

The Warmth of Community, The Fire of Commitment

Our congregation has been using the same words as we extinguish our chalice for three years now, which in the world of Unitarian Universalists makes it a longstanding tradition. I invite you turn to the back of your order of service and read the words to yourself once more, even if you have them memorized.

Let me tell you, if Olivia, the interim minister who started this closing tradition, had needed committee approval to use those words, that committee would still be debating. Once you get past “We extinguish this flame,” which is pretty straightforward and literal, the possibilities for debate suddenly rise exponentially with “But not the light of this faith we share.”

Can you imagine six of us on a committee, trying to agree on what THAT means? Aren't we a non-creedal church, the Church of the Individual Journey, precisely so that we don't have to share our faith, or our lack of it, with anyone?

In the interest of transparency, I need to tell you that I serve on a committee of six that is going to bring that very question to the congregation in the upcoming church year. The Committee on Ministries was formed with the charge that it would lead the congregation through a review of its mission and covenant and then “oversee, support, and review” all the ministries of the church to help us realize our mission. Someone asked me last Sunday if I was on that committee that's going to write a new mission statement, and the answer is no, I'm not. I'm on the committee that will help all of us discern what we are called to do as a church, and then help us focus our ministries towards answering that call to the very best of our ability.

That means that yes, we need to talk to one another and figure it out:

what IS the light of this faith we share? Do we have a faith? Do we share it? I once asked our minister Michael Leuchtenberger if a non-theist could have a theology. It was an email conversation, and the first part was right out of seminary, stuff about process theology and an unfolding universe. The line I remember is “Faith is those beliefs you are willing to act on.” Faith is those beliefs you are willing to act on. A good line to remember as we work to create a shared vision: what are we willing to do together? Are we willing to help refugee families find their way in a new country? Why yes, we are. Are we willing to give our offering plate to nonprofit agencies every Sunday? And still pledge enough to the church to keep it going? Yes again. Is there more we could do? Are there things we could do better?

The answer again is yes. Then how do we decide what is ours to do, and what is more than we can handle? It’s not an easy question, and it’s not a question that six people should make for the rest of the congregation. There was a cartoon in the January 24th edition of the New Yorker magazine that showed a man at a dinner party saying to his companions, “I’m in the market for an easier religion.” It made me squirm a little because I think that might be our reputation.

Moving on from the light of this faith we share, we come to “The warmth of community” doesn’t sound quite as controversial, not at first. I’ve heard many of our members say one of the main reasons they come here is for the community. If I do say so myself, it is a fabulous community when at its best. Picture our Thanksgiving dinner with a church family of 200 people, tables in almost every room of the building, with turkey and gravy and pie for all. Small children are enveloped in a village that loves them. They weave through a forest of legs, safe and happy. Teenagers are having the time of their lives while washing dishes. Young adults (and some not-so-young adults) return with their parents to reconnect with a beloved community, sharing stories of lives now lived elsewhere.

But living in a community has its challenges, too. We’ve lost our share of members when the community became too cold, or too hot, or too heavy

for comfort. Our deliberate work over the past few years at improving our conflict resolution skills and learning the art of nonviolent communication has borne some fruit, but the fact remains that achieving a community that feels cozy and welcoming to all isn't a standard feature automatically granted to us because we are Unitarian Universalists. Being a warm, welcoming community is ongoing, necessary, and sometimes difficult work.

Which brings us to the fire of commitment part. I'm going to give you a number that I'll say up front is more of a gossip number than a firm statistic, but I recall hearing someone say at General Assembly that currently, there are about 220,000 Unitarian Universalists worldwide. Theodore Parker, a 19th century Unitarian minister and social activist is now famous in UU circles for saying, "Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere." I used a population clock on the Internet and according to its calculations, the world population right now is fewer than a million shy of 7 billion people. That puts us at about .00003 percent of the world population, hardly a blip on the radar. Here in New England we are a little protected from the knowledge that almost anywhere else, if you tell someone you are a Unitarian Universalist, the response is going to be, "A what?" If ours is to be a religion like sunshine going everywhere, we're going to need to get us some much brighter lights. If we just divide up the world, each adult member and every child enrolled in our religious education programs needs to light the way for almost 32,000 people.

