

# PRaises FOR THE JOURNEY

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH  
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## CALL TO WORSHIP - Margi McCue

When I first entered Atkinson in 1991 I knew I was in a sacred space. It was a combination of the sense of history, the sense of community, the beauty of the sanctuary. I felt the history in the style of the pews, the pulpit and surrounding woodwork - a traditional style that was familiar to me from my childhood in a Congregational Church.

I was entranced by the beauty of the amazing stained glass windows depicting Jesus as the shepherd and as a holy man in prayer – Jesus the teacher and prophet whose teachings I had studied and loved. I felt a sense of community through the warm welcome we received upon entering – both from members of the congregation and from the minister, Rev. Richard Bellingham.

But there was also the design of the sanctuary that added to the feeling of community – the pews placed in an inclusive way, almost like a semi circle and the amazing acoustics which allow us to more fully enjoy beautiful music.

Atkinson called to me and made many parts of me feel safe – child and adult, Congregationalist and Unitarian Universalist. I felt as though I had come home. And since then - whenever I enter - I get the same feeling of encircling love and safety come over me. I am home again.

I invite you now to enter into worship this morning in this sacred place. Join with our foremothers and forefathers who worshiped together in this sanctuary in past years. Join with future members who are yet to worship in community here in years to come. And Join in community today – in this sanctuary where we are free to explore, question, dialogue, or remain in silence as we travel together on our spiritual journeys.

Come let us worship together.

## READINGS

We offer two readings this morning. The first by Jack Mendelson.

Here in this sanctuary of ancient dreams and wisdom and beauty, we come to grow, to be healed, to stretch mind and heart, to be challenged, renewed.

to be helped in our own continuing struggles for meaning and for love;

to help build a world with more justice and mercy in it;

to be counted among the hoppers and doers.

In the face of cynicism, darkness, brutality around us and within, we seek to align ourselves with a living community that would affirm rather than despair that would think and act rather than simply adjust and succumb.

Here we invite the spirit of our own humanity and the healing powers under, around, through and beyond it, to give us the nerve and grace, the toughness and sensitivity to search out the truth that frees, and the life that maketh all things new.

And this from the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson.

The story is written in the form of a series letter from a dying father to a young son, the father being a minister in a small town in the Midwest at about mid-century.

The light in the [sanctuary] was beautiful this morning, as it often is. It's a plain old church and it could use a coat of paint. But in the dark times I used to walk over before sunrise just to sit there and watch the light come into the room. I don't know how beautiful it might seem to anyone else. I felt much at peace those mornings, praying over

very dreadful things sometimes—the Depression, the wars. That was a lot of misery for people around here, decades of it. But prayer brings peace, as I trust you [now] know.

In those days ... I might spend most of a night reading. Then, if I woke up still in my armchair, and if the clock said four or five, I'd think how pleasant it was to walk through the streets in the dark and let myself into the church and watch the dawn come into the sanctuary. I loved the sound of the latch lifting. The building has settled into itself so that when you walk down the aisle, you can hear it yielding to the burden of your weight. It's a pleasanter sound than an echo would be, an obliging accommodating sound. You have to be there alone to hear it.... After a while I did begin to wonder if I like the church better with no people in it.

## SERMON

Rebecca Parker, who is now President of Starr King School for the Ministry where I received my Master of Divinity, was the daughter and granddaughter of Methodist ministers. She tells the story of how she first learned she was Unitarian.

She was going through the confirmation class at her father's church and realized she couldn't join the church because she didn't have the necessary faith. Rebecca calls her parents Christian humanists and says they always encouraged her to think independently – especially in matters of religion – but she knew it would cause a stir if the minister's daughter wasn't confirmed. She went to her father to explain what she believed and what she didn't. Her father listened carefully and told her there was a name for what she was – Unitarian. It was perfectly acceptable to be a Unitarian and a Methodist. Her mind at ease, Rebecca joined the church and later followed in her father's and grandfather's footsteps into the Methodist ministry. She now also holds fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister

Many years later, Rebecca, who is also a fine musician, was invited to participate in a group giving input on a revision of the Methodist hymnal. The denomination had commissioned the hymn that we now call *Bring Many Names*. In its original draft, the first verse did not yet exist. It started right out with image of a Strong Mother God. Now was all twenty-plus years ago, and beginning a hymn with an image of the Divine Feminine was too much for most of the group. They asked the author to write another verse that would ease them into the hymn, and so he wrote the verse we now sing first – Bring many names. But it still wasn't enough for the hymnal committee and they rejected it.

