

**Reading** Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century by Paul Razor

Underlying the covenantal nature of Unitarian Universalism is a theological relationality: Unitarian Universalism locates the sacred in between and among, rather than within, any particular entity. While individuals may be theist, atheist, or any multitude of other possibilities, Unitarian Universalism currently exists as an institutionalized agnosticism. We do not take any exclusive position on the existence or nonexistence of God. We do, however, often speak of Spirit and the spirit among us. Contemporary UU prayers, published and unpublished, often include the formula "Spirit of...", for example, Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Spirit of Justice, Spirit of Compassion. One of our most popular hymns is titled "Spirit of Life." This language has become a comfortable catchall, allowing theists to find their Gods within the naming of Spirit and atheists and agnostics to hear an acceptable metaphor or a naming of the collective action, desire, and virtue that exists among the members of the community. The UU preference for ongoing deepening, expansion, and refinement speaks to an active theology, one in which there is neither static holiness nor eternally unchanging Good, but rather a theology that requires discovery and creativity in the process of formation.

For more information, please see Paul Razor's *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st*

*Century* (Boston: Skinner House, 2005).

Sofía prophetic call

Sunday, Jan. 22, 2023

Sofía's invitation to us:

"Beloveds, we are called to communal care like never before – to serve one another, to organize for justice, to widen the circle of concern, to collectively imagine new ways forward in community, and to grow spiritually together. Our nation and our denomination are experiencing immense ideological struggles. Our congregations worry for their future existence, and our religious professionals and lay leaders are worn down to the bone. Yet ours is the work of hope in the world, where Unitarian Universalism commits itself to a liberal **and liberating** message for our time. I believe in a Unitarian Universalism that draws on its noble heritage of freedom, reason, and justice to be nimble in responding to the needs of our living tradition."

With these powerful words, Rev. Dr. Sofía Betancourt has announced her hopes to be the next spiritual leader of our Unitarian Universalist Association. There remains just a few weeks for any other candidates to state their intention to be considered by petition but it is likely with the endorsement of the UUA nominating committee and the enthusiastic endorsement of over 60 UU religious leaders, educators, activists, and scholars of diverse identities that Sofía will likely be our next leader.

Before commencing her twenty +year ministry post seminary, she was here in this community. A Cornell alumna who co-founded the pagan ministry at Cornell and was active with The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPS) chapter that was active in this congregation. Sophia also taught Sunday School and sang in our services, and in a manner of speaking found her call to the UU ministry through her relationship with this community and Cornell.

A child of immigrants from Panama and Chile, she has shared that, "Growing up as a queer AfroLatine cis woman of mixity, complexity, and multicultural, multiracial heritage was not easy in a world that likes to govern whom we can love, how we can have family, and who gets access

to power based on our collective racialization. But it has inspired in me a deep appreciation for opportunities to work in diverse settings, where the assorted experiences and perspectives of those involved create a richer experience overall". Adding, "I often describe my sense of call as preaching from the crossroads or building bridges at the meeting point of difference."

Having known Sofia since her days at Cornell, it is not a surprise to me that she would after completing a degree in Botany and serving as the chaplain to Cornell Pagan community attend a UU seminary and to also after that, to graduate school seeking to giving voice to an environment ethics that is rooted in the lived experiences of indigenous women, most notably for her in the experiences of women of the African black diaspora. It is not surprising to me, that her lived experiences leads her to find spiritual nourishment from especially the Universalist side of our heritage that emphasizes in Sophia's words that "we are all beneficiaries of unearned grace, an all-embracing love, that we are called to profound relational accountability, and that we each possess a dignity that surpasses all violent forms of oppression." - this is the stated core of "Sofia's understanding of life, living, and service in faithful community."

It is also not a surprise to me that Sofia has surfaced as a needed leader of our movement at this time. She possesses great courage, vision and deep compassion and a radical gentle humility - I am not talking about a perfect or godlike person; I am talking about leadership though that might very well bring out our best selves if we lean into her invitation.

In a talk she gave to a UU congregation in Oregon, she shared how important, it is when speaking to others to make visible the diverse aspects of one's identity as it will reveal what and who influences how we each think and what matters to each of us in this world,

Think about that for a moment, when you think about your life story and experiences, how that has shaped who and how you are in this world and what deeply matters to you. I imagine if we were to pause this service and listen to what each of us might reveal, we would hear our collective longings - the particular stories that speak soulfully to our wishes for authentic wellbeing for ourselves, for each other, for our world,-- we

would hear too of the ache that lives in all of us, that part of us that feels wearied by the brokenness that is our world too.

