The grand prize was a toy Noah’s Ark, complete with pairs of plastic pigs, elephants, snakes, and so forth.

I had won this tiny boat and its miniature menagerie by being able to rattle off the proper names of all 66 books of the Protestant version of the Christian Bible.

Though just six years old at the time, I’m certain it’s a feat I couldn’t come near to pulling off today, at least not without a lot of time, even though I hold a degree in comparative religion and another in a strange field called “divinity.”

Words like Habakkuk and Obadiah just don’t seem to roll off my tongue as easily as they once did...

As many of you know, the world of my childhood was shaped by fundamentalist Christianity, through and through.

Church was the cornerstone of my family’s life. It was where we visited our friends and even where we visited the graves of my great-grandparents, who were at rest in the burial ground just outside the sanctuary.

In so many palpable ways, our lives were anchored there at the Fairview Free Will Baptist Church.

Every Sunday morning, we attended worship services and Sunday School (which were two separate events, incidentally).

A luncheon would follow coffee hour, and then everyone would go home for a nap, before returning to church in the evening for more.

Looking back, I can’t recall every being bored at church.

Instead, in and around bible lessons and children’s choir,
I remember endless games of hide-and-go-seek
in parts of the building I probably should never have seen.

I remember unsupervised relay races
through that same cemetery I mentioned before,
and baseball games that went on for hours in the backyard of the church.

I remember potlucks, and bus trips, and baptisms galore.

I also recall having a network of adults
who were like an extended family to me,
forming something of a safety net for me and all the other kids.

I recall being deeply loved,
and the feeling that even though I was a child,
I was a cherished part of that religious community.

A feeling I so hope that we are passing on to the children in our midst.

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In recent days, thinking about how our religious past
gives shape to our present lives, for better and, sometimes, for worse,
I was drawn to search out this little book from my library,
the very first Bible I ever owned.

Now, given the course of my academic studies,
I have acquired many more Bibles through the years.

I own copies in most of the major English translations,
a copy of the Christian scriptures in Greek,
excerpts of the same in Latin,
and commentaries on the Gospel of Luke in French.

And, I have taken countless courses
that helped me to understand more fully
just how the collection of texts called the Bible came into being—
how these documents were the work of very human hands
and were compiled, at times,
through contentious debate and vicious political maneuvering—
to be passed down as the canons we have today.

Still, all of that notwithstanding,
it is the poorly painted scenes found in *this* particular little Bible—
of Jonah and the Whale, of the parting of the Red Sea, of the Good Samaritan, and Jesus feeding the 5,000—that colour more of my religious imagination than I really care to admit.

It baffles me, really.

I mean, through the years, I’ve engaged in a careful study of much of the Bible.

I’ve even been fortunate to visit many of the world’s great art museums and seen sophisticated depictions of these same biblical scenes by Raphael, Rubens, and Rembrandt.

But, opening this Bible again this week and looking upon visual images I’ve not seen in decades, I was struck by how profoundly familiar these scenes were (and are) to me.

In an instant, they are capable of transporting me back to a time and place I thought I had left behind so long ago.

To be sure, I have travelled quite a long road from my Sunday School days, but, as is the case for many, if not most, of us who come from other faith traditions, I have carried a lot of my past along with me.

* * *

As is typical of most Unitarian congregations, only 10-15% of us were raised in this faith tradition.

What’s more, I’m pretty certain that I could count on one hand the adult members of this congregation who’ve actually been here since they were children.

I could preach a whole sermon on why that is—but the growth of our faith has, for several decades now, come through the over 90% of us who arrived from other—or increasingly, no—religious traditions.

Ours is a religion of immigrants, or sometimes, of religious refugees, if you will.
We arrive here from many different paths, 
with some of us taking long, and complicated journeys along the way.

Those among us who are “come-inners,” 
as we converts to UUism were once called, 
owe a great debt of gratitude to those who have been UUs all of their lives—including the children and youth in our congregation.

“Cradle” UUs sometimes tire of hearing the rest of us 
talk about our conversion experiences—and assuming our experience is universally shared.

And they can feel frustrated with our unresolved religious trauma.

A few years ago, a survey of this congregation 
indicated that the religious background 
of 53% of us is Protestant Christianity, 
that 20% of us were raised Catholic, 
5% are of Jewish heritage, 
13% had no religious background growing up, 
and 1% each were either Buddhist or Muslim.

