



Authority

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries, and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Few phrases so bluntly and ambiguously express the challenges of our times as the command to “Question authority.” Like a banner held high when we stand up to injustices entrenched in any system, it can empower and embolden. And, like a slap across the face when others question our authority or the authority of values we cherish and believe in, it can sever relationship abruptly and painfully.

Unitarian Universalism, with every faith tradition that traces its heritage to the reformation of another, is born of the power of questioning one understanding of authority and naming new ones. We join many religious liberals in a centuries old, once heretical turn from hierarchical understandings toward the authority of continuous revelation. As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize multiple sources of wisdom — including a wide range of religious, humanist, and scientific teachings, the deeds and words of those working for justice, and earth-centered traditions — but we privilege truth that rises from a “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” and an “original relation to the universe.”

As such, each of us is both blessed and challenged to fully step into the authority we have claimed for naming and defining the divine, how it moves in our lives, and what authority it has or does not have over us.

Have you noticed? How this curls like a question pointing right back to itself?

This is fitting. The phrase Question Authority is widely attributed in its contemporary usage to Timothy Leary,

once named by Richard Nixon as the “most dangerous man in America.” It became a rallying cry for 1960s countercultural rejections of war, racism, sexism, and more. It continues to serve today’s protests of these and other injustices persisting more than a half century later.

What is sometimes lost, however, is that questioning authority is meant to uncover something reliable to which you grant authority as a result of your questions. Leary wrote, “But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”

Authority, like so many of the themes we explore in worship, is relational. Questioning its governance may be a wise check on accepting the way things are and the power structures that keep them so. But ultimately, this questioning calls on us to seek and name where we *do* grant authority, and having granted it, to participate in carrying out what it asks us to do.

Are you ready? To what do you grant authority that you are willing to follow? Is it possible to live in this world without doing that?

Authority gets a bad rap for the many ways in which it is abused. This creates a suspicion of authority that can make us reluctant to act, to wield the power we so fiercely claim as a human birthright. But the simple fact of authority is neither good nor bad. It’s the how of it that matters. Contrary to Nixon’s claim, the most dangerous use of authority might be when it *doesn’t* circle back around, in questioning

and conversation, or in checks and balances built into accountable human systems and, more fully and fundamentally, woven into nature itself.

The danger of authority is glaringly obvious in the “Great Chain of Being.” That Platonic hierarchy of power depicted a pyramid of beings with allegedly diminishing value; it found a home in medieval Christianity and poisonously lingers still in the foundations of systemic racism. But nature itself offers us a different model in what might be called the Grand Ecology of Being. Nested there in a web of multidimensional relationships, authority flows in interdependent rhythms and cycles across time, species and elements.

So fire has authority over the trees it burns; and trees have authority over the earth their roots break up; and earth has authority over the stream it slows with silt; and the stream has authority over the fire that rages.

To truly question authority, we must each find our own particular place in the grand ecology of being — a place that will both grant us authority and hold it in check. And wherever we are granted authority, we are asked to accept it, to responsibly exercise it to the benefit of the larger living web of relationship and being. The danger of authority in our own faith tradition may be less about where it is guarded institutionally than about how it is often defended individually, holding us outside of the belonging that religious community is intended to foster and support. Because there, in relationship, we find the authority of love.

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JANUARY SERVICES

Sunday Worship and Coffee Hour

While our building remains closed, multigenerational Sunday Services are being live-streamed from the Sanctuary at 10:00 a.m. Details and links, including access to past services, are available online at www.unityunitarian.org.

Each Sunday, everyone is welcome to join a virtual Zoom coffee hour after the service. To participate in the coffee hour, please use this link: <https://bit.ly/unitycoffehour>. If you would like to receive our congregational emails, please sign up here: <https://bit.ly/ucuemailsignup>.

January 3: Tolling of Bells

Livestream service: <https://youtu.be/xZ2-c0j6Zjo>

"It matters how you carry it, books, bricks, grief..." wrote Mary Oliver. Given the magnitude of our grief in response to the pandemic, our annual *Tolling of Bells* service seems perfectly timed for the turning. If you would like to have a candle lit to honor someone you loved and lost in 2020, please send their name, your name and a sentence or two that points to their attributes, to Rob Eller-Isaacs at robei@unityunitarian.org.

January 10: Whose Story Is This?

Livestream service: <https://youtu.be/MO40tvDpfFI>

We all have a multitude of stories that we carry with us that inform us about our lives and our identity. They belong to us. Or do they? Worship associate Erika Sanders and Rev. Janne Eller-Isaacs will delve into the issues of story, identity, and who has the authority and power to tell stories about identity.

January 17: Soul Force

Livestream service: <https://youtu.be/8LmnGYUq0H4>

Combining the Sanskrit word *satya* meaning soul or truth, and the Hindi word *graha* usually translated as force, Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha* to refer to non-violent resistance. Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs and worship associate Ben Pettee will honor the legacy of Dr. King by renewing our understanding of the practice of *satyagraha* and of how its lessons are applicable today.

January 24: Dare to Be Powerful

Livestream service: https://youtu.be/-7rl_qLIMNA

Audre Lorde wrote, "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." When we use our strength in the service of our vision, it becomes less and less important whether we are afraid, and it also becomes less and less important how the external environment is changing. Our vision doesn't change, though our choices about what we do with our life force might. As the year on the calendar changes, as the national leadership changes in the U.S., how does our use of our own power remain the same and how does it change? Rev. Meg Riley, pulpit guest; Lia Rivamonte, worship associate.

January 31: By What Authority?

Livestream service: <https://youtu.be/eob1xncsuSw>

The question of authority surrounds us in the controversies and divisions of our time, from politics and media to criminal justice and the science of vaccinations and climate change. What are the sources of authority that we can rely upon in a post-fact era, when skepticism reigns of the old and entrenched order and brazen power assumes the guise of authority? Rev. KP Hong and worship associate Rebecca Flood explore the crisis and question of authority at a time when the organizing structures of society no longer hold and nothing definite seems forthcoming.

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In what ecology of being do you place yourself, and how does that name the nature and boundaries of your own authority? What is beyond the boundaries of your separate self that has authority in your life? Does your own belonging — to this or any other community, to your current relationships or those you long for, to love itself — exert authority over the choices you make and the legacy of your life unfolding day by day?

This is the invitation we are each given to question — and honor — authority in a faithful, fruitful way.

By Karen Hering on behalf of this month's theme team:

*Ahmed Anzaldúa, Drew Danielson,
Janne Eller-Isaacs, Rob Eller-Isaacs,
Ray Hommeyer, KP Hong,
Ruth MacKenzie and Laura Park*

Authority Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme, a variety of resources including books, poems, videos and audios, are listed in this month's Chalice Circle packet available online at www.unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html and by request from karen@unityunitarian.org.

Offering Recipients

January 3: East Side Elders

January 10: Listening House

January 17: Open Cities Health Center

January 24: Store to Door

January 31: Spirit of St. Stephens Street Outreach

Turn to page 13 for organization information.