

“Association Sunday: Growing a Religion”

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There is an organizational development story about a man who injured his thumb on the job. He was told by his foreman to go to the clinic. He stepped inside and saw an empty room with only a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of the room there were two doors--one marked "Illness" and the other marked "Injury."

The man thought to himself, "I am not sick; I have just hurt my thumb." He walked through the door marked "Injury."

He found himself in a second room. It was empty except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back door were two doors--one marked "Internal" the other "External." The man thought to himself, "It's my thumb that is hurt, not something inside." He walked through the door marked "External."

He found himself in still another empty room except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of this room there were also two doors, one marked "Therapy" and the other, "Treatment." He thought to himself, "I don't need counseling or therapy. What I need is to have this thumb treated." He walked through the door marked "Treatment".

He found himself in still a fourth room. Also empty except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of the room were two doors--one was marked "Major" and the other "Minor." He thought to himself, "This isn't a major illness; it's just my thumb that is hurt." He walked through the door marked "Minor."

He found himself outside the clinic on the street. He walked back to the building and went to work. The foreman saw him and said, "Were they able to help you?" The man said, "I'm not sure--but I will tell you one thing, that is the best organized outfit I have ever seen!"

Both my wife Cathie and I come from churchgoing families, and both of us had been turned off by traditional church so had stopped going; indeed stopped believing in the traditional concepts and had become humanists or agnostics. We found our sense of community when we were first married with our friends our music our intellectual pursuits and our jobs. We really felt little need of so-called religious community because that was for us the same as conservative and old and let's face it parental, , except for those times like around certain holidays like Thanksgiving, Xmas and Easter and then the weddings. or funerals. We wanted something religious, but not the old ways, because they no longer fit us, or to be more accurate of course, for they had not changed, it was we who had changed, we who had new needs, new, liberal, Post modern, post Christian spiritual not doctrinal needs. We didn't need salvation nor did we need the old fashioned God of the pie in the sky variety of stern and unyielding Father figure authoritarian rule giver. We had too many questions that we had not been allowed to ask. Too many doubts. Maybe too much education.

At least that was what my mother often used to accuse me of!

The point I'm trying to make is that so often part of growing up is rejecting the old ways, including religion, or at least, and I think this is very important, rejecting the old way of approaching understanding maybe even of celebrating or believing religion, but not of religion itself. In other words, each of us must discover our own way of religion, our own idea of God, if you will, even if that includes no God or Goddess.

It's from Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet: "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer." (trans. Stephen Mitchell)

Alice Walker writes in her book, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*:

I must love the questions/themselves/as Rilke said/ like locked rooms/full of treasure
/to which my blind/and groping key/does not yet fit. /And await the answers/
as unsealed/letters/mailed with dubious intent/ and written in a very foreign/
tongue.
And in my hourly making/ of myself/no thought of Time/ to force, to squeeze /the
space/ I grow into."

From a UU perspective:

The Great Oliver Wendell Holmes was asked at a dinner party what his religion was. He answered, "Unitarian." "Why?" his interrogator continued. "Holmes replied: "In Boston everyone must be something, and the very least you can be is Unitarian."

I'd like to change that thinking to the opposite that the most one can be is UU! Almost 15 years ago now, more than 500 of us UU ministers met in Hot Springs Ark for a Minister's Convocation to try to find a sense of what our theological center was if any and we tried to come up with language that might bring into the next Millennium; here's part of what we said:

Covenant of the 1995 UUMA Convocation

"In the midst of mystery/And the enduring presence of religious community, The creative power of transforming love,/Engages us in the beauty and tragedy of life To awaken compassion, call us to justice,/And invite us to live in harmony with the earth. /In light of our commitment to our Unitarian Universalist faith and our responsibility to our colleagues, congregation and the world:

We covenant to affirm that at the heart of our faith is a profound sense of the holy and a critical trust in the power of reason. We lift up this universal religious experience, while respecting our different religious languages and symbols, in worship, religious education, fellowship, and service."

Dick Gilbert from a sermon surely in response to the 1995 ministers' Convocation entitled: "Souls on Fire!-Can UU's have Religious Experiences? 1995

"There is only one catch, stated strangely enough in a sign on a Las Vegas gambling casino which says 'You must be present to win.' There is more wisdom in this than first meets the eye. Too often we are absent from life-too often we don't pay attention to the holy ground beneath our feet-too often we do not listen to the music of the spheres-too often we are too busy to serve the people who need what we alone can give. We must be present to win.

And so I confess that the irreducible passionate and enduring center of my Unitarian Universalist faith is simply this:
In the light of truth and the embrace of beauty
We unite for the celebration of life and the service of humanity.

