

“Will Your Anchor Hold?”  
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It was the night of a threatening phone call, yet another threatening phone call. The young Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, more than half a century ago<sup>1</sup> – the young Martin Luther King was unable to sleep and went down to the kitchen, heated up a pot of coffee, and took his problem to God. Here is what he wrote:

My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

At that moment, [King wrote,] I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced [it]. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.<sup>2</sup>

King’s willingness, his ability not only to take his problem to God but also to feel God’s response, God’s assurance, is remarkable, but it may represent a problem for us. I don’t have that kind of relationship with God. Indeed, I don’t have that kind of God. For me, and probably for many Unitarian Universalists, the question is, how does our religious faith sustain us? What is the equivalent for us of King’s late night encounter with God over a cup of coffee at the kitchen table?

Of course, most of us don’t receive bomb threats, we’re not movement leaders, but who among us is spared the pain, the vulnerability, that is part of life?

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<sup>1</sup> January 27, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength of Love* (1963), in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 509. See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1988), 162.

There is a story – it’s probably happened more than once – of a Unitarian Universalist, a UU of long standing. He was old, quite old, and the good health of his earlier senior years was gone – emphysema, Parkinson’s, congestive heart failure, stroke, prostate cancer, it was one of those – the quality of his life was severely compromised, and the future held out more of the same, but getting worse, and eventual death. He left us. He abandoned his church; he abandoned his Unitarian Universalist faith and found another religious community, where he could find the sustenance that he needed, where he could find the support that he could not find with us.<sup>3</sup>

Why did he find Unitarian Universalism lacking? Will you, will I, search elsewhere in time of need?

One could take the intellectual approach here, the rational approach.

- I could explain how death is a necessary part of life;
- I could remind you that the only way to avoid the pain of loss and separation is to avoid attachments with other people, to avoid love;
- I could argue that a world in which God intervenes on an *ad hoc* basis would be an unlivable, chaotic world;
- I could assure you that time heals wounds, perhaps not all wounds, but most of them.
- I could recall what I’ve heard from patients in the hospital: “it could be worse.”

I could develop any of these approaches. But I won’t, not this morning.

The young woman with the cancer diagnosis, the parents whose son has been killed in Iraq, the elderly man who always expected to be the first to go and is suddenly a widower after a burst aneurism quickly drained away the life of his beloved – they are not looking for theological excursions, but they cry out in pain. How do we respond to their pain? How do we survive our own pain?

Some of us express our pain through singing hymns, hymns like “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,” which we sang a few minutes ago.<sup>4</sup> Hymns are a vehicle for expressing our sorrow, our pain, our anger; hymns can be a comfort to us. Perhaps in hymns we can find some clues about how our Unitarian Universalist faith can support us through hard times, when it feels

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<sup>3</sup> See Forrester Church, *Born Again Unitarian Universalism* (1986), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition*, #97.

like we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, to use the language of the 23rd Psalm.

I would like to share with you this morning a few lines from three hymns, three hymns that you will not find in our hymnal. Perhaps you remember them from your childhood, perhaps not.

The first was written by C. Austin Miles, in 1911:<sup>5</sup>

Let the stormy breezes blow; their cry cannot alarm me,  
I am safely sheltered here, protected by God's hand.  
Here the sun is always shining; here there's naught can harm me.  
I am safe forever in Beulah Land.

And here's the refrain:

I'm living on the mountain, underneath a cloudless sky. (praise God!)  
I'm drinking at the fountain that never shall run dry.  
Oh yes, I'm feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply,  
for I am dwelling in Beulah Land.

Can we have that feeling of security, that feeling of being safe forever, dwelling in Beulah Land? It reminds me of the inner peace, the confidence, that Martin Luther King found – found within himself – at his kitchen table the night of the bomb threat.

The next hymn was written by Elisha Hoffman, in 1887:<sup>6</sup>

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,  
leaning on the everlasting arms;  
what a blessedness, what a peace is mine,  
leaning on the everlasting arms.

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,  
leaning on the everlasting arms?  
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,  
leaning on the everlasting arms.

And here's the refrain, with the women and men responding to each other:

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<sup>5</sup> *Hymns of Heritage and Hope*, Advent Christian General Conference (1991), #756.

<sup>6</sup> *Hymns of Heritage and Hope* #655.

