

“Doing Church, Being Church”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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When I first entered a Unitarian Universalist sanctuary I was in search, not ministerial search, the kind of search that brought me here, but search for an integrity of spirit that matched integrity of deed, the kind of search that brought me to this faith. I didn't know what to expect. By then I had been to seminary, was amid my doctoral work, was raising as a single parent two little girls, and was job hunting. You can tell perhaps that I was walking across a rather wobbly suspension bridge. Yes, I was in search.

What I found was what I didn't know existed. Now you might be ready for a qualifier here. This was not the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Shangri-La. It was simply a space and a time and a company that breathed affirmation of whoever came through the door – me even, compassion that translated into compassionate justice, music with words that insulted neither my intelligence nor my budding feminism, and religious perspective grounded in the most liberating dimensions of Judaism and Christianity but not limited to those faith filters of meaning making. On second thought, maybe it was Shangri-La.

I came back and came back and when my daughters and I moved to a town where we were to live for over two decades, I joined the Unitarian Universalist church there. I became active in that church, probably within the first month or so after I signed the membership book. I worshipped there almost every Sunday. I made friends there, friends with whom I felt *sympatico*, but who were by no means clones of me. I got involved in religious education, anti-racism work, even ended up on the Board of Trustees – a non-New Englandese term for a Parish Committee. Church once again became for me a lifeline of meaning making.

Each of us has our own story of how we arrived here. We all come looking for something that sometimes we don't even know, but something, something brings us through the door. Whether we stay, whether we activate as members who “do church” is a choice, not just an individual choice but a choice of this entire community in how we reach out to newcomers, sustain our connection with seasoned members, and inspire one another to participate in what we're about and what we're about to be about.

Let's back up a bit. What does it mean to “do church?” Does it mean to show up on Sunday mornings with our children, drop them off across the street, come over to the Meeting House, slide into a pew, and hope for a rare hour of peace and quiet? Does it mean to be on a committee or sign up for an event or agree to teach an RE class or sing in our choir or any of the host of activities in which we find ourselves as members of this congregation? Does it mean to worship together, to share joys and concerns, to raise our voices because we're getting to know some of the hymns just in time to be jarred by a new one? Does it mean to celebrate together those milestones of birth and dedication and marriage and memorials? Does it mean to reach out and connect with a larger circle of individuals and congregations who call themselves by the same long-winded appendage that we do – Unitarian Universalists? Does it mean contributing our time, our talents, and yes, our money to ensure that this congregation is sustainable and perhaps even visionary in being a church which prompts that other core question: What does it mean

to *be* church? What does it mean to *be* First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset? How does it change our individual identity? How does it define our collective identity?

How would you answer a neighbor from a quite different faith tradition or no faith tradition at all who asks you what it means to *be* a Unitarian Universalist who *be*-longs to this congregation? What is it we're supporting with our pledges of time and talents and money? If we back away from answering these questions, then on what grounds can or will we ever invite an unchurched friend or acquaintance to join us for worship or for an activity that we feel particularly defines who we are and what we're about?

What is the magnetic force that calls us here? What is the magnetic force that keeps us here? What is the magnetic force that compels us to do and be differently because we are here together in this faith community that is within the larger circle of Unitarian Universalism?

I believe the question that underlies all these other questions is: What is the *soul* of this community of faith? It's a treacherous question. Michael Durall helps us understand it. Michael is a somewhat maverick Unitarian Universalist – I know, some of us are probably thinking there's no other kind. Michael is also what we might call a participant observer, sometimes known as a consultant, and he specializes in churches, churches of a variety of denominations, but primarily Christian and Unitarian Universalist, with respect, I would say, for the overlap that this indicates. On the homepage of his website for the CommonWealth Consulting Group, you'll find a photograph of a signpost with five slats of wood hammered to a frame atop which is the replica of a roof and a steeple. On each slat except one is carved the letters of a denomination, all with arrows pointing in the same direction. One under the other, you'll read: Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist. On the bottom slat, with an arrow pointing in the opposite direction, you'll read "Lumber Yard!" I wonder if Michael is saying churches need his help!

In his work with hundreds of congregations, a core question that he posed was: "Does your church have a soul, and if so how would you describe it?" Here are a few of the responses:

"Yes, but it is a candidate for life support."

"Yes, in theory, but only about 10 percent of us wear our souls on the outside."

"Yes, because there is a greater presence than self."

"The soul of this place is like the talent of a young artist, in need of both training and public expression."

"This church has more tradition than soul."

and

"No, and I don't think a church can have one unless people do intense work together."

What a mix of hope and cynicism, vision and understanding surfaces in these responses that are all too commonly kept in the private pockets of pew-sitting folks who can't bear to rock those steeple-topped boats we know as churches. So they disclose privately their yearnings and their hopes, EXCEPT for that person who responded, "Yes, because there is a greater presence than self."

