

“Not Unspectacular”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
February 8, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

In the summer of 2022, I traveled to Washington, D.C. from York, Pennsylvania, where I was living and serving at the time. The youth of our congregation in York were going to D.C. on their coming of age trip, to learn more about our religious tradition and the ways many faithful people bear witness in the day-to-day workings of democracy. At the last minute, they had added something to their agenda for the weekend - a public protest in response to the Supreme Court case *Dobbs vs. Whole Women's Health*, the case that overturned the precedent of *Roe vs. Wade* and removed the previously granted right to privacy in health care decision-making that turned abortion care and other reproductive health care on its head. Prior to the trip, the Director of Religious Education in York and I had held discussions with the youth and their parents about the safety of their participation in this demonstration. Each child was granted permission to attend by their parent or guardian. It was a valuable experience for all, both the demonstration and the debrief we did afterwards, where we had some really challenging conversations about how hard it is to talk about these things, about human sexuality and health and pregnancy and the economic realities of bearing and raising a child and the systemic oppression

that made reproductive choice only available to those with sufficient resources - of time, money, familial support.

In the middle of this time of intense learning, as we were moving from the protest back to the church basement where the kids were staying with their chaperones, someone in the crowd caught my attention.

“Hey!” he said, pointing to my left arm, “why not just ‘spectacular’?”

“What?” I said, not sure I had heard him correctly in the noise of the crowd.

“Your tattoo!” he pointed again, “Why doesn’t it just say ‘spectacular’?”

“Oh!” I replied, “Because it’s a line from a [poem!](#)” And then I turned to leave with the group of young people who were out there learning and trying to grow their own understanding of the systems in which they were to come to adulthood.

For me, tattoos are a means of personal expression, a spiritual practice, a way to flex the muscles of courage, of living my values and who I am in the world. My heart is quite literally on my sleeve, on my skin, where anyone can

see it or read it or appreciate it or misunderstand it.

This particular tattoo, lettered and designed by me and tattooed by Maddie Blaze, represents the promises I made at my ordination, where this poem was also my text.

“Look, we are not unspectacular things.

We’ve come this far, survived this much. What would happen if we decided to survive more? To love harder?”

What *would* happen if we decided to survive more? To love harder?

What would happen if every adult spent time with the youth of their community, to listen to the dreams and the demands of those who are to inherit the world in which we live?

Now, it’s been a few weeks since I was last here with you and speaking from this pulpit that you have entrusted me with. I take that trust very seriously, and was excited for the guest speakers that our amazing worship associate team had planned for the two weeks I was traveling to Albuquerque, New Mexico for a UU religious professionals conference and a few days of heart-expanding,

soul-enlivening vacation.

And then, the storm.

The change.

The unexpected.

The feelings of helplessness as we watched what is happening in our country, feeling frozen in more ways than one.

The feelings of hope, gratitude, and inspiration as we watched what is happening in Minneapolis, as we watched communities stand up and say *NO*. No, no, not on our watch. No to the rising tides. No to being terrified.

As one of the volunteers on the planning committee for our conference, I watched with wonder and gratitude as so many of my beloved colleagues and friends returned home from answering the call to bear witness in Minneapolis. I watched as everyone's flights got wrenched, delayed, canceled, rebooked. I watched as we gathered as a congregation - you see, the UU Ministers Association, the sponsor of the conference, does act with one another as a congregation. We care for one another as best we can across the geographic distances that

separate us, that can isolate us. We lift one another up when we are down. We do our best to bring all of ourselves to the work we do together. And we try to make room for when we are tired, when we are grieving, when it all feels like too much to hold.

Although I was gone from your pulpit for two Sundays in a row, UUCR, you were rarely far from my thoughts or my heart. I knew I was returning to this pulpit on the Sunday that you are honoring me with the consideration of a call to settled ministry, a chance for us to explore, together, the work we are called to do in this hurting world.

I also knew I'd picked this text already - what a nice parallel! My ordination text, reappearing at yet another momentous occasion in my own faith journey!

And then, on Thursday January 22, when I was in the middle of frenzied preparation for a flight I'd moved up to avoid the storm, the weekly update email went out with a copy of the letter that the children and youth of this congregation wrote together, to us, on Sunday, January 18. That day, we celebrated the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and they took his dream as their inspiration. I looked at that letter again as I thought of the youth I was privileged to accompany to that demonstration in Washington, D.C. four years ago. I also thought of the

children and youth I have taught and learned from and mentored across my career as a religious educator immediately prior to my shift to professional ministry.