It broke Rebecca's heart that her own people could not be open to an image of God that embraced her and her experience as a woman. Apparently, she was still not made in the image of God, nor did God reflect her image.

Fast forward several years. Rebecca was talking to Rev. Mark Belletini who led the effort that created our current gray hymnal – *Singing the Living Tradition*. He told her the Hymnal Commission had sheets and sheets and sheets of music to consider. On the very first day they met, resting on the top of the pile was *Bring Many Names*. Even as they had no idea how many months they would labor – discussing, arguing and agonizing over what to include and what to leave out – everyone on the committee looked at this hymn and all agreed instantaneously. *Bring Many Names* was in. Simple as that.

This story confirmed for Rebecca, while she is still a Methodist, why she also felt called to speak for a wider embrace of liberal religion as a Unitarian Universalist.

For we do bring many names. For ourselves and for the Holy. Many names and no name at all.

And in so doing we create a sense of sanctuary – a place of safety and rest, a refuge.

We like to say that we are a people who prefer questions to answers. That it's the journey and not the destination. Many have felt a great relief in finding this faith and realizing that it demands of us no certainty about the nature or name of the Holy. God for us may well be a strong mother, a warm father, young and growing, old and aching, great and living. We may have no God at all and be welcome here.

All we need is to remain open. To bring our minds and hearts to the endeavor. To honor the journey with all its uncertainties. To welcome the wanderer, the worshiper, the doubter, the seeker.

What a relief it can be, to find a place that indeed offers sanctuary for the journey. Indeed, a place that praises the journey. A place that allows us to be pilgrims and, as another hymn puts it, searchers in the soul's deep yearnings. A place that allows us to seek wholeness of spirit even on life's wild roads. A place that allows our restless spirits to seek the truth in freedom. A place that offers, too, a respite and rest on the journey. A journey that feels sometimes liberating. Sometimes exhausting.

For to be human ultimately, I believe, is not to be able to come to final answers and surety. Life is always changing, arising and passing away, as the Buddha taught. Atoms arise and pass away so rapidly that they cannot be said to ever really exist in space and time. Mountains arise and pass away far more slowly. And, in the largest perspective of the history of the earth, of the universe, we humans are far closer to atoms than to mountains in the brief span of our existence.

Some will say that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything we want. That is both facile and false. A far truer statement is that we must figure out for ourselves what it is we do believe. In a world that is always arising and passing away, changing and growing, what we believe is also changing and growing. Far from simple, this can be the most daunting spiritual path. I know those who have rejected the dogma and rigidity of another faith, but still have trouble with the moving target that Unitarian Universalism presents. For me, the deepest truth is that the target *is* always moving. Throughout human history, even in the history of a single life, the Holy has many names. And those names can change or disappear altogether.

Yet what a relief it can be to find such a sanctuary as this. A place that invites the question, embraces the journey, acknowledges that what is holy manifests throughout all of life in infinite forms and infinite diversity. What joy to find others on the same path – albeit a misty path that often shows us just a step or two ahead. We are not alone in this foggy wilderness. What a joy to find hostels, sanctuaries of rest and sustenance like this one.

People often tell me when they first found the church they cried – with relief, with joy, with wonder, with a poignant kind of sadness.

When I was on my internship in Toronto, some people came to get me after the service one Sunday. It seems a young woman was still sitting in the sanctuary weeping almost uncontrollably. They didn't know what to do, and this must surely be a job for a minister. I asked the young woman if she'd like me to sit with her. She nodded, unable yet to find any words to speak of what so overwhelmed her. Over the course of the next few months, I came to know Robin well.

