

Wisdom's House

by Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt on the Ordination of Sofia Craethnenn

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What an honor and a privilege it is to be with all of you on this blessed occasion. It has been my pleasure to know Sofia for more than five years, ever since she was a first year student at Starr King School for the Ministry and I was the president of the school's board of trustees—and a sister seminarian at Drew Theological school, at the other end of the country. Sofia and I have created worship together, argued theology together, and by the time this night is over, we will officially be sister ministers together in this faith that we love.

And so I begin this evening in gratitude, to Sofia, as well as to you, the members and friends of this congregation. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of that most sacred of our Unitarian Universalist practices, the formal recognition of one who has been called out from among the people. Through ordination and installation, the covenantal relationship between a minister and her congregation is sealed. No bishop lays hands upon this woman tonight; no ecclesiastical body pronounces her worthy of service. In the tradition of our free religious faith, only you can do that. I thank you for the chance to reflect again on the honor bestowed upon us as ministers, who respond to God's call as expressed through men and women—like yourselves—with whom we share this sacred task of ministry.

Our reading this evening is taken from the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures, and what a provocative passage it is. I have always loved the Wisdom literature of the Bible, not least because it reveals for careful readers the feminine face of God. One of the first great revelations in my ministerial studies was the discovery that in every one of the classical theological languages, the word for Wisdom is feminine. In Hebrew, it is *hokma*; in Latin, it is *sapientia*, in Greek, it is *Sophia*. What a delicious synergy it is, then, that all of you, in your collective wisdom, have called upon one whose name means wisdom, to help you build your house—this free religious community in which you have invested so much of your time, your talent, your treasure and your love.

There is a deep wisdom to be found in the Unitarian Universalist path; it is a wisdom that is drawn from many sources and finds expression in many ways. Traditionally, we have rejoiced in our rugged sense of individualism and our lack of dogma and creed. And yet our ever-growing, ever-evolving faith demands constant reevaluation, and in these days we are more aware than ever that unbridled individualism leads to isolation. We are clearer than ever that being creedless does not mean that we are rootless or without foundation. The challenges of the 21st century demand that we grow ever wiser about our faith, if the liberal religious way is to have any meaning at all for generations to come. One of the central questions for every generation of Unitarian Universalists is this one: how do we construct wisdom's house in our own time?

In this original passage of Proverbs, the house that wisdom builds includes seven pillars. In rabbinical texts, these seven pillars refer to the seven clouds of glory that surrounded

the people of ancient Israel in their movement away from the slavery of Egypt and into the freedom of the Promised Land. One cloud in front and one behind them, one cloud on either side of them, one cloud above the people to shield them from the harsh weather, one below them to cushion their steps and one cloud of glory to precede the people in the journey, clearing the way of the desert's dangers.

Seven is often a recurring number in the evolving stories of Wisdom; similar images occur again in the book of Isaiah, chapter 11, when the prophet refers to the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety and a reverential respect for the God of their understanding.

Many of us in the free religious tradition have forsaken familiarity with traditional scripture. We are frightened away from it by its appropriation by our more conservative brothers and sisters, who are apt to use the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as a weapon to wound and to exclude. Yet when we succumb to this lure, we give up a precious part of our Unitarian and Universalist heritage. We lose the opportunity to understand ourselves and our roots in the dissenting tradition of Christianity, a dissenting tradition that, in every age, has transformed the religious landscape by opening doors to fresh thought and new insight. When we abandon this ancient wisdom, we abandon some of our most useful tools.

When she calls out, "Who is ignorant? Let them step this way," Wisdom's voice in this text is at once an invitation and a call to action for us. We, as liberal religious people, have a role to play in the building of wisdom's house; we have seven pillars of our own that help us to walk in the ways of perception, seven clouds of glory that surround us as we move as religious liberals through this wilderness time.

The first three of our seven pillars are the closest we have ever come to a Trinitarian formulation: our traditional pillars of freedom, reason, and tolerance are foundational to the Unitarian Universalist way. It is our commitment to freedom-- to believe or to doubt, to seek and to question, to reject or to embrace the life of the spirit—that most often distinguishes us from our brothers and sisters in other faith communities. It is our commitment to reason—our confidence in the right and responsibility of human beings everywhere to bring to bear in matters of faith all the powers of the mind---that has protected us from blind obedience and mindless submission to authority of every kind. It is our commitment to tolerance—the willingness to be open to those who differ from us in sect or class, in nation or race, in gender or theology—that has helped us hold fast to the vision of an earth made fair and all her people one.

