

Faith in a Crisis

The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Ellen Lyon¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*My heart is moved by all I cannot save: So much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.*

— Adrienne Rich

Invitation to Worship Ellen Lyon

Good morning. Our topic today is “faith in a crisis.”

Religious liberals often seem uncomfortable with the term “faith.” We’re more familiar with crisis, which is hard to avoid in the course of an individual life or in our troubled world.

But faith, that can conjure blind obedience or superstitious belief. And we’re a skeptical, rational people.

When I was growing up in a traditional Christian home it was a compliment to say someone had faith. Adults would say it was someone’s faith that had carried them through a particularly tough time or a tragedy. I usually felt sorry for people with great faith because terrible things always seemed to be happening to them.

I was taught that God used crisis to test faith. God was wily that way. He -- and God was definitely a he -- would sometimes pile on problems just to see if you’d keep your faith. The more faith you had the more God had to throw at you just to see if you could take it. It seemed to me you were better off walking around saying you didn’t have much faith at all so as not to draw a divine “oh yeah, let’s see how much.”

I can’t say that in the crises of my life I have always known God’s presence but I have felt a loving, healing presence after those crises, a welcoming home of sorts after a stormy patch at sea.

¹The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen is parish co-minister and Ellen Lyon is a lay worship associate of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

A little later Duane is going to tell you about liberal theologian Rebecca Parker's take on faith in crisis. He shared with me a few of her essays and I have to say I really like her viewpoint.

Rather than the wishy-washy, namby-pamby, watered-down faith that critics accuse liberals of, Parker calls for a muscular faith strong enough to recognize and resist evil. She talks about a faith that assuages suffering rather than celebrates it.

That's what I'm looking for in a faith now -- something that confronts the bad and restores my confidence in the good. Come let us worship together.

Sermon Duane Fickeisen

In the midst of a crisis and in its aftermath — whether it's a natural disaster, a major act of intentional violence, or a terrible accident that impacts our whole culture or an unanticipated and unwanted event in our personal lives — it is common to ask "Why?"

We may wonder, Is it God testing us? Or perhaps punishing us? Or is it part of some larger plan that only God knows and is beyond our understanding? Or we may ask why is it happening to us and not to someone else. (Or conversely, why is it happening to someone else while we've been spared?)

The "Why?" question is one of the sticking points for theologians. How can you explain the existence of evil — and I mean to include not just intentional acts that cause harm, but also those so-called "acts of God" that are beyond human control? Among theologians, this is known as the theodicy problem.

Essentially, it's the problem of defending the goodness of God and explaining the existence of evil. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ultimately loving, why on earth would he permit evil to occur? I just can't accept that it's for my own good. And I sure don't want God to be a perverse sadist, who lets evil happen for his benefit.

Process theology solves the theodicy problem by positing that God is not omnipotent. (It certainly seems more acceptable to consider that God is not all powerful than it is to make God blind to events or less than beneficent.)

A compelling philosophical argument is that free will is inconsistent with an omnipotent God. And it is certainly much more satisfactory to think that our choices matter and that our actions

make a difference than to imagine that we are just playing out a pre-scripted scene and that our decisions are only illusions of control.

The answer that makes sense to me is that bad things happen because God can't stop them, not because God has caused them. They are often the result of free will being exercised in ways contrary to God's call to us to create more love and enjoyment. Sometimes that's because we lack sufficient knowledge to judge the consequences of our actions — we are not wise enough to know everything. And sometimes it's because we intentionally choose to harm another. The events in the natural world that often impact us — volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, for example — are beyond human control and are simply the consequences of natural events.

As the bumper sticker says, "Stuff happens." Asking why is largely an academic exercise. It seldom leads to healing, transformation and growth, or to deeper caring for our world. So while the questions of "Why?" may linger, there are more powerful questions to ask in the face of disaster. "What next?" "How shall I respond?" "What do I need right now?" and "How can I help?" for example.

One of my seminary professors, Rosemary Chinnici, now retired professor of pastoral theology at Starr King School for the Ministry, has said that when our inherited faith proves inadequate to the challenges we face, we have three choices. We can hold to our religious beliefs and deny our experience; we can hold to our experience and discard our beliefs; or we can become theologians.

I suspect many of you are Unitarian Universalists or considering joining us because the first two options weren't tenable and you're here to find out if there might be a belief system that is consistent with your experience and that provides comfort and guidance in the midst of struggles and times of crisis. You are practicing theology.