Our burning bushes, our blinding flashes of insight, our rites of passage are as common as the everyday if we are present to them. These are not the stuff of conventions-they are the tinder with which the soul comes ablaze."

Two years after that I read an article that said, "For the first time, a minority of German citizens profess a belief in God. A survey in the magazine "Der Spiegel" found that the number of believers has dropped to 45 percent from 50 percent in the past four years. During the same span, the number of atheists has risen to 28 percent from 20 percent. Only one out of four Germans said they believe in Jesus Christ. -- "News Briefs," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, July 14, 1997, p.69.

Now I want you to think of the irony of that, because Protestantism really comes out of Germany with Martin Luther, in Wittenberg, Germany, 1517; the key figure in the Reformation rejecting the authority of the Catholic Pope; retaining the bishops, and making the "Bible" as the ultimate authority for all matters of religious belief and practice with the "priesthood of all believers and all should read the Bible, and interpret it in his own way. This, of course, opens the floodgates which will lead to the heresy of both Unitarianism and Universals which after all was interpreting the Bible!

But it all started in Germany with Luther. You might also like to know by the way, that most of the priests who became Protestants seemed to get married!

The UUA believes it is a living religious tradition that draws from many sources. The six sources upon which it draws include:

- 1) Direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder;
- 2) Words and deeds of prophetic women and men;
- 3) Wisdom from the world's religions;
- 4) Jewish and Christian teachings;
- 5) Humanist teachings; and
- 6) Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions.

I believe these are sources for the future as well, and that we will find more to draw from in the future.

We grow a religion because we need the freedom to explore, to search, to discuss, to question, to doubt, indeed, to disbelieve, though we eventually come to the need to believe again, or put differently, to flesh out what it is we do believe, what it is does give us meaning, bring us comfort, enable us to get through the hard times. Yes, there are perfectly good answers out there, perfectly good religions-some barely used-but we hear the beat of a different drum-fitting that that is a Unitarian quote from Thoreau, isn't it?

The history of the Unitarian part of our heritage especially, is one of a constantly evolving movement, almost pathologically independent and anti authoritarian, hence unwilling to make the sacrifices for growth. Our sometimes rabid individualism has made community building difficult. Let us call a spade a spade; we have been selfish about sharing our treasure which we ourselves only stumbled upon. We have kept ourselves a secret, located our churches and fellowships in out of the way places, and have not spread the Gospel, which is Greek for "Good News." We have not grown our religion; it has grown sometimes despite us.

Growing a religion requires some work of us gardeners. Hard work. Commitment. Vision. Energy. Committee meetings. Cash. Sacrifice. Compassion. Working for Social Justice. Helping and loving one another. An opening of the mind, heart, hands, and spirit to the mysterious- by whatever name we wish to call it. The teachings of Jesus are not less meaningful because there are people who have interpreted them differently, OK vastly different, than we have. We still teach that love is the most important part of religion, not rule-following.

My colleague who is minister of the Olympia Brown UU Church in Racine Wisconsin, Tony Larson, often puts on UU Revivals with more than just a little tongue in cheek, but he often does his own translating of old hymns into UU language. Folks start out somewhat playing, but eventually we realize that we are a liberal religion that draws from many religious sources, as in the Hasidic story earlier. So this hymn translation of "What a friend we have in Jesus;" meant respectfully:

- What a friend we have in Jesus. What a friend in Socrates.
- What a friend we have in Buddha. To the kingdom we have keys.
- We believe in many saviors. We believe in many seers.
- Souls whose universal gospel Speaks to us across the years.
- What a friend we have in Moses. What a friend in Esther, too.
- We have Lao Tzu and Confucius. And a prophet lives in you.
- When you're weak and heavy laden, Cumbered with a load of care,
- Think of friends thru-out the ages, Ev'ry-when and ev'ry-where.
- Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
- We should never be discouraged. U.U. saints are ev'ry-where.
- Souls like President John Adams. Souls like Olympia Brown.
- Oh, what friends we have to guide us. Oh, what sages we have found.
- What a friend in Charles Darwin. What a friend in Susan B.
- What a friend in Clara Barton. They all helped to make us free.
- What a friend in P.T. Barnum. What a friend in Jefferson.

- We've four hundred years of friendship. And you bet there's more to come.
Words: Tony Larson

We believe in religion that laughs,, like the great Lebanese Christian prophet of the old 20th century, Kahlil Gibran, one of my favorite spiritual resources wrote: "Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh, and the greatness which does not bow before children."

