

*Human Renewal***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on September 26, 2021**

As a Minister, I have the privilege to be with people and families at their most tragic times and their most wonderful times. Last week I held the hand of a dying man struggling to take some of his last breaths and a few days later I held a precious newborn in my arms. For me, this was a glaring instance of renewal—the end of life and the beginning of life. Such a powerful experience. A hopeful experience. I don't know about you, but I'm crushed by all of the bad news these days. Frightened immigrants at the U.S. border; crooked politics; gun violence, division, and disease. Reading these stories makes me feel hopeless and helpless, not to mention angry and disconnected from my fellow citizens. That's why I need some inspiration right now, to motivate me to stay true to my values of caring for others' welfare and fighting for what's right. I feel the need to call for the renewal of humanity. The Buddha tells us, "A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity."

When thinking of human renewal, names such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, and Bronson Alcott come to mind. These Unitarians, these Transcendentalists, ushered in loving and transformative facets to our beloved Unitarian Universalism of today. Transcendentalists regarded the inner spiritual transformation of the individual as the central event of human existence. A conversion of sorts. This experience of conversion involved a transcendence of the pleasures and routine miseries of everyday life, into the joy and righteousness that was to be found in a new, or renewed, relationship with the divine.

At the time of transcendentalism American denominations -- Anglicanism, Congregationalism, Unitarianism -- had lost much of their power to move the hearts of their flocks, and Transcendentalists sought to return to a purer, more visceral form of religion that derived its strength from emotion rather than convention or duty. The Transcendentalists can be exasperatingly vague in their prescriptions for spiritual transformation, a vagueness which derives principally from their distrust of all forms of ritual and inherited religious forms. Does that resonate with anyone here? I offer you this look into transcendentalism as part of our history, our faith and to help us understand that as the transcendentalists believed, we too must believe the to be unconverted to radical love we do not feel in the fibers of our being a sense of connection, love for humanity but rather feel a sense of alienation from a benevolent universe. Thoreau tells us that the practical intent of Transcendental preaching was to "renounce the distractions and temptations to which social intercourse or human nature expose you, and which will interfere with your spiritual development." Failing to do so will leave you lonely without compassion or the urge for the rebirth of our humanity.

In "The Oversoul," Emerson expresses the fundamental Transcendentalist belief that a higher view of reality can only be achieved by ascending above the plane of individual subjectivity. He writes that "[f]rom within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us

aware that we are nothing, but the light is all .... And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself.”

To convert is to change from one character, type, or purpose to another. Our bodies convert food into energy. We can convert inches to centimeters, pounds to kilograms, and dollars to euros. Our hearts can undergo similar conversions. We can change direction morally, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Hebrew word translated “converted” means “to turn back or return.” It is also translated as “restore,” or to return to what we were initially created to be.

The renewal of humanity begins in the heart and radiates outward to affect everything we think, say, or do. Merely stating that renewal has occurred does not make it so. Real renewal is obvious as a person switches direction, changes allegiance and moves from individuality to community. As the heart is transformed, the actions follow until the entire life has been renewed to humanity. Episcopal priest and theologian Carter Heyworth tells us “Love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not, at heart, a matter of sentiment, attachment, or being “drawn toward.” Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one’s friends and enemies.” The most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds. What if we consider it this way? Recognize that loving in the way that Heyward describes – love as a “renewal to humanity, a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile...a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world” – is a heroic journey, one that requires a willingness to move beyond at least the pettiness of our personal ego to embrace, as far as possible, a love for others that is not weak and sentimental, not based on what or who we like or do not like, but rather is a life and world-changing commitment we can make? What kind of people would we be then? What choices would we make?

Love is a conversion to humanity — a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh. The Transcendentalists had it right. This is what our faith is all about—the renewal of humanity, a rescuing life from cynicism, redeeming it from crassness, saving souls, although not in the narrow and restricting sense in which too many churches use that phrase. Many of us were reared in denominations where being saved meant taking communion every Sunday, or reciting the creeds, or confessing a laundry list of nit picky sins. Mark Twain ridiculed that kind of religion a century ago when he defined faith as “believing what any darned fool knows ain’t so.” That kind of faith is more concerned with obedience and conformity than with changing hearts or freeing the spirit. Our faith is not about dogma, not about ritual or living up to other people’s expectations. Rather, religion for us is an openness to the mystery that sustains and upholds life. It is a sense of kinship with the cosmos. It is an invitation to bolder dreams and more generous action. It entails radical affirmation. Unitarian Universalism is self-transcendence expressed in service to the world. This is not only the faith we choose, but also the faith that chooses us.

Instead of checking your emails or the news headlines first thing in the morning, take 20 minutes or so to seek experiences of moral uplift. Just like going to the gym or meditating, a habit of moral elevation will have better results than an occasional elevation experience. If you don’t

make it part of your schedule—if you don't say that this is an important part of your life—you're not going to get to it. There will always be something else to do. This practice is just one example of seeking what we might call moral elevation. Elevation is elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty; it causes warm, open feelings; and it motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves. We must not only seek moral elevation for ourselves, but spread it around to others, too. Moral elevation has been shown to promote altruism and it is very contagious. Make an effort to shine some light on some of the wonderful things the human condition is capable of doing. By adding more moral elevation to our lives, we can all find hope in the midst of darkness and not give up on humanity. Who knows? If we make moral elevation a part of our daily routine, we may even be moved to become the next hero in a morality tale yet to be written.

And so, we have a choice whether or not we will be part of the renewal of humanity. A choice to sustain the free church, to be the liberal voice of the south, the hands and hearts of this congregation firmly standing, innovative offering intellect, spirit, mercy and justice in an aching world crying out for us. Love as a virtue is a possibility: it is an opportunity to expand our small selves into a larger sense of self, which includes the world. It is a chance to engage others creatively and “without pretense or guile,” opening ourselves to new ways of shaping the world and our place in it. If we approach problems like global warming, poverty, health care reform or war from a perspective of love, the whole conversation shifts. Together we can spark renewal here and now, in our families, in our communities, in our state and around the world. May you understand that your conversion to humanity, our renewal of humanity, starts here. And let us renew our faith in one another and draw strength from the good that is gathering in troubled times as communities of diverse faiths and ethical traditions unite to care for one another.

May it be so.