

Holding Tension Without Breaking
Paying Attention to One Another in a Fractured World

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Opening Words/Call to Worship

Good morning, and welcome.

This month, our theme is Paying Attention — the spiritual discipline of noticing what is before us, within us, and between us.

In a world that constantly pushes us toward speed, reaction, and certainty, attention asks something different of us. It asks us to slow down long enough to see one another clearly. To listen with curiosity instead of defensiveness. To remain present even when differences make us uncomfortable.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition calls this pluralism — the practice of honoring many perspectives, identities, and experiences without requiring them to disappear into sameness.

Pluralism does not mean that we all agree.

It means we are willing to stay in relationship long enough to learn from one another. And that takes courage.

So this morning, as we gather in community, let us practice the discipline of attention — attention to our own hearts, attention to the voices around us, and attention to the possibilities that emerge when people choose curiosity over contempt.

Let us begin.

Prayer and Meditation – Witnessing Prayer by Kate Steinberg (With permission from WorshipWeb)

Spirit of Life, Love that calls us to love, Care that calls us to care, Presence that calls us into presence:

We give thanks that we have been brought together in this beloved place, this holy sanctuary, this sacred harbor where we bring ourselves as we are, in times of sorrow, in times of joy, in times of confusion, in times of fear, in times of clarity, in times of quiet acceptance.

In our efforts to pay closer attention to our inner lives, to each other, and to the world around us, may we notice divine essence today, however it expresses itself.

May we cultivate presence and awe while we attune to murmurs and shimmers within us and around us, whether it be the spark of a new idea, a vulnerable share from someone we love, or unexpected warmth from someone we don't know.

May we continue to attune to what Reverend Howard Thurman called the 'sound of the genuine' within ourselves. May we become quiet enough and still enough to notice the call deep within us that lures us towards what matters most, this call that lures us towards freedom and purpose. We ask for guidance and space and time to do just that, so we can lead the lives we feel most called to.

Today, we remember the people who have paid close attention to us in our lives. These people have loved us into being through the way they witnessed us. The way they attuned to us both strengthened us and transformed us.

There may be only one person we think of who has done this for us throughout our lives. We give thanks to them today.

We say “Thank you for witnessing me. Thank you for paying close attention to the stirrings in my heart.”

We also consider someone who may want to be witnessed by us. Perhaps this is someone we haven’t been able to make time for. Someone we love who dearly wants our attention.

May we find a way to say “I’m here with you. I’m paying close attention to the stirrings in your heart.”

May we continue to cultivate the practice of paying close attention so that more people feel lovingly held in our hurting world.

May we meet this moment and all the moments ahead with spaciousness and presence.

May we deeply and lovingly witness the person in front of us, beside us, and within us.

Blessed be. Amen.

**Sermon: “Holding Tension Without Breaking:
Paying Attention to One Another in a Fractured World”
by Rev. Dianne M. Daniels**

WHAT — Paying Attention to One Another

Our theme this month is Paying Attention — the spiritual discipline of attention.

Two weeks ago, we began by reflecting on paying attention to ourselves: noticing what moves within us, what shapes our thoughts, and the quiet inner currents that guide our choices.

Today, we turn outward to explore paying attention to one another.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, this kind of attention is not merely a social skill. It is a spiritual practice rooted in Love.

Love, in our faith, is not sentimental approval. Love is the willingness to remain present. Love is the discipline of seeing another person as fully human, even when we do not fully understand them, agree with them, or feel comfortable with what they are saying.

When we pay attention to one another in this way, we make room for dignity. We make room for complexity. We make room for an honest rather than shallow relationship.

That matters because pluralism is not just about diversity in the abstract. It is about living with real differences in the room. Different life experiences. Different spiritual histories. Different political instincts. Different hopes and fears. Different assumptions about what fairness, freedom, or faithfulness require.

Pluralism asks more of us than politeness. It asks us to resist the urge to flatten one another into categories. It asks us to remain curious long enough for a real person to appear.

And that is where tension comes in. Tension is not always a sign that something is broken. Sometimes tension is the natural result of an honest encounter.

