

## “Pride and Joy”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday, June 14, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

According to the spreadsheet I keep to track such things, the last book I read in 2025 was [Falling Back in Love With Being Human](#), by Chinese-Canadian author Kai Cheng Thom, who is a transgender woman. She was also the keynote speaker at the UU Ministers learning conference in January of this year, so I wanted to read some of her work before hearing her keynote speech. I served on the planning committee for this learning conference, and our team was deeply saddened when Kai told us that she would need to give her address remotely - but we understood. We understood that her various identities made the idea of traveling from Canada to the United States in these times not merely challenging but potentially dangerous. Her speech, which I cannot find a transcript or a video of, remains a luminous if vague memory, of a person so caring, so centered in love that my own heart could not help but open in return. I wanted to share something from Kai with you today, but without a transcript of the speech, and having sent my copy of her book on to a trans friend in need of comfort and uplift, I turned to the internet. For a while she had an advice column; this is from the final advice column for Xtra Magazine, where she is still a contributing writer, just not a professional advice-giver. Kai's [last letter](#) is from - and to - well, Kai.

“As the waters closed over your head, you wondered what it would take to be worthy of love and capable of loving. This was the question that saved your life—because you decided that you had to find out. It is a question with two answers: The first is that everyone who has lived is worthy of love, because it is not something that we have to earn. The second is that to be capable of loving, we have to live. We have to spend our lives practising love and all of its mistakes.

We live amid the ashes of a dying planet, in the throes of a mass extinction event caused by human beings. A relationship with suffering and death is something that we all must cultivate. Yet we have a calling, here in this

decaying world, and that is to live and to serve life with every precious breath that is gifted to us. That is the meaning of both hope and strength: to ardently pursue human connection with passion and compassion, in each moment telling the epic love story of our interconnected lives. To make great mistakes and to never stop learning from them. To speak for beauty and justice, wherever we are.”

The epic love story of our interconnected lives.

What a joy.

It is audacious, perhaps, to continue to choose joy, to continue to choose love, to continue telling the story of love and of connection and of passion and of compassion, to continue to choose to go on even in the face of all that seems to pile up in opposition to joy, to connection, to love, to compassion.

Love is not something we have to earn.

Joy is our birthright.

Very few things in life are guaranteed, but that does not mean we are not worthy of them. We are born as tiny sponges, ready to soak up all the world we possibly can, through every sense available to us. The ways we receive love, receive joy, receive a sense of our worthiness for these things are sometimes broken by people who have been broken in their own turns, by people or systems or institutions who decided that they were in some way unworthy.

When Unitarian Universalists say we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person, we really do try to mean it. Even though it's one of the hardest things to do, especially when someone (or some group of someones, some institution or system) is trying to deny our own worth, our own birthright of love, of joy, of connection, of compassion.

The epic love story of our interconnected lives means not only that we are worthy of love by means of our existence but that we are capable of loving others, of putting more love into the world, of adding our own lines and chapters into this epic story.

It means so much more than just our individual love stories, but that doesn't mean we should put those aside. They can be our greatest teachers.

### [i love you to the moon &](#)

not back, let's not come back, let's go by the speed of  
queer zest & stay up  
there & get ourselves a little  
moon cottage (so pretty), then start a moon garden

with lots of moon veggies (so healthy), i mean  
i was already moonlighting  
as an online moonologist  
most weekends, so this is the immensely

logical next step, are you  
packing your bags yet, don't forget your  
sailor moon jean jacket, let's wear  
our sailor moon jean jackets while twirling in that lighter,

queerer moon gravity, let's love each other  
(so good) on the moon, let's love  
the moon  
on the moon

What a beautiful confection of a daydream of a poem. I simply cannot read it without smiling. What if the lightness and buoyancy of our love was enough to lift us to the moon, truly, to a place where we could have a cottage and flowers and fruits and joy, joy, joy?

Maybe not everyone dreams of a cottage and flowers and fruit. Maybe not everyone is familiar with the phrase “I love you to the moon and back.” But the playful nature of the queer love story that served as our opening words serves as a reminder. The love and gentleness we show one another, that we show to our most intimate companions and partners, whatever their gender, their orientation, their gender expression, their number - that love is our teacher. Those moments of connection and of joy serve as reminders. They give us the muscle memory to live in a world that might want to deny our joy, our worth, our right to live and love and express our true selves - to not just survive in that world but to thrive.

We don't thrive alone. One person thriving isn't enough - take, as textual evidence, the mere existence of billionaires. We are not unconnected individuals set out on some kind of imagined equal playing ground. We are a collective, we are a searching, seeking, group of beings who long for that love, that connection. We long to be a part of that epic love story.

Let's love the moon, let's love each other. Let's love the world and fill it with our audacious sense of connection and of worth. Let's make grand mistakes and continue to learn from them, to be gentle with ourselves and others when we fail to live up to our best selves, to respect that this is part of our learning, our collectivity, the way we improve things for ourselves and for each other and for each generation to come.

In the generations since Stonewall - 57 years ago, within the lifetimes of many of us here gathered - we have seen such improvement, such growth, such increased nuance and understanding for the many ways we live and love and grow and thrive in our varied lives of queer joy. Even the word “queer” has traveled a long and changing road in those years. And the history of queer joy, queer expression, of fighting for the right to live as our true selves...that history, that shared epic love story, did not start at Stonewall. It is ancient, it is epic, it has been part of humanity since humanity itself took shape, started telling the stories and painting the pictures that co-created who we are. Gay or straight, trans or cis, queer or

ally, the joy of any of us means a richer interconnected love story for all of us.

Right now that love story might feel like an impossible dream. Mistakes are being made all over the place. Sometimes it's hard to tell what is a mistake, what is an opportunity for learning and growth, what is a bad action, what is thoughtlessness or carelessness that serves none of us, what is active hatred or disregard. But we can seek and find hope and strength by not trying to spread our attention all over the place, thinning it. We can reflect daily on what within our lives interconnects us. We can reflect on our own mistakes and ask ourselves how we might better center love in the future. We can reflect on places we see interconnection broken, love denied, and ask ourselves and one another, how can we weave this together again?

“That is the meaning of both hope and strength: to ardently pursue human connection with passion and compassion, in each moment telling the epic love story of our interconnected lives. To make great mistakes and to never stop learning from them. To speak for beauty and justice, wherever we are.”

Amen to that, Kai Cheng. And so may it be.