church people registering voters by the millions, people rallying to care for each other during the worst pandemic in a hundred years.

We're still here.

When the house of Israel received that heart of flesh, it was not an individual experience. It was collective. The entire people, the entire community, the entire social system received a new heart.

This is important.

Because when I talk about the heart transplant that will save us, when I talk about replacing our original sin with a heart of flesh, I'm not just talking about individual sentiments. I'm talking about the belief beating in the center of our collective social system.

When I met those patients with new hearts, it was as if they had been reborn, and in a religious sense the word rebirth denotes a lack of sin. It is the convergence, the return to what is good and moral and life-giving, a return to God, to the essence of life.

But one of the realities of receiving a new heart is the possibility of rejection. It is possible that a body won't accept a transplant, so people spend the rest of their lives working to keep their new hearts, paying attention as if their lives depend on it, because they do. It is not a one time intervention, it is a new way of living.

What if we lived this way? What if we spent our lives making sure our hearts never turned to stone, making sure that the heart of our nation was cleansed of its original sin?

Imagine that world.

To live a life of faith as Unitarian Universalists is to live towards the principles that guide us. Our principles are neither a checklist nor a record of achievement. They're the horizon, the North Star that helps us find our way back into convergence with the good. They're the map home to ourselves, to each other, to our source and our connection.

They keep our hearts flesh.

As Universalists, we believe that it is always possible to be pulled back into union with the good. Universalism is the belief that salvation is always and everywhere possible. Salvation is about the lack of sin, the convergence with the good. So as Universalists, we believe that we are never so far out of alignment that the pull of life and love loses its power in this world.

Our spiritual legacy is one of profound hope.

A hope that sees the suffering of the world and still believes that love can heal all wounds. As Unitarian Universalists we choose to live this faith in action, for love is not only a sentiment, it is a profound commitment to living a life that converges with the good, that speaks up and uses its power to undo systems and cultures of violence.

Love is leaving no one behind, knowing when we need to be held, and when it is our turn to hold others. Love is a commitment to the truth that no one's value is conditional, not even our own.

This is the transplant that saves us. This is our heart of flesh.

Amen