This summer I celebrated my 50th birthday by going the General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina. Known to most UUs as GA, it is the annual convention hosted by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The first evening, a worship service for the whole gang of us, 4,000 UUs give or take, opens with a banner parade. Sara McNeil, Linda Ashford, and I took our church's banner into a huge warehouse-like room and lined up with all the other banner-carrying delegates. After what seemed like kind of a long wait in a subterranean hallway, we got the

signal to go. We walked into another huge meeting room and entered a crowd of happy people, all singing familiar hymns set to lively music from the band. After proceeding down one long aisle, across the front of the room, and up another aisle, we deposited our banner to be hung in the convention center and took our seats. What stunned us was that once we were seated, the banners kept coming, and coming, and coming. It was as if we'd gone down a magic escalator into another world where EVERYONE was a Unitarian Universalist, and we were watching the UU equivalent of the Macy's Parade. We sang and clapped and pointed out our favorite banners to each other.

It was the beginning of four days of living and learning in a UU revival atmosphere. The worship services were thrilling and often very moving, with lots of good music and singing. We heard from a variety of speakers who were carrying bright torches of caring and commitment. Wherever you have fires of commitment burning, you run the risk of fire getting out of hand and causing harm. There was a right relations team milling throughout the convention center in lime green t-shirts, ready to help resolve conflicts and address issues that arose as a natural consequence of over 4,000 people trying to dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another.

Overall, I had a great time. But there were definitely moments when the fire of commitment felt scary to me. I had made my own commitment to leave my career in teaching in order to attend Meadville Lombard Theological School, one of two UU seminaries in the United States, so I can be a credentialed minister. As I looked at the sea of people in Plenary Hall, I felt a bit like my son Carl when he saw the ocean for the first time. He was just about Bella's age, and as I carried him down the beach towards the water, his grip on me got so tight I couldn't have dropped him if I tried. He hid his face on my shoulder and said into my neck, "Too much!" We may be a small denomination, but Unitarian Universalism is WAY bigger than this church. I had my first huge wave of doubt and fear; as I confided to Michael, our settled minister who was

also in attendance, I suddenly felt like a housewife from a tiny town in New Hampshire who had been under the delusion that she could play God. I felt unfit, not yet ready, afraid I had yielded to an impulse rather than answered a call. Who am I, to be a minister? Who are we, to transform the world?

There is no one here but us. On my birthday, I joined hundreds of people, most of us dressed in bright yellow t-shirts, and walked from the convention center to a large park in the center of Charlotte, where local ministers of many different faiths stood together to voice their opposition to a constitutional amendment that would prohibit same sex marriage. It really did seem like there was no one but us, no crowd watching, no other pedestrians in the park, no opposition from those who support the legislation. But the next morning, there we were on the front page of the Charlotte Observer, a sea of humanity dressed in yellow Standing on the Side of Love t-shirts. Below the article describing the rally was a news article reporting that the New York Senate had passed legislation allowing same sex marriage. Let me tell you, the joyful noise when that news was announced in Plenary Hall the night before was possibly loud enough to be detected by a seismograph.

I thought about those yellow Love shirts a couple of weeks ago as I was watching Carl use a magnifying glass to sear his name into a piece of wood. Once he finished, he decided to prove to me that it was possible to trim off the end of the board using only the magnifying glass and the rays of the sun. He hasn't finished yet, and maybe he never will, but he did prove his point. If he was patient enough, and kept that light focused by adjusting the lens as shadows moved and the angle of the sun changed, he could indeed cut right through that board using nothing but light.

Over the past few months as I have been meditating on those closing words of ours and trying to figure out how we can know a worthy fire of commitment from a dangerous one. I think a lot of us are afraid of

getting carried away with passion. There was one worship service when I was singing, waving my arms in the air, hugging strangers – acting not at all like my white-woman-from-New-Hampshire self. The crowd was wildly enthusiastic, and I wondered how different we were from the throngs of people who cheered on Hitler. How can we tell the difference?

