

**Poem:** "Down on My Knees" by Ginger Andrews  
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### **Down on My Knees**

cleaning out my refrigerator  
and thinking about writing a religious poem  
that somehow combines feeling sorry for myself  
with ordinary praise, when my nephew stumbles in  
for coffee  
to wash down what looks like a hangover  
and get rid of what he calls hot dog water breath.  
I wasn't going to bake the cake

now cooling on the counter, but I found a dozen  
eggs tipped  
sideways in their carton behind a leftover  
Thanksgiving Jell-O dish.  
There's something therapeutic about baking a devil's  
food cake,  
whipping up that buttercream frosting,  
knowing your sisters will drop by and say Lord yes  
they'd love just a little piece.

The reading is taken from the essay, "A Faith for the Free," written by the Unitarian minister and theologian Dr. James Luther Adams.

The free church...when alive... is the community in which men and women are called to seek fulfillment by the surrender of their lives to the control of the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality. It is the community in which women and men are called to recognize and abandon their ever-recurrent reliance upon the unreliable. It is the community in which the life-spirit of faith tries to create and mold life-giving, life transforming beliefs, the community in which persons open themselves to God and each other and to commanding, sustaining, transforming experiences from the past, appropriating, criticizing, and transforming tradition and giving that tradition as well as newborn faith the occasion to become relevant to the needs of a time. These roots of faith grow in the individual as one participates in the worshiping, educating, socially active fellowship of the church. And certainly if they do not grow in the individual they will not grow in the family, if they do not grow in the family they will not grow in the community, and if they do not grow in the community they will not grow in the nation and the world.

Everybody suffers, wants to run away,  
is broke after Christmas, stayed up too late  
to make it to church Sunday morning. Everybody  
should

drink coffee with their nephews,  
eat chocolate cake with their sisters, be thankful  
and happy enough under a warm and unexpected  
January sun.

## How Faith Endures

A Sermon by

The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt

October 14, 2007

I don't know how your family feels about you, but my family thinks that I am weird. This is a source of great pride to me, because my mom has always loved me for it, and she still does. When I wouldn't wear a bra after I read *Sisterhood is Powerful* in 1968, when I wanted to cut off my straightened hair and wear an Afro so short you could see my scalp, my mom would give me an exasperated look that always included a smile and a twinkle in her eyes and she would say, "Ro, you always been weird." This is her way of saying she loves me.

Now my little one Daniel tells me the same thing, but his eyes are not twinkling when he says it, and there are few things more lowering to your self esteem than an 11 year old who tells you that you are weird because nobody else's mother is a minister and makes them go to church. Unless of course it is an 11 year old who tells you that you are disgusting for kissing his father in the living room at 10 o'clock at night—which unbeknownst to him is the only sure way we have discovered to make him go to his room without argument. We shouldn't be kissing anyway, he informed me recently because, after all, his father and I are “more than a half-century old.” We think this is his way of saying he loves us, but we are not yet sure.

If you have pre-teens, you know the drill; your children love you but they do not get you; your life, your youth, your dreams are far beyond them. To Daniel, history is the Vietnam War and ancient history is segregation and surely we must be older than that. To my 14 year old, Allen, who

calls himself a gangster intellectual, history is Woodstock and ancient history is D-Day, his latest fascination, and surely we must be older than that. Time and history conflate for them; there was no really important life before they arrived, and we were never young, and what did we do without them? Sometimes, we wonder ourselves. How did we ever learn to see this world through anything other than the prism of their youthful, candid eyes, their bold expectations and demands?

We learned by living, and they are learning too. Already, the world is disappointing them. They study the Constitution in their social studies classes, then come home and ask me how it is possible to have courts that meet in secret, and I cannot answer him. Allen already knows how vulnerable some of his friends are to the lure of the streets. He reassures me about the paucity of gangs at his school, but I suspect there are things he never tells me. Daniel puts his arms around me when I am sharp with him one afternoon

and tells me he is sorry I am having a hard time. When I tell him I wouldn't be having a hard time if he would try listening to me every now and then, he shakes his head and says, No, not that, I mean about Marjorie, reminding me of my best friend who lay dying a thousand miles away.

“Sometimes life just sucks, Mom. Sorry for the language,” Allen tells me. How can I disagree? Once they leave for school, I leave for church, where I often hear more bad news than I can stand to know. Heartbreaking illness and enraging injustice and deaths that make me weep after Bob and the boys are sleeping. And I don't know the half of it. How do we bear all that we bear? How does our faith endure?

On a shelf at home is a thin, worn elegant volume bound in red. It is the dedication book honoring what was then the new home of the Community Church of New York,

built in 1947 at 40 E. 35<sup>th</sup> St. in New York City between Park and Madison Avenues. It is a handsome volume, a record of a unique time in the history of New York, with congratulatory letters from the governor of New York State and the Mayor of New York City, from senators and congressmen, and from many of the great leaders of the day, offering tributes to the two ministers who worked so hard to establish and to build it—The Rev. John Haynes Holmes and the Rev. Donald Harrington. Both these men were towering figures in American Unitarianism in the years before consolidation with Universalist Church of America in 1961, though not without controversy. The two men were pacifists at a time when it was difficult and dangerous to be so. They were so committed to civil rights and civil liberties that in their respective ministries, Holmes was one of the founders of both the NAACP and the ACLU, while Donald Harrington would support and offer office space to the fledgling anti-



apartheid group, the African National Congress, long before Nelson Mandela became its leader.

In their preaching and teaching and writing, they embodied the qualities of which James Luther Adams speaks in our reading today—they worked to build the kind of community in which “persons open themselves to God and each other and to commanding, sustaining, transforming experiences from the past, appropriating, criticizing and transforming tradition and giving that tradition as well as newborn faith the occasion to become relevant to the needs of a time.”

Dr. Holmes and Dr. Harrington could discern the needs of a new time already hard upon the world, and they had already done a great deal to hasten that time. They dreamed of a world, and most especially a church, which knew of no distinction among sects or classes, nations or races, but was one beloved community, united with others, known or unknown throughout the world. If those words sound at all

familiar to you, it is because you can find them as a unison affirmation in your gray hymnal, ~~#TK~~<sup>474</sup>. In a modified form they remain, to this day, the unison affirmation of Community Church of New York.

Like many dedication books, there are pages of photographs and lists of committees. On these pages are the lists of members and friends whose faithful and generous giving helped to raise the walls of that beautiful church that still stands today, that still nurtures the hearts and minds of those who attend it. But several of those pages in that elegant book are especially dear to me.

The first are those pages that list members of what was then known as the Auxillary Council (now the Church Council) and the Community Couples Club (now called the Couples Cluster), along with a photograph of those who served that year. Among them is a lean and handsome African American man in a dark suit, smiling and at ease; his name is Isaac. When I met Isaac many years ago, he told me

the story of gratitude that brought him there. He first came to New York to attend law school and to say thank you for the generosity of a Unitarian woman who made it possible for him to attend Hampton Institute in Virginia, now Hampton University. Her name was Mary Robinson, and in keeping with her openhearted faith she bid this young man come and worship with her on Sunday at Community Church, which met at the time in Town Hall, a local concert venue. He came and he kept on coming, experiencing the good news of Unitarianism and the freedom not only of the mind, not only of the spirit, but a freedom of interaction and the freedom within community that as a southern-born African-American man, he had rarely known.

And so he joined the church, and later, when he met a pretty New York City schoolteacher named Gladys and fell in love, Dr. Holmes married them after the service at Town Hall on a Sunday afternoon in June of 1946. That is how he came to be part of the page in this elegant dedication book, young

and handsome, a member of the auxiliary council of the church, where eventually he would raise his family and serve in nearly every leadership capacity for a half a century.

This is how communities of memory and hope are built, one person, one family at a time: With invitation and a welcome to the stranger, with commitment and involvement. With frustration and disconnection. With endings and with beginning again. With the honoring of the past, and with a larger trust in the dawning future. Today is your Celebration Sunday, a time for you to lift up all you have given and all you have yet to give to this faith and this religious community that you love. No, you do not love it every moment. Sometimes, like Ginger Andrews' nephew stumbling in for coffee, you feel like you or your congregation, or maybe both of you, have hot dog water breath. But one of the things you celebrate this Sunday is your capacity not to be fooled. You are never so tired, never so sorry for yourself that you forget the dignity and the

beauty of ordinary life or of ordinary praise. You are never so worn down by momentary disappointment that you forget the glory of what is ours as people of liberal faith, a glory that you have helped to create day to day, week to week, year to year. You learn here, in religious community, what it means to stand “thankful and happy enough under a warm and unexpected January sun.”

What you have done, what you continue to do here, in your working and your worshiping, in your giving and in your living, is to create a place for you and for others, in James Luther Adams’ words, “to recognize and abandon your reliance on the unreliable.” In giving up being fooled by what is trivial and transient, you have instead given yourselves over to gratitude and praise, you are focusing on what is permanent and real, and the works of your hands and your hearts are an ever renewing gift.

Faith endures because of women and men like you, because of men and women like Isaac and Gladys, who gave themselves into God's keeping, who made themselves part of the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers, who spoke consistently and faithfully of the freedom they had found in God, who sewed the seeds of faith generously and widely, never dreaming of where they might take root, and brought up their sons to do the same.

Their time, their talent and their treasure were invested in the community of faith where they had found life. Their older son, Glenn, would spend his entire adolescence immersed in church camp and LRY. Their younger son, Robert, was not much of a churchgoer, but considered himself Unitarian just the same. That's what he told his girlfriend in college, a young woman who had never heard of Unitarian Universalism until he mentioned it to her. He brought her home for spring break, and together with his parents they traveled to that same sanctuary celebrated in

the dedication book, the building itself more than a half-century older by then, but still ringing with the truth of freedom in community, still alive with the commitment to the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality that first inspired its construction. Years later, by the time that young couple became engaged to be married, their son Robert said it would mean a lot to him and to his parents if they could marry in a Unitarian Church, even if it wasn't Community Church and she said yes to him and to the church and that young woman was me. And now we, too, have made the commitment to freedom in community that only liberal religion can make possible.

Today is Celebration Sunday, when you are being asked to make your financial gifts to Unity Church. As you reflect on the gift you will give, reflect first on the gifts you have been given. Reflect on the way your faith has transformed your life and the way it continues to transform it. And give in such a way that 100 years from now, those who long for

what you have found here may come to this place, and learn the story of liberal faith, and be transformed. Amen.