

Toward a Unitarian Universalist Theology for Collapse

David R. Weiss - February 21, 2025

I am no less overwhelmed than any of you by all the damage being done to our democracy and more these days—and the relative paucity of means at my disposal to effectively resist. I could spend all my time responding to one crisis after another—writing essays or creating social media posts to share insights, channel anger, or frantically weave solidarity. Some days that’s exactly what I seem to do. A worthy endeavor because this is an “active battlefield”: real human beings are being threatened and harmed each day.

But there is also a long game here.

The awkward, uncomfortable, damning truth is that the Donald Trump’s efforts to dismantle democracy and much of the infrastructure of our government—with cascading fractures across the rest of our society and spanning the globe—are going to be with us for a while. Not least because they are manifestations of the precarity of civilization itself.

True, Trump is seemingly determined (willfully? ignorantly? greedily?) to crash our particular society as hard as he can crash it. But the *even more* awkward, uncomfortable, damning truth is that *this society was (is) going to crash no matter who was at the wheel*. Collapse was (is!) going to be our inheritance, regardless of who is governing. And while the quality of our governance will likely make an extraordinary difference in the amount of collective suffering that occurs as we collapse, at this late stage, the rips in our social fabric will be ragged and violent no matter the political lean of our leader.

Which is why I’m choosing in this essay to ask briefly, and with only partial reference to the immediate evil of this administration, how a distinctly Unitarian Universalist (UU) theology as reflected in the shared values of Article II in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) bylaws might guide us in a long season of Collapse. (Full disclosure: I’m fairly new to the UU tradition. So, my thoughts are necessarily provisional—but hopefully equally provocative.)

Collapse refers to the now inevitable fracturing of the ecological stability necessary for our “advanced” complex civilization and the fraying of the social-economic-political-cultural structures that will accompany these ecological fractures. In conversations around Collapse, it’s common to make a distinction between “collapse aware” and “collapse acceptance.” The former names the *awareness* that Collapse is real, inevitable, and imminent, but this awareness stops shy of full acceptance. It may be caught by emotional denial or despair. The latter names the inner state of having come to a place of *acceptance* and peace regarding the inevitability and the all-encompassing character of Collapse, which may well include human extinction.

In this essay, I am interested in exploring what I would call “collapse engaged.” Perhaps it is simply a nuanced version of “collapse acceptance,” but it strikes me as a “religious” project of sorts to frame it like this: having become *aware* of Collapse, and having made peace in *accepting* Collapse, how do we then *engage* Collapse? How do we live ethically, meaningfully, and purposefully, in ways that actively serve the greater good even in the midst of collapse? That’s my question.

My response to it is primarily a contribution to an “inside conversation” within the UU tradition, although, on account of its core commitment to pluralism and a covenantal versus creedal unity, the values shared by UU folks are recognizable and accessible to anyone. For those reading from “outside,” when the Universalist and Unitarian traditions merged in 1961 to form the UUA (both traditions have roots going back nearly 200 years in America and still deeper in Europe), they chose to organize themselves around shared principles and values *held in covenant* rather than around beliefs or dogmas

to which one would offer *creedal assent*. Vis-a-vis some other liberal-progressive traditions, the difference between covenantal and creedal can be subtle, but the contrast is stark when set against most conservative-fundamental traditions.

The UUA espouses *no supernatural claims or doctrines*. While individual members may hold *personal beliefs* about God (or gods, as do some UUs with affinities to pagan or other Earth-centered religions), others are stridently atheist/humanist. What *binds us together* as a “people of faith” is our commitment to live our lives with meaning and purpose by manifesting shared values. And *our covenant to do so in mutually supportive community* with one another: in local congregations and in wider associations.

Additionally, the UUA committed itself from its inception to regularly revisit its Article II principles and values, in order to revise them as necessary to reflect the way the tradition is unfolding, both with its members’ convictions *and* with the demands of the historical moment. The most recent revision, the result of a 4-year study and conversation process, was adopted in 2024. That’s the Article II I’ll be reflecting on.

These shared UU values are often portrayed via the “Shared Values Flower” image with Love as the central value, around which Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity are arrayed like petals. Love, often described as “Liberating Love” holds central place, both in the image and as the animating energy that manifests itself through the other values. Part of the aesthetic logic of the image is that, aside from Love itself, the other values are not “ranked” in any way. They’re regarded as inseparable and interwoven.

So, (briefly) here are some thoughts “Toward a Unitarian Universalist Theology) for Collapse.”