When we are standing on the side of love, acting with kindness and compassion, in service to others, we're probably doing pretty much what Jesus would do. When the fire is being stoked by anger, or fed by fear, it's time to put on our yellow shirts and form a firewall to protect others from harm. It's called back burning when firefighters deliberately set small fires along a natural or manmade firebreak such as a river or a road. As they burn back towards the main fire, they deprive it of fuel so the fire can be contained until it dies out.

Imagine if you were a transgendered teenager and you could look out on hundreds of those shirts, telling you that yes, your life is precious, you are loved, and you deserve to be treated with respect just the way you are. We heard from a Charlotte high school student, Loan Tran, who had suffered insults and bullying on multiple fronts, for the Vietnamese heritage evident in her face and hair, and for her sexual orientation and gender identity.

Imagine you are a Latina or Latino living in Arizona, where the law allows police officers to stop anyone they suspect may be an illegal immigrant and check their paperwork. It was there that locals began to refer to Unitarian Universalists as "the Love People." It was there that our Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Peter Morales, was arrested for civil disobedience during a protest of that law. I don't know about you, but I am A-Okay with it if we ditch that long, awkward name and rename ourselves the Love Church.

I was wearing my Love shirt on the final day of General Assembly, heading across the street to my hotel to drop off a load of books I'd

bought, when I saw a man whom I'd seen a couple of days before, standing outside the convention center with a handmade sign saying "Ask Me About Jesus." I had been thinking about him quite often – I could tell by the name of his website, Trash Evolution.com, that we held some radically different ideas about the nature of the universe. But I had to admire him for the fire of his commitment, standing there alone to testify to his faith. So when I saw him there again and he offered me his literature, I took it and told him I'd like to talk with him after I put my books away. He was slightly startled by this and pointed out that his website address was on the pamphlet. I said no, I'd really like to talk with you. I went to the hotel, where it occurred to me that the man was standing in the midday sun in a long sleeved shirt and long pants. I bought a bottle of water at the hotel gift shop and gave it to him as I invited him to sit on a shady bench to talk for a few minutes. Sounding surprised again, he commented that I did have a heart and thanked me.

In talking with Herb, I learned that Jesus had helped him overcome alcoholism and a gambling addiction. I could see why Herb would think so highly of him. As we were talking, a man came out of the convention center, name badge identifying him as one of my people, and offered to take Herb to lunch. Then he added, "Because I'm gay, and I find you very attractive." It was mean, and I was embarrassed that someone from my beloved community would treat him that way. A few minutes later, a woman came over saying with apparent delight, "Lyn, it is so good to see you! It has been too long!" She looked like a black gospel singer, and I wracked my brain trying to think when I might have met her. The name on her badge wasn't familiar, and she was from the South. It suddenly dawned on me that she was trying to rescue me from talking to Herb about Jesus, so I played along. "Wow, Cheryl, it is good to see you too! I am just talking to Herb here about Jesus." She said with delight, "Isn't it good news about Jesus, that he loves EVERYbody!" Herb started to argue that God was wrathful, too, but she repeated cheerily as she headed into the convention center, "Oh, Jesus loves EVERYBODY! Such good news!"

When our conversation seemed to have run its course, Herb asked if he could pray for me. Now, being a New Englander, when people ask me that question they usually mean they'll put me in their prayers later, when I'm not around. So I said "sure, and may I pray for you?" Herb said it wouldn't do any good, and I told him he shouldn't be so sure. Then he started praying for me, right on the spot. He prayed for me to let Jesus into my heart, and I prayed for him to grow in love and be able to love all of his fellow humans.

The work that lies ahead for our congregation (and which I highly recommend as a personal spiritual exercise too) is to engage in reflection and holy conversation, to commit ourselves anew to living in the spirit of love, and to discerning those areas of need where we will answer our call to service, transforming ourselves and the world we live in.