

"Broken Open: Leading and Learning"
Service of Installation
Rev. Angeline C. Jackson
Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis
October 5, 2025

What a great pleasure it is to be with you on this occasion! Wonderful to see good friends and colleagues, dear ones from Neighborhood Church, dedicated members of this congregation, and, most especially, to celebrate this milestone with you, Angeline. What a great day to commemorate the developing relationship between minister and congregation.

I know you've already had a year to begin to know each other, but it's hardly been a normal year, has it? At least we hope that this is not the new normal. It is an incredibly difficult time to figure out what it means to be a beloved community - to both nurture our own flagging spirits and to reach out beyond our walls to call for justice.

I don't know about you but there are times when I don't just feel broken right now, I feel shattered. Watching ICE raids in people's homes - *in people's homes!* - with flash grenades and riot gear - I feel like my body is just full of tiny cracks – our larger body is full of bigger cracks. What can we in our admittedly small communities really do to change anything? What can we do to find healing for ourselves?

One of my favorite poems that I often use in worship is from the Native American poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:

Over and over we break
open, we break and
we break and we open.
For a while, we try to fix
the vessel – as if
to be broken is bad.
As if with glue and tape
and a steady hand we
might bring things to perfect
again. As if they were ever
perfect. As if to be broken is not
also perfect. As if to be open
is not the path toward joy.

I believe in the truth of this. I just know that it isn't easy. So how do we go from feeling shattered and broken apart to being broken open - broken open even in joy?

One of the things that I say in my work on transforming conflict is that conflict doesn't exist because we are bad: conflict exists because we have something to learn. Even right now, in the midst of what feels like the most intractable conflicts we've ever experience, there are things we need to learn. We need to learn a different way of thinking about leadership; we need to learn new ways of listening to one another and to others outside our usual relationships; we need to actually learn a different way of learning.

Let me start with the leadership part: I believe that part of what has gotten us into this mess in the first place is the cultural fantasy that Americans continue to fall prey to that leadership is about the

person in charge. That if we just elect the right person everything can be fixed. At its heart this fallacy believes that leadership is located in the person. That there are people who are natural leaders and others who aren't. And those who are should be able to make it all work for those who aren't. Even if this theory seemed to hold in the past, and I would argue it didn't, our world is far too complex now to think that only certain people with certain skills can make any real and lasting change.

And, let's face it, this theory at its heart is mysogenistic and white supremacist, because who are the ones who are typically seen as "leaderly" if not white cis men. It's easy to think that we Unitarian Universalists are immune from such thinking. After all the majority of our ministers are women; we have more and more ministers of color and more and more ministers with diverse genders and identities. And we do and that's absolutely wonderful. And yet I can't help but notice how many of my colleagues with these diverse identities are not fully supported in their ministries. Is that because they are not good "leaders?" Absolutely not. Is it because it can be hard for traditional UU communities to recognize their leadership? Hmmm. And here we have Angeline C. Jackson, a young, queer, black woman. Does she have leadership skills? Absolutely. And will there be some who will, however unintentionally, question her leadership capacity – I have no doubt.

Because here's the thing: Angeline is not here to tell you what to do! Although I'm sure there are times that she wishes she could.

She is not a perfect, fully-formed leader - none of us are. One of the things I talked about at Angeline's ordination was how much I appreciated her approach to learning. Unlike other seminarians who think they have to show they have nothing to learn, Angeline is a sponge for learning. She is always eager to learn something new. That doesn't make her insecure. In my view that speaks to a kind of security of self that I admire in someone of any age. And it's not that she swallows whatever is given to her whole, she questions everything. It's just that she understands that we all must learn and change and grow - that we must be broken open, even, at times, to find that new source of strength and purpose that comes from shedding that which is no longer useful or necessary.

In a few moments you will engage in the rite of installation which speaks to your work together as shared ministry. We talk about this a lot, but I'm not sure we really know what that means. It certainly doesn't mean that Angeline is responsible for everything. It doesn't mean that she does everything perfectly every time. It doesn't mean that you have to de-value her unique skills and gifts in order to see her as "just one of you." It means, in my view, that we understand leadership as a shared enterprise in which you engage in constant negotiation about who can do what; that there are those among you who have skills Angeline does not; that everyone has something to contribute in order to make this thing called beloved community work.