First, why a *theology*? If UUs don’t share a common belief in God, why call this a “theology”? Because, even while UUs have no shared agreement about a supernatural being or beings, we do share a *deep vision of living* rooted in ultimate values. In theologies centered around a belief in God, this belief in God serves as their “ultimate concern” (a term coined by the Protestant/Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich); it acts as the orienting and integrating point of reference for their lives. Hence, “theology” because these thoughts are drawn from that ultimate concern.

In the UU tradition, we regard Love as an animating energy around which we seek to fashion our lives. The central unity of Love has been affirmed from our earliest predecessor traditions onward, and even as we have stepped back from belief in any deity, we have held onto Love as the Ultimate Concern that we seek to invite into our lives and bring it to bear on the world around us.

Also, despite having no doctrine regarding things supernatural, our worldview is alive with a sense of the sacred. This intuition, apprehended both by intellect and emotion, is of a Something Qualitatively More, a dimension to life that is larger than self or family, tribe or nation, even larger than humanity as a whole. It elicits reverence and awe, aspiration and action. It sparks the recognition of a “seamless garment” to reality that encompasses the churning of the stars and the stillness of the soul.



No less than any supernatural tradition we stretch language to the limit to name these things. We may find Love a less limiting notion than God, but I suspect we would admit that at last even the word Love is left breathless at the heart of our experience. It is perhaps the furthest we can reach in language and concept, such that we speak of Love and allow silence, wonder, and reverence to say the rest.

Second, what of Collapse? By this I mean the unraveling of both the natural world and the humanly made world in all of its social-economic-political-technological complexity in response to human stresses that have overwhelmed the abundance of the planet and will equally tear apart the fabric of the many institutions we have created. I have written about Collapse elsewhere at length, so I won't repeat that here. I will simply note that—without question—Trump's ascendancy was fueled by the early ripples of Collapse. Though hardly inevitable, his election and the ideology that now actively dismantles our world has been nonetheless shaped by the forces of finitude pressing in on our awareness. Collapse can and will take many forms as it plays out across the globe. Trump's authoritarian fascism represents one particularly toxic political expression of Collapse. And it's playing out before us right now.

Third, merely a sketch? Each of the seven values in Article II is worth an essay or more in itself. But between a broken neck (my dad's) and a cancerous prostate (mine) and a rapidly disintegrating national politics (ours), I am stretched in more ways than I can adequately juggle right now. I can *sketch*, but that's my limit. I can return to these thoughts later.

So, we begin. (The italicized sentence used to introduce each value is drawn from "Our Shared Unitarian Universalist Values," a 2024 pamphlet from the UUA.)

Interdependence: *We honor the interdependent web of all existence and acknowledge our place in it.* The words carry truth and intention in every moment, but in a time of Collapse they take on a certain stubborn urgency. As systems break down, the temptation is strong to look after ourselves and abandon those around us. (Or attack them.) In high stress scenarios interdependence seems wistful idealism, but this is precisely when its wisdom is most needed.

Whether in Trump's "America," or in some yet worse era of Collapse, this value reminds us that humility is the first rank of wisdom—and also a first grace. We do not reign, nor need we cower. Rather, *we belong*. Because suffering is so widespread in Collapse: among marginalized and targeted groups and across exploited species and landscapes, we honor the interdependence we know as truth by *opening ourselves to deep grief*. This isn't to say we don't also resist and protect, but Collapse is defined by its irrepressible force. There will be much—too much—suffering that we cannot stop. And in these cases we honor interdependence by grieving.

And, yes, we honor interdependence by resisting insofar as we can. This value affirms that solidarity and community—across differences, between people, with other living things, and even with landscapes and ecosystems—are *always* worthy goals because they echo the deep reality of our world. When we act in alignment with interdependence, we join our energy to the quiet flow of truth. This never guarantees success, but it promises integrity and potentially a harvest of righteous power.

Pluralism: *We are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.* UUs came early to acknowledge there is *much* to learn from human wisdom outside our own tradition. And over the ensuing years we came (yes, with occasional fits and shouts) to recognize there was wisdom beyond our tradition *that we needed*—sometimes to complete our insight, sometimes to correct our mistakes, and sometimes to heal the wounds that have resulted from our entanglement with whiteness and dominion.

The work of pluralism in Collapse is to redouble our commitment to learn from others; the simple truth is that many of the communities that have been harmed by white supremacy, homophobia, extractive capitalism, and all the adjacent othering of empire are already well-acquainted with the

dynamics of Collapse that are only now impinging on our lives. Members of marginalized communities will be some of our best mentors now—because they have lived chapters of this tale before.

