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“Our Power to Bless”

*A sermon preached at the UU Society of Burlington  
on February 7, 2009*

First Reading<sup>i</sup>

Our first reading this morning comes from the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The narrator is a Midwestern preacher by the name of John Ames who comes from a long line of pastors. The novel takes the form of an extended letter which John Ames, nearing the end of his life, writes a letter to his young son, imagining he will read it when he grows up. In this excerpt, Ames is reflecting on the nature of blessing by recalling an afternoon when he was a young boy when he and his friends decided to baptize a litter of kittens:

*Now, this might seem like a trivial thing to mention, considering the gravity of the subject, but I truly don't feel it is. We were very pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town, and this affected our behavior considerable. Once, we baptized a litter of cats.*

*They were dusty little barn cats just steady on their legs, the kind of waifish creatures that live their anonymous lives keeping the mice down and have no interest in humans at all, except to avoid them. But the animals all seem to start out sociable, so we were pleased to find new kittens prowling out of whatever cranny their mother tried to hide them in. They were as ready to play as we were.*

*It occurred to one of the girls to swaddle them up in a doll's dress—there was only one dress which was just as well since the cats could hardly tolerate a moment in it and would have insisted on being unswaddled as soon as they were christened in any case.*

*I myself moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula. Their grim crooked-tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek and began carrying her babies off by the napes of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but we were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism.*

*After all these years, I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question.*

*There is a reality in blessing . . . It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your mysterious life at the same time.*

## Second Reading<sup>ii</sup>

Our second reading comes from the late Irish poet John O'Donohue, who died unexpectedly in last year at the age of 52. Not long before his death, he was interviewed for the NPR program Speaking of Faith – which is how I first learned about him. This reading is an excerpt from O'Donohue's book *To Bless the Space Between Us*, in which he makes the case for recovering what he calls “the lost art of blessing.”

*It would be infinitely lonely to live in a world without blessing. The word blessing evokes a sense of warmth and protection; it suggests that no life is alone or unreachable.*

*While our culture is all gloss and pace on the outside, within it is too often haunted and lost. The commercial edge of so-called “progress” has cut away a huge region of human tissue and webbing that held us in communion with one another. We have fallen out of belonging. Consequently, when we stand before crucial thresholds in our lives, we have no rituals to protect, encourage, and guide us as we cross over into the unknown. For such crossings we need to find new words.*

*Our times are desperate for meaning and belonging. In the parched deserts of postmodernity, a blessing can be like a discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another. I believe each of us can bless.*

*When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plentitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighborhood of loving kindness. In the light of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way. In a dead wall, a new window opens, in a dense darkness a path starts to glimmer, and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew . . . Let us begin to learn to bless one another. Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you.*

## Sermon

I also have a story involving kittens and water – though it doesn't end up quite the same way as John Ames' tale of baptizing the barn cats at a creek. A year and a half ago, my husband Ben and I adopted a pair of kittens – two litter mates that we named Milo and Jack. They were ten weeks old when they came to us, and for us, it was pretty much love at first site.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon ended a few weeks after we got the kittens, when Milo, the older of our two boys, started regressing to his younger pre-litter box days.

I will spare you the details, but suffice it to say, one fateful Sunday night, we found ourselves deciding to give Milo an emergency bath. Maybe you can tell where this is going. You see the thing is, neither Ben nor I had had kittens before and we definitely did not know the proper procedures for bathing a cat.

If we had taken the time to check the internet, the first thing we would have learned was: avoid having to bath your cat if at all possible. Second, and related, we would have learned that if you have to wash a soiled kitty, it is wise to use as little water as possible and to avoid getting the whole cat wet if you can.

But, unfortunately for all of us, in our new-parent panic, we by-passed Google and went straight to the bath tub, where we proceeded to give a squirming Milo his first-ever bath. In theological terms, we didn't get as far as a full-immersion baptism—but certainly, there was more a good deal more water involved than the dabbing-on-the-brow approach that Pastor Ames employed with his barnyard litter.

At the end of our ordeal, like John Ames and his childhood friends, Ben and I ended up a wet kitten. But as you can probably tell, nothing about our experience felt particularly sacred! We had accomplished a crucial chore—and yes, we had a squeaky clean cat, but it was pretty clear we hadn't performed any sort of blessing. At the time, it was less clear whether Milo would ever forgive us (which fortunately he did about a half an hour later).

Here's the thing: in our haste, we didn't have the presence of mind to consider and appreciate the mysterious kitten life we were holding in our hands. And, truth be told, unlike John Ames, we hadn't set out to in the first place; to offer a blessing was not our intention.