Leaning (Leaning on Jesus), leaning (Leaning on Jesus),  
 safe and secure from all alarms;  
 Leaning (Leaning on Jesus), leaning (Leaning on Jesus),  
 leaning on the everlasting arms.

Here, instead of the image of Beulah Land, we have the everlasting arms – reliable, dependable support, support for the long haul, whenever we need it, unconditional. Who would not want to lean on those everlasting arms?

The third hymn was written by Priscilla Owens, in 1874:<sup>7</sup>

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
 when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
 When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  
 will your anchor drift, or firm remain?

Here is how Owens answers her own questions:

We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
 steadfast and sure while the billows roll,  
 Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
 grounded firm and deep in the savior's love.

I want to admit that I am not a sailor. I have never been out in a small boat on a wide sea. I do not have first hand knowledge of the utility of anchors. We need an anchor, Owens tells us, when we encounter storms in our lives, when we encounter strife. The question is, do we have the right anchor? Will our anchor remain firm, or will it drift? Will our anchor hold?

What these three hymns are about, as I hear them, as I feel them, is emotional support, of something to fall back on, to cling to, in time of trouble and despair. What they are *not* about – this is my personal interpretation –

- what they are *not* about is a God who makes promises about what wonderful things await us when we die;
- what they are *not* about is a God who will make everything come out right in the end;
- what they are *not* about is a God who assures us that there is a good reason for our present suffering.

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<sup>7</sup> *Hymns of Heritage and Hope* #627.

Most of us could not accept a theology that describes such a God.

The good news is – the good news of Unitarian Universalism is – that you don't need a theology that our rational selves cannot swallow in order to receive the comfort and support that we expect from our religious faith.

I want to look at these three hymns some more, this time in reverse order.

“Will your anchor hold?”, Owens asks. Her anchor is love, and love is our anchor, too. Love will sustain us; love will get us through, both the love we give, and the love we receive.

The good news is that the amount of love available is not fixed. Love – unlike oil – is inexhaustible. The more love you give away, the more you share your love, the more you have.

The good news is that love does not end with death. I came to an awareness of this after the death of Norma, my mother-in-law, more than 20 years ago. I continued, after she died, to feel her love. I can still feel her love today. I don't mean anything spooky by this, just that love endures. The love we have for others, the love we express to others, will live on in them after we are gone.

Owens refers, of course, to “the savior's love.” In my summary I left out the savior. Does the reference to the savior make you feel uneasy? Her savior is Jesus. But for me, Jesus has a message of love that liberates us from the need for a savior, frees us even from a need for Jesus.

Personally, I would keep Jesus, not as Lord and Savior, not sitting on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, but as the personification of the struggle to extend love to the whole human race.

Consider, in this regard, the words of Mary Kay Beall:<sup>8</sup>

Jesus has no hands but your hands  
to heal the world's infirmities,  
to touch the hurting, to comfort, to calm,  
to offer healing balm.

Owens, in “Will your anchor hold?” writes of the anchor that holds firm; Hoffman, in the next hymn, sings of leaning on the everlasting arms of Jesus. Different metaphor, same idea. This is about love, the love that we provide to our family, the love that we share with each other, in this beloved community.

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<sup>8</sup> *Hymns of Heritage and Hope* #522 (adapted).

As Mary Kay Beall wrote,

Jesus has no arms but your arms  
to lift the fallen, to hold the faint,  
to bear the heavy weight of grief  
– for all who seek relief.

Hoffman’s hymn, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms of Jesus,” like many hymns, has a scriptural citation. Its biblical foundation can be found, so the hymnal states, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 33, verse 27.

That reference sparked my curiosity, since as far as I knew, Deuteronomy was written quite a few centuries before Jesus came on the scene. What I found, when I pulled out my Bible – actually I used the Bible that lives in my computer – what I found was this verse:

He [that is, God, the LORD] subdues the ancient gods, shatters the forces of old; he drove out the enemy before you, and said, "Destroy!"

That’s from the New Revised Standard Version, which is the translation we used in seminary, the NRSV. Nothing here about Jesus – no surprise there – but also nothing about love, nothing about arms, everlasting or otherwise. I thought perhaps I had the wrong verse, but then I checked the King James translation:

The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them.

The old translation, the King James version, has “the everlasting arms.”

One lesson here is that determining the meaning of biblical passages can be difficult, which should give humility to those who rely on the Bible as the source of truth and moral guidance.

