

Queer Faith

delivered by Alex Kapitan at First Parish in Brookline, February 18, 2018

Good morning!

Like Keith said, my name is Alex, and I'm so glad to be here with you all this morning. Thank you for the warm welcome and for the gift of getting to share space.

We are carrying a lot of pain this morning. In our world today it feels like we are constantly reeling from one unbearable assault on our hearts and souls to another. None of us is untouched by violence. And many of us are carrying more than anyone should ever be burdened with. There's anger, despair, fear, numbness, hopelessness, resolve.

How do we make meaning? How do we access hope? How do we continue living?

These are the questions that bring us together as a community of faith. This is why we are here. None of us can carry this burden alone. It cannot be done. In this space, in this place, you are not alone. You are not expected to pretend that everything is okay. Everything is not okay. And we are here to hold that truth, and hold each other.

I have a lot of reasons to feel hopeless and afraid. The thing that keeps me going is my queer faith. So I want to share my queer faith with you here this morning, in hopes that maybe it will give you some hope and maybe even some fire and some resolve. But I'm also going to do something more than just share my queer faith with you. I also want to queer faith.

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I was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My parents found Unitarian Universalism in 1991, when I was six. My dad is the son and grandson of Presbyterian preachers, and my mom was raised a devout atheist in small-town, working-class Wisconsin. The family joke is that when they joined a UU church my dad's family said "oh no, he's lost religion" and my mom's family said "oh no, she's found religion!"

As a UU, I was raised to ask questions. I was raised to question everything that was presented by society as normal in my life—the segregation and racism of my hometown, the idea that adults knew more than children and youth, the expectation that I was a girl who would grow up to be straight.

As a UU, I was taught to honor my own truth. I was taught that my truth was true, even if it didn't line up with what I was told was supposed to be my truth. I was taught as a UU that there is no one ultimate, absolute, universal truth. I was taught that what makes our world beautiful and what makes our communities strong is that everyone has a different truth, and everyone's truth is true.

So when I was thirteen, and all of my friends were crushing out on boys, I paused. Instead of assuming that I was attracted to boys, I wondered what my truth was. When I ascertained that yes, I was attracted to boys, I paused again, and wondered if that was all there was to the story. I began thinking of myself as bi-ish. Then bi. Then pansexual. Then queer. Instead of agonizing over figuring out who I was, or struggling with my sexuality, or denying my true self, I was privileged—truly blessed—with the space to simply allow my truth to be true, even as that truth changed over time. This journey of living into my truth when it came to sexuality wasn't a linear search for who I really was, discarding different lies or half-truths as I went along until I found the one, true, ultimate, enduring, capital-T-TRUTH about who I was. When I was sixteen I was bi-ish. That was my truth. Who I am today does not negate who I was when I was six, or sixteen, or twenty-six. All of these truths are true.

My gender is also a story of many truths. Although the word genderqueer was originally coined in the 90s, I certainly didn't have access to it, or to any non-binary role models in the wider world, until probably a decade and a half later. I had no language to describe who I was, so I simply was. I was excessively feminine and masculine all at once, drawn to theater and drag and music and art, understanding my body as both intimate and foreign, as a canvas for expression. I chafed at every single expectation that the world had for me based on my perceived gender. I knew what wasn't true, so I made choices, one by one, that brought me closer to ease, closer to myself.

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The mythology of the closet—this dominant narrative that our wider society delights in and propagates—is that I should have struggled for years under the weight of being different, that once I realized who I really was I should have lived in pain and suffering trying to deny or suppress my deviance, that when I felt I had no other choice I should have eventually screwed up the courage to “come out,” and that finally I should have burst out of the closet I had been living in, fully formed as my new, authentic self, cutting all ties to the miserable and false me I had been before.

Although this narrative is a patchwork that reflects many peoples' truths, it is certainly not a universal truth, and none of it is my truth. I have never experienced a closet. In the sense of what “coming out” has historically meant in our world, I have never come out. I was born outside the closet, thanks to generations of fierce ancestors who paved the way and made this possible for me. And thanks to Unitarian Universalism.