We are a community of theologians, seeking meaning and shaping worth from the content of our many experiences and in the context of this real world we inhabit with its flaws and disasters, its wondrous abundance and opportunity, and in relationship with other beings. That leads us to answers to "What's next?" and "How can I help?" They include working to create and sustain healthy communities that welcome diversity, strong relationships that keep us connected and networked with each other, and

paying attention to the needs around us and reaching out with generous assistance.

And that means naming violence, tending the wounded, and practicing hospitality and welcome. And it mandates a balance of holding and protecting the best parts of our traditions while creating new robust practices that affirm our faith.

The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker is a leading contemporary theologian and she's one of us. Rebecca has been the president of Starr King School for the Ministry for nearly two decades. She was the first woman president of any theological school. She followed her grandfather and father into the ministry as a liberal Christian and was serving a United Methodist congregation in Seattle as its parish minister before being recruited to lead Starr King. She holds dual fellowship as both a United Methodist and a Unitarian Universalist minister.

Her theological work is cutting edge and may be beyond naming with any familiar category, but she has deep roots in process theology — having studied with John Cobb and Charles Hartshorne, two of the seminal philosophers and theologians whose work created process theology. I've spoken about Hartshorne's work before — he was a Unitarian and an amateur ornithologist who combined his passion for observing behavior of birds with process thought to show that birds sing for enjoyment. He was actively engaged in doing metaphysics beyond his 100th birthday and made very significant contributions to process thought, by suggesting that God must be in relationship with all of existence and that to be in meaningful relationship requires that God grow and change. It is a radically heretical idea to suggest that God is neither omniscient nor immutable. But it makes a much more interesting God — one we can be in relationship with, and one that can truly help us shape our lives.

Rebecca also has a deep commitment to feminist theology and to its influence on anti-oppression work. But perhaps the primary source for her theology is her experience — of serving as a parish minister and facing the practical, day-to-day realities of pain and violence as they have touched the lives of those she has served, of two decades leading a transformative and innovative seminary, and of the tragedies and violence in her own personal life.

Through that she has strongly rejected the traditional Christian idea that suffering leads to salvation. The advice that we should gladly accept our own pain and rejoice in our suffering, as

it leads us closer to Jesus has led to more suffering and to denial of our experience. This notion has been used to keep people, and particularly women, in violent and dysfunctional relationships and has prevented us from experiencing what Jesus himself said was the essence of God's love — that the Kingdom of God is right here among us.

There is much more to be said about both process theology and about feminist and liberation theologies, of course. In a full semester course on feminist theology that Rebecca taught at Starr King, we just scratched the surface of the rich and nuanced work of feminist theologians.

But today I want to explore how our faith serves us in times of crisis. The essays that Ellen mentioned reading are part of a collection of Rebecca Parker's essays and sermons that was published two years ago in a book called *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*.² I recommend the book for a deeper engagement with Rebecca's clear vision and writing, which will surely invite you to reflection and to reframing theology. You can order it from the UUA Bookstore.

Rebecca writes that we're in the midst of the apocalypse — that it's not some future event, but that it is very present here and now. The evidence is in the chaos and violence around us — genocide and wars of aggression, environmental devastation and species extinction that are irreversible, pandemic illnesses (AIDS and flu for example), and a collapsing economy to name a few examples.

It's not just bad news in distant places, but troubles right close to home, too. Rising costs of basic needs — fuel and energy, food, and shelter — coupled with the falling value of the dollar relative to other currencies and the crisis in mortgages and other forms of credit are squeezing family budgets. Actual loss of employment for some and fears of it for others add to the stress on families.

Our political leaders seem impotent to respond effectively, using their power for personal gain and to benefit the greediest of corporate monsters.

It's not all bad news, certainly. Right there among the chaos and violence is a fascinating creativity, communications that permit us to be in touch around the world with friends and family as

² Rebecca Ann Parker. *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now* ed. by Robert Hardies. (Boston: Skinner House, 2006). See www.uua.org/skinner

well as with strangers, and — despite the recent rise in costs and inconvenience — the ability to travel and to experience other cultures is widely available.

But in the face of this apocalypse, Rebecca calls us to several practices grounded in our theology of universal love. The inherent worth and dignity we espouse points to the presence of a spark of the divine within each of us.

One of the questions that was asked of us last week is, “Why do you use the word ‘pray’? Who or what are you praying to?” Part of the answer is that I’m praying to that spark of the divine within each of us, expecting that by naming its presence and evoking our memories of it so that we might all remember to pay attention to what calls us to act from our best selves, to remember that it is we who are God’s agents, we who choose and take action, and that there is something that calls us to choose well, to bring more love to the world.