There's a beautiful poem called "What Word for This" by Michael Kleber-Diggs which reads in part: "I am summoned to spaces magnified in community. What name for this? I feel called. I walk forward to say this--this is what I have to offer: one part of my small story. Or, this is what I've witnessed; I want you to notice it, too. My hands, my grasp, sometimes, they only claim air. Sweet siblings, we're here--together--either way, what name must we give to this beyond our words?" We all have parts of our story to contribute and they weave together to create a strong fabric of community that can withstand the battering the world brings.

I think this is why so many of us are turning to the philosophy of emergent strategy by such thinkers as adrienne maree brown that look to the natural world and its fractal structures to find a model for community that is more sustainable and inclusive. She writes this:

Do you already know that your existence--who and how you are--is in and of itself a contribution to the people and place around you? Not after or because you do some particular thing, but simply the miracle of your life. And that the people around you, and the place(s), have contributions as well? Do you understand that your quality of life and your survival are tied to how authentic and generous the connections are between you and the people and place you live with and in?
....

In a fractal conception, I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the

system by how I am, as much as with the things I do. This means actually being in my life, and it means bringing my values into my daily decision making. Each day should be lived on purpose.

Living into this kind of purpose involves learning something new. And by learning something new I don't mean learning new facts or figures. I mean learning a new way of being. I mean letting go of false certainties and the fallacy of finding perfect answers. Maria Popova said, "Nothing, not one thing, hurts us more – or causes us to hurt others more – than our certainties. The stories we tell ourselves about the world and the foregone conclusions with which we cork the fount of possibility are the supreme downfall of our consciousness. They are also the inevitable cost of survival, of navigating a vast and complex reality most of which remains forever beyond our control and comprehension. And yet in our effort to parse the world, we sever ourselves from the full range of its beauty, tensing against the tenderness of life."

Holding ourselves open, allowing ourselves to be broken open, even when anxiety wants to drive every part of our existence, allows us to see possibilities we might never have imagined.

So what does this mean for us as religious communities? To me it means finding ways to balance the wisdom of our spirits with the call to a new kind of prophetic vision. It is not just about what we should do, but how we can be together.

Mirabai Starr is a teacher of contemplative practice who describes herself as a Jewish Sufi with a Hindu guru and a Buddhist meditation practice and a pagan inclination who is a contemporary translator and commentator on the Christian mystics. I guess that covers all the bases! She recently wrote this: "The key to living as a prophet-mystic is showing up for what is, no matter how heartbreaking or laborious, how fraught with seemingly intractable conflict and how tempting it might be to meditate or pray our way out of the pain. Contemplative practices train us to befriend reality, to become intimate with all things by offering them our complete attention. In this way, the prophet and the mystic occupy the same broken-open space. The nexus is grief. The mystic has tasted the grace of direct experience of the sacred and then seemingly lost the connection. She feels the pain of separation from the divine and longs for union. The prophet has perceived the brokenness of the world and is incapable of unseeing it. He feels the pain of injustice and cannot help but protest. But the mystic cannot jump to union without spending time in the emptiness of longing. The prophet must sit in helplessness before stepping up and speaking out."

We absolutely need to find ways to act right now, to make our outrage known and demand justice. And in order to sustain ourselves in this time we need to prepare our spirits for the long haul. My colleague Lynn Unger talks about how we are constantly bombarded by the message that we should try harder. She writes:

“instead of trying harder, maybe we could try softer. With more flexibility, more curiosity, more ability to shift to meet the moment.”

Angeline is the kind of minister who can help lead you through this moment: collaboratively, thoughtfully, grounded both in purpose and in spirit. You and she together can hold one another in that precious space of being broken open: broken open to learn and lead together; broken open in courage to face the heartbreak; broken open to experience a new kind of joy, together. So may you live and find your being. Amen.