

“Looking for Miracles”

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There is a miracle in making it through when life seems impassable, unsurvivable. Finding that lightbulb when the darkness seems never ending. We hear this in Rev. Lubkin’s retelling of an old talmudic story about Adam.

As she said, the first solstice was approaching and Adam noticed the days were getting shorter, the nights longer, the darkness expanding. He didn’t know yet that that balance of day and night was reaching a tipping point, the longest night approaching. Adam was terrified that the night would soon consume the day, that his death was imminent, and so he prayed and prayed and started to notice that the days were getting longer again, the endless night starting to wane. And so the next year, Adam celebrated, understanding that the world will not be consumed by darkness, that fluctuation between day and night is part of the fullness of life.

The worship theme for this month is “opening to joy,” which has the potential to hold full merriment and sugar plum fairies, but I want to start with the opening that comes with imagining that more life is possible when the night seems endless. Imagining that maybe the oil will last for eight days, guiding our way through the longest nights.

When I plan services I try to speak about things that matter to you, to offer a place to practice making meaning together in real time. When you tell me what you need, I try to listen, and I was asked to talk about suicide, to bring the unspeakable out of the shadows. Before I do that, I want to be really clear that I am only going to talk about it on a theological level. I am not going to talk about the act itself. Expanding our capacity to make meaning is healing. Spreading traumatic stories is not. And so we will stay within this boundary of caring.

I do think it’s important that we name the reality that suicidality exists and talk about how our faith responds to it. Because, when religion speaks of suicide it is so

often with shaming silence and talk of hell, with making death by suffering an unspeakable sin. It's horrifying. And I'm sure many of you have been witness to this kind of theology - maybe it's even why you're here in this place.

We, as Unitarian Universalists, reject this entirely. Damnation is at odds with the very core of who we are. People often talk about Unitarian Universalism as if it's the "anything goes" church. And that's squarely inaccurate. It matters that we know our theological boundaries.

We are Unitarian Universalists, at the very core of our theological world is the belief that no one is damned, that no one need suffer to redeem their soul, because it has always been whole. And no degree of suffering can sully your humanity. No agony, even when it becomes our demise, no agony can rob us of our humanness.

Hear this: your pain, no matter how great, your pain can never take your humanity.

This is not to say there is no sin in the world - it would be naive to say that we live in a world without harm and violence.

But suicide is not a sin. It's a cascade of suffering. It is tragic and horrible and it is morally neutral, not sinful. It matters that we know how to name this.

Often there's a narrative of shock when someone dies by suicide, the sense that no one saw it coming. Part of this, I'm sure, is because pain so big it blocks out the sun is taboo. It's something we're not supposed to talk about. It's Adam's world closing in and feeling like the dark will never lift, that we will be alone and lost in the endless night.

For people suffering with suicidal thoughts, asking for help might seem out of reach. So it's important that we accept suicide as a reality that's part of the human experience, not something beyond naming. Because we know that one of the best ways of preventing suicide is simply asking someone if they're considering it.

Our own Dr. Ed Boudreaux was named as the 2021 Researcher of the Year by the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention. In an interview with the Community

Advocate, Ed noted, “it’s not true that most people who want to kill themselves will hide it, so asking questions helps...a few simple questions in screening, for example, can help us detect suicide risk that is not typically detected.”

See our capacity to talk about suicide, our willingness ask about each other’s suffering, to bring that unspeakable thing into the light, that can make all the difference.

I’ve heard many people talk about surviving suicide attempts as if the survival is a miracle, as if their life started over that day, maybe you’ve heard this too. And I don’t want to glamorize suicide, because it is something that can result in a copycat effect. I do want to encourage us to look for the moments when we help spark light in the dark.

And I do want to be clear that there is no damnation in death by long suffering. There is no moral failing in pain. Nor is the pain itself some divine punishment for a moral failing. Rejecting a theology of damnation is core to the very existence of Unitarian Universalism.

It matters that we tell that story, name that boundary. In a country where so-called religious freedom has become so thoroughly co-opted by the religious right, it matters that we own our religious commitments, perhaps more loudly. It matters that we know how to refute a theology of damnation, not by scorning religion, but by embodying our own theology of universalism. A theology which gives us the faith to say that no one’s humanity is conditional. A theology which gives us the courage to face the endless night and believe that dawn will come. A theology that believes connection and creativity are more powerful than despair.

When we tell the story of Hanukkah, we think of the iconic tale of the oil that lasted for eight days. It’s a story of the warmth of those flames somehow making it through, the spark surviving longer than seemed possible, somehow able to spread, expanding our sense of what is possible.

I’d call that a miracle. The expanding sense that more is possible, when we’ve

collapsed into nothingness, when we're convinced by death or endless night, and life somehow struggles through to morning, I'd call that a miracle. A miracle in the sense that the impossible has become possible. That's the opposite of damnation.

We, Unitarian Universalists, we do hold fiercely to some beliefs. They're not names for transcendence or stories about how the world came to be. We hold fiercely to the belief that no one's humanity is negotiable. Ever. We hold fiercely to the belief that we are inextricably connected, that the care we show for each other matters. That even death cannot undo our having lived and affected the world.

We, Unitarian Universalists, we also hold lightly those stories about wisdom and meaning that become creed, we hold lightly the names for the mysteries of the sacred. But that doesn't mean anything goes. And it matters that we are clear about this boundary. Because religion is sometimes used as a weapon, is sometimes the source of great suffering. And so it matters that we say no, that we spread that flame that says you cannot be damned.

It's better to say something than to stand by in uncomfortable silence.

I wonder who you know who is suffering, maybe not to the point of death, I hope, but suffering nonetheless.

You are here in this community and I assume there's a reason. And since we UUs are allergic to forcing anyone to do anything, I assume you're here because it adds some warmth, some meaning to your life.

There are UU congregations all over the country and these days, we're all over the internet. If you know someone who is suffering, why not invite them into this place of warmth, or whatever place of warmth is their religious home. Not because we want to grow our numbers, but because maybe a place like this could be a salve to their suffering. Maybe a community of caring is the thing they need to ease their isolation. Maybe the idea of connection is beyond their imagining right now and it's time for you to ask.

Winter is coming, the nights are still getting longer. There's a reason so many traditions begin lighting candles in this season of expanding darkness. We need warmth, we need to hold faith that the endless nights will end, that the cold will not overtake us. So pass the flame, light the lights, wonder if there could be miracles in our midst, life sparking aflame in the hollows of suffering. Because in this place, no one is outside the circle of love, no one is lost.

So light the lights and call your beloveds home.

Amen.