

And to think that I heard it on Berry Street!

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, September 18, 2022 * Unity Church Unitarian

“Nothing, I said, growing red as a beet, but a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry Street.”

‘And to Think that I saw it on Mulberry Street’ was one of those books that I loved as a child, because I too, was that kid who didn’t really see the necessity to be grounded in reality – in what was right in front of me. Instead, as children so often do, I treasured my imagination and used it as an opportunity to create stories and worlds where trees could talk and dirt mounds became mountains. This morning, we are not only going to take a walk down Mulberry Street with Dr. Suess, but take another stroll down a different street, Berry Street, as a way to reflect on September’s theme of “covenant.” “Covenant” is not a word most people use in daily life much. “Promises” is a more religiously neutral word. Most of us do recognize that promises form a kind of invisible guardrail that frame everything from our most intimate relations to our relationships to our nation, our planet and the Holy. As one church member said: “a Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all living things.”

So, this morning, we’re going to dig deeper into this religious word and to do so, I’m going to place us at the corner of Mulberry Street and Berry Street – the crossroads for both our personal and collective reflection on what it means to live and practice a life framed by the covenants we make with one another – as well as the ones we break.

We begin on... Mulberry Street! *And To Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street* has been rightfully honored as a celebration of childhood imagination and the pure creativity that it entails. Following his father’s instruction to pay attention to what he sees on his walk to school down Mulberry Street, our young protagonist Marco is very disappointed by reality, so he begins to “embellish.” Each detail he notices on Mulberry Street suggests a new “what if” possibility. What if it wasn’t a horse pulling that cart, but a zebra instead? Wouldn’t that be fun? And what if it wasn’t just a cart, but a chariot driven by a charioteer? One thing leads to another and by the time Marco has been back and forth to school that horse and cart on Mulberry street has turned into a fantastical parade of amazing people and creatures that are the product of his limitless imagination!

In fact, Marcos’s imagination has led him so far away from what is **really there** on Mulberry Street that when his father asks him what he saw, Marco has nothing to say. Marco’s father is usually seen as the downer of the story, impatient with Marco’s tendency to “turn minnows into whales.” What’s wrong, we are led to ask, with harmless exaggerations and flights of imagination? I will answer that question later in the sermon, but to do so we’re going to leave Mulberry Street for the time being, and head down that other street – Berry Street.

Berry Street is in Massachusetts, or at least it was. It now sits under a skyscraper in downtown Boston. Even though it no longer exists, Berry Street ranks alongside nearby Beacon

Street, as among the best-known streets in Unitarian history. That is because Berry Street was the access street to the direct entrance into the vestry of the Federal Street Church, the church where William Ellery Channing, the founding religious leader of the Unitarian movement in the United States, would receive visitors and hold meetings. The vestry door entrance on Berry Street was where Channing invited all the local clergy who leaned in the Unitarian Christian direction to arrive to gather in 1820 to create a bond of union and to hear an inspiring lecture that would speak to the current moment of challenge and controversy that they were facing as Unitarians.

Two hundred and two years later, the Berry Street lecture, offered at the Unitarian Universalist Ministry Days before General Assembly, it is believed to be the longest running continuous essay series and conference within our faith tradition and likely in America itself. Each year, a new essayist or panel of essayists is chosen and invited to rise to the occasion of telling the annual gathering what they see, what they believe, and they imagine are the important movements of the mind, heart and spirit in our Association of congregations and in the world. In 2021, your Ministers Emeritus, Reverends Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs delivered a powerful, important, and impactful Berry Street lecture which summarized the essence of the teachings that many of you have heard and practiced over the course of their ministry. Rob and Janne tied their teachings about the importance of developing a deep spiritual practice to the early roots in the Transcendentalist movement and to an innovative congregation called “The Church of the Disciples.”

This past June, though gravely ill, Rob summoned all his strength to go to two events; the Service of the Living Tradition, where he and Janne were honored with a standing ovation – and – the 2022 Berry Street lecture, offered by the Reverend Mykal Slack. The last hug that Mykal received before going on stage to deliver the lecture, was from Rob Eller-Isaacs, offering Rev. Slack encouragement to preach a good and true and lively word on the theme of covenant.

