

## **From *E Pluribus, Unum* to “In God We Trust”**

**Rev. Rita Capezzi--UUFM**

**February 27, 2022**

### **Homily**

Some say the circle is the perfect shape, each point on a curving line equidistant from a clear center, center and circumference echoes of each other. Change the radius that links the center to the edge, and you get a smaller or a wider circle, the expansion infinite. We know circles occur naturally—the sun, the moon, planets. We create circles in material—wheels, clocks, rings for friendship and for marriage. Because of the physical reality to circles, this perfect shape, we humans have also invested the circle with significance—philosophical, spiritual, divine—halos, mandalas, medicine wheels. When we imagine the very best of what Unitarian Universalism has to offer us and to the world, we imagine a circle ever-widening, increasingly larger as we in the interior become aware of something on the exterior that needs to be included. And thus, the circle enlarges, and our sense of who we are as a people grows and changes.

A motto is chosen to encapsulate the beliefs or ideals guiding an individual, family, or institution. Mottoes have the function of holding all the layers of life together in a neat and tidy bundle, or keeping the layers, all that multiplicity, at bay. Official and unofficial mottoes, they act like circles, giving shape to our living and our thinking. Consider the mottoes on our money, both coin and paper. *E Pluribus, Unum*—From the Latin “Out of Many, One,” that was always a favorite of mine. The phrase goes as far back as the Revolutionary War that formed our notion of democracy, 13 letters to symbolize the unity of the original thirteen colonies. Placed on the Great Seal of the United States, what remains the unofficial motto of our country appeared first on a coin in 1775. By 1873, the motto became a requirement on all coins. Within my childhood understanding of American history, especially immigration history, *E Pluribus, Unum* held meaning and promise that from differences could emerge inclusion, everyone welcome and needed without question or reservation.

During the Civil War, what would become the official motto of the United States began to appear on coins—“In God We Trust,” a phrase from the fourth stanza of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, popularized during the War of 1812. In 1861, a Reverend M. R. Watkinson of Pennsylvania wrote a letter to the Treasury Secretary suggesting that the word and concept “God” be added to coins during wartime. The wording would appear in 1864 on the first two-cent pieces. By 1938, all coins would have the motto, and they still do. Further, in 1956, in the midst of the McCarthy Era and the Cold War with so-called godless Communists, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into a law the words “In God We Trust” as the official motto of the United States, which it remains today. War seems often the reason to create tidy slogans, mottoes about who is included and who is not. Listen carefully, and you will hear it in the descriptions we give of Ukrainians and Russians, of allies and enemies, circles drawn, wagons circled.

We in this congregation have our own mottoes too, don't we: Love Beyond Belief. Our UUFM Education and Justice Coordinating Council is also trying out “Love in Action” for our internal and public justice efforts. Mottoes mean to hold us together in all the variety and diversity and conflict among us. When

we try to imagine a good reality—maybe one with no heaven or countries to fight among or possessions to divide us, a reality where we live for today and in peace—mottoes and slogans, even a song, can come to mind. Yet, any of these mottoes—*E Pluribus, Unum*, "In God We Trust"—can be divisive rather than unifying, can present a false reality of unity when instead there has been erasure or exclusion. Are we really one out of many as a nation? We know full well that our democracy struggles to include equally, even under the law. And doesn't the Constitution and legal precedent have something very explicit to say about the separation of church and state? Are the godless atheists of our faith tradition, or those for whom God is not a Christian, unquestionably included? Even "Love Beyond Believe." Does that unite us, does it draw us into an ever-inclusive circle if we don't ask, and ask often, what that motto means, in our personal and in our collective lives?

Reality is a messy business, and circles, mottos, just do not do it justice. But there is another image that might work better. An image that might enable our country and this community to figure out, in the words of angel Kyodo Williams Sensei "how we can stretch into the so-called margins to broaden our understanding and the ability to be inclusive," [ . . . ] "not 'how do we make you a part of what we are?' but 'how do we become more of what you are?'" A classic Zen exercise is the *ensō*, the circle hand-drawn in a single fluid brushstroke. It is close to perfect, but never there. The *ensō* defies mechanistic precision; indeed, it is often incomplete, left slightly open as though in invitation to everything beyond it. And each one is different, never the same circle twice. The beauty of the Zen circle lies precisely (or more precisely, imprecisely) in its imperfection. A perfect circle is uninteresting, a closed system containing nothing, while an imperfect one vibrates with warmth. It is open, human, fallible. *Ensō* is not a closed circle but rather the arc of, a fragment of, a spiral, symbol of the journey of change as life unfolds, an inclusion of all the multiplicity and the messiness that lives accumulate.