One of the observations Rebecca makes is that as it becomes ever more clear to us that we are not in control of every aspect of our lives — and can never be — and that there is really nothing we can do to guarantee our safety against every potential hazard — our tendency is to withdraw, to narrow our spheres of activity, and to turn toward tribalism for protection and to regain the illusion of control.

So we bolt the doors, shutter the windows, and pull the blankets up. We screen our calls, and we watch movies we’ve downloaded or gotten from Netflix on DVDs rather than go out to the theater. We bowl alone, not in leagues, as Robert Putman has written about. We spend vast sums on missile defense systems despite flaws in the concept and we have gone to war to depose leaders that threaten us.

The use of fear for political gain is keeping us isolated, compliant, and willing to accept abuses of personal freedoms and privacy. The results are a tremendous loss of global stature and respect, declining value of the dollar and a suffering economy, and escalation of violence.

What is really needed is not withdrawal, but recognition that we’re not in control, releasing the need for it, and admitting and embracing humility. I’m not advocating that we not take actions to protect ourselves. And I’m not suggesting that we shouldn’t be prepared for crisis, but I do think we’ve put too much effort into short-term measures of protection and not nearly enough into

long-term relationship building and capacity to respond to emergencies that will ultimately give us much more security than we can ever gain by locking people up in prison and causing regime change in other countries.

Your board of trustees discussed safety within the Meeting-house at its meeting this past week. Aware of the shootings at the UU church in Knoxville last month, they created an ad hoc task force to research and recommend measures to improve our ability to respond to a crisis within our community. Ellen, Ed Glasgow, and I will report back to the board on ways to better prepare ourselves to respond to a potential incident.

Rebecca calls us to pay attention. She suggests that our first response to the apocalypse should be to become alert and aware of the violence and pain around us rather than to deny the crisis by turning our backs on it. The first steps toward overcoming despair and becoming responsive are to recognize and describe the problem.

Our failure to do that keeps us isolated from experience and immobilized by our despair. Our faith calls us to be present in this world and to pay attention. To be agents of transformation, we must start with an honest assessment of present conditions. We must look at the situation around us with clear and unflinching vision.

Next, she says, we must reach out to the victims of the apocalypse and bind up their wounds. We are called to help the wounded heal and to offer the hospitality of a welcome table, a place where all are invited to share resources and to become a part of the beloved community.

Sometimes that means actually practicing first aid, staunching the bleeding and applying bandages. Sometimes there is nothing more we can do — and nothing more important — than simply to be present, to listen and witness, to present the face of God boldly meeting suffering, acknowledging it, and being present to it. This may be one of the greatest acts of love. Our faith calls us to be in community, to reach out to one another, to work for justice with compassion.

And then we must work to build healthy communities. It is a radical act, perhaps revolutionary even, to create strong communities gathered around a covenant of commitment to each other and to the larger gathered community. And that is the first part of UUCV's mission — to create an enduring liberal religious com-

munity. I understand that an enduring community must be one that is robust, vigorous, dynamic, and organically alive. One that draws you to deep engagement, one that encourages you to put the principles we espouse and your highest values into action.

In order to be robust and enduring, a healthy community must find a balance between maintaining tradition and welcoming innovation. Ours is a living tradition, one in which we experience an ongoing evolution in faith and belief, but one that stands firmly on the foundations our religious ancestors created.

One of those ancestors was William Ellery Channing who preached a sermon titled "Likeness to God" in 1828. In it, he urged his listeners to seek to be more like God. He said, "I do and I must reverence human nature ... I know its history. I shut my eyes on none of its weaknesses and crimes. ... But injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. ..."

Channing continues to talk about human nature, "I bless it for its kind affections, for its strong and tender love. I honor it for its struggles against oppression, for its growth and progress under the weight of so many chains and prejudices These are marks of a divine origin and the pledges of a celestial inheritance."

Those are powerful and still-relevant words from one of our ancestors. Though trampled on, our nature is capable of love. And that is the mark of that spark of the divine inherent in each of us. You carry it within you. The God I pray to is present within each of us, and calls us to create more love. The question I leave you with is, "How will you help?"

Rank by rank we stand on the shoulders of our radical religious ancestors, honoring them and their courageous deeds that beckon us onward, guiding our dreams and our actions. We acknowledge that the path is sometimes hard and long, and we dedicate ourselves to striving onward, encouraged and informed by their aspirations and dreams, driven by our own hopes, while we seek an even higher truth — the faith that will serve us in times of joy as well as crisis. Let's sing it with gusto and pride.

Amen.