

# "Do Not Be Daunted"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (Online)

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## **Song:**

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.  
Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.  
Do justly now, love mercy now, go humbly now.

You need not complete the work, but you cannot abandon it.  
You need not complete the work, but you cannot abandon it.  
Do justly now, love mercy now, go humbly now.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.  
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*Melody & Adapted Text: Lynn Harrison (2021-23)  
Based on text of Rami Shapiro, Pirke Avot & Micah 6.*



## **Sermon:**

I'd been inspired by that passage for several years  
before I realized I could set it to music.

Part of the reason I write songs is that an idea set to music is one I will remember.

The words I sing are the words I take to heart...and I wanted to take these to heart.

They are, as you've heard, usually attributed to The Talmud--the Jewish holy texts.

But in fact, this isn't quite accurate.

In recent weeks I've learned that it's a "mash-up"--that is, a creative re-combination--of several different sources, old and new.

Most recently, the quotation is found in Rabbi Rami Shapiro's 1995 book "Wisdom of the Jewish Sages."<sup>1</sup>

Rami Shapiro is a self-described "Zen Rabbi," a contemporary spiritual leader and poet influenced by both Judaism and Buddhism.

The "do not be daunted" quote is a paraphrasing of his interpretive translation of Rabbi Tarfon's wisdom in the Pirke Avot.<sup>2</sup>

I've learned that the Pirke Avot, meaning "Ethics of the Fathers," is a compilation of ethical teachings and maxims from Rabbinic tradition...and Rabbi Tarfon is one of its most prominent voices.

I should add that I am learning this as a non-Jew, and very much a beginner in understanding these writings.

Rabbi Tarfon lived in the first century of the Common Era, more than two thousand years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/5600/wisdom-of-the-jewish-sages>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ethics-of-the-fathers-pirkei-avot>

He used to say "It is not your duty to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but neither are you free to neglect it. If you have studied much Torah, you shall be given much reward."<sup>3</sup>

Sounds familiar!

And the part about "Doing justice, walking humbly, and loving mercy"?

Well, that seems to be a direct reference to the book of Micah, Chapter 6.

It says, "What does God want of you? Only to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your God."<sup>4</sup>

The book of Micah is part of the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament.

But what about the "do not be daunted" and the "enormity" part?

Well, the only source I can find for that--"do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief"--is Rabbi Rami Shapiro, the contemporary writer living in our time.

You can see there's been some paraphrasing, interpreting, combining and adding-to going on.

In other words, there's been some change along the way, which is a natural and creative part of life, as we were reminded in Angela's story.

Today I'm devoting my entire message to this creatively-used and recycled text, one that you may recall is a favourite of Shawn's as well, because I think it has valuable things to offer us as Unitarian Universalists today.

So, let's begin.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_Avot.2.15?lang=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.15?lang=en)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Micah%206%3A8>

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"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief."

That word "daunted" seems apt, from my perspective.  
Set back, discouraged, dissuaded, overwhelmed...frightened.

Aren't those familiar feelings for many of us today?

And then, "the enormity of the world's grief." Well, exactly.

Perhaps there's a reason why this part of the quote is likely to have contemporary rather than ancient origins.

After all, the Pirke Avot dates back two thousand years and the Book of Micah long before that.

Long before the age of the Internet, when we are all confronted by all the enormity, of all the grief, all the time.

In the distant past, people would have experienced the intensity of personal grief, and collective grief on the community level, but they were hardly subject to the enormity of existential grief on the scale we experience today.

So it makes sense that the first line, "do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief" might likely have originated in our own time, rather than in the distant past.

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From there, the reading moves on to the things we're advised to do, in order to "not be daunted".

The first instruction is to "do justly now."

This aligns so well with our Unitarian Principles, including our 2nd Principle: "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

Our 6th Principle: "The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all."

And now the new 8th Principle: "Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions."

As modern-day Unitarians, we're called to act in ways that are fair and ethical, that address and uproot oppression in all forms.

To act with integrity and honesty.

To stand up for what is right, to the best of our ability.

The teaching to "do justly now" likely makes sense to us.

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But then comes "love mercy now."

What might the word "mercy" mean to us, and what might it call us to do?

At times I've noticed, in some corners of Unitarian Universalism, a certain rigidity about human failings and mistakes...

One that oddly echoes fundamentalist ideas of sin and damnation, even though most Unitarians might not recognize it.

Some people also have expressed to me an unforgiving attitude toward themselves: saying, in effect, that if they mess up in any areas, they have irreparably harmed the world...that they have "broken covenant" in a way that deserves punishment.

To say that this is a risk to mental health is a profound understatement.

It leads to the kind of "all or nothing" thinking that puts the person at risk, when life puts them in challenging situations-in which we all find ourselves, from time to time.

The idea that we should be perfect, unfailing, completely consistent, error-free...this runs counter to a view of Self and world which is compassionate and, indeed, forgiving.

It sets up a perfectionistic high bar that no honest person can reach.

On the other hand, theologies with radical acceptance at their foundation can allow people to change, learn and grow without the threat of banishment or damnation.

I find this in the Buddhist invitation to "rest in the nature of Alaya, the essence" which is beyond all judgment...and the Christian concept of a universally forgiving God.

Despite this part of our Universalist heritage, the word "mercy" may seem a bit foreign to us.

After all, we have no ritual of confession or amend-making.

Many other spiritual paths do, including Catholicism with its rite of confession, Judaism with holy days devoted to atonement, and even 12 Step recovery programs with their practice of owning up to shortcomings and then making amends.

Neither do we have, in our worship services, the "assurance of pardon" that I remember from the United Church of my childhood.

