

Uncertainty  
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UUMSB

My husband and I are newly empty nesters. After having two years of four young adults in the house (our two kids, plus two others, and sometimes more) we were ready to have greater control over our home environment again. We had a great time fixing up the apartment, spreading out, and getting rid of lots of stuff. Our apartment now looks more shabby chic than Animal House. I had a feeling I was going to like being an empty nester, and I do, but I didn't realize how much I was going to worry. Especially in the first few months, I worried about what I didn't know, and how things were going for the kids out in the big bad world. I know how much I told my own mother when I first moved out, so I was pretty sure anything we heard would be sanitized. I didn't *really* have control over the safety of my kids when they lived in my house, but once they were out, that fact was right in my face.

How many of us have lived in uncertainty, waiting to find out about a job, an apartment, a test, a diagnosis? In those kinds of moments, we have already done what we can do to influence the decision, the outcome, and we are caught in the waiting—waiting to make plans, our feelings in limbo. Some of us are better at holding that than others. Some people get sad, some angry, some withdraw, some ignore it, and some embrace it. Some types of uncertainty are easier to hold than others. It is always true that we are not in control of the universe, of chance, of anyone else's being, or truly, even the vagaries of our own bodies. Cells in our bodies misbehave, people make choices, storms come. With science, we can get closer and closer to understanding the whys and wherefores of our world, but we will never fully understand everything. Because we are all connected, our choices impact our environment, and our future. But we as individuals are not in control. Sometimes things just happen. The universe we are a part of is expanding and changing, and we are enmeshed in an infinite web of interconnection. Some believe that there is a force outside of that web guiding us, some believe that there is an ideal we are working toward, some believe that the web of connections is in of itself transcendent, some believe that science and reason are the best ways to understand the world. Each choice we make impacts our world, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small, but there is no amount of work or will that any one of us can do or have to force an outcome. Sometimes that is easier to hold than others. Sometimes the fact that we are not in control stares us right in the face. When we are in that place of uncertainty, what do we turn to, what is our support? As Unitarian Universalists, we have no one answer to this question, we have many.

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams believed that liberal religion must be ultimately optimistic. Not necessarily immediately optimistic, but in his words after World War II:

In response to the primary question of whether history has a meaning ... This is the issue that cuts through all others. It cuts through the ranks of those who believe in God as well as through the ranks of the unbelievers. The affirmative answer of prophetic religion, which may be heard in the very midst of the doom that threatens like thunder, is that history is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice, looking towards the ultimate victory in the promise and fulfillment of grace.<sup>1</sup>

Adams also wrote, "Every blade of grass, every work of art, every scientific endeavor, every

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1 Ibid. 20

striving for righteousness bears witness to this meaning. Indeed, every frustration or perversion of truth, beauty, or goodness also bears this witness, as the shadow points round to the sun.”<sup>2</sup> Adams echoes Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's assertion in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. Unitarian Universalists don't often speak of ultimacy in large groups, perhaps because we do not have a common vocabulary for these kinds of discussions. As I have gotten to know the individuals in this congregation however, I know that many of you regularly think and talk about these sorts of big questions. My invitation to us all is to be a little more gentle with ourselves. We don't need beautiful poetic language about our understanding of the universe to share it with others, or ourselves. We do not have to be perfect. And in fact, as we would tell anyone who is exploring something new, if we don't make mistakes, we don't learn. We can't come to our own understanding of what is outside ourselves, unless we experience it and try to explain it.

How do we hold uncertainty? How do we handle a lack of control? Each of us probably has practical and spiritual tools for making our way through such moments. But, when we are in the thick of things, it can be easy to forget. It can be easy to get stuck in the details, or in worry. The Dalai Lama has written:

If the situation or problem is such that it can be remedied, then there is no need to worry about it...Alternatively, if there is no solution, no possibility of resolution, then there is also no point in being worried about it, because you cannot do anything about it anyway.<sup>3</sup> Easier said than done, right? When we are living in a moment where two roads diverge in a wood, and we don't get to choose which we will go down, how do we handle that? I need to make lists, scenarios, and spreadsheets. I tease out options, consider the choices I *will* have control over once the path is set, and so on. I do all of this to feel better, when the situation is out of my control. But eventually I come back to the fork in the road and I have to be in that moment. No amount of planning, or thinking can get around the waiting, and the choices of others. Sit with me in that moment. Look at the fork in the road. There may be infinite forks that have happened in our lives, paths that we have gone down, that we never saw or were conscious of, but when we *do* know, when we are waiting, what do we turn to? What do you turn to? Do you pray? Breathe? Meditate? Seek solitude? Seek companionship? However alone we might feel in a moment like that, we can know that not only does everyone experience this as well, but that we have come through these moments before ourselves. It is easier to stay centered when we practice, when we have prepared for times of stress, have built our resilience, but sometimes we get hit with a sucker punch. Those are the times when we need to lean on someone or something outside of ourselves. However we understand the universe, we can remember to lean on something—the arms of those in our community, or the arms of that force outside of ourselves that pulls us toward that optimistic possibility of justice, love, and grace.

When I was in seminary, we used to sing the song, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” a lot and we have sung it here together. It is an older hymn, that was written to comfort some people who had lost loved ones. The chorus is

Lean-ing, lean-ing, Safe and se-cure from all a-larms,  
Lean-ing, lean-ing, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

It invites an image of God that one *could* interpret as an anthropomorphic God up in the sky, which is fine, but I hear it a little differently. In Christian scripture, Paul talks about the church being the body of Christ, in other words, that *we* are the arms of God. We are the hands in the

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2 JLA “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith”, On Being Human Religiously, 13.

3 <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/articles/counter-stress>

world that do the work of building community, holding each other, working toward justice and fulfillment of grace. That is what I hear in the song, and why it is one of my favorites. These are arms we can lean on when we are at a fork in the road, waiting, and troubled. We might also feel hands beyond us, a force for love, compassion, justice, grace, blessing, there when we seek it. A force in the universe, arcing toward justice, at each crossroads with us, waiting to see what choices we make next.

Will you sing with me?

### Leaning On The Everlasting Arms

Written by: Elisha A. Hoffman and Anthony J. Showalter,

What a fel-low-ship, what a joy di-vine,  
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms,  
What a bless-ed-ness, what a peace is mine,  
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

### CHORUS

Lean-ing, lean-ing, Safe and se-cure from all a-larms,  
Lean-ing, lean-ing, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

### VERSE 2

Oh, how sweet to walk in this pil-grim way,  
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms,  
Oh, how bright the path grows from day to day,  
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

### VERSE 3

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,  
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms?  
I have bless-ed peace with my God so near,  
Lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.