“Beginner’s Mind: Pluralism”
Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, November 8, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

I have a dear friend from seminary, who a few years ago moved from her adopted home of Long Beach, California back to the home of her birth, Berlin, Germany. She wanted her daughter to know her grandparents more closely, and to go to middle school and high school in a place safer than… well, anywhere in the United States. We principally keep in touch by leaving one another asynchronous voice messages, which is often easier than navigating the time difference to set up a real-time conversation. On Wednesday morning of this week, I left her a voicemail message that I wasn’t sure made any sense. We had talked about how removed she felt from American politics, we had shared our concerns about the rise of extreme right-wing positions… a uniquely horrifying concern in Germany, of course, but worrisome everywhere to two Unitarian Universalist ministers trying to live our values in our shifting, changing, hurting world.

In answer to my message, she left one that made me cry. All my emotions have been close to the surface lately; honestly that’s not a particularly unusual state of being for me but it has been heightened of late, for many reasons.

What I felt, on Wednesday morning, which I tried to articulate for her so imperfectly, was this… I felt a sense of release from a stasis I hadn’t fully realized I was living within. When I awoke on the morning after the election to see results so broad and so deep, I… well, I wept.

I didn’t weep because I felt like all our problems were fixed - no, of course, all of us know that elections are a beginning and not an ending. I didn’t weep because I felt like I could rest from the work of democracy - I wept because I felt, in my bones, how hard so MANY people had worked for the same outcome. So many people around the country. So many people who are so different from me, in addition to many people who might be more similar to me. From senate seats to school boards, from city councils to

governors, I felt the affirming spark not just of “No” - no more of this, no more corruption, greed, lies, no more minimizing the needs of the vast majority of Americans in service to the wealthiest few - I also felt the spark of “Yes.” The spark of correction, the spark of justice.

“When the glee of the progressives is stilled,
When the posters in yards are removed,
When the lawyers and politicians and pundits are quiet,
When the protestors are safely home,
The work of Democracy begins:

To prioritize the vulnerable,
To reunite the caged children,
To feed the hungry,
To house the houseless,
To release the prisoner,
To decriminalize poverty,
To provide healthcare for all,
To educate the masses,
To care for the Earth,
To protect the vote,
To let life flourish.”

To let life flourish. I was grateful when I read these words from my colleague the Rev. Mr. Barb Greve, Director of Ministries and Programs of the UUMA - Barb wrote these words after the elections in 2020, but they still resonate.

The thing I celebrated the most, on Wednesday November 4, was this: I celebrated that our children, in every part of this nation, got to witness the fact that actions have consequences. We are accountable for what we do and do not do, especially in the jobs to which we are hired. We have lived in a world where it felt like too many people in power relied on bullying, on intimidation, on greed, on the desire for power or control.

Those aren't ways to run a country. Those aren't ways to build relationships. They are ways to shut down dialogue, to silence too many voices, to impose an imagined simplicity on our country and our being. Those ways of being do NOT center Love, the action-verb Love at the heart of our faith, and I felt that Love being centered again, when I awoke on Wednesday. Not an ending, but a beginning.

Today is a beginner's mind day. I want us to reflect, together, on some of the parts of our faith tradition that we might not have given our attention to as closely. As we have talked about before, Unitarian Universalism is a tradition where many of us arrive as adults. There are many reasons people seek - and find - our faith communities as adults. The faith communities of their youth or young adulthood may no longer be a good fit. They may have never experienced a community of faith and be looking for something they can't quite define. They may have heard or read or seen evidence of a strong religious tradition in this country that feels very different to some of the dominant narrative right now - a religious tradition that doesn't try to offer answers but instead supports a responsible and accountable kind of questioning, a way of approaching the world open-heartedly, open-mindedly, with Love at the center.

In Unitarian Universalism, we don't profess a creed. In fact, we are forbidden from doing so by the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, our nationwide organization that exists to support the growth of our tradition and its congregation and its leaders. Instead, what we have is a covenant of shared values. With Love at the center, those values we hold to be most sacred are Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity. (JETPIG!)

Today I want to talk about Pluralism.

These shared values reside in Article II of the Bylaws of the UUA. The introduction to the values reads as such:

“As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our Association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:”

And then there is the list. For Pluralism, we read:

“Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.”