These three pillars—freedom, reason, tolerance—are our historic foundation as Unitarian Universalists. But it takes more than these things to build wisdom's house. We must recommit ourselves to other qualities as well, qualities that are easy to talk about but hard to live into. To build wisdom's house, we must renew our hope. Not the naïve and unrealistic hope of the privileged who assume there is a solution for every problem, and that every story will end happily ever after. Instead, we must cultivate a bedrock hope that comes from a different attitude toward life. It is an attitude often learned by those who have seen the worst that life has to offer, yet in spite of everything see beyond those experiences to the power, the presence, the life that undergirds life; it is an attitude best expressed by the mystic Julian of Norwich, who wrote, as part of her divine

visions, that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." We must renew our hope.

Our religious communities must reacquaint themselves with love. Not the benign and often anemic love that expresses itself as polite and friendly feeling among neighbors, but the love that asks of us that we shoulder each other's burdens and bear each other's pain. It is a love that begins at home, but quickly broadens its reach, for authentic love—agape—cannot long exist without another pillar—justice. Once we have known another's pain as well as our own, once we can experience, through a gracious love, the interdependence that truly exists among all of life, we grow increasingly less content with the world as we know it. We become, as Dr. King challenged us to become, creatively maladjusted; we become restless to make right at least our corner of a world in which so much is so cruelly wrong. Love and justice are pillars that in fact support one another, and so we must renew our acquaintance with love and justice.

And our communities must recommit ourselves to peace. We in the liberal religious community have an honorable and historic witness for peace; we have marched and been arrested, we have raised both money and our voices for peace around the world. But we are far too casual about what it means to make peace with ourselves, with our families, in our homes and in our congregations. We cannot hope to succeed in creating peace on earth if we cannot do it in congregational meetings, or over the dinner table, or in our own hearts. Even as we call out for peace on earth, we are also called to adopt the rest of the phrase from that old hymn: "let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Freedom, reason and tolerance, love and justice, hope and peace—these are the seven pillars of Wisdom's House as Unitarian Universalists might build it. These are the foundation for the religious community that all of you covenant this night to begin together. It is hard not to envy you as you begin this sacred task together. As you eat the bread and drink the wine of new community, as you prepare to leave behind the identity of a disconnected people, as you formally choose life together as minister and congregation, I challenge you to consider two things: for what purpose do you build your house, and how will you sustain yourselves in the task?

The answer to the first question, I think, is the task of the coming years. You are becoming a new people, and as you grow in wisdom and understanding, so too will you grow in your clarity about the purpose of Wisdom's house as you will build it here in Stockton. How will you sustain yourselves in the days and months and years ahead? I hope that you will add one last thing to your house: faith. For some among us, faith is a dirty word. It conjures up old images and older wounds, painful memories of vengeful gods and religious stances laden with hypocrisy. Many of us first came to Unitarian Universalist congregations to escape these false messages. Some of us long ago rejected any notion of faith in something greater than ourselves.

But to be truly alive, to be genuinely wise, our congregations must become more than simply refuges, places to hide from pain we cannot bear or conversations we would rather not have. As Unitarian Universalist congregations, we covenant to take seriously the free and responsible search for truth and meaning; to do so means to grant to others the same respect for their faith that we ask of our own. An engaged Unitarian Universalism, a truly wise Unitarian Universalism, demands that we take our rightful

place in the religious marketplace of ideas, that we grow in theological and spiritual literacy, that we ground our dissent from narrow and exclusionary religion in a posture of deep respect for those whose faith differs from our own, and that we open ourselves to the possibilities of grace, whatever the source of that grace should prove to be. For some of you, that will be a faith in the Goddess or in God; for others that will be a faith in life; for still others, it will be a faith in the gathered community as you move into your future together.

However you express it, it is my hope and my prayer for all of you, congregation and minister, that together you will live and grow in faith as well as in wisdom, and that you will walk in the ways of perception all the days of your lives. Many blessings to all of you. Many blessings, my sister, on this holy night. Amen.

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