

## "Who Said That?"

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"Your playing small doesn't serve the world.  
It is our light, more than our darkness,  
that most frightens us."

Quick...who said that?

Many of you may have recognized it as a quote from Marianne Williamson.

Before she entered U.S. politics, she was the author of a book called "A Return to Love" which drew on the contemporary spiritual text "A Course in Miracles."

For many years, though, this quote was incorrectly attributed to Nelson Mandela.

He of course was an eminently quotable person, because he was such a courageous, inspiring and well-known figure.

The attribution of the quote to Mandela gave Marianne Williamson's words added weight, because she was lesser known at the time... and the quote spread, influencing countless people all over the world to this day.

Was it important, who said the words?  
Or was it important that the words were said?

In our culture, we have tended to place a great deal of weight on the attribution of wisdom to specific individuals.

If a person is well-known, we tend to give added credence to their opinions...so much so that we might discount our own perceptions, or the viewpoints of people who are lesser-known.

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Many misattributions have occurred in religious life.

You may remember the *Desiderata*, the writing that begins  
"Go placidly amid the noise and haste  
and remember what peace there may be in silence."

It was thought to be written by an anonymous author, and discovered in a Baltimore church in 1692.

This gave it a romantic and mysterious cast that put it in the league of ancient wisdom teachings.

Fortunately, it remained popular when it was revealed that, in fact, it was written around 1920 by a lawyer in Indiana named Max Ehrmann.

Then there's the quote "We do not have to think alike to love alike"... wise words that have inspired so many Unitarians over the years.

They did not originate with Francis David, the 16th Century Transylvanian Unitarian.

But rather, they were a re-phrasing of words uttered by George Wesley, the founder of Methodist Christianity. He lived in England in the 1700's.

Knowing that, is the statement less meaningful for Unitarians, many or most of whom have turned away from traditional Christian doctrine?

Was it important, who said the words?  
Or was it important that the words were said?

Well, likely both.

Of course we need to recognize, and indeed rely, on expertise and specialized knowledge--we see the dangerous results of anti-intellectualism

in so many areas.

And yet, we must balance a healthy respect for authority with an open and genuine curiosity for voices that tend not to be elevated.

This could lead to a broader, more equitable distribution of power, a culture of more genuine collaboration, that could lead to wholeness and wellness for all.

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One of the funniest and oddly most gratifying moments in my own ministry came when, in a meeting, someone quoted Nelson Mandela...

With words that I had written, for my sermon a few weeks before.

In that moment, when I heard "my" words attributed to Mandela (who's evidently quoted a lot!) I instantly realized that it wasn't important for me to make the correction.

It was more important that the words were spoken, not that they were spoken by me.

In our Unitarian tradition, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person... yet like everyone else in our culture, we elevate some individuals over others...

Thus undermining the inherent worth that we profess to promote.

We also, in the 8th Principle, recently adopted by the Canadian Unitarian Council, pledge to take individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions.

In addition to the anti-oppression work with which the 8th Principle is most often associated, this new principle can be seen more broadly, as an invitation to examine how we perpetuate systems of power and privilege in ways that are often unconscious and inadvertent.

By privileging certain voices over others, we suggest that some people are indeed more valuable and worthy of respect than others.

By insisting that the wisdom we affirm come from a famous source-- that is, one that has a cultural or consumer stamp of approval-- we marginalize wisdom that comes from the margins.

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Sometimes, of course, the voices that come from the margins **are** noticed and elevated, thus becoming well-known and quote-worthy.

A recent example is the voice of Greta Thunberg, the previously unknown pre-teen student, also living with autism, who refused to go to school until action was taken to address climate change.

Her protest, of course, was noticed... you might say it "went viral"... and she became one of the best-known figures in the world calling for urgent climate action.

Likewise, the poet Amanda Gorman, a very young Black woman, has been instrumental in bringing necessary awareness to the world, through poetry alone.

Of course, the idea that a "little child shall lead them," originally found in the Old Testament book of Isaiah is not new.

The idea that the unrecognized, the voiceless, the shunned and rejected are exactly whom we need to follow instead of the powerful...

Well, this is a familiar teaching in our Judeo-Christian heritage and in wisdom teachings from many traditions.

It might even be seen as a basic spiritual principle... an example of what's called "perennial wisdom"... one that I believe is essential for us to re-learn now that our world is in peril.

Every person, of every age and position, is needed now, to do the urgent work of justice.

Every platform we use, no matter how humble, is needed...to ensure the well-being of the whole.

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Living, as we do, in this culture where some individuals are valued more highly than others, we might hesitate to use our gifts in ways that are valuable.

This is true in the arts, where the stigma of the unrecognized artist and musician still exists, where there is little financial support for the arts, and indeed little economic support for all forms of community service at the local level.

The term "amateur" is still rarely a compliment... And we hold onto disparaging labels such as "those who can, do...and those who can't, teach."

Even on the professional level, the recent tilt toward fundamentalist thought and "cancel culture" has led to the rejection of certain works...not because of their own inherent flaws, but because of the shortcomings of people who made them or the times in which they were written.

In a recent lecture I attended by the Rev. Dr. Catherine Meeks, a prominent Black anti-racism leader and theologian, she quoted Carl Gustav Jung...

But was quick to point out that she wasn't quoting him because he was Carl Jung, but because what he said was true: that is, it was meaningful and valuable.