This value also guards us from holding neighbors and friends in contempt if they have been lured into active collaboration or passive complicity with the brutal forces of Collapse. This is *not* to say that we should feel no sense of betrayal or anger. Nor that we refrain from voicing our feelings. From politicians to families and neighbors, those who promote or accede to the dehumanizing rhetoric and destructive policies being implemented by Trump and his administration *are fundamentally responsible for their own actions*. But our recognition that, even so, they *remain* sacred beings, calls us to a pluralism that involves honest and pointed critique and real pain, but which has no place for sheer contempt.

Justice: *We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all feel welcome and can thrive.* Under Collapse in general Beloved Communities will be under assault. The pressures of a world where finitude means precipitously(!) less for each of us will amplify the impulse to hold onto what's ours—even if it came to be “ours” only through a system biased against others. Furthermore, under a Trump-led Collapse, because Beloved Communities smack of DEIA practices (diversity-equity-inclusion-accessibility), our work for justice sets us on a collision course with the pathological values of Trumpism itself.

From efforts to undermine voting rights to creating fear within immigrant communities to undoing LGBTQ+ rights and altogether denying the reality of transgender persons, we are experiencing societal Collapse by executive order in real time. Because our work for Beloved Community is at the very heart of our religious vision for humanity, this value of justice makes the very practice of our religion an embodiment of what Trump has named “the enemy within”—a sacred manifestation of the “wokeness” he aims to erase from our civic life.

This suggests it is imperative to cultivate justice and democratic practices and undo the misshaping wrought by whiteness in our own communities *with special urgency*. As we make our own congregations vibrant living laboratories of justice, we will also gain essential skills and wisdom needed to let this *holy yearning* leaven the communities around us as well. *This work will not be without peril*. There are martyrs in our heritage. This may be a good time to become acquainted with their stories as seeds for our own faithfulness today.

Transformation: *A living tradition adapts to changing world and supports individuals in their growth and the deepening of their understanding.* As a UU community we have covenanted to grow together. It's why we embedded in our bylaws the *mandate* to revisit our principles and values on a regular basis. The world changes, and our faithfulness must adapt to new knowledge and understanding of the world in which we dwell. This pledge to ongoing collective self-transformation means that today we re-imagine what it means to be “Answering the Call of Love”—in a time of Collapse, marked by ecological upheaval, economic uncertainty, social unrest, and political terror.

Part of this is admitting that some of the changes we face are irrevocable. We might endure and eventually overturn the present political tides, though that will not happen easily or quickly. But the shifting planetary dynamics driving Collapse overall will not be undone on any time scale that matters for human life. Still, we transform ourselves to be a community that seeks to alleviate suffering and to support human meaning regardless of our capacity to do this absolutely. We will, no doubt, have small victories ... and major defeats. That is the nature of Collapse: more losses than gains. It is not a cheery prospect. But our readiness to transform again and again might provide the nimbleness that will allow us to persevere in our faith even in a collapsing world.

Generosity: *We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.* I'll be honest, this spirit sounds a bit ethereal until fleshed out by the demands of scarcity that Collapse will bring to bear. As we expound in our actual bylaws, "We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality." The words were crafted so recently, just over the past five years, but they will be severely tested by Collapse.

True, our storied history includes persons who have shown remarkable generosity of spirit in dedicating themselves to abolition, suffrage, civil rights, and human rights around the world. Nonetheless, these "remarkable" stories will need to become *the norm* under Collapse. A generosity of faith that speaks truth and a generosity of presence/witness as civil rights and wellbeing are under attack, threaten to bring us into direct conflict with Trump's rule (sadly, the word "governance" would be an inaccurate euphemism). Gratitude and hope can surely help sustain generosity, but *grit and solidarity* are spirits we must cultivate more rigorously to undergird our generosity in Collapse.

This is true, too, of our generosity with material resources. Both short term (under Trump) and long term (under full scale Collapse), sharing resources will no longer be an extension of our relative security. Rather, we will learn to share material goods in recognition of our profound mutual insecurity and vulnerability. This is a value whose mettle will be most honestly measured as want makes itself at home in our midst, as it surely will. Then generosity will be the heartbeat of our lives. Or our hearts themselves will be stilled.

