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**“Waiting For You”
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The story of John Murray’s ship (Howe) getting stuck on the sandbar is kind of a fun story to tell kids, isn’t it? About how the ship won’t move, and won’t move, until after Murray has preached his first Universalist sermon in America. People say it’s our Unitarian Universalist miracle story.

But from the grown-up point of view, I actually find the story quite harrowing. Here are a young man and young woman, deeply in love. So deeply in love, that when her father refuses to give her permission to marry him, she runs away and they marry anyway. That would have been quite something to pull off in those days, when women belonged to men as if they were cattle or furniture. So here is this couple, and they have a baby whom they adore. They are Methodists, and he is deeply religious, and a lay leader in his congregation. They begin hearing about a strange new church, immoral and wicked, teaching people there is no such thing as hell. Without the threat of hell, why would anyone be good? But they talk to a woman who has been converted, and this woman is not wicked at all. They decide they will see for themselves. And they find a group of kind-hearted, loving people who believe that God is all loving, that God’s love is so vast and so powerful and so abundant that it sweeps all hatred and pain away.

The young couple is entranced with this vision of abundant love. It is so compelling that they feel called to share it with others. They keep their membership in the Methodist church, but also go to the Universalist one, and soon John is so strongly called that he begins preaching Universalist sermons.

Then disaster strikes. The Methodists question John and discover he has converted to Universalism. He is excommunicated, and the Murrays are shunned. He loses his job at the mill. The family descends into poverty. Soon, the baby becomes sick. John borrows money for medicine and care, but the baby dies. Then Eliza becomes sick, and John borrows more money to care for her. But then she dies too. John’s debts have become so great that he is thrown into debtors’ prison. His eyesight begins to fail. He descends into despair.

So here is John Murray: he has followed his call to proclaim the message of a love so abundant that it binds every wound, heals every care. And following this call has cost him everything. He contemplates suicide.

But then he meets a traveler from America, and he finds a new vision. He will leave his troubles in England and go off to America to start a new life. He renounces all religion and decides he will never preach again. Murray sets sail on the ship, Hand in Hand. And the rest you know: The ship goes aground, Murray comes ashore, and finds a chapel and a congregation waiting for him.

I can’t help but think about the moment when Thomas Potter first entreated Murray to preach Universalism in his chapel. Can you imagine? Can you imagine Murray’s terror? It must have been like standing on the edge of an abyss, being asked to jump over the edge. He has already lost everything but his own life, is he now being asked to lose yet more? Of course, he refuses. But Potter asks him to make a bargain, and Murray thinks there’s no harm in it, the ship will be moving any moment. But the ship doesn’t move. Murray takes this as a sign from God, and here’s the really

interesting thing. After all he has been through, after he has lost his family and renounced religion and preaching, Murray is still open to messages from God. Can you imagine the depth of both his fear and his faith?

He goes to the chapel, but he goes in deep dread. He doesn't know what to say. And then, he looks around him, and he sees Potter sitting proudly in the chapel he has made, with his friends and neighbors around him. And it is as if John Murray's whole being cracks open: divine love pours in and through him and shines from him and he has all the words he needs. He has jumped off the edge of the abyss and found he has wings. He goes on to save thousands and thousands of people from lives of anguish and despair. He finds love again. His wife Judith gives birth to American feminism. The couple now trusts so completely in their call that they risk everything again and again in following it: John is often violently attacked, his church is sued, and the reputations and ministries of both John and Judith are ridiculed and threatened. But never do they waver. John Murray and his wife Judith Sargent Murray know that love is the most powerful and abundant force there is, and they are called to proclaim this truth. Their life is one big YES.

Murray's story reminds me of this poem by Rumi:

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
They may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

“Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. They may be clearing you out for some new delight.”

The story of John Murray and this poem by Rumi both teach important truths. One is that life sometimes violently sweeps our house empty of its furniture. And this truth is followed by another: sometimes our truest call comes when life has laid us waste. And *this* truth is followed by yet another, which is that following a true call involves immense risk. Following a call to shake up the way things are, create beauty, disturb convention, bring love into places defined by fear, risks bringing that fear down on us. But if we hear a call and fail to follow it, we can never be happy. Our fear and our faith may start out as equals, but there comes a moment when the fear drops away. We surrender. Our being cracks open and love and light pour in. We cry YES.

Here is another story about a call:

Once there was a woman whose heart and body were broken. She had suffered much: her parents had abused her, her first husband had traumatized her, her teenaged son had gone away from her. Her work life was no better: as an ecologist, she had spent years working on behalf of poor women of color, in a field dominated by men working for the good of giant corporations. She had intimate knowledge of the terrible damage being done to the earth by consumerism. She had been collecting data for years that showed the people of the earth know how to live sustainably, but were simply not doing it. She felt that everything she had done for the past two decades was useless. She had lost hope that there could be any future for her children.

The woman became so ill that she could do nothing but lie on the couch. Doctors said she had post-traumatic stress syndrome and fibromyalgia. She had to leave her work.

One day she had just enough energy to go sit by a stream. She felt too weary and sad even to weep. Little by little the sounds of running water, of birds, of dragonflies, of a breeze whispering through cottonwood leaves, entered her being. She looked up and saw the bones of the hillside, its underlying bedrock, jutting out. She looked at the round stones of the creek bed, smoothed and shaped by thousands of years of being rubbed against each other by water. She saw a hummingbird sipping from red flowers above the creek, a relationship that had evolved over eons. Her consciousness shifted and she suddenly became, simultaneously, all these things, and nothing. And then she heard the voice of the world, as clearly as if it were a person sitting next to her. It said, "You must speak." It said, "You must use *all* of your gifts to save life." It said, "You must begin immediately."

At first the woman said no. She protested that she didn't know how, and she was afraid. No one would listen to her anyway, no one ever had, and she would just get sicker and die. But the voice said, "Go to a place where you can learn how. Go immediately." So the woman got up from that place, and went home, and wrote down what she had heard. And then she applied to seminary.

This is the story of my call. Sorrow after sorrow had accumulated and laid waste to my body and soul. I thought I had lost all faith; I had put behind me any preconceived ideas of what my life would be. Yet, like John Murray, somehow I was still open to messages from the voice of the world. When I heard that voice, it was as if my whole being cracked open and the light of love poured into me and through me. I had to surrender. I had to say YES. And as I began to follow my call, as I began to learn how to speak in new ways, I began to heal in body and soul. I began to be transformed. I began to live from a place of love so abundant that it buoyed me through every challenge. I went to the edge of the abyss and stepped off, and when I did I found I could fly.

Following the call has involved taking risks of many kinds: leaving my home and family for long periods; protesting for justice in the face of violent police presence; speaking out against oppression of every kind even when the only result is ridicule. Yet as a dear friend of mine, a minister who is at the forefront of the Occupy Oakland movement, says: "**I can do no other.**" I must share my vision of love so abundant that it heals the world. I am whole and well and happier now than I have ever been, because I am doing what I was born to do. I have found my place in the family of things.

What were you born to do? What is your place in the family of things? What vision of the world do you want to manifest?

Here is a third story of a call. Once there was a Unitarian Universalist church whose membership had dwindled from hundreds to only about fifty people. This church had a beautiful historic building, in the heart of an inner city neighborhood. The congregation was historically made up of white people, and the neighborhood was made up of mostly black people, with a few Asians and Latinos. As white people had moved away from the neighborhood, fewer and fewer of them came to the church. There came a day when the few who were left had to decide whether to close the church and sell the beautiful building, or stay and raise millions of dollars to preserve it. If they were going to stay, they would not be able to keep doing business as usual; they would have to invent a whole new kind of church. They decided to stay. So that meant they had to take a good look around them and see what was really going on. They noticed how the poverty of the black neighborhood around them contrasted with their own affluence. They investigated, and discovered that the poverty there was a direct result of racism. They did not resist this learning or deny its truth: instead, they allowed it to crack them open. The light of love poured through, and they understood their call: to create a community so abundant with love that neither racism nor any other form of oppression could exist. And although it terrified them, they said YES! to the call. Now, some decades later, this church is a vibrant center of Unitarian Universalist religious life, with over 400 members of all ages, colors, classes, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations and gender identities. It describes itself by saying it “embodies beloved community as an intentionally multigenerational, multiracial, multicultural, anti-oppressive religious community.” The congregation continues to listen for its call and to follow it. The people can do no other. They stepped off the edge of the abyss and found they had wings.

What are you called to do? Who are you called to be?

This congregation has been through a period of crushing pain. You have lost beloved ministers and been through great conflict. You have lost membership. It seems to me that your house has been violently swept empty of its furniture.

And yet...you are still here. The house is still standing. You might have lost your faith in what you thought you knew, you might have had to let go of your preconceived notions of who you were as a community—but you are still open to hearing the voice of the world. That you have brought me here is proof of this. Will you allow yourselves to learn to trust one another again? Will you allow yourselves to be cracked open so the light of love can pour through? Will you trust that love is so abundant in this starry universe that it will hold you? Will you come with me to the edge of the abyss? It has been said that a calling is where your deepest passion meets the world’s deepest need. What are the passions of this congregation? What are the needs here, in this beautiful blue and green bioregion? A Unitarian Universalist congregation can be a beacon of love and hope in a conservative area where fear is rampant. You have shown this by helping Proposition 1 pass. What fear in this place remains to be soothed? What pain cries out to be healed?

America was waiting for John Murray. The world is waiting for you. May you say Yes. May you step to the edge of the abyss, and soar.

Blessed be.

Howe, Charles A., *The Larger Faith: A Short History of Universalism*, Boston:
(Skinner House Books, 1993).

Rumi, “The Guest House” (http://www.panhala.net/Archive/The_Guest_House.html)