And so Rev. Slack did. Unlike what happens on Mulberry Street, the Berry Street lecture doesn't entertain fanciful expressions of Unitarian Universalism. Instead, it's more like Marco's father, who asks “what did you REALLY see?” The Berry Street lecture asks us tell us not only what the speaker sees - it seeks to uncover the REASONS that the wagon is broken and why the horse, who should be spending their time in pasture, is still working overtime pulling heavy loads on Mulberry Street.

Rev. Mykal Slack began by telling us that Unitarian Universalism is at a crossroads where [quote] *we have to decide whether we are going to actually be the robust innovative dynamic worthwhile-for-all-of-us faith we want to be or if we are going to coast along in the muddiness that both conflict and praxis avoidance builds, and therefore lose the people that I would argue UUism is actually built for.*” Rev. Slack invited us to explore of what he described as “founding and festering mythologies” that shape our movement and are no longer serving us well in becoming the faith we want to be.

The first founding and festering mythology is that the beating heart of our faith is covenants, rather than creeds. What? I thought to myself. No, Covenants are Us – right?! Covenants are what distinguishes us from those other faiths that make their people say creeds, right? I’ve heard innumerable stories about new Unitarian Universalist who were forced to mumble the Nicean creed and realized “I don’t believe a word of this! If this is what it means to be a (fill in the blank) then I’m outta here!” I’m PROUD of the fact that one of my first tasks as your interim minister has involved creating covenants with colleagues and staff about how we will be in right relationship with one another.

But here’s the rub – covenants are promises which we freely adopt to support each other in our individual spiritual journey and practices; and they frame the ways in which we promise to BEHAVE with one another. When we use the term “right relationship” we are talking about how to behave with one another. Rev. Slack continues: *So, perhaps, the work that we do to continually rely on covenant to help us do this thing better, to be in right relationship in ways that are meaningful and that aren’t just performative, needs some reconsideration.*

Because, if a commitment to covenanting in community only extends as far as anyone’s comfortability, as far as anyone’s racism, as far as our ableism, as far as anyone’s homophobia or transphobia will take them, then once anyone becomes confronted with lived experiences outside their purview or comfort zone, covenant goes out the window, Right relationship goes out the window. Good intentions go out the window. And then what does it all mean when we recite the words that so many of us know: Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law; this is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”

I love that covenant – in fact, we spoke it last Sunday. But sometimes, love is not the spirit in the church and sometimes we become indifferent to service or self-righteously absorbed in service above all else. Sometimes we don’t dwell in peace and sometimes, we find it difficult to help one another, especially when we’re hurting or believe our values have been betrayed. We shouldn’t be surprised that we break our covenants to ourselves and one another. But what Rev. Slack rightfully challenges Unitarian Universalism on is the belief that simply making or saying covenants is enough. We must live them out in practice, especially when it’s difficult.

This takes us to his second founding and festering mythology which is: “We’re doing all right.” By that, he identifies a kind of self-satisfaction, particularly among those of us who believe ourselves to be white, that Unitarian Universalism is doing mostly pretty well. We’ve got aspirational statements of things we are going to do or have done – we’ve created covenants with carefully crafted language – but then don’t quite absorb how difficult it’s going to be to make it real. It reminds me of the time I wrote up a set of goals for myself one summer, which included: Lose 20 lbs – grow my hair out to shoulder length – run a marathon –read War and Peace and learn Hungarian. Needless to say, I accomplished none of those goals that summer. Because just wanting something doesn’t necessarily make it so! In our own congregational life, we may say we want to create Beloved Community - then we realize just how hard it is to de-

center white supremacy culture; how exhausting it is. We are tempted to either beat ourselves up for not smashing white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, transphobia, ableism and sexism right this minute or to lapse into an easy assumption identified by Rev. Slack : “we’re doing all right.”

Here’s Rev. Slack’s main point, which is a sobering corrective to “we’re doing all right.” He challenges us to be aware of the disconnect between the way things are – and the way many of us imagine the church to be. It’s not unlike Marco, having a vivid and active imagination, which prevented him from seeing the reality that was in front of him. It’s me, when I talk about Beloved Community without having real relationships with people of color outside the church walls. It’s me – and maybe you too, when the concerns of the world and my personal grief leave no room for the daily practice of de-centering whiteness. It’s us – Unitarian Universalists – when we realize “we’re doing all right” too often doesn’t include those from historically marginalized communities who find their way to a Unitarian Universalist church.