*“Everyone has petted a cat,” Marilynne Robinson writes, “but to touch it like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing.”*

This morning, I want to invite you to explore with me that “very different thing” which is blessing. In doing so, I want to take seriously the charge that John O'Donohue offers in our reading “to rediscover our power to bless one another.”

But before we embark down the road that O'Donohue lays out, let me pose a more basic question I think we need to answer first. Which is:

How can Unitarian Universalists in this day and age really talk about having the power to bless? Having long since given up a theology grounded in an omniscient, omnipotent God, whose power favors only a privileged few, and, related, having rejected traditional notions of sin and salvation, can we talk about “blessing” in way that is authentic to our liberal tradition?

Perhaps it will not surprise you, given that I've chosen this sermon topic today, that I think the answer to that second question is “yes.” And to take things a step further, not only can we bless one another, but we also need to bless one another.

We need to bless one another because an act of blessing makes real the simple truth that, as John O'Donohue puts it, “no life is alone or unreachable.” When you offer someone a blessing, you make a connection with that person that penetrates all of the surface layers of personality and self-protection we wear like armor every day. To offer a blessing—and to have it received—is to connect with another human at the deepest level.

John O'Donohue writes, "a blessing is different from a greeting, a hug, a salute, or an affirmation . . . blessing is from soul to soul."<sup>iii</sup>

Soul to soul. I think we hunger for those kinds of deep connections—but so often our practical sensibilities get in the way of making them. Like our experience with Milo's unintentional baptism, we focus on the business at hand in any given encounter. We go to our jobs or school, we go to the farmer's market or a community meeting—where we do our work and accomplish our tasks.

But in these daily encounters, how often do we pause to acknowledge the sacredness of another person? How often do we put down what we are doing, and take in the extraordinary life sitting across the table from us—or next to us in the pew?

My hunch is not often enough; we need more blessings.

And as John O'Donohue notes, we especially need blessings when we arrive at a threshold in life—those moments when we are passing from what is known to what is unknown: Starting a new job; beginning treatment for an illness; grieving the death of a loved one; preparing for the arrival of a child. For such crossings, O'Donohue says, "we need to find new words."

And what would these new words convey?

For starters, they would say: "I see what you are going through." A blessing, at the very least, says: "I know that you are facing something—whether good or bad or somewhere in between."

*"The sensation is of really knowing a creature," writes Marilyn Robinson, "I mean, really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. There is a reality in blessing. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that. I have felt it pass through me."*

Maybe you have felt that power of a blessing. I remember a time when I did. It almost two years ago and I was in the sanctuary of the church I grew up in Philadelphia. The occasion was my ordination to the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

Often, amid all the pomp and circumstance, there is in the midst of the service an occasion for blessing. It's called the Laying on of Hands and it comes from the ancient tradition of laying hands on another to bring healing or bestow a blessing. In some denominations, only clergy may lay hands on the person being ordained. But in our tradition, anyone can be part of this ritual.

At my ordination, I had asked my mentor Thomas to perform this part of the ceremony. Thomas first asked my family and dear friends to come up to the chancel, gather round and place a hand on me. Then he asked my colleagues and mentors to come up to the chancel and place a hand on someone who was touching me.

Then, he asked everyone in the sanctuary to rise if they were able and to move toward to the front of the room, to get as close as they could – and then to lay a hand on the person in front of them or next to them.

In hushed silence, people began moving forward and placing their hands on the person next to them. From where I stood, it was a breathtaking site. An interconnected web of people linked by the physical touch of hands, by the emotional bond of the moment, and, by the spiritual connection of shared humanity.

That it in of itself would have been amazing enough. But once everyone was in place, Thomas did something else—something that you could perhaps only do in a Unitarian Universalist ordination: he led all of us in an Om Shanti chant.

Instead of offering a traditional pastoral prayer, Thomas invited everyone gathered to raise their voices and chant ancient words to wish peace on the me—to wish peace on all of us—to wish peace on our world.

And so, that eclectic congregation which included lifelong UU’s and my Jewish aunt and cousins and avowed secularists and my parents’ yogi neighbors and my mother’s Baptist teacher friends—they all lifted their voices and sang:

Om Shanti, Om Shanti, Om Shanti.  
Om Shanti, Om Shanti, Om Shanti.

And I will tell you, in that moment, I felt it pass through me—the blessing.

I felt my mysterious life and the mysterious lives of all the people in that sanctuary, not all of whom knew each other, but all of whom were connected in that moment hand to shoulder, shoulder to hand, heart to heart, soul to soul.

Looking back on that experience a year later through the lens of John O’Donohue’s writing, I am struck by two things that I want to share with you.