When I applied to UU seminary, half a lifetime ago, I was full of ache, feeling utterly betrayed by a faith tradition that felt so incredibly powerfully destructive. Just prior to starting seminary though, I took part in a peace delegation that took me to Nicaragua. But within days, I got really really sick to the point of being delirious with fever and I was very afraid as it was not safe to travel. There I experienced a radical generosity, I will remember to my grave, I was taken into this tiny house that housed an entire family and invited to rest in one of the only two beds for the household where my hosts, Esperanza, stayed with me through the night, prompting me to sip some sort of something (I still don't know what it was) while hearing her soothing voice, telling me in Spanish she would be my mother until I was well. There in a town named Dulce Nombre de Jesus (Sweet Name of Jesus), Esperanza, which means hope, nursed me back to health. When I recovered, we traveled to Managua during the day and heard economists speak to our delegation of the impact of the US sanctioned low intensity warfare--- sanctions that were literally strangling this tiny nation and its people. Standing just outside the US embassy enveloped in barb wire in every direction, were houses that barely withstood wind. Weakened by dehydration, I was defenseless and wept the entire day---- feeling the deep feeling of culpability I could not turn away from -- it was a feeling of indictment that was convicting in a powerfully healing way. I witnessed persons of such little power live lives of purposefulness and generosity because they lived within the genuine care of others, interdependent, -- don't get me wrong, these communities like the many others across the globe and within our own nation should not live with such poverty because of the greed of we the powerful. But here is the reason this story came back to me when reflecting on Sophia's prophetic call to us to be willing to be convicted --- to become softer, less in charge, better listeners, humble. For much of my privileged life, I have been prone to despair when hate is visibly still winning, I lose my way and find solace in distraction. Sophia, artist, musician, grounded in environmentalism rooted in the experiences and wisdom of indigenous women, would say, my despair is a privilege and a failure of faithfulness in

my unwillingness to stay in relationship, to be willing to stay vulnerable. That is a tall order for most of us who have lived privileged lives. I like to feel in charge, feeling agency, being smart and insightful. I continue to learn that so much of how I move in this world is steeped in a damaging individualism, with this false sense that I can keep my life orderly, stable by the sheer brilliance of my agency. Is there no small wonder that I am prone to despair when I feel the truth, that chaos is actually at every turn of our lives if we are tuned in.

In these moments of truth, I appreciate being reminded that we come from a religious heritage that places its faith in a living covenant that invites us to consciously subvert the separate, private interests that often drive our lives, for the public good of all/ to seek to see a vision larger than any single eye can see. To enter into a real covenant requires gentleness, patience, to be willing to be less sure of ourselves and knowing that this is so countercultural for most of us and that we will fail often and need to find our way home again to community -- to have the courage to ask for forgiveness and to be willing to be forgiving to others when they lose their way.

I have such faith in this community, in a matter of speaking, I sense were kind of taken to our knees especially in the wake of our last minister leaving us. Something quite marvelous is surfacing though in our collective weariness – being on our knees softened us and humbled us – most of us are not accustomed to feeling that sense that in a moment, that this entire enterprise could completely fall apart--- I would say that is our greatest gift at this moment – it has enabled us to feel at the center of our hearts, how much we crave and need community, to savor the gift of companionship beyond the narrow confines of our individual lives. I love what is possible here when a generosity of spirit guides us away from living insular lives. But we are still in a fragile time of needing to build safety in our communal interactions. As we move forward as a community, our covenant with one another requires that we be explicit and name behaviors **that might get in the way** of healthy exchanges and respectful dialogue. This will require vigilance on all of our parts.

I love this quote I found this week: Mary Byron, A white UU lay woman who speaks of her journey of faith in which she is working to respond to the radical call of our spiritual principles

Superiority feeds our egos, and it shrinks our hearts, and I don't want to live in a small-hearted world. My joy comes from belonging in a community with big-hearted, creative, welcoming people. Working with people of imagination and with a willingness to come together to build a more just and generous faith community is life-affirming.

I love this one too and let it be my meditation in trying to discern what message I could bring that might be of value to our beloved community.

Erica Shadowsong, a UU artist/storyteller, of African and Latin descent, religious educator: Hope is a precious commodity these days when so many things deserve holy outrage. I find a lot of hope in that idea of truly belonging to each other and the earth. I believe that what will help lead us to heal the planet (and all living), is embracing this as a spiritual perspective, not simply a philosophical or metaphorical one. From the well of spirit, human beings have always drawn the hope that is required to survive crises. It is easier to change things from a place of spiritual conviction than moral outrage or empathetic desperation."

Sermons in our tradition are historically a full 20 minutes, so wrong within an hour-long service. Reprieve from words, please welcome a brief time of spaciousness to dwell quietly in each other's care, savoring what has been gifted to us this day.

Peace.

**Closing Words:** The importance of being part of a community joined in covenant. By denominational lay leaders, Natalie Briscoe, Kathy McGowan, and Nancy Combs- Morgan

As Unitarian Universalists, we hold our relationships at the center of our faith tradition. Because of this, *how* we are together is most sacred. Our promises of how we are going to be, are held in our covenant. As a spiritual community it is our work to aspire to be better so that the world can be better. Sometimes we fall short. As the Rumi poem says “Though I’ve broken my vows a thousand times, come yet again come.” This is one of the things that we love most about our UU faith is that it asks us to come, yet again, back into covenant.

What great news for us all.

[Natalie Briscoe](#), [Kathy McGowan](#), [Nancy Combs-Morgan](#) 2022