This brings us to the third founding and festering mythology of our faith as identified by Rev. Slack asks us to grapple with: that - ***Unitarian Universalist Culture and Unitarian Universalist values are the same thing.*** Rev. Slack asked: *What are the ways UU culture is aligned with U.S. dominant culture by default and, therefore, not actually aligned with UU values? ... Some of those aspects of culture are above the surface and easily noticeable. We even laugh about some of them - Priuses, NPR, Coffee hour. Some are just below the surface and barely noticeable, but can be spotted if we’re paying enough attention. And some - some of the values, symbols, history, attitudes, behavior and so on are so deep below the surface that they are working to fuel the inner- and outer-workings of whole communities without anyone even noticing that those aspects of culture are even present.*

Part of the mythology of UU’ism is that we are a quintessentially American religion aligned with the important values of the founders of the country. Even as some have questioned those values and realized that as a nation have ignored many of the racist dimensions of those values, we still like to think we are aligned with the best of American progressive values. Those progressive American values are also steeped in – you guessed it – whiteness and white culture which creates a culture which becomes the norm.

Changing one’s own heart and mind is hard enough – but changing the culture of a church –is *really, really difficult!* It reminds me of a story my stepdaughter told me. When she was in college, she decided to visit the small Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in her college town on a Sunday morning. As she awkwardly stood in the lobby, reading the bulletin board, she overheard one member spontaneously and enthusiastically say to another: “Look, a young person!” That one moment told her volumes about the culture of the church she was about to attend and of how she would or would not fit in. Imagine how a similar comment would have landed if she were a young woman of color, or disabled, or trans or queer.

The question at the heart of Rev. Slack’s lecture is this: Is it possible for us to look at Unitarian Universalism more simply, more soberly, more historically accurately, as what it is

today and always has been – a reflection of enlightenment values that have been distorted and badly applied through the framework of white supremacy culture that surrounds us?

In order to reflect on THAT question, I have to go back to Mulberry Street for a minute. I began by telling you how much I loved that book as a child AND I would never pull out my old copy and read it to my grandchildren today. Why? Because in “Mulberry Street” Geisel’s art work and narrative included an image of a “Chinaman” with yellow skin. In a later edition, Geisel did modify the text and the image, but he could not bring himself to completely eradicate stereotypical and racist images from some of his children’s books. Thankfully, in 2021, the publisher decided to stop reprinting books by Dr. Seuss which contained racist or stereotypical imagery. There was a furious response from right wing media that this was another example of “cancel culture”. I don’t see it that way. I see it as a decision of integrity that reflected what they publisher could do to live up to the values they say they believe in, rather than simply succumb to the popular culture’s love of the Dr. Seuss books.

So, Rev. Slack’s Berry Street address provided us with an appropriate critique of the state of this institution of ours, as experienced through the lens of a black, queer, trans Unitarian Universalist minister who loves this faith enough to keep coming back despite microaggressions, despite having to deal with the dominance of white, hetero, transphobic and ableist culture that is also part of Unitarian Universalism. And all of this – leads us back to covenant – the covenants we make, the covenants we break and the covenants we attempt to keep.

That’s why I wanted you to hear Russ Balenger’s story this morning. Russ likely didn’t know what Unity’s covenants were when he stepped into the doors of the Unity Church. He may not have read up on Unity’s on-going and deepening commitment to anti-racism and multiculturalism. But what he did experience was a congregation who attempts to live out and live into the covenants we profess, perhaps imperfectly, but ones that we hold at the center of our shared life together.

Rev. Slack’s Berry Street lecture is both a critique of and a love letter to Unitarian Universalism. It’s a reminder of how important it is to continue to decenter white supremacy culture, which is so deeply rooted in this faith tradition, to allow for a wider embrace, that includes all who seek what I believe is a life-saving message. Russ found this faith expansive enough to stay committed. Nothing is ever perfect – in fact, the quest for perfection *is* a manifestation of white supremacy culture!

So here we are, on the corner of Mulberry and Berry Street, invoking our imagination at what a truly beloved community can look like – all while being grounded in what’s really real, and acknowledging the work we still must do to make it possible

The corner of Mulberry Street and Berry Street isn’t just an intersection. It’s a crossroads. Which way do we go? Self-congratulating fantasy or honest engagement with reality? The choice, of course, is up to us.