The first is that the power of blessing comes not only from the way it forges a deep human connection—which I surely felt during that Laying on of Hands—but also in the way it expresses a yearning or longing for something to come. A blessing begins by acknowledging what is, by bearing witness to the present moment—but it ends by articulating a desire for what will be.

A blessing says “I am here with you” but it also says “I hope this for you.” John O’Donohue describes it this way when he says that “the beauty of blessing is its belief that it can affect what unfolds.”

Now, let me pause here to take us back to my basic question of how UU's can do "blessing." Implicit in my question was an acknowledgment that the word "blessing" or the phrase "to be blessed" may be hard for some of us.

And my hunch is that whatever difficulty we have with blessing probably stems from this idea that it can affect a particular outcome.

It can be hard, or counterintuitive for some of us in the liberal religious tradition to think that our words might cause the forces of the universe to somehow shift or change, or that our words might warrant an intercession from God. Such an idea seems to contradict the theological outlook we have spent so many centuries developing.

And I don't know that there's any easy way to do away with this theological tension when it comes to blessings and believing they can affect what unfolds.

But here's my answer: do it anyway. Offer your blessings anyway; express your desire and your longing for what may come.

We may or may not believe that our words can change the course of cosmic events or bring about any particular outcome; but still, still our words do matter. They matter to the one on whom we offer our blessings.

And perhaps that is all we need to believe.

To offer a blessing, we just need to believe that our reaching out—our expressing our deepest desires for the one we are blessing will make a difference in that person's life. Which will in turn make a difference in the lives that person touches. And that, my own experience tells me, is more than enough.

And here, I've made my way into that second thing I wanted to share with you from my experience with the Laying on of Hands. It is something rather simple—that in some ways this sermon has assumed all along—but I think it's worth making explicit as we near the end. It is something to which both John O'Donohue and Marilynne Robinson also attest. And it is this:

Anyone can bless.

You can bless. Your child can bless. Your friend can bless. Your boss can bless. Your mail carrier can bless. Your waiter can bless. And yes, cats and dogs can bless too.

Sure, us clergy tend to offer blessings more than the average person. But what if we all found more occasions to offer another person our blessing?

In her poem, “If You Knew,” Ellen Bass writes:<sup>iv</sup>

What if you knew you'd be the last to touch someone?  
 If you were taking tickets, for example, at the theater . . .  
 you might take care to touch that palm,  
 brush your fingertips along the life line's crease.

When a man pulls his wheeled suitcase too slowly through the airport,  
 When the car in front of me doesn't signal,  
 when the clerk at the pharmacy won't say Thank you,  
 I don't remember they're going to die, like all of us.

A friend told me she'd been with her aunt.  
 They'd just had lunch and the waiter, a young man with plum black eyes,  
 joked as he served the coffee, kissed her aunt's powdered cheek when they left.  
 Then they walked a half a block and her aunt dropped dead on the sidewalk.

Bass concludes:

What would people look like if we could see them as they are, soaked in honey,  
 reckless, pinned against time?

Bass' poem brings me back to where we began – with a kitten's bath two falls ago. Here was the thing, I told you: in our haste, my husband and I didn't have the presence of mind to consider and appreciate the mysterious kitten life we were holding in our hands. We didn't take the time to acknowledge that sacredness.

And isn't it so often the case for us – as we navigate the rush and tumble of our daily lives. Getting the kids up and fed and to school, making it to work on time, meetings deadlines.

But what if this: what if we try to live even a little bit the way Bass imagines in her poem? What if we tried to see the people we encounter every day in the light of their fragile and mortal humanity? What if tried to remember that you and , that we—each and every one of us—is a wonderful and mysterious life, a beating heart, a sacred presence. Then maybe, just maybe, like the waiter in the poem, we might tell more jokes and give more kisses on the cheek, rather than make scowls or say angry words. Maybe we would remember to offer more blessings upon one another.

As John O'Donohue writes, “*Let us begin to learn how to bless one another. Because whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you.*”

My friends, this is my hope for us: that we can each be agents of blessing in our lives, that we can claim and use our power to bless—with our dearest loved ones—and those to whom we are connected only through our shared and precious life on this earth. And I hope, too, that a million blessings return to enfold you. May it be so now and in the days to come. Amen.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. 21-23.

<sup>ii</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless The Space Between Us* (Doubleday Religion, 2008), xiii-xv, 199.

<sup>iii</sup> O'Donohue, 199.

<sup>iv</sup> Ellen Bass, "If You Knew," see: [http://www.ellenbass.com/if\\_you\\_knew.php](http://www.ellenbass.com/if_you_knew.php).