

**A FAITH FOR HARD TIMES**  
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Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

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**READING**

*Calling him back from layoff*

Bob Hicok

I called a man today. After he said  
hello and I said hello came a pause  
During which it would have been

confusing to say hello again so I said  
How are you doing and guess what, he said  
fine and wondered aloud how I was

and it turns out I'm OK. . . .I said

he could have his job back and during  
the pause that followed . . . .  
his breath passed in and out ...  
until he broke through

with the words *how soon thank you*  
*ohmyGod* which crossed his lips and drove  
through the wires . . . .as one long word as one hard prayer  
of relief meant to be heard  
by the sky. When he began to cry I tried

with the shape of the silence to say  
I understood. . . .  
After he hung up I went outside and sat  
. . . .

And thought if I turn my head to the left  
It changes the song of the oriole  
And if I give the job to one stomach other

Forks are naked and if tonight a steak  
Sizzles in his kitchen do the seven  
Other people staring at their phones

Hear?

## **SERMON**

My mother was born in 1913 in a small town in Wisconsin. The great depression hit the rural areas of our country long before 1929. She was seven when her father died. He had been a preacher. There was no life insurance, no paid up house and three young children to support. Her

mother married again, a widower with two young children. They would have two more children of their own. Her stepfather hated farming all his life, but continued to farm on someone else's land even after they lost the family farm so he could support his family.

Life was hard. Mom wore second hand clothes. She hand carried water back to the house for washing. I remember three stories about those hard times. The first is that her stepfather stuffed paper in his shoes in the cold of winter so that she might have shoes for school. The second is the providential arrival of an insurance check for a finger she had broken that enabled her to finish nursing school. And the third was her gift to her parents after she graduated of some land and a chicken coop. Her parents moved into that structure, installed curtains for walls to give themselves and the remaining boys at home privacy. It was humble. I suspect the whole family had to swallow their pride, but they finally had their own home again..

Each generation has its own hard times. Each one of us has our own hard times. No-one entirely escapes. Certainly not the rich. Certainly not the famous. Still, hard times are not evenly distributed. Some of us carry in our genes the seeds that will betray us over and over in life. Some of us are born at a time or place that is particularly blessed or cursed by fortune. Some just cross the wrong street, purchase the wrong can of tuna, go to the immigration office on the wrong day.

We don't know what the future holds, but this is certainly not yet the next great depression. Far from it. But "recession" and "depression" are relative

words and this is the worst economy most of us in this room remember. Many of us are feeling more stress at work, if we still have a job; at home if we don't. Those with jobs are often working harder than ever. Many of us feel guilt that we still have a job yet worry that tomorrow we may not. If we are managers or owners, we may worry about whether we will have to shut down. Young parents wonder about the college funds they've been creating for their children – or planned to start soon. High school seniors worry about finding jobs, having to postpone college, or going to a state school instead of the school of their dreams. Retirees question whether they need to go back to work. If I were buying stock, I'd be looking seriously at Ambien. There are a lot of people having trouble sleeping right now.

Or maybe I'd be seeing if there was a way I could invest instead in religion. Won't people be returning to churches in droves? Aren't hard times where religions are supposed to shine? Yet most consider our own faith a wintry one, abstract and intellectual rather than warm and nurturing. What does Unitarian Universalism offer in the middle of the hard nights and difficult days?

The comfort we offer is a quiet but solid foundation for our lives in good times and bad. There is an integrity about our faith that hold ups well. We understand that our metaphors for the source of life and love, music and beauty are imperfect and incomplete. Ours is a living, growing, interactive engagement with that which is greater than ourselves. We are asked, invited, to seek the foundation of our lives with our head and our hearts, assuming that it will grow and change even as we ourselves grow and change. Our faith grows quietly through time in study and shared

conversation, through spiritual practice yes, but also keen observation of our lives and our universe.

When the hard times come, if we have diligently answered that call, if we have done the work, we will have an image of the divine that is large enough, grand enough to hold onto in our time of need. And if we don't, our neighbors will hold our hand. In my sleepless nights, I pray to that which has no name except those we give it. I speak the words of the old hymn, "Grant me wisdom. Grant me courage, for the facing of this hour." Over and over I say those words, until wisdom comes. Until courage comes. Or until I allow wisdom and courage to take their own time to reach me and let go of certainty.

But prayer is hardly the only path. Our faith recognizes that many paths lead to spiritual maturity. Some of us are called to one path; some to another. We are invited, we are encouraged, to find the path, alone or in the company of seekers like ourselves that holds the most promise, the most depth for us. For many Unitarian Universalists, that is the path of study and reflection, mining the wisdom of science leavened by religion. For others, it is a path of growing the spirit through meditation and spiritual practice, increasing our ability to let go of our fears so that we may live fully present to life in all of its joy and sorrow. For others, it may be a path of developing an attitude of gratitude, that enable us to experience the presence of the Divine during those sleepless nights, embraced by a love that will not let us go.

We said at the beginning this morning that ours is a wintry faith. For some of us, in the end, it may not be faith that carries us through hard times, but that other foundation of Unitarian Universalism, good works -- caring for our neighbor, caring for our planet. In 1819, when William Ellery Channing, described a new religion he called “Unitarian Christianity” he called us to remember that differences in faith mattered less than how we lived. If we sometimes struggle to find a common set of beliefs, we are united in our faith that whatever our age or circumstances we are called to do justice and mercy. Our life work is to be builders and healers.

For us, today, in this hard time, it may be as much how we live as the strength of our faith that saves us. For when we submerge ourselves in acts of helping and healing, creating and building, we grow stronger. In reaching out to another, we ourselves are saved. In acts of mercy, we find mercy, we find God. In other words, we find what ultimately matters – that we all suffer, we all fail, but we are all also magnificent, necessary parts of something great, something sublime. Each one of us matters. Each one of us makes a difference. Even in a chicken coop with curtains for walls. Even there, in that most humble of abodes. You. Me. All who went before us. All who will follow. We are one. Together bending the arc of the universe upward, ever so slightly. For our children. For ourselves.

Let us remember that we walk together even when we follow separate paths; let us remember that we sing together even when we sing different words. “Though days be dark with storms and troubles wait at every turn,” may we find comfort in the dark. Together may we know we can go on. Together may we know we will go on.