If we are truly paying attention to one another, we will sometimes feel stretched. We will hear things that challenge us. We will encounter perspectives that unsettle our assumptions. We will discover that being in a beloved community is not the same as being in an easy community. Beloved community has room for difference. It has room for discomfort. It has room for growth.

Our value of Interdependence also speaks here. We do not exist in isolation. We shape one another constantly. Our words matter to each other. Our silence matters to each other. Our willingness to pay attention — or our refusal to do so — affects the health of the whole.

When one person is dismissed, the whole community is diminished. When one person is truly heard, the whole community becomes more honest, more resilient, and more alive. And in a world like ours right now, that may be one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines there is.

Because we live in a time of fracture.

Political fracture.

Cultural fracture.

Family fracture.

Many people feel as though they must choose between two extremes: silence or argument. Either we avoid difficult conversations entirely, or we enter them prepared for battle.

But our Unitarian Universalist tradition invites us to imagine another path.

The path of pluralism. Pluralism is not simply tolerance.

Tolerance says, “I will allow you to exist.” Pluralism says something deeper:

“I will pay attention to your humanity — even when we see the world differently.”

And that kind of attention takes courage.

The philosopher Simone Weil once wrote that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. When we truly pay attention to another person, we offer them something sacred: the dignity of being seen.

But attention also asks something of us.

- It asks us to remain present even when tension arises.
- It asks us to listen before responding.
- It asks us to hold complexity without rushing to resolve it.
- In other words, it asks us to practice holding tension without breaking.

The description for today’s service puts it this way:

Staying present in tension is moral courage in miniature. Respecting another’s identity, culture, or viewpoint without the need to dominate or replace it allows differences to coexist side-by-side and shows goodwill without sacrificing one’s own identity.

That is not easy work.

Because when conflict appears, our bodies react quickly.

- Our hearts beat faster.
- Our voices sharpen.
- Our thoughts race toward defense.

One guide to conflict reminds us that when tension rises, the first step is often simply to pause and breathe — to interrupt that cycle of reaction so that we can respond with clarity, with calm, rather than impulse.

Calm, it reminds us, is not weakness. Calm is strength under control. Calm does not mean passivity. It does not mean pretending everything is fine. It means refusing to let reactivity do all the talking. It means making

enough room inside us to **choose** our response instead of being driven only by our first impulse. That is a spiritual discipline.

And in a fractured time, it is a profoundly countercultural one. We are constantly encouraged to react immediately, publicly, and dramatically. But attention asks something else of us. It asks us to slow down enough to notice what is actually happening — in us, before us, and between us.

And attention — real attention — begins with that calm. When we slow ourselves enough to listen, something shifts. Instead of preparing our rebuttal and only pausing long enough to start speaking, we begin to hear meaning. Instead of defending our position, we become curious about another person's experience.

And curiosity opens a door. It does not erase disagreement. But it allows differences to exist without becoming destructive.

Pluralism is the spiritual discipline of paying attention to one another without the need to win.

SO WHAT — Why This Matters

Why does this matter? Why does the discipline of paying attention to one another matter so much right now? Because much of the conflict we experience today is intensified by forces we barely notice.

For example, many of our beliefs are shaped by social conditioning — the messages we absorb from culture, media, politics, religion, and the communities around us.

From childhood onward we are taught what to value, what to fear, what to admire, and what to reject. These influences are powerful. They shape the way we interpret words like “justice,” “freedom,” “faith,” or “truth.”

And when people whose conditioning differs meet one another, tension is almost inevitable. But recognizing this can deepen our compassion. Because it reminds us that people are not simply stubborn or

unreasonable. They are shaped by stories — just as we are. And when we begin to see that, attention becomes easier.

It becomes possible to ask questions rather than make assumptions, and to listen without immediately judging.

Another reason this matters is because avoiding difficult conversations rarely solves anything. In fact, avoidance often allows tension to grow stronger.

One alternative definition of confrontation reminds us that many of the conversations we avoid are **precisely** the ones that need to happen. Avoidance may feel safe in the moment, but it often leaves resentment or confusion lingering beneath the surface.

