

'For All The Saints'
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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware
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Meditation

I don't know who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. – Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings*

Sermon

The idea of saints and sainthood tends to baffle Unitarian Universalists – they are not, as such, a big part of our tradition. Growing up as a Protestant child, I tried to make sense of them. As I understood them, they were a company of real men and women who had achieved a quasi-divine status, to whom you could pray to intercede for you with God. We were told it was superstitious, proof of our Protestant superiority. Most of the Catholic kids in town went to their own elementary school, which kept believers in saints at a further distance, making the notion even more exotic and strange to me. Once the Catholic kids started to pour into my junior high school, I remember being fascinated by their St. Christopher medals and patron saint holy cards. And I was puzzled. Why would my friend Grace, who was one of the smartest girls in our class, pray to St. Jude for help on her chemistry test? It made much more sense for ME to pray to St. Jude – I actually needed help! But Grace just smiled at my questions, feeling no need to justify her practice. “It works,” she said.

All Saints Day is one of those grand marketing schemes of the early church. It first showed up on May 13, 609 or 610. This was the time of a “pagan observation of great antiquity, the culmination of three days of the Feast of Lemures, in which the malevolent and restless spirits of the dead were [pacified].” Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Pantheon at Rome to the Blessed Virgin and all the Martyrs – our team had won the religious world series, so out you go, Pagan deities. One hundred years later, the feast of All Saints was moved to November 1, by Pope Gregory III, to honor “the just made perfect who are at rest throughout the world”, and it coincided with another Pagan festival Samhain, which was like Lemures, but also a harvest festival. Samhain was considered to be the time of the year when the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest, and we might cross into their world, and they into ours. It was an ambiguous holiday compared to those of the church, which tend to celebrate light

over darkness, good over evil. As much as I dislike people's traditions being taken over, I'm sure it made sense to turn people's attention to the positive, to honor the heroes of goodness and look to them for inspiration. Blessed are we, who live in an age where we can celebrate both.

I actually like the idea of saints and of honoring them. Some people who honor saints simply look to them as a more loveable and accessible face of God. I know many people of all religious persuasions who talk to loved ones after they have died, looking for strength, or just company. And I know many Catholics now who look upon their saints more as role models than minor deities. I don't think any of these are wrong. And yet I think something called "All Role Models Day wouldn't have lasted". Real saints were dangerous people. They shook up the world. They were people whose holy yes to the call within themselves is at the very least inconvenient to the rest of us, and seemed insane in their time. We just don't quite know what to do with them. Shane Claiborne writes, "It's what always happens to the saints and prophets who are dangerous: we bronze them, we drain them of their passion and life and trap them in stained glass windows and icons, confining them safely in memories of the past. St. Francis becomes a birdbath. Malcolm X is put on a stamp, and Martin Luther King gets a holiday." (Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*)

From our vantage point, we forget that Martin Luther King was, for many people in his day, a laughing stock. We forget about the many people, whom we would probably consider reasonable, who saw the trouble his movement ignited, among both black and white people, and told him to settle for lesser, more reasonable goals. We forget that he battled his own fears, and at times felt lost. He took an unpopular stance against the Vietnam War, and his last planned march against poverty, was considered to be tilting at windmills. I prefer this human King, though – and admire the man who said yes in the midst of all this.

In 2007 one of the scandals of the religious world came from the published letters of Mother Teresa, in a book called *Come Be My Light*. It revealed her struggle – for decades, until the end of her life – with spiritual darkness. Well aware of the large numbers of people who would seek to canonize her after her death, Mother Teresa wrote, "If I ever become a Saint – I will surely be one of 'darkness'. I will continually be absent from heaven – to light the light of those in darkness on earth." This idea of becoming a "saint of darkness" came from the absence she felt, even a rejection by God. She wrote to one of her spiritual directors, "Now father – since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss – this untold darkness... Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. The place of God in my soul is blank." (Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*)

She entered the religious life at 18, from Serbo-Croatia, in 1928. At this time, she experienced visions of Jesus that were personal, compelling and quite beautiful. Soon after she joined the Loreto order of nuns, she was given another strong vision. She was told to feed the poor, to serve the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. She wrote in her letters of her longing to serve the poor. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were not enough for her. She petitioned her priest to allow her to make an additional vow - “not to refuse [God] anything”, choosing to be considered accountable “under the pain of mortal sin.” Those of you who grew up Catholic will know that committing a mortal sin means the coldest hell, the greatest separation from God, something from which one can never come back. Talk about upping the ante! So great was her yes.

