

## **“The Sound of Snow”**

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When did you remember that you have always been enough? That your worth has never been conditional?

We Unitarian Universalists often get nervous around religious words. But that moment of rootedness, that moment of remembering, in the darkest hollows of your soul, that you have always been enough, that’s what I’d call salvation. But that’s rarely an easy thing to find, because it means letting go of the stories about why we matter. The hustle and the approval seeking lead us astray. This requires stillness.

When did you remember that you have always been enough?

The journey back to ourselves, to our wholeness, is rarely straight or simple or well-lit. I’ve found, in my own life, as Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor described in our reading, that we often learn things in the dark that we can’t learn in the light. We can try to run from it, to refuse to make space for it, but I’ve learned that the surest path is the one that leads us into the dark. It looks different for each of us, holds different fears, different stories, different struggles, but ignoring it rarely does us any good.

Here’s how I learned to walk in the dark. How I came to remember that I have always been enough.

I grew up as a Unitarian Universalist but wandered away in college. Most of what I remember learning as a child was about what other people believed and what we did not believe and it left me yearning for something more. A Unitarian Universalism based on a rejection of other systems of belief not only felt vacant to me, but kind of mean.

As a young adult I was looking for ritual and structure, a way to navigate life and make meaning in community, and I found that Judaism filled my need.

But years later, as I questioned converting, that still small voice kept telling me to go home, that I already had a religious tradition, that I didn’t need to change. I found myself at a crossroads – do I give up on the tradition of my childhood, or

do I give in to it? I know our shortcomings, but I found myself pulled. I understood that I had the right skillset to be a minister, but that wasn't what made me do it - that piece was almost irrelevant.

Deciding to become a minister was more a matter of giving in than choosing or striving.

Then after starting seminary at Starr King, I moved back across the country, transferred to Yale Divinity School, started my Masters of Divinity over again, losing my first year of study.

By the spring of my first year at Yale, I was finally hitting my stride. The culture shock of being a UU at a Christian school had worn off, I had made friends, it was going well.

And then, after finishing one of my big essays for the semester, I went out on a run. Spring was just beginning to bud, the pre-sunset light felt like magic, I felt like everything was going my way. So I began to pick up my pace, enjoying the freedom of stretching out my stride, feeling the air fill my lungs.

And then I caught my toe, swung like a pendulum into the stone sidewalk, and everything went dark.

It was four months before I was medically released to take my final exams.

The path has not been straight. And yet, and yet, here we are.

In my mid-twenties, the thing that kept me from converting to Judaism was a deep knowing that I could not commit myself to claiming a single truth.

This was the same reality that put me at odds with some of my Christian classmates and lessons at Yale. I do not believe that there is a single true path to the divine, nor that some are excluded by nature of their belief or lack thereof.

I went into seminary committed more to the sociology of religious community than I was to Unitarian Universalism.

That summer between my first and second year at Yale, I was almost entirely restricted to my home. I had doctors appointments and physical therapy appointments almost daily, but could do little else. The severity of my brain injury meant that I would sometimes forget where I was in the timeline of my own life,

getting confused about what decade it was. It meant I would trip over words and struggled to make sense - my language skills became a game of association, trying to fill in all the words I had lost with something similar, but often failing. It meant that the whole world felt too loud and too bright and too much.

And no one knew if it would get better or when.

Before the accident I had felt like I was hitting my stride and then in a moment it all changed.

And in the midst of the valley of that shadow, I wondered if Unitarian Universalism was enough. I was lost in the dark without a path out.

Because in that instant I had lost my physical vitality, my cognitive capacity, my clear vision, my independence, my sureness in myself. Before then, I had lived my life safely inside my capacity for success, my intelligence and my self-reliance. Perfectionism is a cold and brittle armor, but it felt safe, and I found myself stripped of it that summer.