This matters spiritually because unexamined conditioning can keep us from living our values with integrity. If we have not asked where our reactions come from, we may mistake reflex for conviction. We may assume that our discomfort is always wisdom. We may assume that our inherited perspective is the same thing as truth.

But transformation begins when we become willing to ask deeper questions: What matters to me? Why does it matter? Where did this belief come from? Is this truly mine, or have I simply absorbed it from the world around me?

That kind of reflection is not weakness. It is maturity. It is spiritual adulthood. And it is one way we loosen the grip of fear and defensiveness in our lives.

This is one reason Unitarian Universalism matters. Ours is a faith that calls people not simply to believe, but to examine. Not simply to inherit, but to discern. Not simply to repeat, but to grow.

We are asked to bring our whole selves — heart, mind, memory, conscience, and experience — into the work of making meaning. That means we do not need to fear complexity. We do not need to fear nuance. We do not need to fear the possibility that another person's perspective may reveal something we have not yet seen.

But confrontation does not have to mean **combat**.

In fact, one of the quiet tragedies of our time is that many people have come to treat every disagreement as a threat. But disagreement is not the same thing as danger. Honest tension can become an opening.

Confrontation, when grounded in respect, can become a **bridge** instead of a **weapon**. It can create space for truth-telling, clarity, and even mutual respect. That does not mean every conversation ends in agreement. It means that not every hard conversation has to end in harm.

Our UU value of Equity also speaks to this moment. Equity reminds us that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.

That means attention itself becomes moral work. Who gets listened to? Who gets interrupted? Who is expected to make themselves understandable to everyone else? Whose pain gets minimized? Whose anger gets labeled as dangerous, while someone else's anger gets called leadership? When we ask those questions, attention moves beyond courtesy and into justice.

At its best, confrontation simply means choosing honesty over silence. It means trusting that truth spoken with care can build bridges rather than destroy them. And that kind of courage — calm, respectful courage — is what allows communities to grow stronger rather than drift apart.

There is also a deeper reason this matters. Because paying attention to one another prepares us to pay attention to injustice. When we stop seeing people clearly, injustice becomes easier to ignore. History shows us this again and again.

But when we practice **attention** — when we listen to one another's stories and experiences — our moral imagination expands.

- We begin to see the ways systems affect people differently.
- We begin to understand suffering that we may never have experienced ourselves.
- And that awareness creates moral clarity.

So attention is not merely polite behavior. It is the foundation of justice. Before we can respond to injustice, we must first be willing to see one another fully. And seeing clearly requires courage.

And this is where Transformation enters the picture. Transformation rarely begins with certainty. More often, it begins with attention. We notice something we had not noticed before. We hear a story that unsettles us. We become aware of a wound, a bias, a pattern, or a truth that had been hidden from us. That moment of attention can become a threshold. It can move us from defensiveness to humility, from assumption to understanding, from complacency to moral clarity.

That is why this sermon matters in the larger arc we are building this season. Paying attention to one another is not the end of the journey. It is the preparation. It is how we learn to see. And once we begin to see clearly, it becomes harder to ignore the wider injustices around us. Attention in a relationship becomes training for attention in public life.

NOW WHAT — Practicing Attention

So what does this mean for us? How do we practice the discipline of attention in everyday life?

First, we begin with calm presence.

Calm presence is not only a personal gift. It is also a communal one. In every congregation, every family, every workplace, there are moments when someone's steadiness helps keep the entire situation from unraveling. The person who listens rather than escalates. The person who pauses instead of pouncing. The person who helps others return to clarity when emotions are running hot. That kind of presence is a form of generosity. It offers others more space to breathe, think, and remain human in the midst of stress.

And generosity matters here because attention itself is generous. To listen with care is generous. To ask another question rather than assume you already know is generous. To make room for someone else's full

humanity is generous. In that sense, our practice of attention becomes one way we live our values beyond words.

In moments of disagreement, we pause. We breathe. We remember that our goal is not victory, but understanding.

Listening deeply can transform the tone of an entire conversation. When someone feels heard, defensiveness often softens. And even when agreement does not follow, dignity can remain.

Second, we practice speaking our truth with respect.