What's more, our concept of "covenant" has departed somewhat from the original story of covenant between God and humanity which is central to the Abrahamic traditions.

Instead, it's turned into promise-making between human beings.

Have you kept every "promise" you've ever made? I certainly haven't!

So, what happens when our covenants are broken? We need the assurance that we can "return again in love."

That we can start again, knowing that we are inherently worthy and acceptable (as is affirmed in our First Principle) no matter what. This is mercy.

Without mercy, we are sure to be daunted.

We need to "love mercy now."

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So that takes us to "Walk humbly now."

In the song, I changed the line to "go humbly now," knowing that many people feel that the word "walk" is an example of "ableist" language.

In any case, to "walk" or to "go" is to move forward in the world in whatever way we can.

And of course, the key word in the line is not "walk" but "humbly."

So what does that word mean?

As I've studied the perennial wisdom tradition for many years, the concept of "spiritual humility" has come up over and over again.

It is expressed in various ways depending on the tradition: "the last shall be first," "falling upward," "beginner's mind."

It is the deeply counter-cultural perspective that wisdom has more to do with mystery than knowledge...that less is more.

It is the call toward simplicity...it is small is beautiful...it is the "not so big life"...and it does not come naturally to us.

Or, maybe it would come naturally if we weren't so conditioned by our culture to want more and more, and bigger and better, and faster and faster.

It was a Unitarian, in fact, who coined the phrase "onward and upward forever."

Indeed, "onward and upward" is still business-as-usual for so much of our culture and even for ourselves as we seek ever-more comfortable lives, higher achievements, deeper insights and richer experiences.

I say this not to beat us up (recall "love mercy now") but to gently point out that there is plenty of space to "return again" toward a more humble attitude:

One that could be more loving and inclusive and less harmful to all others and the world.

So we've finally come to the end of the first verse.

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.  
Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now."

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The next stanza in the text reads, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."



Now, that's a lot of syllables, and for the song I simplified it to read "You need not complete the work, but you must not abandon it."

I had trepidations about including that word "must"...wondering if it didn't allow enough room for mercy...but at the time, I thought it was the only one that fit.

Also, given the challenges of our lives and the world today, I felt that "must" was the right word.

But let's take the first part of the line first.

"You need not complete the work." That took out the precise but multi-syllabic word "obligated."

We so often do feel "obligated," don't we?

We so often do feel we "need to" complete the work that we see before us.

This recognition of urgency is something that causes a great deal of anxiety for many people, including many in our congregation and including me.

The felt sense, the clear awareness, that there is work that urgently needs to be done but that we do not personally have the capacity, the energy, the understanding, the time or the talent to complete it.

We do not have the years ahead, the good health required, the economic stability, the power or influence...I could go on.

In other words, we are simultaneously aware of both the scope and depth of the world's suffering and the reality of our human limitations.

This is a tension that is very difficult to hold, and Rabbi Tarfon, interpreting the Pirke Avot, no doubt understood that.

I can imagine that long-ago religious scholar speaking with others in the synagogue and hearing people's anxieties about this very thing...just as we do in ministry today.

And so, that wise writer wrote "you are not obligated to complete the work."

That is, he acknowledged the fact of human existence with its limited timespan and scope.

"You need not complete the work"...no-one is expecting you to.

"But neither are you free to abandon it." Aye, there's the rub.

Caught between a rock and a hard place...caught in the "crux" (that is, the "cross") of paradox, with two things that can't possibly co-exist, but that do.

I shortened that line, to make it fit the song. I wrote "you must not abandon it."

But then I realized that "cannot" fit just as well as "must not."  
And, in fact, it is the better word.

After all, "must" sounds so judgy and so much like "should."

And indeed "cannot" is more accurate, pointing as it does to the simple fact of existence.

As long as we are here, we "cannot" escape the task of attending to "the enormity of the world's grief" even if we only bear witness to it.

Does "you are not free to abandon it" mean that we are not free to make choices, or to step away from tasks which are not ours to do?

I don't believe so.

I don't believe this line is meant to tell people they can't change course, discern more appropriate ways to serve, nor attend to their own physical and mental health when needed.

Rather, it is a simple acknowledgement that we are continually called to engage with life...with "the work" of life...the work of relationship.

We cannot give up on it. And we must not.

Yet we will be daunted by this continuing calling.

And so, in order that we may stay present, keep attending to each other and the world...we must "live justly now, love mercy now, and go humbly now."

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That brings me to what I feel may be the most valuable aspect of this thoughtful passage.

It offers us a set of tasks that is within our human scope.

It does not ask us to change everything...but simply to live our lives in ways that are ethical, compassionate and humble...whatever those ways look like in our particular lives.

The original text from the Pirke Avot recommends that we live that way, and then adds: "If you have studied much Torah, you shall be given much reward."

In my current Unitarian Universalist understanding, I take this to mean: "If we continue to read the wisdom texts of the world, which include the Jewish holy books and so many others, we will be given much reward," not necessarily in any future life, but right here in this one.

Fortunately, in the enormity of the world that is available in our time, there are so many wisdom texts to be found...some written long ago and some written last week.

It is well worth our time to find them, read them, and re-read them.

Create a personal "wisdom library" for ourselves that's open 24/7 and there when we need it.

We can journal our own reflections on these texts, write songs or poetry based on them...even draw pictures of them.

This keeps the wisdom alive in our hearts and rippling outward into the world at a time when the challenges are indeed enormous...

And when we might feel daunted, or even defeated by grief...were it not for the healing power of beauty, wisdom and love.

And so...

*"Do not be daunted  
by the enormity of the world's grief.*

*Do justly now, love mercy now, go humbly now."*

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