In this particular case, because over the course of his life and career Jung also said things that were not true, and not helpful to the cause of justice, it was important for her to disentangle the particular individual from the valuable truths he brought forward.

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In Unitarian history, this is an echo of an important piece of writing called "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity" by Theodore Parker...whose words we heard in the Call to Worship today.

This work is part of the "canon" of Unitarian and Universalist history that all UU ministers study before we're ordained...and it's something I think you'd be interested in, as well.

Here are excerpts from the sermon "The Transient and the Permanent." Parker delivered it at an ordination in 1841.

At that time, Unitarianism was still a completely Christian religion...so he's speaking about the authority of Jesus.

Theodore Parker wrote:

"...It seems difficult to conceive any reason why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer,

Any more than the truths of science on that of [the person] who makes them known first or most clearly.

It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes.

The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers [...] must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority."<sup>1</sup>

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In a culture that prioritizes individualism, we're apt to conflate the message with the messenger.

But what if we saw the messages themselves as living things?

Living things brought forth into the world by life itself, because life itself needs them... not because the person who brought them forward was "special" in some way?

Fortunately, there are many examples of how this has been so--how messages of deep insight and wisdom transcended the barriers against them.

After seeing the Leonard Cohen exhibit at the AGO a few months ago, I was surprised to learn that the album on which the song "Hallelujah" appeared was rejected by the large record company, Columbia.

The head of the company reportedly hated it, and Cohen was devastated by the rejection.

Yet "Hallelujah" eventually went on to be covered by hundreds of people and has made a positive difference in the lives of millions.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Parker, "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity"  
<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop4/175763.shtml>

Songs are living things, and that song found a way to live.

Similarly, the song "The Rose," written by a little known songwriter named Amanda McBroom, was initially rejected by the producers of a new movie who thought the song was "dull."

Only when the star of the film, Bette Midler, lobbied for "The Rose" was the song included in the movie of the same name.<sup>2</sup>

Almost unbelievably, the same is true of the song "Over the Rainbow."

The producers of The Wizard of Oz wanted to cut the song because they felt it "slowed down the film."<sup>3</sup>

Somehow, these beautiful messages emerged, despite the cultural barriers they were up against.

A difficult question is whether our capitalist system was ultimately helpful in bringing these messages forward... or whether it's been harmful in suppressing other messages at the same time.

This is one of the many paradoxes of modern life that we have to live with, and that we can ponder, as we seek to transform ourselves and our world, into one which is truly nourishing and sustainable for all.

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We are now living through a profound transformation, as Artificial Intelligence threatens to upstage even the most thoughtful, skilled and talented people.

It is now possible to replicate the work of any artist, in any medium.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://storyofsong.com/story/the-rose/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.columbia.edu/news/over-rainbow-story-behind-song-century>



Looking ahead with this in mind, it seems difficult to imagine how any one individual's thought would be privileged over another's... because the thought itself is now so clearly collective and shared.

The rapid emergence of AI is now intensifying calls for Universal Basic Income, which in my view has long been needed... but ever more urgently now.

As someone who creates what we call "intellectual property" AI scares me, because I see how the "hive-mind" can take away recognition from artists.

Some people are now referring AI "plagiarism software" because of this problem.

I am not someone who has earned a great deal of money from my creative work over the years, but of course I want to see professional artists', musicians' and writers' livelihoods protected and preserved.

At the same time, I have to pause to consider how much our individualistic and personality-driven culture has harmed us as a society.

How it marginalizes those who are unheard.

How it devotes extraordinary resources to what Joni Mitchell called the "star-maker machinery"...

At the expense of the most vulnerable... and at the expense of the earth itself.

I was encouraged to read, just this week, that Brian Eno has created a new initiative in which many musicians (admittedly ones that are commercially successful) name "The Earth" as their co-writer, and send a significant portion of their proceeds to environmental groups.

It's an ingenious way to get more money flowing toward earth-centred causes... but I think it's even more important than that.

By naming "The Earth" as their co-writer, these artists are saying that beauty is not the independent creation of a handful of special human beings...

But that it is something co-created with all of life.

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I have to wonder whether it is now time to re-think our love affair with quotable individuals....

With the famous.

With the "idols" of the world.

I recall the Biblical quote-- which we can assume was itself misattributed--

"Thou shalt not worship idols, other than Me."<sup>4</sup>

That is, we must not "worship," or hand over the value of our attention... the weight of our consciousness... to false idols...

To anything that draws our attention away from the Greater Good... the well-being of the Whole.

Indeed, one of the six identified sources of wisdom in the current UU tradition warns us specifically against "idolatry of the mind and spirit."<sup>5</sup>

That word "idolatry" might seem unfamiliar to us, until we begin to think about how we allow our awareness be held captive by the false valuations of our commercial culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:3-6

<sup>5</sup> UUism 6th Source: "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

Rather than continuing to turn our attention to false idols, perhaps we can cultivate our ability to discern what is truthful, beautiful and worthy... no matter where we find it...

And let it guide us toward a future that affirms and nourishes all people and all beings on this precious planet.

You can quote me on that. But I'd rather you didn't.

I'd rather you take this message into your heart... frame it in your own language and let it inspire your own actions in the world.

I'd rather you share it, freely and with love, wherever and however you can.

This is our birthright, our invitation and our opportunity, as human beings living on this planet at this extraordinary time in history.

The prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi put it well:

"Make me an instrument of thy peace."

We all can be such an instrument... and indeed we all must be... so that the Larger Music will live on for generations and generations to come.