

“Help Us to Learn”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
August 16, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“There are thousands to tell you [it cannot be done](#),
There are thousands to prophesy failure;
There are thousands to point out to you one by one,
The dangers that wait to assail you.

But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing
That ‘cannot be done,’ and you’ll do it.”

My dad was a big Edgar Guest guy. He loved memorizing poetry, and Guest’s work - charming and rhyming and deeply rooted in the grounded themes of our daily lives - appealed to him. I don’t recall if he’s the one who taught me this poem, or if it was something I read in school, but I know it’s lived rent free in my head for a very long time.

“Spirit, [I would really rather not learn this](#).

Didn’t think I needed to.

I thought someone else could do it. Thought a leader was coming to do it.
Thought the young people could do it. Or the elders could do it. Or the professionals.

Or I don’t want to learn it ‘cause it means letting go of something I hold dear.

Letting go of being someone who knows the answers.

Letting go of being someone who doesn’t know.

Letting go of the way I see the world.

Letting go of how I might have to change.

Letting go of certainty, of logic, of facts, of control.

Of the myth that you can live on this earth and not harm.

Or the myth that I can't learn anything new.

Help me to learn it. Please.

And then help me to live what I have learned.

And do right by the gift of being taught."

Now the first time I read this prayer by my colleague the Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen, it landed like a gut punch. I've used it to start off meetings, especially hard meetings, about topics it feels intimidating to tackle, many times. And it's often received the same way. *Whuf*.

Here at the start of the new school year, which also happens to be the start of the new church year, we are in that space so perfectly delineated between these two works. "You can do anything you set your mind to!" "You must realize how incredibly difficult this is!"

Yes. Both. Yes, and.

When I was a girl, I would sometimes share my dreams for the future with my parents. While they were loving and supportive, they were also...cautious. My father, especially - even for all his Edgar-Guest-esque sense of gung-ho, my father was often the one to shoot my dreams down. When I said I wanted to be a veterinarian, he asked me seriously, "Do you think you could work with sick cats and dogs all day, and sometimes even have to put them to sleep?" When I said I wanted to be a meteorologist, he

said, “I dunno, kid, you have to be awfully good at math to do that, and you know that’s not your best subject.” When I said - I believe this was around age five - when I said I wanted to be a *nun*, he said, “You know, nuns take vows of poverty, so if you become a nun, you can’t inherit anything when we die.”

[pause] Yeah, I know, right?!

One of the greatest gifts my father was able to give me was a steady stream of earnest, honest conversations throughout my life - and this did not end when we learned he was dying. In fact, we started having them more often. We knew we had to make the most of the time we had. So one day, I asked him why. Why had he so often come up with reasons that I *shouldn’t* do the things that I wanted to do?

“I was scared you would fail, and be disappointed, that that would hurt you. I was scared you would be hurt.”

“I thought someone else could do it. Thought a leader was coming to do it. Thought the young people could do it. Or the elders could do it. Or the professionals.

Or I don’t want to learn it ‘cause it means letting go of something I hold dear.”

I’m so glad and grateful that we got a chance to honor our Bridgers this morning, even the ones who couldn’t be here in person, because there is something so important in having this conversation as a congregation. How often in our lives, at any stage of life, have we longed for a leader - specifically *someone who wasn’t us* - to come along with answers, or solutions, or even the simple willingness to show their work - to engage in the struggle while not trying to hide that it is a struggle?

The other week, after engaging in a few rounds of extremely frustrating, hopelessly bureaucratic miscommunication, to address an issue that had dragged on for literal years, I was glad to finally arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. I sent a message to a friend, saying in part, “Remember when we were kids, and we thought grown ups knew what they were doing?”

Remember when we were kids, and the adults in our lives thought they knew what was best for us? Thought they knew how to protect us? Not every adult. Not even always the ones who mattered the most to us. But there they were, adults in our lives trying their best. Maybe trying to give us something they didn’t have. Maybe trying to get us to appreciate what we did have, instead of wanting something else, something more. Maybe just trying to do what their own parents did, for good or for ill, simply because they weren’t sure what else to do.

Admitting that we don’t know something can be hard, once we’re grown up. Letting go of a sense that we have become that mythical being who “knows what they are doing”... letting go of a sense that we can exist on this earth and not do harm.

