

Birmingham Lecture

Living Our Mission

For You: Conjuring a Language of Love

the Reverend Meg Riley
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It is truly an honor to speak with you today, although sometimes a nerve-wracking kind of honor, I must admit. As I prepared these remarks I had occasion to reflect many times on the wisdom of our ministry as a whole, something I realized I don't do often enough. Envisioning our collective ministry is a deep well, which I encourage all of you to drink from when you're thirsty!

My title, *For You: Conjuring a Language of Love*, was inspired by Adrienne Rich, from her work, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Prose*:

A revolutionary poem ... reminds you where and when and how you are living and might live—it is a wick of desire. A revolutionary poem is written out of one individual's confrontation with her/his own longings, including all that she/ he is expected to deny, in the belief that its readers or hearers... deserve an art as complex, as open to contradictions, as themselves.

The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees, inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying and beloved.

Rich's words describe my call to ministry. It has always been my love for specific people, the context of particular communities and landscapes that has empowered me with voice with which to speak through my terror and my doubt.

It was through such love that my call to the ministry came. After college, I worked in a shelter for abused and abandoned children under the age of 5. Watching these children, who were learning what it means to be alive in some of the worst circumstances imaginable, I became deeply awed by the resilience and wisdom of the human spirit. These children had already suffered more than anyone should have to in a lifetime. They did not know love that was not interwoven with abuse or neglect. And yet, I observed that within a week of good care, consistent expectations, and kind attention, almost all of them began to manifest vitality and curiosity and creativity. That is not to say that they were healed, but that they visibly and quickly grew towards any light that was offered to them.

I also had opportunities to see the limits to this resilience. One child in particular broke my heart. Joey was two and a half years old when I met him. Outrageously defiant and perpetually acting out, he delighted me even when he exasperated the entire staff. He came to the shelter after his 15-year-old mother abandoned him in downtown Minneapolis because he was getting on her nerves. Within days of his arrival, the shelter began to work its magic, and his defiance was softened into energetic curiosity and limit-testing. His mother, coming to visit, was delighted with the change in him and wanted to take him back home. This was a common phenomenon at the shelter, and she did take him home. Within 48 hours

she had once more abandoned him, leaving him alone at a mall to be picked up by the police. We took him back to the shelter. His lights came on, but this time they were a little bit dimmer. After this horrific cycle had been repeated three more times, there was no more creativity or curiosity or acting out. He was listless, depressed, and uninterested in coming back to life again.

My call to ministry was defined by my new awareness of both the tenacious vitality of the human soul, and the power we each hold in our hands to betray that vitality irreversibly. On one level, it was a web of specific interactions with abused and abandoned children that caused me to pursue a life that was centered in nurturing the soul. On another level, however, this call was centered in my need to nurture my own soul's tenacious vitality. I was recovering from my first full-scale heartbreak at the time I worked at the shelter, unsure that my own life could continue. There was no emotion expressed by those small children that I could not find echoing within my own psyche. And so, caring for them gave me a structure within which to care for myself, in my smallest and most vulnerable places. Conjuring language of love is not just about becoming a social justice activist. It is about being alive, part of the web of life.

I know that every person in this room has experienced what it means to bring love into places where the wounds in the psyche are gaping and raw. One place where Unitarian Universalists do this particularly well is in memorial services: I have seen many of you, over the years, walk courageously into the center of unbearable grief and create a container for it—I have witnessed your facilitating memorial services held in the wake of violence, AIDS, murder, crib death, family homicide, hate crime, drug overdose, an airplane flying into the Pentagon—I have seen you stand fast in the truth of what happened, and speak that truth, not run from it, not seek to transcend it with platitudes. I have seen you offer the gathered community a place to tell their own truths, to conjure language of love even in the face of unbearable pain, rage, and loss. This naming, this gathering, is a witness of our faith's cherishing the inherent worth and dignity of every person—in the most scrupulously concrete way imaginable. Theologian Tom Driver said that "Radical immanence is transcendence," and our memorial services, in my experience, embody this transcendence.

From Mary Oliver:

And certainly and easily I can see

How God might be one rose bud,

One white feather in the heron's enormous, slowly opening wing.

It's after that

It gets difficult.