Courage also means trusting that honesty and kindness can live in the same sentence. Too often, people imagine they must choose between being truthful and being loving. But our faith calls us to hold both. We can say what matters. We can name what hurts. We can challenge what concerns us. And we can do it in ways that honor the person in front of us. That is not a compromise. That is a spiritual skill. That is moral courage in miniature.

Paying attention to others does not mean abandoning our own values. Pluralism is not about erasing differences. It is about allowing differences to exist without forcing one side to disappear.

Sometimes that means having the courage to say what matters to us — calmly, clearly, and without blame. Honesty spoken with sincerity can strengthen relationships rather than weaken them.

Third, we practice fairness and appreciation for different strengths.

There is a story about two bakers in a village competition. One baker produced creative and colorful breads filled with flavor and imagination.

The other baker presented a simple loaf — technically perfect in every detail.

When the judges chose the perfect loaf as the winner, the village became divided. Some valued precision. Others valued creativity.

But the village elder reminded them that fairness does not mean declaring one approach superior in every way.

Fairness means recognizing the value of different contributions.

Eventually, the bakers began working together, blending precision and creativity to serve the whole community.

I think congregations need that reminder. We are not called to all think alike, speak alike, or move through the world in identical ways.

One person may bring precision. Another creativity.

One person may bring steadiness. Another urgency.

One person may be gifted at welcoming newcomers. Another at asking difficult questions.

One person may feel deeply called to justice work. Another may quietly sustain the community through care, consistency, and presence.

Fairness in congregational life is not about forcing everyone into one mold. It is about recognizing the sacred value of different gifts and allowing them to strengthen the whole.

This is what pluralism looks like in action. Different perspectives are not threats. They are possibilities.

Finally, we practice positive reframing. Positive reframing does not deny difficulty. It simply invites us to look at situations from another angle — to find opportunity where we might otherwise see only frustration.

When conflict appears, we can ask:

- What might this teach me?
- What might I learn about another person's experience?
- What might grow from this moment if we remain open?

Reframing tension this way makes it constructive rather than destructive. And in that sense, every difficult conversation becomes an opportunity to practice moral courage.

Positive reframing is especially helpful when tension feels discouraging. It reminds us that difficulty is not always disaster.

An awkward conversation may be the beginning of trust.

A disagreement may reveal that people care deeply.

A moment of discomfort may uncover a place where growth is trying to happen.

Reframing does not ask us to deny pain or pretend everything is pleasant. It asks us to remain open to the possibility that something meaningful can still emerge.

And because we are a congregation, we should ask what this practice looks like here. It may mean paying closer attention during coffee hour to the person standing alone.

It may mean listening more carefully in committee meetings.

It may mean making more room for differences in age, experience, theology, and style.

It may mean refusing the easy habit of writing one another off.

It may mean remembering that beloved community is not built by accident.

It is built by attention, over time, in ordinary moments, through repeated choices to stay present with one another.

Closing — A Step Toward the Next Sermon

Our theme this month is Paying Attention, and today, we have explored what it means to pay attention to one another — to practice curiosity instead of contempt, calm instead of reaction, courage instead of avoidance.

In two weeks, on March 31, we will take the next step in this journey. Because attention does not end with relationships. Eventually, attention leads us to confront injustice.

When we begin to see clearly — truly see one another — we also begin to see the systems and structures that shape our lives. And that clarity calls us toward action.

But before we can act wisely, we must first learn to listen deeply. So this week, I invite you to practice the discipline of attention.

- In conversations with family.
- In encounters with neighbors.
- In moments when disagreement arises.

Pay attention not only to the words being spoken, but to the humanity behind them.

Because every time we choose curiosity over contempt, patience over reaction, and courage over silence, we strengthen the fragile threads that hold communities together.

And in a fractured world, that may be one of the most powerful spiritual practices we can offer.

This is how Love takes shape in community. Not only in grand statements, but in repeated acts of attention.

This is how Justice begins to grow among us — not only in public witness, but in the habits that teach us to see one another clearly.

This is how Interdependence becomes more than an idea — when we remember that the health of one life affects the health of the whole.

And this is how Transformation begins — one conversation, one pause, one act of listening, one courageous moment at a time.

Amen. Ase. Blessed Be.