She was an American at graduate school at the University of Toronto. She had been raised in a conservative faith in the South, but had always been a rebel. She got in trouble more than once for telling the minister of her church that she disagreed with his sermon. She was unable, even as a child, to keep her head down and mouth shut to stay out of trouble. She doesn't know where she got her independent spirit, as her family was fit to be tied at the rebel they were raising. Yet when the minister did things like preach an anti-Earth Day sermon, she knew he was wrong. The gist of the sermon, she told me, was why should we care about elephants? God created man to have dominion over the earth and the beasts. People were all that mattered, all that really mattered to God. This message violated something within Robin, and she could not be silent.

It hadn't been necessarily been the message that Sunday in Toronto that had left her in tears, it was the simple appearance of the ministers. The co-ministers of the Toronto church at that time were the Reverends Donna and Mark Morrison-Reed. Some of you will remember Mark as the minister who preached at my ordination. Mark is African-American. Donna, his wife, is white and Canadian. Robin could hardly believe that a church could have a woman and a black man as their ministers – and that they were married. She knew she wasn't in Kansas any more, although I think she hailed from South Carolina.

Robin wept because she was so moved at the statement the ministers made simply by being in the pulpit. She wept because she felt a powerful homecoming – she had found a spiritual home. She wept because here she knew she would be embraced as a rebel, a questioner. She wept because the very quality that made her feel like an alien in her family and town was actively encouraged in this place. She wept because she had never known such a place could exist. She wept because she had not found it sooner.

Our faith became a sweet and powerful sanctuary for her journey.

This church, this faith, is a sanctuary for so many of us in a complicated and confusing world. It is a world in which many of us feel like seekers with nowhere to seek. For myself, traditional Christian worship – no matter how progressive – never worked even as I always admired Jesus of Nazareth as holy man and teacher. The Buddha's message resonated more strongly, yet I yearned for deeper community than I found in meditation halls. When I first found our faith, I too wept. I hadn't known it could be like this.

Our faith became a powerful and sweet sanctuary for my journey.

Sanctuary can be a state of mind, yet I have always been attracted to holy places. Small wayside chapels, grand cathedrals, homey neighborhood churches. They speak to me of peace and refuge. And I love this sanctuary for all the reasons Margi mentioned and more.

Now those of you who know me well know that I am highly unlikely to *ever* come to church to "watch the dawn come into the sanctuary" as did the narrator in *Gilead*. I am far from being an early riser. It is the late afternoon light I love. Warm and muted, it still catches the tips of the arches of the pews. Peace rises, almost as visible as the mist that rises from wet pavement when the rain has passed and the sun re-emerges. I rarely sit and savor the light, but the beauty of it can cause a quick, involuntary intake of breath. A movement of surprise and satisfaction. Literally, an inspiration. When I exhale my shoulders release. My energy and attention drop into my core, bringing me home, locating me for just a moment. Something holy arises here, when the sanctuary is empty of people yet most especially when it is full of people.

Yes, for us this church can be a physical and a figurative sanctuary.

We talk about transforming lives that transform the world. Yet we can jump too quickly to saving the world – it is in such need. We need a place that will hold the transformation. That will allow for its on-going process. That will give us space to breathe and to be. A sanctuary that will, to paraphrase *Gilead*, yield to the burden of your weight, creating not an echo but a pleasanter, more obliging and accommodating sound.

The movement of our spiritual lives is indeed not an echo – a calling into the universe only to hear the same voice bouncing back. Rather it is more like respiration, a breathing in and out. There are times we are filled with inspiration. The surprised intake of breath in moment of beauty or grace. The deep, calming and locating in-breathe of meditation or repose. In a world of such need, we must find those places and times in our lives that give us sanctuary, refuge, inspiration.

There is a chant that describes this Holy Movement that has become a mantra for me. When I breathe in, I breathe in love. When I breathe out, I breathe out peace.

We breathe in to take in sustenance, nurture, love. Only then can we exhale again, moving into the world, offering inspired gifts of nurtured love and peace.

Let this place, this community be a such sanctuary to you. Let it soothe. God knows, we need it. The world swirls about us. Filled with wonders. Filled with terrors. Let this be place set apart, to catch your breath, to be soothed and comforted. A place to rest where nothing will be asked of you. Conversely, a place where everything will be asked of you and you will find strength to respond.

May it be a powerful and sweet sanctuary for your journey.

Blessed be.

May it be so.