And *ensō* is a symbol of radical inclusion in our religious community, if we can ever get there: "Blessed are we: the transgressors, the trespassers, the passers-by, the cause-takers, the defiant, the compliant. Blessed are we who rise in solidarity, blessed are we who cannot, blessed are we who do not. Blessed are we for this is our Beloved Community, and this is who we are." Might we actually include all that seems to exceed our boundaries, rather than only what seems lovely about us—those we celebrate, transgressors and cause-takers and risers in solidarity, as well as the defiant and the compliant and all those among us who do not rise in solidarity? Can we accept this unfolding different from the perfect circle, where we hope for an inclusive community, but we live in the imperfect one of the moment? Can we live with such uncertainty, knowing we might fail to reach all that we imagine we should?

The democracy we long for, the inclusion and the liberation, it does not yet exist. It has never yet existed. It does not exist yet anywhere—not in Europe, not in Ukraine, not here. Democracy is not yet real: it is incomplete, part of our imagination, what we continue to dream about, hopefully. But the reality we live in, it too is a wonderful thing. It is on the way to being what we want, it is unfolding in the direction we desire if we act for it. Is it? It is, if we are doing the work and making the efforts. The incomplete, the less than desired ought not become a source of hopelessness. Rather, we must be brave enough and hopeful enough to see that unfolding is the way of things, layered, complex, incomplete. This is true when we think about all the injustice that still persists in our democracy, all the oppressions

continuing to make our lives miserable, directly or indirectly. This is true when we think of the state of the world, seemingly full of disinformation and lies and aggression with so little regard for human life.

And this is true in our own faith tradition. A Black Unitarian Universalist minister serving at the national level of our association, the Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore tell it this way: “Shirley Chisholm was asked why she, a Black woman, was running for president: ‘You don't have a chance. Why are you doing that?’ And she said, ‘Because I am in love with the America that does not yet exist,’ and that's how Unitarian Universalism is also. I'm in love with the Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. But I have to hold both the love for that thing and the love for the reality. It does not yet exist. It will probably not exist in my lifetime. I don't think it will in that of my children, but I can't deny my love for it. You know, wanting to be there in that struggle. That's why I'm fighting.” We have to love the reality of our lives, of our democracy, of our faith tradition as they are, in their promises and imperfection. And we have to love these same things—our lives, our democracy, our faith—framed in the better future that we want to unfold and yet cannot know fully and cannot predict. *Ensō*, the incomplete circle, the opening spiral, this is the symbol, the motto, which unites reality and hope with no false confinement, no exclusion, with wonder and curiosity and imagination.

Our world is as it is. What a mercy that we do not have to bear it alone—the disappointment, the uncertainty. And it is also unfolding, becoming, not yet complete. Revelation is not sealed. This the conundrum within which all our lives unfold. We must live with what is, in all its incompleteness. And this incompleteness is what enables us to live in hope, that we might yet make and re-make the world in ways that we desire. And if it's true we are alone, we are alone together, the way blades of grass are alone, but exist as a field. Alone as we are, our small voices weave into the one big conversation. We know it in moments, we imagine it, we bring it into existence in small ways, maybe not well enough, maybe not fast enough, but making our world real and beautiful in all our everyday efforts, and in all our moments of clarity, of clear vision of what this world is and how we can best live in it. Our actions are essential to the one infinite story of what it is to be alive. We are the dust, the dust that hopes, a rising of dust, a thrill of dust, the dust that dances in the light with all other dust, the dust that makes the world. We—together. We together can bend that arc, we can work to create justice, we can live more compassionately, we can all achieve liberation, true freedom. This we can do, when we accept without anxiety that this is the world, we cannot know the future, and we as beloved companions, an ever-expanding company of companions, imagine with action the world better.

### **Reflection**

Our world is as it is. And it is also unfolding, becoming, not yet complete. Revelation is not sealed. This the conundrum within which all our lives unfold. We must live with what is, in all its incompleteness. And this incompleteness is what enables us to live in hope, that we might yet make and re-make the world in ways that we desire. We—together. We together can bend that arc, we can work to create justice, we can live more compassionately, we can all achieve liberation, true freedom.

“We Need More,” we all need more. We need to pull ourselves and pull each other into that spiral which makes life hopeful, worth living, for all of us, incomplete as it is. Get up, child. Get up. May we pull

our bones upright, gather our skin and muscle into a patch of sun. May we draw breath deep into our lungs, for another day calls to us. They, we. We want more. We will try to find the light we're living for.

I know you ache. I know you wish the work were done. But we don't send people away because they're different or even because they're difficult. All people need support, and if people are hurting, we take the time to notice. We do what can be done because it heals and it creates. I know you ache. I know you wish the work were done. Remember this, tired as you are: you are not alone. It is reasonable to assume that all the people on the planet can imagine, can reach out to each other and heal the wounds and make a world fit for us all. Afterall, our world is one world: what touches one affects us all. Though we live in this hard place between what is and what might be may, may our hearts hear this call, to trust and to move toward a unity created by harmony, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together, "Amen!"