A second lesson is that sometimes those who use the Bible are very selective and use the biblical verse as the jumping off point for their own ideas. The theme of verse 27 would appear, in either translation, to be destruction, but Hoffman latches on to the image of “everlasting arms” and uses it to represent love rather than destruction.

I like this way of using the Bible, as long as we’re honest about using it as a source for inspiration and imagery and not as the rule book for life.

Owens writes of the anchor that holds firm; Hoffman sings of leaning on the everlasting arms of Jesus. C. Austin Miles, to move on to the third hymn, is safe, dwelling in Beulah Land. He’s writing poetry; he’s using metaphors and images. He’s not really on a mountain, or

drinking from a fountain, or feasting on manna. Those are literary allusions. His religious faith, his faith in God, gives him the support he needs when “the stormy breezes blow.”

You may be wondering, where or what *is* Beulah Land. You’ll find “Beulah land” in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, Chapter 62, verse 4. This is the hopeful, concluding part of the Book of Isaiah, often called Third Isaiah, written later than the first part, by a different, unknown, person, in a time of hope, when the return from captivity in Babylon was in sight.

This passage, like the one from Deuteronomy, is confusing. The King James version uses some of the Hebrew words as proper names, untranslated, while the New Revised Standard Version translates them into English. This is complicated, but if we were all Hebrew speakers it would be pretty straight forward. So bear with me, here’s Isaiah, Chapter 62, verses 4 and 5:

“You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called Hephzibah” – the King James version here has Hephzibah, used as a proper name; “you shall be called Hephzibah.” The New Revised Standard Version translates the name into English: My Delight Is in Her – “you shall be called My Delight Is in Her.”

continuing on,

“and your land [shall be called] Beulah” – here the King James version has the untranslated name Beulah, while the NRSV has the English translation, Married – “and your land shall be called married, for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.”

“For as a young man marries a young woman [verse 5 continues], so shall your builder” – that is, God – “so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

What Beulah Land refers to then is marriage, in particular, marriage between God and God’s people. Here are some thoughts on that image.

First, as I mentioned before, the idea of a God who rescues us from our problems and makes sure that everything is OK doesn’t work for me. I do not find evidence in our world for such a God.

Second, for me, the image of “God’s people” is an inclusive image. Our Universalist heritage emphasizes that God’s love, whatever that may be, extends to *all*. We recognize the “inherent worth and dignity” of *all* of humanity, not just those preselected by God, not just those who declare Jesus their Lord and Savior, not just those whose behavior measures up, when they meet their maker. To use a different metaphor, we are *all* made in the image of God.

The image of marriage between humanity and God reminds me that I view humanity, despite so many appearances to the contrary, that I view humanity as being good, as being worthy of marriage to that which some would call God – to our highest ideals, to the ultimate mystery, to love itself.

Third, the image of marriage between the created and the creator reminds me that I view the world, the universe, as a friendly place, as a good home for us to live in. Now this is not an empirical statement. If it were, it would be either false or meaningless. Rather, it is an attitude, an attitude of hope – an attitude that says that life is good, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Regarding the universe as a friendly place also, for me, at least, is an attitude of acceptance – life is far from permanent, and it will end, but I accept that; it's OK.

Does our Unitarian Universalist faith provide the support, the sustenance that we need, when we, like the old man in the story, are suffering from terminal but seemingly interminable illness? Through the love of community, through strong interwoven relationships, I believe that it does. It is not a matter of logical proofs, but of leaning on each other's arms.

Could our Unitarian Universalist faith provide strength for a Martin Luther King in time of crisis? Yes, I believe that it could.

Through a vision of a world of peace and justice, a world that no God can create for us, but that we must bring about ourselves, a vision of all of humanity working together, we can find the strength to carry on – to carry on when times are bad, when the odds are long – to carry on even when we realize that the kingdom of God, the realm of peace and justice, may not, will not, come within our own life times.

Here's more by Mary Kay Beall:

Jesus has no feet but your feet  
to walk the paths of righteousness,  
to seek the sad, to lead the lost,  
and never count the cost.

Jesus has no voice but your voice  
to sing – some day – the songs of joy and peace,  
to shout the news of victory  
that sets the captive free.

I believe that we Unitarian Universalists and Martin Luther King could find common ground in such images.

Will your anchor hold, when the storm lashes out at us, when the waves tower over us? Yes, in this community of love, support, and understanding, yes, your anchor will hold. Amen.