Equity: *We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.* We make "flourishing" the benchmark of equity (and it ought to be), but there is no material human flourishing possible on a planet irreparably harmed by human exploitation. Our interdependence is so fully interwoven with the whole of our planet, that—especially as a Sixth Extinction unfolds, tearing asunder countless relationships upon which we and others in the community of Life depend—we *must* extend our perception of inherent worth to every echo of life. Inherent worth doesn't mean equal worth, but it places an inescapable moral claim on us and our actions that we have sidestepped far too long.

Eventually, in the long *unending* season of Collapse, flourishing will not be possible, *except* as an inward disposition to be generous with the dignity, love, and compassion we bring into the world. Moreover, in a political context where equity is demonized—even criminalized—as an affront to the legacy of whiteness in our nation, the active embrace of equity may be consequential today in ways unimaginable just a decade ago. Knowing this, we should own equity, as the compass of our inward disposition or the aim of our outward collective action, with extra savvy and self-awareness. It may well place a target on us in exact proportion to how much we answer the call to be in solidarity with others who are targeted by the powers of our socio-economic systems and our authoritarian state.

Finally, as we extend inherent worth to all echoes of Life, in a time of Collapse it will become clear that for *some* of these echoes (creatures, species, ecosystems, peoples, perhaps even humanity as a whole), their lot in a collapsing world is to perish. Whatever it may mean to practice equity when we find ourselves accompanying others (or ourselves!) toward extinction, equity says that every being is worthy of honor, respect, and care even when flourishing—or survival—are no longer possible.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values.* Love in practice manifests itself in the shared values we covenant to embody in our personal and collective lives. It is the restless, yearning energy that sits behind and moves within each value. As well as the hunger/invitation toward wholeness we acknowledge in the universe itself. And it is the agency—the inner drive—we aspire to have at the heart of our lives.

Yet we recognize that among the primal impulses of the cosmos there is also the tragic: that finitude dictates that life, from stars to microbes, comes at its own expense. Life writ large is renewed, as life writ small exhausts itself and is taken by others. And there is also an unholy capacity for evil—the needless yet willful causing of harm. We dare to suggest that this capacity is not evidence of a broken or rebellious humanity, but rather evidence of a primal tension that is intrinsic to self-aware beings who experience freedom—and finitude. Whether this is limited only to humans, we cannot say.

What we can say is that this capacity for evil seems to bear witness to an energy latent in the cosmos itself. It is part of the raw longing for Life not yet disciplined or accountable to a community. In this perspective, *to speak of Liberating Love as our core value is to say that, in a universe relentlessly tinted by the tragic and persistently haunted by the potential for evil, in this time and place, we choose Love. We choose Love not singly but collectively, because Love is the choice to live in community within the tragic constraints of finitude and, insofar as possible, against the lure of evil.*

In a very real sense, Collapse, as the imminent consequence of undisciplined living on a finite planet, and Trumpism, as the penultimate rebellion of human evil against the wondrous complexity of life and the denial of finitude—both of these reflect a strident rejection of Liberating Love and the values arrayed around it.

Many UU congregations light a chalice at the start of the service, a simple act of reverence that draws us together. That chalice is often linked to the Love we set at the center of our lives (as in the Shared Values Flower image). We typically light the chalice with one set of words and extinguish it at the end of the service with another. The readings vary, but in my congregation, we use these words every week at the end of our time together: “We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts, until we are together again.”

This has been our habit for much longer than my time here. As we continue to light that flame each week under an increasingly despotic president and an ecologically ravaged planet, it is tempting to despair or panic. That’s the purpose behind “shock and awe.”

But the values we hold, the Love that animates them, and the collective energy of our covenantal life—*these things are sufficient for the moment we’re in*. Not that they will “save the day,” but that they will steady us to be channels of Love in a tilting world. We light the chalice weekly, as a visible symbol of the Love at center. But the truth is, *we are that chalice*. Gathered together, we host the flame of Liberating Love among us. And scattered afterwards, we each carry an ember of that flame, not only in our hearts, but also in our deeds.

We claim no monopoly on these values. Indeed, they are echoed in many other faith traditions. For us, they offer a theology for societal collapse that forms our character and fashions our commitments in tumultuous times. It is a Theology of Liberating Love that leads us to draw on the shared values of interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity as we engage the dynamics of Collapse in this world.

The question is not whether doing so can “save” the world. More modest than that, it is *whether doing so can save our humanity*. Even that is not guaranteed. But we believe that keeping a lit chalice in our hearts and in our lives—together—is the place to begin. Collapse is here. *Find your chalice and get lit.*

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, “writing into the whirlwind” of contemporary challenges, joys, and sorrows around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, peace, and family. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” Support him in Writing into the Whirlwind at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait.