



UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

“Find Out How Much Love the World Can Hold”

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The singer-songwriter Dar Williams has a song called “After All.” (If you aren’t familiar with Williams, I recommend her album *Out There Live*.) The opening lyrics are, “Go ahead, push your luck / Find out how much love the world can hold.” She continues:

Once upon a time I had control
And reined my soul in tight...
So I stopped the tide
Froze it up from inside
And it felt like a winter machine
That you go through and then
You catch your breath and winter starts again
And everyone else is spring bound

Have you ever felt like that? That you were trapped in winter and “everyone else is spring bound?”

When I heard that the theme of this year’s annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly was “Love Reaches Out,” Williams’ lyrics kept coming to mind: “Go ahead, push your luck / Find out how much love the world can hold.” Myself and five representatives from this congregation joined almost 5,000 other Unitarian Universalists last week in Providence, Rhode

Island at the annual UU General Assembly. The final count was 4,754 total UUs registered, including 316 youth.

Needing a Convention Center and sports stadium to contain the huge numbers of UUs present is always a good reminder of the size of our movement at the continental level, coming in at more than a thousand congregations nationwide. And meeting in New England, the site of our



historic roots on this continent, is always a good reminder of how venerable our tradition is. Whereas this congregation emerged in the 1960s out of what is known as the “Fellowship Movement” (a lay-led, bottom-up, grassroots movement of birthing new UU congregation), the first meeting house of what became The First Unitarian Church in Providence was built in 1723. Although the Providence had a long history of liberal theology, it did not become officially Unitarian until the early 1800. But even in the early 1700s, their minister was criticized for “not being evangelical enough and preaching damnable good works.”

To Calvinists who emphasized that salvation comes not through human effort, but through *God’s* grace alone, our UU emphasis on social justice — on *humans* creating a better world — appears indeed to be “preaching damnable good works.” But as the Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke put it in his 1886 “Five Points of Unitarian Faith,” we have long emphasized “Salvation by Character”: that how we choose to live our lives really matters, and we really can make a difference for others and in this world.

And the character trait we UUs have most emphasized is *love*. As the Unitarian minister James Blake wrote a few years after Clarke in 1894: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law; this is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”

It is also no coincidence that the theme of “Love Reaches Out” was chosen for this year’s General Assembly, which is on the fifth anniversary of our “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign, made famous through being emblazoned on bright yellow t-shirts. The Standing on

the Side of Love slogan was inspired by the outpouring of love and support that came from the larger Knoxville, Tennessee community in the wake of the tragic 2008 shooting at our UU congregation in



Knoxville that was targeting for its liberal stand on social justice issues. The community's affirmation of the congregation over and against hate, intolerance, and exclusion inspired our ongoing emphasis in the larger Unitarian Universalist movement that, yes, we are the "love people" — standing on the side of love for "peace, liberty, and justice for all."

As my colleague The Rev. Peter Friedrichs said at General Assembly, that means that **"We stand on the side of love, not the sidelines of love."** It means that love reaches out—that love is a verb. Love is as more about what your do, how you act, and how you treat those around you than simply how you feel inside.

Perhaps the biggest take away for me from General Assembly was the emphasis that "Love Reaches Out" means partnering to create social change with those whom you may in many ways differ from politically or theologically. During the seven years I spent as an associate pastor in northeast Louisiana, I was able to work with African-American ministers and congregations who on the opposite end of the spectrum from me theologically, but who I agreed with about working for greater racial justice and equality in our community. Love reaches out rather than staying isolated only with those who agree with us 100%. So I will be talking with some of my colleagues in the coming weeks and months about the ways we might begin to be involved with some similar congregation-based community-organizing here in Frederick. I have already learned in the past week that there are UU congregations in our region — in Montgomery County, Howard County, Baltimore County, Virginia, and D.C. — that have had positive experiences with congregation-based community organizing. And I'm interested to learn from their experience about what may or may not work in and around Frederick County.

Related to our ongoing justice work, every two years, there is a vote at General Assembly to select a new Congregation Study/Action Initiative. Because there are an endless number of worthy causes on which we could focus as a movement, the CSAI process selects one issue on

which we are a larger movement will spent four years studying, reflecting and acting. Recent CSAIs have included Reproductive Justice, Immigration, Ethical Eating, and Peacemaking. The new CSAI selected in Providence is Escalating Inequality. So another part of Love Reaches Out that we'll be exploring in coming years will be reaching out across class barriers.

I began this morning with that opening line from Dar Williams: "Go ahead, push your luck / Find out how much love the world can hold." As she moved toward the song's conclusion, she writes,

So go ahead, push your luck
Say what it is you gotta say to me
We will push on into that mystery
And it'll push right back
And there are worse things than that
Cause for every price
And every penance that I could think of
It's better to have fallen in love
Than never to have fallen at all

And we should not limit our understanding of Williams' song simply to romantic love. "Love Reaches Out" is also about taking the risk of pursuing your passion, of shipping your art out into the world, whatever that looks like for you: your gifts, what makes you feel fully alive and engaged with the world and connected with those around you.

In the coming days and weeks, I invite you to **experiment with what it feels like to use "Love Reaches Out" as a mantra**. If you find yourself with the inclination that, "I should probably introduce myself to that person standing in the corner," I invite you to remember, "*love reaches out*." If after exchanging harsh words with a loved one or colleague, you find yourself wondering which one of you should be the first to say, "I'm sorry," I invite you to remember, "*love reaches out*." As our UUA President Peter Morales challenged us to consider this past week, "**If it doesn't reach out, it's probably not love.**" *Love reaches out* means releasing that clenched fist, opening your heart, and extending your arms wide. See what it feels like to "Go ahead, push your luck / Find out how much love the world can hold."