We must grow our religion if we are to survive into this century as we keep evolving as our new generations keep reinventing religion, if you will. UU Minister George Marshall in his wonderful book about the history of UUism writes:- "The task of the church is not in finding an armor by which we are shielded from life, but rather the inner mechanism, the will, spirit, and material by which, in a world of both inner stress and outer disaster, we can stand up calmly and serenely to life." And illness, I might add, and finally death as well. And yes, weddings, too, those life events we want to mark with great spiritual depth, not just civil ceremony. Indeed, it was one of those times when people discover us, when they need us!

Psychiatrist, feminist, religious explorer, and writer, Jean Shinoda Bolen writes of her experience at mid-life, recovering from a divorce, feeling depressed, middle aged, and menopausal, when a benefactor who had been touched by her work gave Dr. Bolen tickets for a religious pilgrimage to mystical places like Stonehenge, the cathedral at Chartres, and even Avalon, the home of the mythic Camelot. She wrote a wonderful book about the experience called "Crossing to Avalon." She writes about the relativity of time in a new way:

"Our sense of time alters when we cross into Avalon. The Greeks had two words for time, 'kairos' and 'kronos.' Time as we know it in the rational world is linear and measured kronos, which we keep track of by clocks or chronometers, derived from Kronos, the name of the Greek god who swallowed his children. Time in the fatherworld enters each January 1 symbolized by an infant and departs on December 31 as Father Time, a long-bearded, bent-over old man. In the motherworld, we participate in time and thus lose track of it; the Greek word for this quality of time is kairos. Whenever we are doing something that we love and are totally absorbed in the doing of it, we are in kairos rather than kronos time, whenever we are with someone we love and totally absorbed in being with that person, whenever we are in love, whenever what we are doing nourishes the soul, we are out of ordinary time and in the motherworld."

Church-time and even ministry can be either, of course, but religiously we are energized and spiritualized by the Kairos of working in and for the church. Oh, some meetings are certainly far from Kairos, but as we share the ministry of this church, as we find our gifts, our talents, our ministry, we change time, almost like magic from kronos to kairos. Einstein explained the relativity a little different, but see if they are not similar. There is a great deal of difference in a minute when we compare a minute of sitting on a hot stove with a minute of kissing our beloved talk about kronos and kairos! We need to create more Kairos time in our lives.

Other tasks of the church, of religion, of shared ministry is to call us to live more fully in relationship with each other, with our deepest selves, with the religious spirit called by so many different names. We need to be called to become authentic with each other and to risk letting down our psychic guard. To call us to confess our sins, which are our weaknesses, faults, mistakes, egocentricity, and to apologize for hurt we might have caused, even unintentionally. The rewards of shared ministry might be the most profound of our lives, might be on par with giving birth, because here we might give birth (despite our genders) to a new being who might be us, who might become transformed into transformers of the world. The Great and Mysterious spirit which calls forth the countless religious manifestations of history move still in us who come here, searching for meaning, for love, for celebration of life, for finding joy or expressing grief, of the profound and comforting realization that we are not in this alone, that whether we call it higher power, God, deep friendship, or the holy spirit which we produce by our coming together. Come, let us live religiously with one another.

In *The Emerging Laity: Returning Leadership to the Community of Faith*, James and Evelyn Whitehead write: "Ministry is not meant to be delivered to a passive and docile community of believers. Ministry arises from within the community itself. Each faith community is recognized as a source of ministry, not just its recipients."

Especially for us in our religious search for truth and meaning, for love and the meaning of life, we don't expect our professionally trained clergy to have all the answers, or to be perfect. We usually don't want to feel like the minister is running our church, and indeed the concept of shared ministry is becoming more popular and more meaningful for many lay people. There is even a new book titled, *The Shared Ministry Sourcebook*:, edited by Barbara Child, specifically for our congregations. "At the root of shared ministry," Barbara says in the introduction, "is the belief that all people, not just clergy, are called to share their gifts and to serve one another in religious community. Sharing the ministry, laypeople participating in worship services, visiting the sick and elderly, leading religious education programs, and making other contributions to the congregation's ministry. For clergy, sharing the ministry means engaging the entire congregation in the spiritual well-being of its community."

Let us grow together. Remember, invite one person to church, spread the good word, and that word is love.

Amen, Shalom, (Peace in Hebrew), Assalaamu Alaikum(may Peace be upon you in Arabic), Abrazos a todos (Hugs all around) Namaste, (A Hindu greeting the divinity within you) Blessed Be, and let me add one more blessing that I adapted from the Spanish long before I went in to ministry. "Vaya con Dios" is Spanish for Good-bye, but literally is "Go with God," SO I adapted it to say "Vaya Con Su Dios, "Go with your idea or interpretation of God."