

## 5/21/23 UUCF Graduation Sunday Presentation

Good morning.

Some of my clearest and earliest memories are rooted in the land. I've grown up on my family's regenerative farm, and while the practice of farming itself never spoke to me, in the way it did for my sister, I always saw that connection to nature made manifest in the food we eat and hours under the sun. As any actual farmers are aware, there's little of that romanticism in the day-to-day. I remember being shaken awake at four in the morning because our cows were in the road, and going out in the dark and the rain to herd them back through our neighbor's muddy cornfields. I remember countless electric shocks on fences, some literally hard enough to knock me to the ground; brutal snow storms as we went out to check on the animals; all the matter of fact realities of birth and illness and death. But I also remember a childhood that led me to fall in love with the woods, to acquaint myself with every toppled tree and river bend. And I believe that's the reason I became involved in climate justice organizing. Because the thought of those places being marred is a personal loss.

The youth-led group I volunteer with is called the Sunrise Movement. We're known mostly for harnessing the media with civil disobedience like sit-ins, and the rapid popularization of the Green New Deal. Sunrise—and the youth activism sphere more broadly—has a lot in common with Unitarian Universalism. Both act in accord with clear principles, both seek to spread their word out in the world through grassroots engagement, and the ideas behind each have become meaningful for me, as they have for many, in trying to determine who I am and who I want to be.

My introduction to the UU tradition began through the usual channels: my parents. We started attending regularly in 2018 and I found the structure of thought here fascinating. I wasn't and am not what I would call a religious person. I don't have a firm stance on the nature of God or the hereafter, just a sort of everyday spirituality. What struck me about this place is how it welcomes people anywhere along that spectrum, from devout to atheistic. It's a place for questions. When measured against the history of churches and worship, that's a pretty amazing thing.

Unitarian Universalism is also closely linked to my first experiences of environmental organizing. I helped found a local Sunrise Movement hub, Sunrise Frederick, in January 2020, when I was fourteen. One of my best friends gathered a handful of us, gave us cardboard and markers, and told us about this group they'd heard of, offering a new kind of climate advocacy. Sunrise was young, media-savvy, fluid in its tactics and presence, and they were calling on students to bring their message to our communities. So, we did. For the first few months, we weren't even an official hub, just an informal strike circle coming together each week to share wild ideas and big hopes. Our group's first home was here, at UUCF. Down the hall, in a classroom, we set chairs in a circle and learned how a movement grows, how to form a coalition, shift the conversation. It showed me the optimism inherent in those spaces. To work toward change, you need the conviction that things *can* change. That they will.

In our first year, we held a phone bank and made more than a hundred calls to our senators and representatives; ran community trainings; performed art builds and a banner drop; and collaborated with another local group, HEAT, to host a Climate Justice rally in front of city hall. Through all this, I was excited and really scared. No one had handed any of us a rule book. Every time I wrote a speech, contacted candidates, planned demonstrations, I was terrified of getting something wrong. Sometimes I did. But over the years, I think I got better at acting in line with my values and helping others do the same.

You might have noticed the phrase, "climate justice." In this crowd, I imagine it's pretty widely understood. It's the conviction that climate action is only part of a journey to collective liberation, across borders and race and class and behind bars and on street corners and inside every house of worship or office of profit. To give a couple of examples, in BBC Future last year, Jeremy Williams referenced two U.S. studies which conclude that "nationwide, the burden of coal ash pollution is carried disproportionately by communities of colour and low-income communities" and that "wildfire vulnerability is spread unequally across race and ethnicity", with majority black, Hispanic or Native American districts facing 50% greater vulnerability compared with other groups'. These most vulnerable populations have contributed far less to historic greenhouse emissions than wealthier and more privileged groups, yet they'll suffer the most.

Our response, then, must be on social as well as ecological levels. And we don't have time to spare. The world is warming, burning, storming, and in the words of environmental journalist David Wallace-Wells, "It is almost certainly worse than you think."

Yet I feel deeply, truly hopeful. We have a chance to fulfill the promise of economic prosperity, social equity. Recognize the earth for the teacher it is. We can bring about a vision of renewable energy and electrification. That shift can create green jobs for all who want them—the key tenet of a Green New Deal.

In a recent Washington Post op-ed, Rebecca Solnit writes, "Much of the reluctance to do what climate change requires comes from the assumption that it means trading abundance for austerity, and trading all our stuff and conveniences for less stuff, less convenience. But what if it meant giving up things we're well rid of, from deadly emissions to nagging feelings of doom and complicity in destruction? What if the austerity is how we live now — and the abundance could be what is to come?"

In Sunrise, as well as other student groups like Climate Defiance and Fridays for Future, all the way to Third Act for elder organizers, that abundance begins with disrupting the status quo. We sit in front of our legislators, in front of coal plants, in front of SUVs in the street, and we refuse to move until they make us move, because that is when we're seen. We mobilize peace and unity as tools for change. And in that movement, where there's room for *everyone*, I still feel like it's a miracle I found a place.

Last summer, I knocked a lot of doors for climate candidates in the midterms. And talking to people, all those strangers, I realized—this is exactly where I want to be.

Like Unitarian Universalism's eight principles, the Sunrise Movement has our own codified ideals. Eleven of them, but you know, it's not a competition. Our ninth says, "We oppose state violence with nonviolent action." When we stand with cardboard signs against cops with guns, when we sing before sirens, when we turn out the vote for every single election. In those moments, peace feels like the most powerful idea in the world.

*That feeling* gives me hope.

And here we all are, in a room built on the commandments of peace. Hope. Unitarian Universalism exemplifies how the pursuit of spiritual ideals is inextricable from political progress. How one can and must compel the other. In a congregation or a society, we each have to reconcile our actions—or lack thereof—with the principles guiding us. Climate justice activism with all its thunder and shine has become my way of trying to do that. It's not perfect, and I sometimes fall into moments of despair or anger. My best answer is to return to the land I have always lived with. The green spaces and muddy places. They remind me of all there is to fight for.

Look out the window. There's a whole world busy saving itself, if we're ready to join it.

I'd like to end with a poem I wrote. This is, *Footprints in Eden*

How long till grasses reclaim  
the fields and furrows?  
The roads—piercing their gray hide.  
How long till grasses rise in our barren plots  
and teach themselves again  
to reach toward sunbeams,  
to be yellowed and careless and  
crooked and untamed and flush with rebirth  
and forsake the laws cut into them.  
How long till logs robed with fungi and softening rot  
fill the foundations of this house,  
generations of brick and belongings the secret delight  
of tree roots. Pale burrowing spiders. No one to remember  
our prayers for permanence.

We are after all a hillside of crocuses—a single season's purple hopes.

We are fractional clover mites garlanding pine needles  
and foxes gone like ghosts before dawn.  
May they outlive us. How many millennia  
till the soil is spared our footprints?  
No shrines of plastic the epigraph  
on land we never knew,  
only the promise of life to decay unto life  
in the delicate bloody dance of immortality.  
Only a fox stalking a scent  
unknowable, burning silent  
through her meadow which was once a brick house,  
was once beloved.  
And when she with her wild eyes finds no sign of us,  
perhaps even the grasses will have forgiven  
our footprints, our follies,  
and will have recalled at long last how holy  
their own light bodies can be.

Thank you.