

“Transgender Day of Remembrance: You Are Seen”
Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, November 15, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

Thank you, Erika, for sharing your exceptional and powerful words with us today. From the beginning of my time with this congregation, Erika has been tireless in her pursuit of justice, her dedication to visibility, and her passion for poetry and creativity. Your gifts make our community so much richer.

“It's a sin of volition
if you use your religion
to castigate another
just to maintain your position.

It's a sin of omission
if you make it as your mission
to parcel out your love
by setting up conditions.”

Whuf.

Many of you know that I grew up Catholic. The harms done in the name of religion, the smallness and ugliness of the castigation of others and the translation of what is supposed to be the limitless love of God into a conditional tool for petty power-scrabblers - there are so many. So much harm has been done. I know that for many who were harmed in Christian churches in their childhoods, the very concept of god is one which is irrevocably broken for them - being told that one is loved but being shown a

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very different truth is more than dishonest; when it is done in the name of a religion or worse the name of god themselves it is a weaponization of the very concept of Love.

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm Love as the center of our faith, as the energizing force behind all our decisions, as that which guides our speech and actions. We strive for it to be central to our internal life so that we may live that value out loud, even when it is hard or unpopular or against the prevailing narrative of the times.

Erika's powerful poem is a fierce redress of that narrative, a narrative that - I am sad to say - still continues. Even as we examine the profound narrative of changes carried out in this country's most recent election, we know that there is still far to go. There were pieces of anti-trans legislation that did go through in several states, although by narrow margins, at the same time that we witnessed more transgender lawmakers elected than ever before, and as shifts in some states that already have anti-trans laws are profound enough that those laws may be overturned or a mandate given not to enforce them.

Keeping love at the center when we witness the names, each year, of those who have lost their lives - an annual listing where we know that Black trans women are the most profoundly affected by the overlapping systems of oppression - that's hard to do. It's hard to center Love in the face of this.

And that's why we turn to joy. To poetry and reflection and real relationship - I'm grateful to everyone in our Pride Committee and who is a part of Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgender Alliance, particularly Dolly who will share her reflection next. We turn to a centering Love that uplifts trans joy and invites those of us who are cisgender to consider the awesome power of the resistance provided by that joy. It is an inspiration to us all, even - especially - in the face of the annual list of those lost to us.

This is why I'm also very grateful to Erika for introducing me to the writings of Father Shannon Kearns.

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“I see you getting up out of that pew and leaving that un-affirming church never to return. I see you finding a new community that welcomes you with open arms.

I see you asserting your identity by insisting that people use your name and pronouns.

I see you finding someone who loves you for who you are and who realizes what a gift you are in their lives.

I see you existing. And surviving. And thriving.

I want you to know that you are seen and loved just as you are. I want you to know that you are not a disruption, a burden, or a too-expensive-cost, no matter what the president says. No matter what your pastor says. No matter what your parent says. No matter what your ex-partner says. These things are not true.

What is true is this:

God loves you not in spite of your transness but because of it. God has gifted you with your unique and beautiful identity. And God loves you because of your identity.”

No matter what the parent or pastor or ex-partner says - those who are closest to us, those we place in positions of trust, have such power to hurt us. What a powerful reflection for all of us, to consider the kind of Love that is full, is unconditional, that celebrates all of who each of us is. Trans or cis, none of us claim perfection - that’s not what Love needs to exist. Love thrives in reality, in learning to love all of ourselves, in learning enough about our neighbors to allow curiosity to thrive into care and love and mutual concern. (After all, remember, it’s possible to love someone and have those times when you don’t like them very much!)

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There are people who aren't here today because they were harmed in churches in the past, and for that my heart breaks. I wish that every pastor could read and live the words of Father Shannon Kearns. I wish that every faith community could consider the beautiful gifts within each and every one of us, varied and changing and glorious in their depth and the ways they allow each of us to move in the direction of Love.

It's more than just Love, of course. We think of Love as the energy, the moving and motivating force that leads our thought, speech, and action. But in Unitarian Universalism, we uplift six values that Love can power to the greatest good: Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence and Generosity. All of these values remind us and move towards a world where trans joy is uplifted, where we value every person for their inherent worth and dignity, their inseparable nature - connected with all living beings, where we proclaim the necessity of dismantling all forms of oppression so that all can thrive, where we know deep within that we need so many different stories to feed and grow our spiritual depth and resilience, where we want to share resources and do our part to repair the broken hearts and spirits that suffered to uphold too many of our systems and structures - to construct new ones where we don't just survive, but thrive. And Transformation! We declare sacred the need and duty to change and grow, to learn and become, to follow that voice within ourselves that calls us to be the most true version of ourselves…even as we know that can change!

So we are grateful for our teachers. Teachers can show up in so many ways. We are taught by these names, each year, even as we long for a world where we no longer have to learn this way. Part of what we learn is to center joy in the face of this pain, to know we each contain all of it.

I am grateful to every trans teacher I have had the good grace to know, for inviting me to consider the sacred work of Transformation and Pluralism, the beauty of not-knowing and decentering myself to learn the truth of others. One of my favorite teachers is Kai Cheng Thom, a Canadian-Chinese writer, artist, social worker, and community counselor. In

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her 2023 book *Falling Back In Love With Being Human: Letters to Lost Souls*, Thom writes precisely that - a series of letters to people who have hurt her, shamed her, or simply been too scared to speak up when harm was being done.

The introduction to the book is also a letter, to the reader, which could be all of us, any of us. I'd like to share part of the introduction to this work now.

"In each incarnation of my professional life, I've pursued the same deeply personal mission: To witness the essential beauty and goodness that lives within each and every person on this planet. To live in the knowledge that everyone is both worthy of love and capable of loving. To embrace the revolutionary belief that every human being – no matter how hateful or horrible – is intrinsically sacred.

"Although it's been a long time since I was part of any organized religion, faith has always been my solace and my guide – not faith in any particular god, necessarily [...], but rather faith in other people. Faith in the transformative power of the bonds between us."

When we gather, we place that faith in one another and in ourselves anew. When we gather each year to honor those lost, we place the hope and intention that each year the list grow shorter, that more and more of our trans siblings can survive and thrive, that our world and our hearts may expand to hold all the beautiful and terrible truth of our stories, our joys and sorrows, and the beautiful task of our becoming.

So may it be.

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