In the moments that leave us defenseless in life, when we find ourselves lost in the dark, alone in that blizzard of our falling selves, we must find our way forward anew.

But that cocoon is not a place for striving. It's a place for stillness, for listening for the sound of snow, for grief and for letting go.

When did you remember that you had always been enough?

I had to write a paper that summer on sin and salvation for my UU theology class. It was a couple months before I was allowed to read or write, but when I finally returned to my studies, slowly, with the lights dimmed, I listened to Mark Morrison-Reed's sermon titled "Dragged Kicking and Screaming Into Heaven." As it often is with sermons, I don't remember exactly what it was that he said, but I understood then that I was a Universalist. And that that was enough.

In that summer I came to know deep beneath the confusion of my mind and my despair, I knew that our sacredness is not a thing of our own making, that our worth is not conditional, that we are never beyond the pull of love, that we will not be forsaken by the holy.

Now I am a Unitarian Universalist by birth and by choice.  
It is not a simple identity with clear borders, and for that I am thankful.  
I find that I am still moved by Judaism, that it still lives in me and informs my religious life. I still make a mean chocolate chip challah.

And I now find that I am moved by the Christian story, as well.  
I have known too many people brought to life by the teaching of Jesus to doubt its power. And in truth I come from a family lineage woven with Jewish and Christian strands. I am a Unitarian Universalist by birth and by choice.

Still, I remain somewhat ambivalent about the Unitarianism of my childhood.  
I do believe that revelation is ongoing, that we can have a direct experience of the holy, that our capacity for reason matters, but I am not committed to a faith based on what is not God. That wasn't enough to withstand the dark.  
Half of our religious heritage is Universalism, and it is the half that kept me a Unitarian Universalist. It's the half that reminded me I was whole.

How did you come to remember that you are inherently worthy, that you are a child of all that is sacred, that you are indispensable in the unfolding of this world?  
The paths that we walk are wide and varied. They are rarely straight.  
And I don't doubt that the ways we feel the pull of life and love take a myriad of forms. I cannot claim a single truth, a single story or prophet.  
I have no interest in trying to limit the mystery that some call God.  
But I can tell you that I have been moved.  
And somehow, somehow our winding paths have led us to this place today.

My last year at Yale I ended up winning an award called the Edward Ashley Walker Scholarship. There was this big celebration that all the faculty and staff attended and they'd sent me an email to make sure I'd be there, which seemed fishy. I still had a hard time with bright lights and noise - I still do - and that room was all celebration and overwhelming. My name was the last to be called. All the awards had been given out by faculty, but the dean of the school announced mine. It was the award for the student who had shown the most progress during the year. Most improved wasn't an award I'd ever wanted to win, especially not with everyone watching.

I remember how poignant that moment felt, not because I was proud, because they were telling the truth about the dark. They were acknowledging how steep my climb out of that valley had been, how treacherous and seemingly impossible.  
The scene in that room was all festivity and hors d'oeuvres and cameras, so I went

outside and sat on the steps by myself, surrounded by the mist. I needed some stillness.

As I sat there, the dean of ministry walked by. He saw me and stopped. He asked me if I understood what the award meant - I hadn't opened the letter they'd given me yet. And he told me that every year the faculty got to choose one student and grant them free tuition for that academic year. And they chose me, unanimously.

See, for that whole year, while my brain and my spirit healed, I'd had to give every professor I had at Yale a medical note saying I had a cognitive impairment. That's not an experience that will leave you with much ego.

So I wasn't excited and I didn't feel joyful. I felt humbled and sober. Because to get to the celebration, I had to look back at the struggle, and to sit in the discomfort of realizing that other people had known how bad things were. And that is a profoundly humbling experience.

And I could not be more grateful. My experience that year is not something I'd wish on anyone, ever. And yet, it was only when I got lost in the dark, when I was stripped of all the things that I thought made me worthy, it was only then that I found myself.

When did you remember that you had always been enough?

Amen