

# Hineni

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**January 22, 2012**

UU Church Sharon, MA

*With much gratitude to the Quezon City Unitarian Universalists, Manila, Philippines,  
for sharing their heart's journeys with me on January 22, 2012*

## **Sermon:**

It's a treacherous winter's day in Montreal. Snow turning to sleet, streets slushy with ice. A desperate call comes in. "My wife is in the hospital. She is looking for spiritual support. We were married in a Unitarian church forty years ago. Please, can you come?"

It's a long slide down the hill to the hospital from the metro, an even longer trek through the hospital corridors. But there she is, small and frail, consumed by her hospital bed. "I want you to do something for my husband," she tells me. "He's an atheist. I have friends, but he has no community. Will you bid him welcome when he comes to church?"

Of course we will, I promise her. But there's something else on her mind. There are more tests to be run, more discussions to be had with the doctors, still, we both know that death is lurking in the shadows of the room. I ask her, as I always ask, what remains unfinished? Like any of us, she has stories to tell of disappointments known so long ago, of wounds that have failed to heal. Yet out of the darkness comes a memory of light – not to brush away what was, but to reframe it.

For an hour, we have stepped out of time. We are two women, holding hands, praying in the presence of death. She is luminous, beautiful, and I know that I have touched the holy.

Weeks later, she invites me to her home. She has been dismissed from the hospital. There is nothing left to do but wait. "I am letting go now," she tells me. "The time has come. But I wanted you to know that my mind is only resting on those beautiful places and moments I have known. Everything else is gone. There's an angel who is waiting for me."

"What does your angel look like?" I ask her.

"Oh, he is lovely, dressed in so many colours. He has no face. He is waiting to embrace me and I know that when he does, I will be safe."

A few days later, she is gone, fallen into the embrace of her angel.

Those days leading up to my first meeting with this precious woman were like a wasteland. I was back wandering in the spiritual desert I often cross. My faith often flickers like a flame seeking oxygen. I hunger for God. I want to cry out, to say in Hebrew, Hineni – here I am God. But sometimes the words don't come.

## Hineni

In the Torah, Yahweh calls to Abraham: “Avraham!” And Abraham answers: “Hineni.” Here I am. Yahweh calls to Moses, and Moses answers: “Hineni.” Here I am, I am ready to do something important, ready to change my life. There are days when this is what I say as I rise to greet the morning. Other days, I am drifting, wondering why I have lost touch with all that should sustain me.

I live in a place called Quebec, a nation within the heart of a nation called Canada. My people, the people I serve, they are wonderful and yet they can be cantankerous. We often live within separate solitudes: the solitudes of French against English; the solitudes of everyone else who can't claim French or English as their mother tongue; the solitudes of those who reject things religious and the solitudes of those who crave faith; the solitudes of each generation and their differing views on life and the purpose of this place we call church.

My people are obsessed with language because we live in a place where everyone is defined by the language they speak. Who are you, if not your mother tongue? My people are obsessed with language because they are Unitarians, or Unitarian Universalists or Unitarians and Universalists – and they can't quite decide. We debate the words we use. Can we worship? Can we invoke God? Can we say words like faith, or religion, or speak of salvation?

Into this world, I have come to serve, because I am so many things. My roots are Jewish and Ukrainian Catholic. I am drawn to both sides of my heritage, a heritage that should be at war with itself. I am the daughter of atheists. I am the daughter whose God was stolen away from her as a child. I am the mother who found God in the sanctuary of a Unitarian church in New Jersey (that most maligned state of all the United States, of all places), while my parents lamented, “Where did we go wrong?” I am the daughter, mother, woman, minister now called to walk with those who shun the holy and those who embrace it.

All I ask is for flexibility.

A devout Christian friend asks me, how I can possibly serve as a minister to atheists and agnostics? “Why go to church if you don't believe?” he wants to know, not out of revulsion but truly out of curiosity.

I tell him this: You do not have to believe to find inspiration or solace in music or the words of another. You do not have to believe to find comfort in the lighting of a candle that marks the loss of someone you loved. You do not have to believe to crave communal silence at the end of a week that has been overflowing with constant noise inside and outside of yourself. Why should church be only for believers? That's the question I ask my friend in return.

Part of what brings my people together, what brings us together, is the recognition that we are not required to cling steadfastly to one truth. The question is, do we use our evolving beliefs (or non-beliefs) to live more honest, caring, loving, or just lives?

## Hineni

I stand and I defend the right to this diversity. I speak out for a place of belonging, a place at the table for us all. Yet I also thirst. I thirst to live this life with meaning and purpose. I thirst to live it with connection, to rejoice in the solitude that shapes me and in the solitude that shapes you. Rilke writes:

Love consists in this,  
that two solitudes protect,  
and touch, and greet each other.

It is in the touching and greeting that we are transformed, not as isolated positions on a theological spectrum, not as isolated souls walking through a wasteland. It is the reaching out, the listening, the testing and the trying that makes us more human and more holy.

Just as the exhaustion seeps into my bones, just as my faith is wavering, a call comes in. A woman lies in bed, waiting to be embraced by an angel. Her vision is a parting gift. Two solitudes meet. This is love, for a brief instant, before the end comes. Hineni. Here I am.