Now this response fascinates me, because I can't tell you how many times folks tell me that they're not really religious, but they're spiritual. Yet here is a person who affirmed that her or his church had a soul "because there is a greater presence than self."

We come here in the first place because something in our selfhood draws us here – a yearning, an invitation, an experiment. We stay here, I believe, because we experience a magnetic force that is greater than the small package of the self. We connect with a larger circle; and some of us connect with smaller circles as segue to that larger circle. Why has Circle Ministry drawn so many of you? In the intimacy of a relatively small circle, you bring your story, whatever it is, around the topic at hand, and you share it and you hear the stories of others in the circle. You're heard; you're affirmed. You listen; you affirm. And you're called as part of the Circle Ministry covenant to plan and carry out at least two ventures beyond the confines of your circle, one for the benefit of this congregation specifically, one, for the benefit of our larger community. You find meaning through acceptance of one another and encouragement to not limit your experience to self or each other, but to a larger circle of humankind. And always a Circle Ministry session begins with a chalice lighting and words that invite you into the time and closes with words that afford passage into the realm beyond the group.

Yet Circle Ministry isn't a microcosm of the church. It's a dimension of a multi-spoked ministry through which we experience and discern the soul of this church.

So what stands in our way? Again, Michael's experience with congregations varied and variable holds responses that may or may not accord with ones that you might offer:

"We don't want to rock the boat."

"We are constantly worried about running out of money and this limits any dreams we might possibly have."

"Membership is too easy here."

And I'll add one that I've heard here, and that was given as the reason for letting go of a commitment to this congregation:

"You're not offering [and the person specified a particular program] anymore, so we're really not interested."

I would posit that a consumer mentality is a big barrier to doing church and being church. Such and such a program isn't on the menu for a particular year, or can't be because we might lack the numbers or the funds or both, and that's that. It's not just here, of course. We're all caught up in what I believe has become a national addiction of consuming, which threatens to consume our very souls. Writes Durall, and this time specifically of our faith:

"Unitarian Universalism has succumbed to a consumer mentality. We hope members and friends like the minister's sermons, the music, the Sunday school, and our programs. If not, the church must have failed."

How to counteract this? How to reactivate what we have and can experience as the magnetic force that drew us here? How to be open to a multitude of forces that bid us remain here because we find meaning that we couldn't possibly find in any other way; because we experience social events not just as another good time but as fellowship; because we experience

outreach not just as a chance to show how good we are but as a natural outpouring of a call to share; because we experience prayer and meditation not just as a chance for some peace and quiet but as a mode by which we connect with the deepest streams of who we are and find that those deepest streams flow as the same river of spiritual yearning; because we know that we have many names and as many opinions about the holy or God or the Great Whoever, but that in covenant we discern together that Spirit of Life that moves through us each and transcends us all?

To be ourselves and to rise above ourselves is a calling to which I believe we aspire as a church. To risk moving out of our comfort zones of perspective and practice into the often not so comfortable zones of justice discernment and justice making is a calling to which I believe we aspire as a church. To be more than we imagine we can possibly be individually and communally is a calling to which I believe we aspire as a church. To be generous because how can we not give to a community of faith that calls us to be and do in spirit and in truth is a calling to which I believe we aspire as a church. To welcome the stranger because we were all once the stranger is a calling to which I believe we aspire as a church, even if it means going up to that stranger in coffee hour, that apparent loner whom no one else is talking with, extend our hand of fellowship, and let them know how glad we are they're here.

“Let me tell you why I come to church,” wrote A. Powell Davies, who spent so much of his life in the pulpit of a church.

“I come to church...because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church – my church of the free spirit – brings me back to what I want to be.

... We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls' deepest yearning. But in church, we do...

We need the unutterable communion of our spirits with the spirit of the highest – all that joins the soul with what it yearns for, all that can raise the frailty of our incomplete humanity toward the level of the spirit's aspirations – that our earthly dust may meet and mingle with the majesty and mystery of God.”

And if you're not so sure about “the majesty and mystery of God,” because we are after all a community of faith and doubt, well, I invite you to take up the topic at coffee hour, *after* you've invited into your circle of coffee cups the one who stands alone, just waiting to experience the magnetic force of an invitation.

I love you, each of you, all of you. Amen.

Sources:

CommonWealth Consulting Group, <http://www.vitalcongregations.com/>.

A. Powell Davies, “Why I Come to Church,” from his sermon, “On Going to Church,” September 10, 1944. Excerpt in *without apology: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion*, Edited and introduced by Forrest Church, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998.

Michael Durall, *The Almost Church: Redefining Unitarian Universalism for a New Era*, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press at All souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 2004.