We are all sacred beings. We each bring our own stories, our own strengths, our own fears, our own dreams into every space and community where we are. And we know - every one of us - what it is like to feel as though we must keep some important part of us hidden. Perhaps for safety. Perhaps for acceptance. Perhaps to preserve relationships. Perhaps to avoid conflict. Perhaps because some parts of us are changing, may feel too new or too tender to share with others.

What if we truly made an effort to see each person around us with Love, curiosity, and respect?

I’d like us to try something. I’d like you to prepare yourself for some quiet moments of meditation, prayer, and reflection. Settle in your seat, close your eyes or soften your gaze. We’re going to revisit part of this morning’s reading, together.

“Which is not to say that I never survive. Just that my survival, in every reality where it is possible, never belongs to me. I see myself: forty. Not a dual-wielding bandit warlord. Just a neighbor, sitting in another endless community

meeting. And how many of our ancestors have already taught us: even after the world ends, there is work to do. I see myself in that work: not the leader, not a lone wolf, just another part of the pack. Because in every universe in which

I am alive, it is because of other people. And I don’t always like them, but I love them. In every universe in which I am alive, it is less because I could fight, and more because I could forgive. Because I could cooperate. Because

I could apologize. Because I could dance. Because I could grow pumpkins in my backyard and leave them at my neighbor’s door, asking for nothing in return. In every universe in which I am alive, I am holding: a first aid kit, a solar panel, a sleeping

cat. Never a rusty battle ax or rocket launcher—sure, maybe sometimes a chainsaw, but only for firewood. I am holding: a cooking pot, a teddy bear, a photo album, a basketball, a bouquet of flowers. Survival is not a fortress. It is a garden.

Survival is not a siren. It is a symphony. And yeah, we fight for it sometimes, but survival is not the fight. It is the healing after: the soft hum of someone you trust applying the bandage, the

feeling of falling asleep in a safe place."

We fight for survival, but survival is not the fight. Survival is soft. Survival is shared. Survival is not a fortress, it is a garden.

In the poem, the speaker considers the sort of things he might picture himself holding in a universe where he survives because of other people. Whether or not some great apocalypse has happened - or has been narrowly avoided - or has been postponed - we understand that we need one another. And we need one another to be different.

What would YOU hold, in a scenario that goes beyond surviving, to thriving? Are you a gardener? A knitter? A storyteller? A cook? Are you good at building things? Are you good at drawing things for others to build? Are you good at singing, smiling, holding a door open for another person?

We all have different things we're holding. I want you, just for a moment, to imagine yourself holding some of the best gifts you bring. Breathe quietly. Then think of every other person in this room, also breathing quietly, holding their own gifts. Feel the power and potential, just within this room. [pause]

Now. Please open your eyes if you have closed them. I'll invite you to look around the room, to look at your neighbors. There may be people here you've known for years. There may be people here you've never seen before. You may be here for the first time, or have been coming here for decades. There are also clouds of witnesses, those who have been members of this community in the past, those who will join in the future. Each with an utterly unique set of gifts.

Now imagine… imagine this isn't just everyone in this room. It's everyone in the valley. It's everyone in the state. It's everyone in the country - in the world.

We aren't always all going to get along. We are certainly not always going to agree. The gift of our shared value of Pluralism is a deeper knowledge of ourselves and a glorious and generative curiosity about others. The gift of the spiritual discipline of Pluralism is not always centering ourselves, is learning to appreciate what others have even if something on the surface seems antithetical to what we believe or hold dear. I don't only want to be judged on my surface! So I want to learn how better not to judge others that way.

What I awoke to on Wednesday was, most of all, a profound sense of gratitude. There were so many people who worked so much harder than I did, who risked more than I did, who spent more time than I did, doing the imperfect but beautiful work of restoring Democracy. Restoring a sense that we can hold others, and ourselves, accountable. Restoring a sense that we all share responsibility for this country that we love. Restoring a sense that there is room for curiosity about our neighbors, once the signs are down and the work of democracy begins anew.

The message my friend left in response to my initial thoughts about this gratitude made me cry because she told me this: "You are smart in your head and you are smart in your heart."

The world needs my gifts. It needs yours, too. We know there are a lot of different kind of intelligences, now. We know brains work in a lot of different ways. We know hearts are complicated places. What could we do, now, to ensure a world where more and more of us can flourish? Not just survive…thrive. Not hide within a fortress but grow a garden, abundant, varied, resilient, and whole.

So may it be.