

God Bless Everyone, No Exceptions!
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One of my favorite bumper stickers says: *God Bless Everyone – No Exceptions!*

It is as deeply a Universalist sentiment as I have heard. It expresses the conviction that in its earliest formulations went something like this: God's love for all is so great that none, no, not one, can be separated from it. Hell was even dismissed as a theological impossibility because a God with so great a love would never damn a person to hell.

And in response to this amazing love of us, Universalists understood that we, too, would be inspired to love all others – who like us are the beloved of God. It was not simply an intellectual affirmation but came out of a felt sense of being loved, out of a thankful heart!

Radical!

So: What would it mean if we took that bumper sticker seriously? Now, if you want to, you could edit your own bumper sticker, fine-tune the wording of your own bumper sticker: Like this one from our own bookstore: *God Bless the Whole World – No Exceptions*. Or maybe: *All Are Loved – No Exceptions*. Or *All Have Inherent Worth and Dignity*...Or whatever similar words you might choose.

The point I'm trying to get at is: What if each of us thought about our bumper sticker every day, maybe even with every breath we took? What would it mean if we allowed ourselves to actually feel our gratitude for being blessed, for all that is our life, every day, maybe with every breath we take? How would we approach each day as we opened our eyes, what would we feel like, what would we want to do with the time that we were given?

And, if everyone opened his or her eyes each morning with that same feeling, a thankfulness that inspired a love of others, what would our world be like? How would people treat each other; what actions would we support? What institutions for good might thrive?

Could be a pretty wonderful picture.

It could be.

It was actually some fairly recent experiences that got me, in my own personal reflections, to think more deeply about this core of our Universalist heritage, this Universalist heresy of ours.

I'll share a couple of them:

Story 1: Tour of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. The group, which happened to be composed of all Unitarian Universalists, came from the Convention Center down the street. One

had a particularly angry face as she asked the young woman leading us, “Where do you think the location is of this “so-called heaven?” I was first stunned and then embarrassed. Where was Francis David’s powerful understanding: “We need not think alike to love alike”? Was that Mormon guide less a person than any of us?

Story 2: I was with some UUs, wonderful individuals whom I know and respect, whose UU values I know run deep. We were outside a Wal-mart in a little town in a beautiful rural area. One of them came out of the store and said, “Let’s get out of here.” I asked if something had happened to her in the store. No, she “just needed to get away from this redneck place.” It had been a visceral experience for her, not an intellectual one. The notion of we and they never felt stronger. I asked myself, what do we do with feelings about those we have grown to see as “other”?

Two instances, both involving UUs whom I would bet are committed to our Seven Principles and worldview, but somehow stumbled in particular real life applications.

I don’t lift up these instances to say how bad these people were. Far from it! I lift them up with the realization that in part each was so disturbing to me because they resonated with moments in my own life in which I felt superior or indifferent or fearful, in which if it were not those exact words tumbling out, I too had experienced feelings of separation – based on difference in belief, or in culture, or other factors.

I lift up these instances because I believe that our religion is compelling enough to lift us to a much deeper, much more personally fulfilling, and much more compassionate, connected way of being than either of these examples suggests.

This morning I invite us to think about how, in spite of all the times we might fall short, we might nurture other kinds of feelings, other kinds of actions. I’m not interested in guilt or blame or shame.

Instead, I would this morning look at the nurture of spirit and of feelings that can fuel an active love for all people. I think we UUs are all pretty amazed at the intellectual analysis of what separates us – race, age, education, economics, sexual orientation, and all manner of other categories which can be so hurtful. I am all in favor of the hard thinking we do about this, and the positive actions that arise from that thinking. But, for this morning I want to look at how we sustain ourselves spiritually in our efforts to stay connected and in relationships sometimes even out of our comfort zone.

I believe that the bumper sticker calls us to pay attention -- not just intellectually, but also spiritually and emotionally -- in three areas of our lives. The “paying attention” part is important!

First, in our love of self

Oops, did I say love of self? Isn’t this sermon about love of everybody? Won’t this get us off track? I don’t think so.

If our feelings of love come from our own sense of gratitude for being alive, being held in a larger web of interconnection, I think paying attention to our own inner being probably needs to come first. How do we renew on a daily basis that sense of gratitude our forbears articulated with such fervor?

