

“A Question of Belonging”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
16 January 2011

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

Our meditation words this morning come from Unitarian Adlai Stevenson:

“I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there’s nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one’s own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination.”

Reading: “What We Aren’t, What We Are” by The Rev. Burton Carley

It has been noted that Charles Darwin was a chronic complainer who was at his happiest when he had something to gripe about.

The story is told that one night he and his wife were guests at a banquet at which everything went wrong.

The speeches were dry, the champagne was not.

The food was inferior, the service even more so.

Worst of all, Darwin was sitting in a draft, about which he had a phobia.

All through the evening, he grumbled and complained.

When the banquet was over, the sponsor of the affair came over to Mrs. Darwin and said apologetically:

“I couldn’t help noticing that your husband was terribly upset.

I do hope he will forgive us.

We wanted so much for him to have a good time.”

“[Oh,] he had a wonderful time,” Mrs. Darwin assured him.
“He was able to find fault with everything.”

This same characteristic may be found among us when it comes to describing our Unitarian [tradition] to those who are curious about us.

It is easy to slide into a kind of negativism that focuses more on who we are not and what we don't believe, than in positive affirmations.

What makes it so easy to frame our community in terms of what we are not is that often the questions we get are about traditional beliefs that illicit either/or kind of responses, and it is easy to fall into that trap.

Here is one suggestion for avoiding that trap. Reflect on one positive reason why the church is important to you, and reframe the question.

One of our members did exactly that when he spoke about coming to the realization that while religions and individuals have insight into what is true, the sole possession of the truth is beyond the claim of anyone, including our own tradition.

So the meaning of membership is choosing to be with people where one is encouraged to grow in the understanding of what is true. And there is no monopoly on the truth.

The holy is not a noun that comes to us from a definition.
The holy is a verb.

The answer to the question, “What is the meaning of life?”
is to be found in what we do.

There is no answer separate from your life and your relationships.

As we create and nurture generous lives,
lives that will be a blessing to others, the holy is discovered as a verb,
something that happens as you connect to what is larger than yourself.

Thus our [congregation] is about more than theories, ideas and beliefs.
It is about covenant or relationships and how together we grow our souls.

[As] G. K. Chesterton put it once:

“Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.”

Sermon: “A Question of Belonging”

Over an academic career spanning from kindergarten to seminary,
it was my only real run-in with the authorities.

It was Grade Seven at Apollo Junior High in Richardson, Texas.

I was on my way to class when the bell rang.
And for reasons I now can't quite recall,
I decided then and there that I wasn't going to make it to my class—
and that I wasn't going to try.

In an instant the corridors emptied,
and I soon realized that cutting class wasn't going to actually be very much fun
unless I had someone to share the hour with.

So, I went, with all deliberate speed,
to the classroom where I knew my friend Kristin could be found.

My plan, pathetic as it was, was that I would get her attention
through the small sliver of a window in the door
and somehow—I guess telepathically—
convince her of a pressing need to excuse herself to the washroom.

(Now, this might be a moment to remind us all that the mind of an adolescent
boy is a sometimes clouded and confounding thing. . .)

When Kristin failed to catch sight of me simply standing outside the door, I
resorted to flailing my arms, and then, eventually I took to hopping.

Up and down, coordinated with an frantic wave,
I was just sure Kristin would see me and quickly catch on to my plan.

And, it was around that time, jumping up and down,
that I felt a powerful presence enter in to my life.

With an enormous hand on my head
and a booming voice not unlike what I imagined God's to be,
Principal Davis brought my hopping to an end
and asked, “Son, just where do you think you belong?”

I'm not sure what I said, but it must have been unintelligible, because the next thing I knew, he had opened the door of Kristin's classroom, ushered me to a seat, and told the baffled teacher to keep an eye on me.

And, with that, he left the room.
Not knowing what else to do, I simply smiled and shrugged.

Now, of course, I wasn't where I belonged.
I had ended up in a Spanish class with a teacher I didn't recognize and a language I didn't speak.

For better or for worse, though, I had thoroughly gotten my friend's attention. . . , and with one steely glare, she made clear I had just reached a bold new height in being a complete dolt.

As I've thought about the congregational conversation we'll be having this afternoon about the meaning of membership, I've reflected back on that question asked by my principal thirty years ago—the question of just where I thought I belonged.

It has turned out to be a question that has defined much of my life.

And, it's a question I suspect that is never really very far off from the thoughts of most any of us.

There is a deep yearning in the human spirit to belong—to be welcomed, to be accepted, to find ourselves “in the place just right.”

Or, is there? Do we really want to belong?

In his poem, “My Ancestral Home,” Louis Jenkins tells a story that I imagine many of us might be able to relate to.

We came to a beautiful little farm. From photos I'd seen I knew this was the place. The house and barn were painted in the traditional Falu red, trimmed with white. It was nearly mid-summer, the trees and grass, lush green, when we arrived the family was gathered at a table on the lawn for coffee and fresh strawberries. Introductions were made all around, Grandpa

Sven, Lars-Olaf and Marie, Eric and Gudren, Cousin Inge and her two children... It made me think of a Carl Larsson painting. But, of course, it was all modern, the Swedes are very up-to-date, Lars-Olaf was an engineer for Volvo, and they all spoke perfect English, except for Grandpa, and there was a great deal of laughter over my attempts at Swedish. We stayed for a long time laughing and talking, It was late in the day, but the sun was still high. I felt a wonderful kinship. It seemed to me that I had known these people all my life, they even looked like family back [home]. But as it turned out, we had come to the wrong farm. Lars-Olaf said, "I think I know your people, they live about three miles from here. If you like I could give them a call." I said that no, it wasn't necessary, this was close enough.¹

Belonging comes with complications.

While belonging can convey a sense of connection, of inclusion, of acceptance, of the joy of knowing others and being fully known, belonging also can involve a sense of ownership, with all the rights and responsibilities that come with it.

In the Unitarian tradition, we belong to our congregation, and our congregation belongs to us.

And, so when we talk about belonging and membership, both parts—the benefits of connection and the obligations of ownership—are at play because a congregation is both an organization with practical considerations and a religious community with spiritual concerns.

It's tempting sometimes to think that they're not related, or that one is more important than the other.

It's easy to see this place as only a warm and fuzzy spiritual hub

¹ Louis Jenkins, "My Ancestral Home" from *European Shoes*. Will O' the Wisp Books, 2008.

and forget that there are light bulbs to be changed and budgets to be built.

Or, on the other side of that coin,
for those sometimes up to their eyeballs in the chores of running this place, it
can be all too easy to forget
that this is a place of peace and spiritual sustenance,
a house of hope dedicated to the growth of our souls
and the healing of the world.

Both parts of belonging, both sides, connection and responsibility,
are essential to the well-being of this congregation,
and both parts are absolutely crucial
for any of us who intend to truly deepen and transform our spiritual lives.

A few years ago, a study on the nature of membership in the Unitarian
Universalist tradition explained that:

. . . magic cannot create the warm fuzzy ideal that most people associate
with community. Real community can only be built through hard and
unglamorous work.

Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment.

Often these days we hear people say they are seeking a “spiritual
community” but want nothing to do with “organized religion.”

By the former they seem to mean a place that will meet their own religious
needs; the latter they seem to associate with a place that will make
demands upon them to support the institution’s needs.

The reality is that you cannot have one without the other,
and part of the [congregation]’s job is to lead people to the discovery of
the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive,
giving not only our money but ourselves.

In other words, only by making a commitment to a community
can we hope to build a community.

And this commitment consists not of lofty idealisms but of practical

realities.²

It's not unlike the hard truth one would find on retreat in a Zen monastery.

Beforehand, it might be enticing to think only of the peaceful hours that would surely be spent seated on a pillow in meditation without realizing that so much of the real spiritual work of a retreat is found in chopping carrots and washing the latrines.

The task there, just as it is here, is to uncover the spiritual in the everyday.

To discover that real spiritual growth often begins on the other side of disillusionment, and, that with stunning consistency, it involves coming to terms with the very real frustrations of living in religious community with other people.

This congregation is a laboratory of the human spirit— a place where, when we are at our best, we endeavour with one another to understand what it means to be fully human.

That doesn't mean that it's easy or that we're always successful.

There are times when we fail to live up to our highest selves— both as individuals and as a community.

There are moments when we need to call one another back to our deepest values and most noble purpose.

And, that is when it is so vitally important that we return to the covenant at the heart of this congregation.

Each week, we affirm here that “Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth our sacrament, and service our prayer.”

We state that we seek “to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, and to serve life, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine.”

² The Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, UUA, June, 2001.

It is not a statement of belief to which we assent,
but a covenant of being to which we aspire.

Ours is not a creedal tradition, but a covenantal tradition.

To become a member of a Unitarian congregation is to subscribe
not to a set of theological beliefs,
but to a set of promises that we make to each other
about how we intend to be and behave,
in both good times and tough times.

That's what it means to walk together in the ways of love,
and that's what it means for any of us to belong here.

I should also say, though, that this journey isn't necessarily for everyone.

Like any congregation, we lose members—
people who stay for a time, but ultimately decide to leave.

This happens for many reasons.

Some people are in the midst of larger life transitions,
some have found the healing or hope that they came for,
some aren't ready to undertake the growth they might need to remain here,
and some just discover that their journey is leading them some place else.

If and when people do decide to leave, they do so renewed
and with a better sense of where they are going, we will have served them well.

And, when that's not the case, we might well have something more to learn
about what it means to build up the beloved community.

We try our best to support all those who choose and commit to be members of
this congregation, though there is certainly more that we could and can do—
things I hope we'll be talking about this afternoon,
while realizing that the responsibility
is one that we all have with and to each other.

In the title essay of his book, *The Blessings of Imperfection*,
Peter Fleck speaks to the difficulties of the shared religious life:

Well, let's be frank and admit that [a congregation] has its aggravations. The eternal and oh-so-necessary concern about finances, the annually recurring problems of balancing a budget, of finding money for repainting the [parish hall], repairing the boiler and tuning the organ, the ongoing criticism of the minister's sermons, which are too liberal for some and too orthodox for others, too pedantic for some and too colloquial for others, the endless committee meetings about the Sunday School curriculum about the propriety of social action, and the persistent shortage of tenors in the choir.

Who wants it? Who needs it?

The answer [he says] to this question is that we...want it, because we need it.

The answer is that [religious community], and I am now speaking of liberal [religious community, he says], in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better, infinitely better, than [life without religious community].

Maybe I should not have said "in spite of its shortcomings" but "because of its shortcomings."

For isn't it true that in our [congregations], in these communities of the spirit, we have more resources than [we would have without them] to accept each other's imperfections, to reconcile our differences, to forgive and be forgiven, to comfort and to be comforted, to love and to be loved?

Isn't that what [our liberal religion] is all about— because [isn't that] what life is all about?

I have talked today of many things— about belonging, about commitment and frustration and love. But this has really been a sermon on the meaning of membership— on the decision we make over and over again to dedicate ourselves to the covenant we share.

So, renewed by the conversation that is to come this day,
may we walk on and on together,
building up the beloved community of belonging in this place.

Amen.