

“The Light, The Warmth, The Fire”

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Buenas Dias, mi amigos! I bring greetings from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, the congregation where I served as worship leader for the past two Sundays, the place where – in between – I lived the indulgent life of a tourist, surrounded by brilliant, sun-baked buildings lining cobblestone streets, the sound of church bells ringing out across the city amid the strains of music...and colors, colors everywhere.

Often when I travel, even when I am not a guest minister, I visit the local Unitarian Universalist congregation to worship. I am forever fascinated by the way in which each visit feels like coming home even though every community and worship service is a little different.

This practice of visiting other congregations was part of my everyday life during my first sabbatical. My goal was to attend one different worship service a week. Some of these services were in Unitarian Universalist congregations, some were not. Among others, I gathered in silence with the local Quaker group (unfortunately meeting in a room next to someone’s band practice,) joined a Science of Mind service in California and a progressive Presbyterian service in the town I lived.

My overall conclusion? From the side of the pews – or folding chairs or benches – attending worship is like buying a lottery ticket. This reminded me, when I returned chancel side, that one can never take for granted another’s choice to give up Sunday brunch to attend worship.

While I committed to one service a week, my personal goal was to experience excellent preaching or, at least, one excellent sermon, a goal that was one part continuing education, one part hunger for spiritual sustenance. Because of the “lottery” nature of my project, the sermons I heard fell upon a spectrum in light of this goal.

The best sermon I heard on sabbatical was not a sermon at all. It was a recorded chapter of a book I listened to as I drove to a clergy retreat, from Anne Lamott’s

book "Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith." Lamott is a liberal Christian who dedicated one chapter, "Holding On" to illustrating why she insists that her son attend church.

At that time in her life, Lamott's son, Sam, was a teenager. Lamott observes that, in his pre-teen years, Sam embodied "a much cuter sullenness." Though Sam is still the same sweet person he has always been, as a teen he is occasionally possessed by a being she simply calls "Phil" - "hairy and scary and awful." In fact, "Phil" made a recent visit, looking at her with smug indignation when she asked him to put his dishes in the sink "as if," she writes, "on a whim, I asked him to go fetch some rocks from the quarry for me."

A source of tension between them is her insistence that he attend church. Even though Sam is a spiritual person, praying with his mother at bedtime and sometimes responding to a beautiful afternoon with "God is really showing off today," he hates going to church. So why does she make him go?

We live in "bewildering, drastic times," she affirms, "and a little spirituality doesn't hurt." She wants her son to know the place that loved her when, before she found sobriety, she felt the most unloveable. She wants him to see the faces who loved him even before he was born. This is nourishment and teaching by "osmosis," the way "kids get the most valuable things." "Showing up is the lesson," Lamott affirms, "singing is the lesson and the power of community." There is value, too, in remembering that while all are loved by God there is meaning in being with people "who love God back." In her words, "Learning to love back is the hardest part of being alive."

She observes she can't provide these lessons "in a tidy package, like a toaster pastry or take out" so she regularly makes Sam come to church. It is good to do uncomfortable things, Lamott proclaims. "It is weight training for life." And, regardless, "he has no job, no car, no money; he has to stay in my good graces."

Anne Lamott's testimony to the meaning of congregational life moved me as I drove towards Cape Henlopen. At that time, while I enjoyed much needed rest away from the demands of ministry, I was also away from the people that composed and shaped the congregation I served, my people. And when I say "my people," I don't mean this in a possessional sense but in a relational way. I heard

Lamott's words as if they were from a relative sending me a letter, telling me about what happened at the last holiday gathering I missed. "Showing up is the lesson" and, for a season, I was no longer there.

But Lamott's reflection also reminded me of the true nature of faith communities. In this time of attending different worship services, like visiting sample tables at the supermarket, I entered these experiences the same way I did my weekly shopping. What flavor is best? Which one is worthy of my choice?

Like so many, I forgot that congregational life is not a consumer commodity. Had I participated in one of those communities over time, each one would have helped me grow, would have taught me something, would have contributed to my on-going quest to understand what it means to be human.

It is not just teenagers who learn best through osmosis. Through regular engagement and commitment, each of these congregations would have provided insight about how to best love life in return. To choose to travel throughout life as part of a community is to choose to have the community change me just as I would shape its nature over time through my presence. And it is through this active, committed, mutual choice that I receive – and we create – something that cannot be found any place else. In this month of reflecting on "perseverance," I am mindful that through committing to a community, through giving something of myself, I receive what I need to continue on, no matter what burdens I may carry in any given season.

I tell this story as it is good to be back here this morning, among "my people," in what is now my spiritual home. The desert sunshine and downtime of vacation brought many blessings but this is the place and the community in which I have chosen to serve; we have chosen to travel together.

And I tell this story as this is the time when we are all invited to reflect on the community that composes the Winchester Unitarian Society and how we might support and sustain our collective vitality, how we might contribute – personally, financially and spirituality – to its present and its future. To that end, while Stephen Perepeluk and Anne Lamott are both tough acts to follow, I share my testimony of congregational life. My testimony - including observations by other members - speaks not of congregations in general but of this place, this sacred

sanctuary, this people; of what happens here and what could happen the more we reach and grow together.