She begged her spiritual directors to burn her letters, not because she was trying to hide her spiritual crisis, but because she wanted people to worship God, not her. But they refused, knowing the hunger of the world to know and understand her. When the book came out, people seemed to want to put her in the good camp or the bad camp. Some considered her a liar or a hypocrite – or at least a fool for not packing up and finding another religion. I do not. So powerful was her “yes” that she could not back away from it, so complete was her self-surrender.

With most people, she showed genuine joy and cheerfulness, and even surprising humor. A woman spoke to Mother Teresa about the challenges of married life, and caught herself, musing aloud that a nun probably couldn't relate to this. Mother Teresa, and said she certainly did understand, and held up her own simple gold wedding band. “Sometimes he can be very difficult,” she said.

All along, we thought she could do everything she did because she was assured by a constant communication with the Divine, because she felt guided, comforted and strengthened by God. Whatever our feelings about a God who intervenes and guides our lives, we assumed she had something special going on spiritually. What if – for most of her life – she didn't? What if she were more like... us?

It is certainly her humanness that draws me to her. Her flaws and struggles simply add to her amazing accomplishments, and the thousands of people she inspired, like Shane Claiborne. Claiborne is very much alive, and still working with the Simple Way in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Their members pool their money and live their faith. They help neighborhood kids with their homework, fix up abandoned houses, sell people food and furniture and clothing for a dollar. They prick the conscience of everybody who says that we can do nothing to help, that poverty is

simply too large a force to deal with. They got over being star struck by Mother Teresa's religious celebrity, and did something, themselves. They would certainly not want to be called saints, but neither would most saints.

We Unitarian Universalists need saints, I'd argue. We tend to like ideas and words. A friend of mine who grew up UU told me that when they were in Sunday School they learned songs like, "Justice, truth, reason and love." Catchy, isn't it? We need *saints*, we need their stories - people who put flesh and bone, struggle and maybe even comic relief to our earnest devotion to principles. We need saints like Mother Teresa and Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. And we need our *own* saints.

James Reeb was born in 1927, in Wichita Kansas, the son of two deeply religious parents. He went to a number of Protestant churches, and graduated from a Presbyterian seminary. He became a Unitarian when working as a Chaplain in a secular hospital, because of the influence of psychiatry on his orthodox theology. He served as a program director for the YMCA, and then became an Associate Minister at All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. An associate minister as saint – I *like* that! I liked reading about his life. He agonized over the few sermons he gave each year, and for the most part, they don't make spell-binding reading. But he loved the people, and was an excellent counselor. He drove the church administrator nuts because he insisted on giving everyone who came in with any sort of request, whether it was a member or beggar from the street, his full attention and the full resources from the office. His overriding passion was for racial justice. He was caught up in the civil rights movement, helping the church partner with neighborhood councils. But even with a church as committed to this kind of work as All Souls was, he felt limited.

After five years, he decided that he needed to devote himself full-time to the work of the inner city, particularly the struggles of its black citizens. He started to work for the American Friends Service Committee, as director of its housing reform program. His last sermon at All Souls had unusual fire. He said, "Many people seemed to feel... that once we've had the march on Washington and once we had the civil rights bill, things were just inevitably going to be easier, that somehow we had done it. And I can say to you that this is the most dangerous kind of self-delusion; that we've not in any way done it..." He went on to say that the riots in New York and Chicago were likely to come to Washington. He did not defend rioters, but urged his people to try to understand what was happening. One reason for riots was despair, he said; the other was a newfound self-respect. "What the Negro now knows is that NO man has the right to have his foot on his neck." In a time of fear and uncertainty, comprehending this was going to take incredible discipline and commitment to our belief in the worth and dignity of every person.

James Reeb, his wife, Marie and four children moved into Roxbury, the extremely poor neighborhood in Boston where the Friends office was located. He wanted to live among the people that he served, not to be an outsider, even though most of his neighbors shook their heads, saying that if they could live in a safer area, and send their kids to a better school, they surely would. His children probably did suffer from the dismal resources and conditions of the school. But living there signaled that he was no mere do-gooder, but a real friend and neighbor. He took up their struggles as his own.