I would suggest that there are many practices or experiences that can call us as individuals into that feeling of thanksgiving, the feeling of individual connection with the pulse of our own life, with the pulse of all life such that difference melts. I am happier, more open to others, more understanding and compassionate when I do some of the following on a regular basis:

Practice of meditation, breathe in, breathe out, the same breaths that every person on the planet also shares.

Experiences in Nature, melting into the richness and ecology around me.

Exercise, feeling my heartbeat, my breath, the way my body feels, getting myself in balance.

Music – of birds, or string sections, or my own inner song; it all makes me feel, not just think but feel a larger connectedness.

Many other ways that give us an “inner tune-up” and open our hearts.

Poetry, reading or writing

The joy we feel in well reasoned thought (not just the thought itself, but the wonder that we can have it).

The unabridged love of life that children share with us.

Naming the blessings of my life when I open my eyes in the morning.

All of these routine and daily experiences lead to gratitude and a more gracious and loving approach to each day. This is soul work. Life is hard, that is also part of our experience, but there is in the core of each one of us, in the soul of every person, seeds of possibility we can connect with, a way to feel our connection to, the pulse of life.

[Song: (solo voice) *Comfort Me, O My Soul* v. 1]

Taking care of one’s own soul is very important and we neglect it at our own peril.

A second piece to pay attention to is the love of those near you, especially those in your faith community.

Why we come to church is not just about the sermon! It is about joining with people who share connection to the power of life, which is both intellectual and visceral – the music, the prayer, the children, the amazements, the pains, the sorrows – *together*.

The together part helps us with the individual soul part! It has the potential to increase exponentially both feelings and ideas, pointing to that which is “larger” in life.

Worship is of course an important aspect of this. One of my favorite contemporary UU theologians, Alice Blair Wesley says:

We come to church to be reminded of, stirred up to recall, and brought again to feel the charm of all that we love and cherish most. For me this happens most often when we sing. More readily than at any other time, when we sing a familiar hymn, the poetry of the text and the blend of our voices join to make me freshly aware of blessings, so that I inwardly exclaim, “Thanks be, O God!” That’s not an explanation, but an exclamation. “Yes, I love this reality, and I’m grateful for its existence, and it makes me want to give back, to serve and to work.”

This is the experience of Universalist theology, to be transformed by participation in a gathered community.

Of course, powerful experiences also happens outside of worship, in Connection Circles, in classes, breaking bread together, in cleaning up the creek, in joining our power together to make good things happen, in mourning with one another, in celebrating with one another.

Our faces, our conversations, our ways of being together in a faith community reflect back to one another our own value; they honor the light, the spirit, the souls in all people.

[Song: (sung by one or more voices) *Comfort Me, O My Soul* v. 2 - “Sing With Me”]

The last area to think about in relation to living the intention of our bumper stickers is in the world beyond our faith communities.

I think I would not be wrong if I said probably all of us in this room have a wish to change the world. The institutional and political responses to that wish are complex and need our focus. But first, I would encourage us all to bring our hearts, hearts inspired by our faith, to this work.

Gandhi has told us “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

In chapel we have learned the meaning of the Sanskrit word “Namaste,” “I honor the light that is in you.” The light, the divine, that which is pure and holy. Try it out, Namaste! Imagine doing that, or at least thinking that, in a disciplined way, with every encounter you have.

What would it look like to live as though each person we meet was one of the most precious people in the world? As precious as my child, my mother, my brother, my friend. Imagine! It might take some work! But perhaps no more than the discipline to start each morning by opening your eyes and naming to yourself what you are grateful for.

There is no doubt that our world is full of challenges, often frightening ones; and the world we live in is a world full of difference. Throughout much of history many humans have tried to escape difference, to ignore it by living in separateness, or to eradicate it or punish it. Don’t

engage with different beliefs at the peril of your life. Don't engage with other races at the peril of your wellbeing. Don't engage with *other* - classes, genders, or orientations, or ages.

This work is hard, made hard by generations of other ways of being.

When it seems especially hard, I encourage you to go back, to feel back to the grounding in your own soul, your own sense of gratitude. I encourage us to come into our faith community, join in struggle around this with one another, and look to one another to lift up the power of our faith and our connection to one another. I encourage us everyday to give thanks to a most gracious universe that, without any particular deserving of our own, has given us all that is our life.

Namaste.

God bless everyone – No exceptions!

BACKGROUND SOURCES:

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