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Just as Unitarian Universalism teaches me that there is no one truth, but rather that there are many, many truths that are equally true—so too does being queer teach me that there is no one truth, but rather many, many equally true truths. In fact, this idea that there's no such thing as capital-T-TRUTH is at the heart of what queer is all about.

I want to pause for a second and acknowledge some of the many truths that are true about the word queer. Queer can mean strange. Queer can be a slur. Queer can be a self-identity term in terms of sexuality or gender. Queer can be an umbrella term. Queer can be a political framework.

How many people have a positive association with the word queer? How many people have a negative association with the word queer? How many people have both positive and negative associations? How many people have neither?

Before I go any deeper, I need you to know that your understanding of queer is true. And your understanding of queer is true. And your understanding of queer is true. There is no wrong or false understanding of queer. Are you with me?

Did you know that queer can be an adjective, a noun, or a verb? Yeah? Queer is even an academic discipline! Queer theory was born in the early 90s as part of queer activism, which pushed back against the growing segment of white, affluent gay and lesbian people who were arguing for rights on the basis that gay people can't help being gay, that we are born that way, and that ultimately we are just as normal as straight people and we deserve equal access to the systems and structures of mainstream society, like marriage.

Queer activism rejected the idea that LGBTQ people are normal, that normal is worth striving for, and that there even is any such thing as normal. Queer activism is bent on tearing down or transforming oppressive social systems and structures, like marriage, rather than just trying to extend those existing structures to benefit a couple more people.

Queer **theory** is rooted in post-structuralism, which is all about the idea that there is no such thing as a single, universal, absolute truth. There are multiple interpretations and meanings that can be drawn from anything, and these truths can even contradict each other—they are still true. Post-structuralists like Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan were very suspicious of religion and science because of how obsessed religion and science often are with the idea that there is a single ultimate TRUTH and anything that contradicts that truth must be false.

Beyond simply affirming that truth is subjective, queer theory questions everything that has been presented as truth based on social norms like the gender binary and the idea of heterosexuality as a gold standard. It upends and rejects those norms. It teaches us that gender and sexuality are constructed, that they are deeply entangled with other aspects of our lives, like race, class, age, ability, nationality, and more, and it teaches us to reject binaries or sets of opposites—like true and false, nature and nurture, woman and man, gay and straight, black and white.

Queer theory does not put stock in a static and immutable TRUTH about who a person is, based in the idea that they were born that way, that their gender, sexuality, race, or any number of other things about them was hardwired into them—instead, it emphasizes the choices we make. It's first and foremost about what we do and how we experience the world, not who we are or how we identify. Queer theory doesn't care what you call yourself

and it rejects the idea that everyone who uses the same word to describe themselves—like “woman,” for example—has a universal, shared experience of the world.

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I don't know about you, but this sounds a whole lot like Unitarian Universalism to me.

Unitarian Universalism teaches that there are many experiences of truth, and that all truths are equally true. Unitarian Universalism rejects dogma and fundamentalism. Unitarian Universalism teaches that our paths aren't set for us, our fate is not predetermined; we always have the ability to make a different choice. Unitarian Universalism teaches that it doesn't matter what you call yourself, it matters how you live your life.

And. Unitarian Universalism rejects binaries, starting with the biggest mythological set of mutually exclusive opposites there ever was: good and evil. This religion says that good and evil are not a binary, that life is far more complex than that.

So in my world, Unitarian Universalism is a queer faith.

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All that said, the Unitarian Universalism that I just described isn't always the Unitarian Universalism that I see being practiced in our movement.

At the core of Unitarian Universalism is the idea that my truth and your truth can both be true, even if they contradict each other. To me, queer can mean liberation and to you queer can mean a painful insult and neither of us is wrong. Both of our truths are equally valid. This is the most powerful theology I can possibly imagine.