14% reported being raised Unitarian, 
while another 3% chose “other,” which I assume indicates 
other religious backgrounds, 
or some interesting combination of the above categories.

This rich blending of backgrounds is a source of our strength, 
but it is also, of course, at times, 
the basis of some of our deepest frustrations.

Competing visions and disparate expectations abound among us 
of just what a religious community could or should be.

Very often, these expectations are firmly, 
though sometimes unconsciously, rooted 
in what we carry with us from our religious past, 
whether as intentional efforts to recreate our previous experience, 
or in direct and vehement opposition to it.

“Baggage” is the colloquial term for it, 
and many of us, myself included, 
have amassed quite an impressive set of it 
through the years of our religious wanderings.
The good news is that your baggage (and mine!) is fully welcome here under the very Big Tent of Unitarian Universalism.

We’ve got plenty of room. The more the merrier!

The catch, though, is that while we’re all welcome to bring our baggage with us, we are eventually expected to actually do something with it.

I would say that a significant step on the spiritual path of being a happy and healthy Unitarian involves unpacking the bags we have brought with us, and to consider which things are the gems worth keeping and what are the things that no longer serve—if they ever did—and need to be let go of.

It’s not that easy to sift through our stuff. And it’s rarely all that much fun.

The treasures can sometimes be hard to find.

And sometimes they aren’t there at all, especially if religious abuse has been a big part of our past.

But more often than not, the traditions from which we came did send us on with gifts that many of us may have simply left unopened.

For the longest time, I found it impossible to find any such gifts in my Southern Baptist upbringing.

The judgment and rejection I felt from the church of my childhood after coming out of the closet was, at times, more than I could bear.

For years, my theological quarrels with fundamentalism were all I could seem to find among the baggage I had brought along with me in adulthood.

I was bitter and resentful at anything having to do with that particular brand of Christianity.
I was reactive to the point of feeling I would surely break out in hives at the sound of certain words or specific types of music.

I had little patience for “God-talk,” and certainly didn’t care to spend time in the company of this particular God’s ambassadors.

While I had wrestled with fundamentalism for years, when I decided to reject it all, cavalierly chucking the theological tradition I could no longer abide, I also discarded, for a time, the value of religious community, and all the gifts that come with it.

The loss was greater than I bargained for. And it apparently showed.

A few years later, at a political rally, after I had shared some rather choice, but uncharitable words with a bunch of Christian counter-protesters, a wise and trusted friend pulled me aside to ask: “So, how is that pain serving you and the greater good?”

I didn’t have an answer.

I didn’t have an answer because, until that moment, I was more than content to stew in my hurts and grievances, all the while, using them to build up around me the walls that ultimately kept my own health and healing at bay.

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Perhaps you’ve heard the story of long ago, of two monks who were traveling together through the countryside.

Before long, they came upon a beautiful young woman sitting and sobbing by the side of a raging river.

She explained that she was afraid of drowning and asked them if they would help her cross to the other side.

Without saying a word, one of the monks picked up the young woman and carried her safely to the opposite shore, where he gently put her down.
She thanked him and went on her way.

The two men then continued their journey.

After a while, the monk said to the one who had carried the young woman, “How could you ever do such a thing? We have taken vows of chastity. It is forbidden to even talk to a woman let alone touch one.”

The other monk lovingly replied, “When I came to the other side of the stream, I put her down. Now, why is it that you still carrying her?”

Sometimes what we most need in this life are friends who will ask us such pointed questions.

Friends who will hold up a mirror and ask if our behaviour is really getting us where we most want and need to go, who will ask if it isn’t about time that we let some things go for good.

There are times when I have thought Unitarianism needs that kind of friend, someone to ask us if we’re still fighting battles that have already come and gone, nursing wounds that don’t serve us all that well.

So often, the tensions that play out among us—and not specifically here but in most every UU congregation—could be significantly eased if we were to commit ourselves to making peace with our past, by picking out the gems, and letting the rest go.

And this is as true for us as a religious movement as it is for us as individuals.

There are many ways our collective baggage comes into play, but one of the easiest to spot in a UU congregation is the very strong allergic reaction so many of us have to most anything having to do with Christianity.
It makes some sense, given that so many of us started out there, and that this religious tradition itself grew from that very soil.

But I desperately want Unitarianism to be a religion that is ultimately about moving toward something—about working to build up a better world, rather than just moving away from something that makes us uncomfortable.

So let us come to own our past, religious and otherwise, that we might be fully free to live into the promise of our faith.