

## **LOVING ALL SOULS**

**A Homily by Pamela Patton  
after a Homily by Kathleen Rolenz  
on the Sunday of our 206<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting  
Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City  
February 2, 2025**

That's our Universalist mandate. "Our orders said to love them all." Love us all.

It's our faith, and still it takes practice. How do we cultivate hearts and minds that really love them all? There are thousands of prayers and meditations from many religious traditions that support our Universalist view, and I benefit from many of them. There's also a practice I made up that fills me with joy. I imagine singing one of my favorite love songs to everyone I encounter on the sidewalk, in traffic, on the television; I imagine singing "You are the sunshine of my life" in full blast Stevie Wonder.

[make eye contact with someone in pews with each phrase]

You are the sunshine of my life

You are the apple of my eye

Forever you'll stay in my heart.

Try closing your eyes, and imagine how you would feel if you could sincerely sing your favorite love song to every person you encounter. It's a thought experiment so give yourself some freedom. Picture yourself on the train, at the grocery store, at work, in the elevator of your building, singing a love song for everyone. Feel it in your heart. Imagine your singing as a blessing for each person. To sense this unconditional love for all beings—it must be how saints feel, how God feels.

We are Universalists, and when we show up here, in person or online, we may not be greeting each other with love songs, but we're blessing each other just by showing up. Every single one of you, no matter the reason you showed up on this day, is bringing your love to our community. It's an act of hope to have walked out your door and made your way here, or to have organized your morning to turn on your screen to watch. I feel your hope, I feel your blessing. When Kathleen invited us to greet each other this morning, we sensed it in each other. Even if it's your first day here or your partner talked you into coming, the fact that you showed up is a blessing for all of us.

We don't know what's going on for most of the other people here this morning, those among us preoccupied with waiting for health related news for ourselves or someone we love. Those among us who feel painful ambivalence about a long-term relationship. Those among us who feel lonely, ashamed. And all of us who hold deep sorrow for people who are vulnerable, who cannot feel safe, who are afraid. We don't know all the struggles held in the bodies and minds and hearts among us, but we can care. We as Unitarian Universalists believe that each person here is worthy of our care.

Let's try another thought experiment, maybe a little easier for those of you disinclined to imagine singing love songs. In her book *An Altar in the World* Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Pronounce a silent blessing and pay attention to what happens in the air between you and...all the other people." Let's take a moment to pronounce a silent blessing for everyone here. Just keep it simple, "bless you all."

And as you start to think about just who you're blessing, all these 200 or 300 people in the sanctuary and online, you may find that you start to get specific and a judge arises inside you suggesting that a blessing is best reserved for after the blessee has done some self-improvement. And you consider what that might mean for the person on their phone over thataway

or the person who lacks manners over that away. Before that inner judge gets too mouthy, let's consider Taylor's advice: "Rightly or not...given the choice between a blessing and a curse, a blessing will do more to improve air quality. A blessing will have more power to transform the blessee, although transformation is not required."

For 206 years, this community has showed up and blessed each other, thousands and thousands of human beings who have faith in our values and who care. Even if you think about all the people who have sat in these pews since this sanctuary was constructed almost 100 years ago, the acts of compassion are uncountable.

Just over the last couple of weeks, I have a dozen stories about how this community connected and cared.

A group of friends collaborated to get a member to the hospital who was in need of urgent medical care.

A member on a Zoom program, isolated by her role as a caregiver, received messages of kindness as she shared her challenges.

And last week our boiler was down on the day we had planned a staff retreat in our Choir Loft. I texted a member at 7am to ask if she might be able to arrange for us to use the community room in her apartment building. By 7:45am she'd made all the arrangements and had the room set up for us.

And the several dozen young adults who showed up to connect with each other for our young adults bagel brunch last Sunday.

Many of you are subtle and when you see someone struggling who may not reach out for themselves, you pull me aside at Coffee Hour and tell me "I don't really know him, but I saw him on the bus and he looked so sad."

You show up, you bless each other.

And how about the amazing people here who have volunteered as Trustees on our Board over the years—raise your hand if you've served as a Trustee.

Or other volunteers—if you’ve volunteered in any capacity at any time, raise your hand.

And if you’d like to volunteer but you’re not sure how and what to do, raise your hand. Please email Gretchen or talk to Gretchen, Kathleen or me after the service. We need you.

We need to keep showing up for each other. We’re expressing our love by showing up, and we’re practicing together to open our hearts to our Universalist values. Look around, see who is here with you. Bless them in whatever way you wish, smile, volunteer to help out if that’s possible for you right now.

I started coming to All Souls 30 years ago, before I was a minister. I sat alone in the back, and I didn’t know anyone. It was a tough time of my life, I cried a lot during the services, but I thought I hid it pretty well. One of you leaned over the back of your pew and said “it will pass.” I thought “no it won’t.” But you were right, it did pass. Thank you.