

“The Altar of Reality”
by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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In any given day, I might feel hopeless, grateful, cynical, or optimistic. It’s all a bit of a mess really.

I remember a time when it felt different. I remember feeling basically at ease and comfortable in the world. I remember having confidence in the seasons, of when it will likely snow, of how hot it would probably get and when. I remember wondering what career I might have, but not really worrying about whether I would be able to maintain the same standard of living I had always known.

And today?

Today feels different. Is it because I’m older now? More weathered by the realities of life? Or *are* things different? Are things “worse”?

I’ve asked some of you who are older this question—are things worse now than you’ve ever seen? I know history has had some pretty hard spots. Our nation was born in Revolution *and* slavery. A generation was decimated by the losses of life and limb with the Civil War. And later generations were marked for a lifetime by first one World War, then a Great Depression, and another World War. We’ve seen fights for Civil Rights for African Americans, for women, for Lesbian and Gay folks that created rifts in families, in communities, in religious congregations like ours.

We know this history and we know the experience of our contemporary moments. These moments of mass shootings that [set the U.S. far apart](#) from other developed countries. These moments when democracy is imperiled by lies, distrust, and deep pockets. These moments of pandemic when ideals of pulling together to “get through this” devolve into divisiveness. And these moments when extreme weather patterns, flooding, and drought reinforce the present reality of climate change. These moments when it feels like “systemic desolation.” (Nancy McDonald Ladd, *After the Good News*, introduction)

I remember when it felt different. Do you?

Lately I've been thinking more about what it means to be a Gen-Xer. Born between the larger waves of births in the Boomer generation and the Millennials, Gen-Xer's are smaller, the "middle child" of generations. We are old enough to remember life before computers, when phones were attached to walls by cords, and cable TV news was a brand new idea. We are young enough that we began to learn to use computers and emails in school, becoming technologically comfortable early on. In other words, we bridge both the worlds of our Boomer parents and our Millennial kids or colleagues.

Infamously, Gen-Xers have been known as a [cynical](#) generation—ever since we raised ourselves, watched parents get laid off, the price of gasoline skyrocket, and politicians lie in Watergate and Iran-Contra. Rather than accept the nomenclature of cynical, I prefer to think of it as realism. Optimism tempered by the pragmatic.

In her 2019 book, *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*, UU minister Nancy McDonald Ladd, a fellow Gen-Xer, wrestles with her own unease with unfettered optimism. She challenges modernist ideals that assure us things will get better through progressive application of reason and hard work. She questions the inheritance of these ideals in the liberal church, including Unitarian Universalism, as adequate to the times in which we now live. Perhaps rather than continuing to have faith in a vision that "it's all going to be just fine in the end," we need to confront the present reality that is breaking our hearts and draining our spirits. Perhaps what we need now is an honest word about how much is going wrong and how hard it all is.

Reading McDonald's Ladd book felt like a balm to my weary soul. In these past two-plus years of pandemic, the hardest part has been trying to rise to the idea that I needed to present some kind of assurance each week that "it's all going to be just fine in the end." From persistent racism, destabilized democracy, gun violence, to climate change, as a good liberal minister it has increasingly felt impossible to stand up here and find some version of this optimistic message of learning how we might do our part to make the world "right." And, frankly, I think you're also tired of being told about this week's problem and being challenged to "do something" about it. Something about how we've been doing "church" doesn't feel like it's working anymore.

*AND...*yesterday's Yard Sale was marvelous. Coming together in common effort was a joy-filled event. So also, during the previous weekend, so many of you came together to support the Memorial Service for Minister Emeritus Ken Sawyer to do what you could on behalf of us all. There are also many small ways that you care for one another in phone calls, emails, cards, and time shared together. There are the nights you show up for choir or log-in to a

program. There are resilient threads of connection that tie us to one another in relationship that have not been broken by pandemic or strife.

What then is the path forward for us as a congregation? How does liberal religion stay relevant in a world of struggle and brokenness if our go-to messages of optimistic improvement increasingly ring hollow?