We can be very proud that we are especially gifted as a collective ministry at pastoral presence, at honoring particular lives lived and deaths died. It's after that, as Mary Oliver says, that it gets difficult. Many of us find a less clear, less compelling, voice when we try to speak about more complicated issues where there are gaping holes, not in individual psyches, but in our collective psyche. We fear that we don't know how to channel our deep outrage about these wounds into a language that might transform the pain into some tiny beginning for healing.

Outrage is one very legitimate source of prophetic vision, an appropriate response, for instance, to the rantings of the homophobia of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama. Chief Justice Roy Moore, in case you are not familiar with this case, wrote an opinion in the Alabama Supreme Court's unanimous decision to give custody of three teenagers to their father, who is alleged to abuse them, rather than to their lesbian mother. Chief Justice Moore's 35-page opinion stated, among other things:

Homosexual conduct is, and has been, considered abhorrent, immoral, detestable, a crime against nature, and a violation of nature and of nature's God upon which this nation and our laws are predicated...

And

The state carries the power of the sword, that is, the power to prohibit conduct with physical penalties, such as confinement and even execution. It must use that power to prevent the subversion of children toward this lifestyle, to not encourage a criminal lifestyle...

And

Homosexual conduct is by its very nature is immoral, and its consequences are inherently destructive to the natural order of society. Any person who engages in such conduct is presumptively unfit to have custody of minor children under the established laws of this state.

Now, there is a part of me that would love to stand up and publicly take down Chief Justice Moore, to speak from a position of self-righteous anger and to name him as evil a force as he has named me to be. But this is not a voice of transforming love. My own self-righteous anger would simply mirror his. Rather, I need to align myself with those who are hurt by his words, and conjure a language of love for them.

Love for the gay teenagers who will physically suffer from his license to violence. Love for people who worship a God of love, not a God of vengeance. Most close to my heart, love for my own five year old daughter, who would be devastated if she heard someone say something so mean about the people she loves and trusts most in the world. If I channel my love for her into writing a response to Chief Justice Moore, I arrive at a very different statement than if I channel my rage at him. I have been offered several opportunities since I arrived here to speak at public events responding to Chief Justice Moore, and I intend to speak out, wearing the protective cloak of a clerical collar, speaking the truth in love. At the Universalist convention in 1793, the gathered people spoke out against slavery NOT because they had some abstract idea about it and wanted to exemplify political correctness, but because they knew in their very souls that a loving God would never create people in order to enslave some of them. To know God was to oppose slavery: it was as simple as that.

Alabama UU clergy, most notably Tracy Sprowls, have already been involved with speaking out publicly in response to Chief Justice Moore, and in response to their speaking, hate-monger Fred Phelps is threatening to come and picket the UU church in Montgomery. For a local minister to speak out is far more courageous than for any visitor to the area to do so, and we will be hearing more about this courage as the week goes on.

I know that many of you speak out in your own communities about matters of injustice. I also know that you have fear about doing so: fear that church members will become upset, fear that politics will divide your congregation, fear of attacks upon the congregations such as the one Fred Phelps is threatening in Montgomery.

I want to suggest, though, that as real as those fears are; an even deeper fear is at work in our reluctance to speak out publicly. We fear that we have nothing of value to say to the American people. We fear that no one except the tiny band who is already gathered in our congregations will comprehend what we say. We fear that we will be judged crazy, or stupid. Perhaps even underneath those fears, we fear that we MIGHT BE crazy or stupid.

"In the cause of silence," said Audre Lorde, "each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or challenge, or annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear that visibility without which we cannot truly live...that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is also the source of

our greatest strength."

It is precisely in the face of silencing fear that we need to conjure language for love. In part, fear can be vanquished when we speak out with the voice of that which we love: river, tree, people...we are identifying with something larger than our own being and this can give us our voice.

However, our fear will only be temporarily vanquished unless we know in the depth of our souls that what we love includes us. The truly prophetic task is to hold the love of ourselves as central in the love we have for everything else. In order to light the wick of desire for others, our own light must be aflame.