One evening James and Marie did something they rarely did – they watched the evening news. They were sickened to see the footage of the police brutality on the marchers in Selma, Alabama. And the next day, when Dr. King called the UUA headquarters, among other denominations, for clergy to come and march. Like our own minister emeritus, Bob Doss, like hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers, James Reeb answered the call. As he told his wife, Marie, “I belong there. It's the kind of fight I believe in. I want to be part of it. Every man who can go is needed.”

The march itself was terrifying, but had gone remarkably without much incident. That evening, he and everyone else there realized that they hadn't eaten anything for 24 hours, the adrenaline had been so high. He and a few other friends decided to walk to a diner. As the other white diners stared at them, they felt hostility hardening in the air around them. On the way back to the church where everyone was meeting, they suddenly heard four men coming up fast behind them. One of them took a club to James Reeb's temple. He died a few days later.

The effect of Reeb's death was immediate and enormous. The death of a white clergyman in the battle for the rights of black Americans brought incredible media attention and inspired marches and protests all across the country. Money poured in from everywhere to support his widow and send their children to college. President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the voting rights act, saying that “this good man” should not die in vain. Civil rights activists, black and white, were justifiably upset that it took a white man's death to raise their movement to this level of importance, when the deaths of 100s of black men and women were not considered nearly as tragic. Given what we know of James Reeb, he would be the first to agree. However, good can come from the most imperfect circumstances, as was expressed by Martin Luther King, who gave the eulogy at Reeb's funeral. He said, “God still has a way of bringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive... This tragic death may lead our nation to substitute aristocracy of character for aristocracy of color. James Reeb may cause the whole citizenry of Alabama to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright

future. Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.”

Soon after Reeb's death, a Roman Catholic newspaper in the neighborhood of Roxbury where he and his family were living, nominated him for sainthood. Something his biographer and former boss Rev. Duncan Howlett said would have amused and honored him.

The important thing was not that James Reeb died, but that he chose to live his faith. King said, “James Reeb's crime was that he dared to live his faith; he placed himself alongside the disinherited black brethren of this community.”

A saint is someone just as human as ourselves, who shows us what is possible when we say yes – yes to the deepest calling in our hearts. Yes to living our faith. Yes to doing what you believe is right and not worrying about what people think of you. While a saint is usually someone who is willing to struggle and even suffer for what they are called to do, I think she would also be someone who finds deep pleasure in the world, too. I think a saint would definitely have to have a good sense of humor. He would not necessarily have big schemes to change the world, but would feel content to shine his inner light, as James Reeb would say, in small ways.

Who are your saints? And what do they inspire you to do?

Saints are not meant to make us point at ourselves and say, I could never do that – I could never go serve the poor in Calcutta, or I'm just not the kind of person who would protest in the streets. But they can lend us courage in our own difficult times, in the ongoing struggle to live our faith. A single mother who wakes up tired every day and feeds her children, gets them off to school, does a job she finds exhausting, and attempts to teach her children by her own example of gratitude and compassion, is answering a difficult call. She might not live Mother Teresa's kind of life, but Mother Teresa wouldn't know what to do with hers. Remember that Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things. We can only do small things with great love.”

We are entering difficult times. You see the signs around you. People are losing their homes, their jobs, their savings. Small businesses are hurting. My husband Robert was talking to the owner of our neighborhood liquor store, whose profits were half of what they were last year, and who was robbed at gunpoint six times this year. How might we be a neighbor to him? Food banks are seeing donations and government support dry up, while more and more people turn to them for help. How might we be neighbors to them? Is there an ordinary saint in our congregation, willing to help us

gather food for them? On the eve of an election, we tend to pin all our hopes on a candidate who will save us. Your vote matters, and it needs to be counted. And, in a time of such distress, our country also needs ordinary saints like ourselves, needs people who are willing to say yes in a time of no. It needs us to look for what we can do, even a small thing. Volunteer for the Emmanuel Dining Room, adopt a young adult aging out of foster care with our ILYA program. Reach out to someone you know is hurting. Help our pastoral care team provide a meal for someone home from the hospital, or a ride to the doctor. The small thing you do may attract other people to join you. Amen..