What if part of breaking the habit of modernist narratives of optimistic improvement is tossing the expectation of a clearly laid out blueprint for next steps? It's not clear what happens next. It's all a bit of a mess in fact. In case you've not noticed?!

But you do know this don't you? You can feel it in yourself, in the news you read, in the fears and anxieties that reside in you, your kids, your grandkids, your younger colleagues. Expectations of relative comfort and future improvement are not as easy to come by as they once were.

AND it's not all bad news. There *are* better, greener technologies each year. There *are* many folks fighting for more gun safety laws and organizing to respond to the anticipated roll-back of Roe-vs-Wade. There are also moments of simple pleasures laughing with friends or family as we once again gather for festive or for everyday shared moments. There are vaccinations, boosters, and all manner of scientific developments. There are peonies that are still beautiful when they blossom, even if its earlier than before. There are still an abundance of *blessings* in our lives.

In an online essay about blessing, Maria Popova [writes](#),

Even for the unchurched among us, who worship at the altar of reality, blessedness can be a beautiful concept unbagged from religion. For me, blessedness is a feeling-tone of grateful wonder. That feeling-tone can come as symphonic as a [total solar eclipse](#) or as quiet as [the rising tide](#). It can bless with the surprising cymbal of [a robin's egg out of time and out of place](#) or with [the murmuration of a moonlit tree](#). It can [bless with Bach](#).

Blessedness need not be the distribution of goodness by an external deity choosing when, how, and to whom to give the "good stuff." Blessedness can be attuning ourselves to the goodness that resides within the contours of our living. Blessedness can be a "feeling-tone" that fosters our sense of gratitude and wonder for what *is good* in life.

Because life is both the goodness and the heartbreak, the joy and the disappointment. Life is lived in the tension of all that we encounter. And sometimes life is just hard and the world is a mess and things may not get better. Sometimes rights are rolled back, democracies die, and nations fall. Sometimes things don't turn out all right.

In such a world we need to know how to be relevant to the spiritual needs of people. We need to consider what it is people need *now* in *this* moment from communities such as ours. And since the answers are not clear, I suspect our path forward will inevitably be messy.

Truthfully, we're already a bit of a mess. Which is to say we don't agree on any number of things. One obvious area is the range of comfort folks have around Covid protocols. Thankfully we've been pretty understanding of each other in this regard. We also don't agree on the use of pronouns. While some folks, including staff, have chosen to include pronouns on nametags or in introductions, a number of you have expressed discomfort or disagreement with this practice to me or to one another. There's a bigger conversation we need to have here about gender, inclusivity, and the pace of change.

And I'm not going to suggest all the answers today. I'm not going to end this sermon with optimistic assurance that all will be fine in the months and years ahead. Nor can I assure you that you'll always feel comfortable or happy here at First Parish or with Unitarian Universalism. But what I can and will do is share with you my conviction that what we create here together matters to the people here and to others yet to walk through these doors. I can and will loudly proclaim my faith in what UU leader Glen Thomas Rideout calls "the gospel of freedom and love." As a congregation and as UU's, we may not have an unblemished past and we may even have a messy present, but we also have a religious tradition committed to an ongoing search in a context of inclusive love.

We also have the ability to attune to the blessings that exist even amidst the heartbreak and struggle. The path forward, I suspect, must be able to account for this reality—a reality where things don't always turn out all right, but where there is real beauty and goodness and love nonetheless. Our path forward, I suspect, will be learning how to stay connected to each other even when it's messy and uncertain. My hope is that this path forward of engaging the messy fullness of the good stuff, the conflict, and the heartaches will be meaningful, if not always easy.

For now, we turn towards the rest of this day, to the upcoming week, to a summer of lay-led gatherings after a final celebratory service next Sunday. For now, we lean into the

resilient connections that sustain us as individuals and a community. For now, we honestly acknowledge the hard stuff even as we attune to the blessedness in life all around us.

So may it be.

Amen.