



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “A Place of Belonging”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon reflection delivered on February 11, 2018  
At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*Home is not where we live. It is where we belong.* African Proverb

*In contrast to how a child belongs in the world, adult belonging is never as natural, innocent, or playful. Adult belonging has to be chosen, received, and renewed. It is a lifetime's work.*

John O'Donohue

*We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.* Community. Starhawk

**Sermon:** Follows a telling of Fannie Barrier Williams life and experiences of exclusion ([www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/journeys/session4/132836.shtml](http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/journeys/session4/132836.shtml)).

We Unitarian Universalists have moments in our history that we can be proud of, such as the welcome that Fannie Williams received at the Unitarian church in Chicago. We've also had moments we can't be quite so proud of, including moments when we discouraged people of color from leading UU congregations. We also know that white culture dominates the culture of our congregations, and that contributes to people of color feeling less at home, even misled by our embrace of diversity.

In the Fall 2017 issue of UU World magazine and also in the current Common Read book, *Centering*, The Reverend Darrick Jackson, Director of Contextual Ministry at Meadville Lombard Theological School, writes, quote: “Unitarian Universalism is my theological home, but it doesn't speak to my black identity.” He continues:

I often ache for the music that makes my heart soar, that brings the divine into the room during worship. I miss ministry that is grounded in and speaks to my black identity. I miss a message of hope that is grounded in an understanding of struggle. I miss all these things, and yet theologically I can be nowhere else than where I am. So I make my home here in Unitarian Universalism, as imperfect as it is, and find ways to stay grounded, to stay connected, and to stay whole. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/othering-and-belonging>

To be grounded, connected, and whole in a group is to belong. We are working at de-centering white culture here to make room for all identities and to be more welcoming to all who find our

theological message of inclusion awesome and inspiring. We do this because love calls us to respond to feelings of exclusion.

‘Love Calls Us’ serves as our annual theme, a phrase in the hymn we’ll sing at the close of today’s service. This month, love calls us to focus on *acceptance*. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> Principle, printed on the back of your order of service, urges us to affirm and promote ‘acceptance of one another.’ The 1<sup>st</sup> Principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person or being. The 2<sup>nd</sup> indicates we should treat each other equally. Together, these three indicate we must radically welcome everyone to our congregations, just as Fannie Williams was welcomed over 100 years ago. I believe love calls us to create a place where anyone can belong, no matter the color of their skin, gender-identity, economic means, political persuasion, religious beliefs, or other characteristic that might divide, and who share or aspire to the values expressed in our Seven Principles.

We want to make this a place where you feel you belong.

Building on earlier work, American psychologist Abraham Maslow named love or relationships as a basic human need after food and security. We humans want to be loved by someone and feel we belong somewhere. It’s a kin to the difference between a house and a home. A house is simply a structure. Whereas a home, whether it’s a hut or a palace, is where we can be ourselves, where we should feel safe and accepted, even loved. Maslow’s understanding of the human need for love is another way of saying we have an inherent desire to be connected, to belong to something beyond ourselves. We are social creatures and we need to know that someone else cares about us, that our lives matter. To belong to a group means we’re accepted for who we are, and that contributes to our feeling whole and healthy.

Buddhist Insight Meditation teacher and psychologist, Tara Brach, says, “Longing, felt fully, carries us to belonging.” We hunger to belong, to have a place where we are accepted. Global journalist and Afghani Muslim, M.F. Moonzajer, says, “Acceptance is the sense of belonging.” We can’t belong where we aren’t accepted.

If you identify as a Unitarian Universalist, a UU community may be the first place you felt accepted and at home. Newcomers often say they felt at home as soon as they walked through our doors. I think that’s because you sensed that your beliefs, or lack of beliefs, were accepted unconditionally. We who stay have found our place of belonging.

Americans today are rootless, we move frequently, we lose touch with friends and family, and the connections we make online don’t fully substitute for face-to-face relationships. Religious community can fill that void. This community can ease the loneliness of modern life, where we never truly know our next door neighbors, and family is absent. Our community doesn’t come together over beliefs. I simple desire to be in community brings us together. Ours is a place where religious misfits belong.

Yes, I call us misfits because we most of us don’t hold our country’s dominant religious views. Our acceptance of diverse religious or spiritual views makes us an unusual group. Our early acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities make us an unusual group. Our acceptance of science and academic scholarship in matters of faith make us an unusual group. We

not only accept our difference, we celebrate it! We value the stimulation and challenge such diversity provides.

When I was a teenager, I found I truly belonged in my UU community. I found unconditional acceptance. I found a place where I could learn and grow and become whoever I needed to become, despite what peers or parents wanted of me. I found a place where I could question ideas and try on new roles. I found community and it drives me as a minister. I want open and free religious or spiritual communities to exist for anyone who needs our saving message—and ours is a saving message. We may be a minority tradition, but we're an important one.

I'm reminded of our minority status when I'm with interfaith colleagues. Many don't get me or our tradition. They don't understand a tradition that includes non-believers. Religious humanism is an oxymoron to many. And when people like me participate in interfaith events, some religious fundamentalists won't participate because they think it might legitimate other traditions. It might also legitimate female religious authority, anathema to some traditions. When I'm outside our walls, I struggle to belong because, for example, statements that assume Jesus is my Lord and Savior make me feel excluded. You've been to interfaith events, I'm sure you've felt that ping of discomfort and exclusion.

Knowing what exclusion feels like, even when it's not intentional, makes me understand the outsider feelings expressed by Rev. Jackson and other UU's of color. I encourage you to read the book *Centering* to better understand their experiences and why it's so important for our congregations to de-center white culture. Not by eliminating it, but by embracing other cultural ways of being.

Listening to the experiences of UUs of color reminds me that the work of acceptance is not complete. In fact, the work of belonging is never complete. Each of us hides a part of ourselves from others, so that we cannot be fully known even as we long to be known. Some parts of our identities may always feel left at the door. And we may fail to see when others are in need of us, of our compassion, of our listening. We may never truly understand another's experiences or see them completely. But the longer we stay in relationship, in community, the more barriers we will break down and the more accepted we may feel.

It is my hope and prayer that we misfits continue to live into the promise of our faith and answer the call of love to greater acceptance.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. Where do you feel most authentically known? Where do you feel most invisible or excluded?
2. What spiritual growth/new understanding did you experience as a result of being part of a group?
3. What helps you feel more comfortable or at ease in a new setting or situation?
4. What, if any, barriers to belonging do you feel or see at UUFA? Is UUFA a place you belong, and what contributes to that feeling?