Lest I forget the gifts of the Winchester Unitarian Society, I only need to recall the weekly ritual of extinguishing the chalice to remember. Each Sunday, we speak of putting out our collective flame but “not the light of truth, the warmth of community or the fire of commitment.”

I cherish that this is a place where we seek and where we share “the light of truth” with one another. And that the truth we proclaim is not singular. When I travel and worship in different Unitarian Universalist congregations, I know wherever I go, I will worship in a theologically diverse community. But I have yet to find one as spiritually rich as this one. I often observe with appreciation that among our members and friends, there are agnostics and ardent theists, there are devoted Christians “freely following Jesus,” there are some who might resonate with the phrase “orthodox atheist” or even “evangelical humanist.” We are Zoroastrian, Jewish, Anthroposophist, Reclaiming, Buddhist “Luthertarian” Unitarians and Universalists.

And through our theological diversity we affirm that there is value in focusing on this life, this world, while we are here together. A long-time member once recalled her first visit to the congregation. She was greeted by a member who said, “This is a great church; you will love how we bury our dead!” While I don’t think that is our next marketing slogan, I appreciate how we celebrate the earthly lives of those who go before us as there is a sacred thread in every biography.

And one spiritual truth prevails through it all. While we are bombarded by messages from all sides proclaiming our deficiencies, we affirm that each one of us is enough.

I cherish this congregation for how we kindle the “warmth of community.” Whether it is a committee meeting or group discussion or Circle Dinner or covenant group, there is a depth and richness to how we engage one another that is remarkable.

But there is also meaning in considering times when we don't easily connect. Another member draws on the First Principle, "respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person," when she considers community. She writes:

when I think of the people in our congregation that I have grown to love.....not just like but love deeply. but then there are others, not so like me, not holding the exact same values or beliefs or not choosing to operate in the world as I do.

I'm in training here, in our church [is] where I have chosen to try and grow. We twist through hard discussions with more than two sides. We let others brush against our pointed imperfections because we know it will make us better. This principle challenges me.

And we tend the "fire of commitment" in the many ways we reach beyond our walls to defend the sacred spark in every human life and the earth we call home. Another member finds inspiration through our service and prophetic ministries. She observes:

We are known by the company we keep...here are the people whose friendship I value. Here are the people whose actions I wish to be known by. The [Winchester Unitarian Society] does a lot of which makes me stand a little taller. We have a rainbow flag...declaring that we support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pride. We have declared that Black Lives *do indeed* Matter. We are now a Level 2 Sanctuary and have 30...volunteers [committed to serving an immigrant in sanctuary.] We march in rallies...take part in the Woburn Council's Thanksgiving and Christmas drives, support the Gulf Coast Volunteers for the Long Haul's mission [to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disasters.] Our youth make me proud...going to Arizona and observing the challenges of the undocumented. By visiting West Virginia and helping out as they can. And learning something about other people and themselves in the process.

We live in our own "bewildering, drastic times," times when values we thought commonplace are now up for question and under attack. I know I cannot face, cannot begin to interpret these times alone. I need to be part of the mysterious

and imperfect spiritual practice of participating in a faith community – in this faith community – to reach beyond my limited view, to understand what is possible to be understood and to find comfort and companionship in the meantime. Like Anne Lamott, I need a place where I can go to make peace with life and all that comes with it.

Together, we sang the words, “What we need is here.” As we sang, I observed that this statement is one part affirmation and one part aspiration. Here we find truth but there are more voices to welcome into the conversation. Here we find warmth but there are ways our collective love can be more abundant, more accessible, more hospitable to the stranger of all kinds. Here we find fire and there is room for us to kindle more heat in the name of justice.

But I believe “what we need is here” as I believe in an abundant universe. What we need – and what the world outside needs – is here, in its tangible reality and in its potential.

This past Friday, we gathered to begin our pledge drive with a festive meal, an evening concluding with a new sacrament, karaoke. If Anne Lamott is right and “singing is the lesson,” I don’t know what the karaoke taught us but it was a lot of fun.

As we begin this campaign, asking each of us to make a financial commitment to the health and vitality of this congregation’s ministries, we are not invited to “play the lottery” but to take a chance. To take a chance together. To each commit our light, our warmth and our fire - with our time, our service, our regular participation and our resources – to further advance our shared mission in the seasons to come. That, as we cannot take for granted anyone’s presence here this morning or any other, neither can we take for granted the member-run institution that gathers and holds us together.

This vision and this shared obligation is why I give 5% of my salary to the Winchester Unitarian Society. Giving away my money makes me uncomfortable but I am reminded that it is good to do uncomfortable things; “it *is* weight training for life.” Pledging is a one small way I practice “loving back” with a community

that sustains me. Pledging is one way I invest in the Winchester Unitarian Society so it may persevere, in this time and for the generations to come.

In our fast-paced world of on-line reviews and instant gratification, the practice of congregational life is counter-cultural. Through what I give and what I receive, what I need does not come through a tidy package but slowly, mysteriously and imperfectly over time. It grounds me in my humanity. As we celebrate community with this pledge campaign, may we honor all that anchors us, inspires us, heals us and empowers us. May we give thanks for “the light, the warmth, the fire” that calls us towards our best selves, this day and in the days to come.