I know a lot has happened since then that letter went out in email, so I'm going to share the text of it with you again.

“Dear Adults,

The World would be different without you. We are proud of the good work you have done and are still doing. You have shown us that it's okay to fight for something we believe in.

WE ARE SCARED ABOUT THE FUTURE.

Our current government administration could make some severe negative changes. Please help us make the best of what happens. Communicate peacefully to prevent and end war. **NO GREED MONSTERS** - make sure everyone gets what they need. No more waste and pollution; we can recycle!

It's not too late to change! We have another chance! Let's make a stronger community where outsiders are welcome and weirdos are encouraged. Remember that one life can change many.

Forever loved,
The Chalice Children of the UU Church of Roanoke,
Virginia”

“What would happen if we used our bodies to bargain

for the safety of others, for earth,

if we declared a clean night, if we stopped
being terrified,

if we launched our demands into the sky, made ourselves
so big

people could point to us with the arrows they make in their
minds,

rolling their trash bins out, after all of this is over?”

Our children and youth are living our example and inviting us to reflect on it together, to reflect the truth of our being back to them, to show them that we can do this without being terrified - our hearts, our values, our actions can be broadcast so loudly, together, that people in the future will look to us as they make their own meanings. They will look to the dead stars and the burning, bright ones to say “Look at them, the ones who listened both to their children and to their ancestors. Look at them, the ones who dared

to dream the world could be better than it was. Look at them, the ones who decided to do it together, not alone.”

“I have not come here alone
I carry my people in my bones
I have not come here alone
If you listen you can hear them in my soul.”

This piece, by the [Peace Poets](#), was one of the greatest gifts I received at the learning conference. We would sing it again and again, both in memory of those we have lost and in loving honor of those we carry with us at all times. Everyone we have ever known, ever loved, everyone whose love allowed us to arrive where we are. Imperfectly, wholly, beautifully.

When we are present for each other, reflecting one another, young and old, different cultures and life experiences, we remind ourselves how not-alone we are. When we choose to listen, deeply, to the wisdom of our elders and both the fears and the dreams of our children, we can start to perceive ourselves as part of an ongoing, ever-changing movement; our faith is not a faith carved in stone that will eventually crumble to dust, our faith is a river of fire and a fall of rain and a gust that carries both our lamentations and our ecstatic cries out on the winds before us, daring one another not to fear change or

hardship but to embrace it with one another's help and love.

“Soon it will be over,

which is precisely what the child in my dream said, holding my hand, pointing at the roiling sea and the sky hurtling our way like so many buffalo, who said *it's much worse than we think, and sooner*; to whom I said *no duh child in my dreams*, what do you think this singing and shuddering is, what this screaming and reaching and dancing and crying is, other than loving what every second goes away? Goodbye, I mean to say. And thank you. Every day.”

What do you think this singing and shuddering and screaming and reaching and dancing and crying is other than knowing that what we love, changes. What we love, moves. What we love, yes, goes away. Goodbye and thank you.

Why did I pick a goodbye [poem](#) on a day that holds the promise of a beautiful beginning? Because we do this work in love, and while *what* we love will go away, the love

itself will not. The long history of this congregation holds the love of its founders, who are not present with us but without whom none of us would be here. The long history of this congregation will be built with love out into the future, when the children who wrote this letter to us are the beloved elders, when generations we have scarcely dared dream of are thriving and happy and expanding this beautiful faith, this beautiful home out to be stronger, to welcome more outsiders and encourage more weirdos. It will happen if we say yes to building intergenerational relationships, it will happen if we say no to staying silent in the face of authoritarianism, it will happen if we say yes to committing to our own spiritual journeys and this shared home for them, it will happen if we say no to complacency and the way things have always been done, it will happen if we say yes, yes to doing this together, it will happen if we say “no duh” to the child in our dreams and point to the sky and the storm and say yes, yes, it is coming, but we will see the other side if we move together. If we remind ourselves, always, that we are not alone.

“I have not come here alone
I carry my people in my bones
I have not come here alone
If you listen you can hear them in my soul.”

(sing it till it's sung) (Everyone who loved you into being)

Amen, ashe, and blessed be.

So may it be.