

## **“Seeking Silence in a Time of Noise”**

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Rev. Leslie Ahuvah Fails’ prayer at the end of her reflection struck something deep within me when I read it –

“Remind us of the steadfast presence of love greater than ourselves, as constant as the stars, even when it is obscured from view.”<sup>1</sup>

This is about as close to a perfect description of Unitarian Universalist faith as I can imagine. We believe, but not in a specific deity, necessarily, but in something bigger than ourselves, something permanent and good, that remains steadfastly real even when we cannot see it.

And it feels like our greatest challenge in times like these.

As a people, we tend to view ourselves as aware of the world around us. We know what is going on in politics and what kinds of injustices are at play. We work to dismantle those injustices as best we can and know that work as sacred in its own way.

And I know that I am not the only one feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of noise and mayhem in the public square right now.

In the 1960s, music producer Phil Spector created a style of musical arrangement that was known as the “Wall of Sound.” Our political scene today seems very much like it would fit in that category, but without the benefit of George Harrison on guitar.

The volume of noise is designed to overwhelm and obfuscate. It is designed to be so loud and so huge and so overwhelming that all we are able to take away from it is the pounding backbeat determining which candidate or cause was louder than the others, and perhaps a catch phrase or slogan that manages to stick in our brains and take hold there.

And so we need to remember that there exists in this world something everlasting, something constant, something permanent, something larger than ourselves, something large enough that we can’t break it, or make it go away.

Like the stars in the heavens above the long winter night of Alaska. Like the sun that rises in the east each day and sets in the west.

Like love, that most powerful and unreasonable of emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> Fails, Rev. Leslie Ahuvah, *The Changing and the Fixed*, September 2, 2020, UUA Worship Web, <https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/changing-fixed>, accessed 10/14/2020

As quoted by Rev. Fails, James Baldwin's verse tells us that change is the only thing that is constant:

For nothing is fixed,  
forever, forever, forever,  
it is not fixed;  
the earth is always shifting,  
the light is always changing,  
the sea does not cease to grind down rock.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, as Theodore Parker wrote in the 1841, there are some things that are a deeper kind of permanent and some things that are a different kind of temporary. In his seminal work "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity," Parker argued that there is nothing so permanent in Christianity as generational changes in doctrine and theology.

"[Humans] have piled their own rubbish against the temple of Truth where Piety comes up to worship; what wonder the pile seems unshapely and like to fall? But their theological doctrines are fleeting as the leaves on trees."<sup>3</sup>

It is the noise of *humanity* that is transient, and the truth of the *divine* that is permanent, he says.

As Unitarian Universalists, we find the divine in a multitude of ways.

We find it in nature, like the stars that are overhead, the earth beneath our feet, or the tides that wash back and forth across the globe in a rhythm determined by the moon and the sun.

We find the divine in our own experiences of transcending wonder, whether in a spiritual experience with a deity, or in relationships of love and tenderness.

We find the divine in reason and science, in a natural universe that follows its own precise and complex laws that we are only beginning to understand. Mathematics. Physics. Biology. All are continuously being revealed to us through study and discovery.

They are constant. What is transient is our understanding of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, James, attribution, undated, multiple sources

<sup>3</sup> Parker, Theodore, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, first delivered at the Hawkes Place Church, Boston, 1841. Published in "THREE PROHPETS of Religious Liberalism Channing, Emerson, Parker," in 1961, Beacon Press, Boston, p. 123

These are days of noise and chaos. Conflicting reports about observable truths, “fake news” by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists, and conspiracy theories that are as fantastical as they are terrifying.

I invite you to think now of what things you know to be permanent, and what you know to be transient, or temporary. Think about that for a moment.

If you’d like to name those things in the chat box of this call, go ahead and do so, so that others can see and possibly share your thoughts.

Faith is a challenging thing, and as UUs, we like to think it is more challenging for us than for others not so dedicated to reason and science. And yet, faith can be a simple thing, entirely accessible to even the most jaded skeptic.

There is a verse of unknown authorship and origin that is sometimes attributed to having been found on the wall of a concentration camp at the end of World War II. It begins:

“I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when [God] is silent...”<sup>4</sup>

Now, a psychologist may dismiss this statement of faith as object permanence, that function of our brains that remembers where things are when they are out of our immediate perception, but I think it goes deeper than that. Yes, we can believe in the sun and know that it will rise and fall each day, even when it is behind the darkest of storm clouds.

But the next step requires something more – to believe in love even when no one is there expressing it. Can we all believe in love that way? Do we know that love exists, even when we are temporarily feeling unloved, invisible? Our Universalist roots tell us that all people are worthy of God’s love and grace, and thus there is good in all people, even when we cannot see it right away. That’s basic First Principle stuff, yes? OK.

And in this passage, the author professes faith in God, even when God is silent and appears to be among the missing.

Because we cannot hear the silence under the noise does not mean the silence does not exist. It is there. The holy is there, among the profane, in our public spaces and within our hearts.

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, Unknown origin, various attributions, including that it was found written on the wall of a World War II concentration camp at war’s end.

How do we cut through all that, then, and find what is real? What is true? What is permanent?

The Hebrew Scriptures spoke of the conflict between the noise of the world and the quiet of the divine. In the first book of Kings, chapter 19, the story unfolds of Elijah being on the run from a vengeful Jezebel. It is a time of utter chaos in ancient Judea, King David is gone, the Northern and Southern kingdoms have split, and Solomon has begun his reign, which was not without significant upheaval. Elijah has fled and taken shelter in a cave at the foot of Horeb, the Mount of the Lord. After he has rested there, an angel instructs him:

<sup>11</sup> He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"<sup>5</sup>

It is human nature to be distracted by the noise of the world, the noise of our own voices, the noise of violence and discord.

It is also human nature to know that the truth is not found in that noise, but in the quiet that is hidden behind and beneath it.

How, then, do we engage in the kind of deep listening necessary to get to that quiet, that silence, where the divine exists?

Theodore Parker encouraged 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Christians to see beyond the limits of humanity's noise to the deeper, truer permanence of virtue and grace.

"Worldly motives – not seeming such – sometimes deter good men from their duty. Gold and Ease have, before now, enervated noble minds. Daily contact with men of low aims takes down the ideal of life, which a bright spirit casts out of itself. Terror has sometimes palsied tongues that, before, were eloquent as the voice of Persuasion. But thereby Truth is not holden. She speaks in a thousand tongues, and with a pen of iron graves her sentence on rock forever."<sup>6</sup>

Truth lasts forever. Our understanding of it continuously evolves, as details are constantly revealed to us, but the truth is constant. Love is constant. Peace of the heart is constant.

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<sup>5</sup> The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 1 Kings 19:11-13, BibleGateway.com, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+kings+19&version=NRSV> accessed 10/9/2020

<sup>6</sup> Parker, *ibid*, p. 148-149

Even when everything seems in chaos.

I return to Rev. Fails' prayer:

Spirit of Life Who Changes with Us, the ground beneath us is shifting—for some of us gently, for others in seismic waves. Remind us of the steadfast presence of a love greater than ourselves, as constant as the stars, even when it is obscured from view.<sup>7</sup>

May this be our practice and our prayer. Today and always.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Fails, *ibid*