We’re going to make mistakes! We’re going to fail! What are we supposed to do? Just ADMIT THAT?

Yes. Yes, and!

There’s a little improv game that we often do at the start of a class or rehearsal or session. In improvisation - whether it’s theater or music or drama or comedy - failure is always there, right alongside us. When we create new things, when we try new things, we can’t know that we’re going to get it right the first time. In fact, we should probably assume that we won’t! That way, if we *do* get it right, it’s like a fun little surprise...and if we don’t, well, that’s what we figured, right? Anyway, at the start of an improv session, sometimes we like to do a little exercise that I’d like us all to do right now. It’s easy! You can just do it right where you’re sitting. The exercise is called “I failed.” When I give the sign [waves hand in the air], we

are all going to say, as loudly and as proudly as we can, “I failed!” Not [mopey] “I failed.” But [excited!] “I *failed!*”

Ready? Let’s go! [try this a few times]

Great! Thank you!

“Somebody scoffed: ‘Oh, you’ll never do that;
At least no one ever has done it’;
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat,
And the first thing we knew he’d begun it.

With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,
Without any doubting or quiddit,
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn’t be done, and he did it.”

He started to SING as he tackled the thing! That’s the part of this poem I love the best.

We don’t get a lot about the interiority of this go-for-it person in Guest’s poem. What I mean is, yes, he’s singing and grinning, but is he also, maybe, just a little bit scared? We don’t know!

And it’s that fear, that uncertainty, that makes Nguyen’s prayer so powerful for me.

“Letting go of being someone who knows the answers.

Letting go of being someone who doesn’t know.

Letting go of the way I see the world.

Letting go of how I might have to change.

Letting go of certainty, of logic, of facts, of control.”

There are stages of life, like adulthood, where we are “supposed” to know the answers. There are stages of life, like childhood and adolescence, where we are *not* “supposed” to know the answers. We honored our bridgers today, we honored the start of the school year, as a way to honor the magnificent act of *admitting and acknowledging that we have more to learn*. When we talk about school, at least, there’s a sense that at some point you’re done with it. (That’s not true for all of us!) But when we talk about *learning*, well, that’s something else.

It’s the start of the church year as well as the start of the school year. Every person here today is at a different place in their own journey, and has a different set of questions. (You shared some great ones with me last week, and I’m still reflecting on them and how we’re going to use them in the year to come.) Unitarian Universalism, as many of you may know, is a faith tradition where *lots* of people in its churches and community centers of a Sunday morning are people who found the faith as an adult. Many of us, myself included, were raised in another faith tradition, and learned the lessons that tradition wanted to teach us. Many of us also were not raised in any faith tradition, but have a curiosity and a seeking nature, and so have absorbed lessons here, there, and everywhere about all these big questions - who are we? Why are we here? Why is there anything instead of nothing? What happens when we die? How are we to live?

If we think hard enough about it, we’re always at the beginning of something, on the cusp of something new. We don’t always know what it is. And that uncertainty can be both frightening and exhilarating. If failure is always possible, then so is success! Sometimes we get too caught up in the things we can’t do or don’t know, and forget there’s so much we *do* have or know that we may be shy about, try to hide away.

Please know your questions are welcome here. Your failures are welcome here. That doesn’t mean that there won’t be times when any of our failures don’t call for repair, for the rebuilding of trust and relationship - remember,

one of the things we must let go of is the idea that we can somehow always be perfect and right and good and somehow avoid ever doing harm. Harm will be done here. But love will also be cultivated here. How do we do both? I don't know! Or rather, that's a question I *cannot* know the answer to, because that answer doesn't reside within or belong to any single person. It's one we have to live into, to answer together, and keep revisiting because the questions and the answers also keep shifting and changing and growing and expanding.

In a spirit of learning and growth, this year I'm going to be doing a periodic sermon series on the essentials of Unitarian Universalism. And yes, as we get our new Director of Religious Education up to speed, we're also giving attention to what new educational opportunities we can offer for folks of all ages. Next week, on Sunday August 23, we'll have a little soft open on that sermon series, where we talk about love and covenant.

I tried to do a sermon series last year, but some life stuff got in the way, so you know what I did? [gesture] I FAILED! But I kept showing up, imperfectly, kept loving, imperfectly, and kept looking for ways to learn and grow.

So may it be, for all of us.