A story comes to mind: Years ago, when I was the youth programs director, I had the occasion to be in Ames, Iowa over Valentines' Day for a youth conference. Sydney Morriss, who was then minister in Ames, chose the day to read love poetry by lesbians and gay men. Thanks, Sydney! Anyway, after the service, Parisa Parsa and I were giving a ride to a young woman we didn't know well, but who had spent the entire youth conference listening to very loud, violent, misogynistic music that had gotten on my last nerve. In the car, she said, 'That was interesting hearing those love poems, but deep down inside of yourself, when you think about gays and lesbians, doesn't something just go, YICK?' Now, this teenager of course had no idea that she was talking to a lesbian or she certainly would not have said what she did. But, I responded to her as honestly as she had spoken to me. "Yes," I said. "I do know that deep place of YICK quite well, despite the fact the fact that I am a lesbian, and I know in my brain and most of my heart that the love my partner and I share is a sacred gift from God. What breaks my heart even more is that music about raping and killing women doesn't run into nearly so deep of a YICK inside me, although my brain and most of my heart don't like it. I am sad that this culture's misogyny and homophobia have gotten into me so deeply, despite the fact that they clash with my own life experience." Needless to say, the girl was taken aback. And then, within moments, she shared a terrible secret. She was raped the summer before by a counselor at a UU conference center. I have always felt that what opened her up to trusting me with her experience was my honesty about my own. I included in my response, even the parts of myself that I am expected to deny, that is rife with internal contradictions. If I had simply said, "Hey stop it with the comments, I'm a lesbian!" she would never have felt safe to open her own soul.

"The only grace we can receive is the grace we can imagine," writes Toni Morrison in her novel, *Beloved*. If we are to make an impact in the big, fast, crazy world we live in, we must first be able to imagine that our words, our deeds, the textures of our staggeringly imperfect lives, carry within them the seeds of transformation: transformation that we experience in ourselves, in our own communities, in the wider world. If our "prophetic voice" separates us from our own soul, our own family, our own congregation, then I suggest that we need to look again at what prophetic voice means.

Mohandas K. Gandhi said that everything he did in his life, every choice he made, was about his own desire to be closer to God, to be on his own spiritual journey.

The voice of revolutionary love is recognizable because it makes us come alive, launches us on a compelling spiritual journey. This aliveness will be painful, even heart-breaking, but the alternative, numbing ourselves out to our own pain and the pain of the world, is certainly soul-killing.

I have just finished reading Dick Leonard's journals from 1965, "A Call to Selma," and I recommend it highly. What is clear in each page of that journal, and in the quotes from scores of other UUs who were involved with the struggle for voters' rights in Alabama in 1965, is that the people who chose to be there did it to nurture their own souls, as part of their own spiritual journeys. This does not in any way diminish the fact that they also did it on behalf of the community of African Americans in Alabama at that time. The two facts do not cancel each other out, but rather magnify each other. We are interconnected.

I simply cannot let the moment pass without asking for those people in the room whose spiritual journey included coming to Alabama in 1965 to stand as you are able and be recognized. And I would ask that the rest of us don't clap, but rather take the opportunity to feel the pride of that journey they made some 37 years ago, to soak that courage into our own psyches, as part of our living tradition.

And of course, our spiritual journeys never cease to evolve. What happened 37 years ago is only one story among many in the collective imagining of a religious movement which could hold the revolutionary desire that all people recognize one another as kin, despite differences in racial or other identities.

I believe that if our ministry is to be vital in the world, is to take itself seriously enough to risk going public, then we need to have deep roots indeed. Roots which go down below our fear, below our sense of inadequacy, below our self-censure, below our impulse to comfort and ease, below our cultural identities, below our racial identities, gender identities, sexual orientations, body sizes and abilities, below our words, below our births and deaths; roots that take us all the way into the depths of our own souls.

Ken Wilbur writes, "Authenticity always and absolutely carries a demand and duty; you must speak out, to the best of your ability, and shake the spiritual tree, and shine your headlights into the eyes of the complacent...if you fail to do so, you are betraying your own authenticity. You are hiding your true estate. This is the bargain. You were allowed to see the truth under the agreement that you would communicate it to others."

In the words of Mary Oliver, the most deeply intimate language of love that we must each conjure is:

What is my name,
O what is my name,
That I may offer it back
To the beautiful world?

May your conjuring bring you grace, authenticity, and ever-expanding love.

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