In this very room there is someone who worships the natural world, someone who believes in incarnation, someone who speaks to the ancestors, someone who believes in the scientific method, someone whose holy texts are the Bible, the Koran, and Mary Oliver's complete works of poetry. In this room there is someone who believes in a single God, someone who believes in many gods, and someone who believes in no god. Just think: there are quite likely as many unique beliefs and understandings of the world and our place in it as there are people in this room. That is staggering. It is overwhelming. It is fabulous.

And we are also vastly different when it comes to the ways we act on our beliefs, and the practices that connect us to our beliefs. Among us today there are people who find grounding and strength in meditation, in prayer, in ritual, in dance, in music, in being near water, in sex, in working with their hands, in touching their forehead to the ground, in being of service. There are people here who think that this service is okay but would feel more spiritually connected if it were in Latin, or Yiddish, or Spanish. And there are a thousand other practices that people in this room use to call us home or connect us to something larger than ourselves.

Somehow, not in spite of this but because of these many truths, we are Unitarian Universalists. Each of us in this room feels called or connected in some way to this UU religion. There are probably as many different beliefs within Unitarian Universalism as there are Unitarian Universalists, and that, my friends, is our greatest strength.

But how often do we truly embrace this strength of ours? For a religion that rejects dogma, I've experienced a whole lot of fundamentalism when it comes to people's feelings about words like God, and prayer, and Christ. For a religion that teaches that deeds are more important than creeds, I've been disappointed time and time again by fellow UUs who seem to care more about how they are seen by others than how they are of service to others.

In order to tap into our super power as a religion, we can't just coexist without meaningfully engaging with each other's truths. We can't gloss over our differences and expect that they will never affect our relationships or our community.

Queering faith means turning social conventions upside down. It means that instead of talking about the weather, we talk about what we believe. It means that instead of saying "to each their own," we share the practices that make each of us feel connected and grounded. And we don't just intellectually engage across these lines of difference. We practice trying to see the world through another person's eyes, roll through the world in another person's chair. My queer faith teaches me that my truth does not depend on you having the same truth. That when both of us can live from a place of truth—different truths!—when both of us can come fully alive from those places of truth, and honor each other's truth, then both of us will be free.

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So let me ask you this: how often do you take the time, in this community of faith, to learn about your different truths? Do you know what the people around you believe? Do you know what practices make them feel connected and grounded? Are you curious about what has informed their truths? Are you eager to explore each others' worlds? To more authentically and deeply get to know each other by sharing the practices that call each of you home?

This is my charge to you: Take this time. Be that curious. Take that risk—because it's a huge risk. It's incredibly vulnerable to share the truths and practices that live close to our hearts and souls. It can be incredibly uncomfortable to try to understand something foreign to us—or more challenging yet, embrace the fact that something that feels constricting or painful to you makes another person feel freer and more whole.

What would happen if centering curiosity, wonder, and real care meant that if I asked you what you believe and what calls you home you could answer fully and freely without fear of judgment or reaction or critique?

What if I could simply bear witness to what you believe, honor your vulnerability in sharing something that personal with me, take joy in your joy, and feel a sense of wonder at the difference between you and me?

I firmly believe that it's only by taking these risks that we can tear down the walls between us, that we can challenge what we have been served up by our mainstream culture, and that we can be truly in relationship with one another. It is only by honoring each other's truths that we can break down the binaries of Democrat and Republican, progressive and conservative, gun love and gun hater. That together we choose a different path. Toward justice. Toward healing. Toward life.

So when you leave this room today, queer your faith. Turn social convention upside down. Disrupt business as usual. Ask someone their truth and take the risk to share yours in turn. Be vulnerable. Open your heart and trust that this community is strong enough to hold you in your anger, your pain, your fear, your despair, your resolve. Bear witness to each other, and offer true care. Together, we can chart a new way forward.

Amen. Ashe. And blessed be.