

More Good Than We May Ever Know

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

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“Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu.”

(A person is a person because of other people.)

African Proverb

Opening Words

“What will survive of us is love.” - Phillip Larkin

Chalice Lighting

Looking behind I am filled with gratitude.

Looking forward I am filled with vision.

Looking upwards I am filled with strength.

Looking within I discover peace.

- Prayer from the Quero Apache Tribe

Readings

“We Need One Another” by George O’Dell

“Blackbirds” by Julie Cadwallader Staub

Sermon

“So how did you come to be a Unitarian Universalist?” It’s a question I sometimes hear shortly after someone learns both what I do and where I’m from. The real question, of course, is: how did you manage to become a Unitarian Universalist, and one of its ministers, no less, when you grew up in Arkansas – Van Buren, to be exact, a town where the closest Unitarian Universalist congregation is fifty miles away, a town some may deem an unlikely place for a Unitarian Universalist minister to grow up because, well – let’s just say it’s an area not known as a hotbed of liberal religion. It’s a fair question but, as I realized just this past week, it’s a question to which I am still learning the full answer. Our life journeys can be best understood by looking backward, at where we have been, teach the philosophers and poets; wise people from the Danish philosopher, Soren Kirkegaard, to the Kentucky poet, Wendell Berry, to Apple’s visionary founder, Steve Jobs, all tell us that we can see a wider and longer view, not while we are finding our way along the twists and turns of life’s path, but only later, when we are farther along.

We all have our stories of how we came to this Unitarian Universalist tradition, but as we take these first steps together as minister and congregation, you deserve to know how I found my faith. As I share more of my story, I invite you to reflect on your own story and to remember who and what

brought you here, to this faith, and to this gathering of souls. I'll get to what happened last week in a moment but for now, let me say that the short answer to the question of how I came to be a Unitarian Universalist, as some of you have heard me say before, is that I found my religion not in a church, but in a college classroom.

I went to college at Henderson down in Arkadelphia, all excited and ready to learn but I had no idea where my learning might one day lead. When I showed up for the freshman world history class, Western Civilization, it was called back in the day, our teacher, an energetic, bespectacled guy, got my attention, big time, when he revealed that, although the course was called "Western Civ," that's not what he was going to teach. "I'm going to teach Civilization, eastern *and* western," Dr. Perry told us, and he did. He taught by storytelling, and as he told the story of human civilization, he included world religions and diverse spiritual traditions, nearly all of them, as far as I could tell, from Agnosticism to Zoroastrianism -- with plenty of Buddhism and Hinduism along the way. And, in telling the story of the evolution of Judaism and Christianity, he wove in Unitarian ideas, like the oneness of God and the notion that the Bible is but one of many sacred books, as well as Universalist ideas, like that of a loving God who would damn no one and the notion that all people are worthy of love and respect -- along with milestones in Unitarian Universalist history. Even though he taught at 8 a.m., I couldn't wait to get to class; I wanted to know more.

After a full year of learning from Dr. Perry I had hoped to take more of his classes but he died suddenly of heart failure, at the age of 44. I couldn't believe it. I hadn't yet experienced many deaths. I'd only been to one funeral, but something in me knew I needed to be at his memorial service which was held at the college. I don't remember a lot about the service except hearing, perhaps not surprisingly, that Dr. Perry had been a Unitarian Universalist. I decided right then that I needed to learn more about what it might mean to be a Unitarian Universalist so I got myself to the library and checked out every book that had anything to do with this faith. (In those days, we couldn't Google.) Surprisingly, perhaps, there were several on the shelves, including some titles I would see again, nearly twenty years later, on the required reading list for ordination to our ministry. As I read these books as a nineteen year old, I knew I had found my faith. I hadn't grown up in any faith community but my mother had instilled in me the conviction that all people are worthy of love and care, with no exceptions, a decidedly universalist idea, an idea that just didn't fit with the main religious voices I had heard in my hometown, voices that led me in my teen years to reject nearly everything having to do with religion of any kind. In Unitarian Universalism, I found my spiritual home. When I've told it before, that's where the story would end, but this week I learned more. Some of you know that my family and I moved nearly 1600 miles this summer with all the accumulation of our lives in tow. Moving, I tell people, ain't easy, (and by the way, though I don't thin I've ever spoken the word in a sermon, no word other than "ain't" has the poetic power to convey what I mean when I say, "Moving ain't easy.") But moving, hard as it can be, can help us to see more of our path -- it sometimes can help us to look back with a wider view.

Last week, determined to sort through all the remaining boxes in my home study before Thanksgiving, boxes of what I call my “ministry files,” I found something that told me more of the story. I found the program from Dr. Perry’s memorial service. Though I hadn’t seen it in years, I knew immediately what it was. But when I opened it, I couldn’t believe what I saw. I saw printed there, word for word, the exact text of those words we say together each week, our Affirmation of Covenant, words that can vary among our Unitarian Universalist congregations, but here, in my hands, were the very same words I now say each week with all of you. “Wow,” I whispered out loud. And then, the yellowed clipping of his obituary fell into my lap and I saw the name of this congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock, with wishes that memorial gifts be given to this church.

I share so much of my story today, because it’s not just my story, it’s also your story, and now, our story. And our story together is but a part of a larger story – the story of people joining together, as the poet says, “manag(ing) to unite and move together toward a common good.” I am talking about church life now – you know, the hard stuff – fixing the roof and keeping the walls painted, cleaning up the messes (both literal and figurative), finding enough money to keep the place running – and also the really hard stuff – being kind to one another even when the news of the world and the news of our lives has us so stressed and anxious on the inside that we’re ready to snap at anyone in our path – the really hard stuff like finding common ground when we disagree, saying “I’m sorry” when our actions or words cause harm. We don’t always do as we try to teach our children -- we don’t always treat each other the way we would want to be treated. The truth is: church life demands the best in us. For any congregation to survive and to thrive, it takes persistence, faith and, vision -- not only a vision of what might be in the years ahead but also a vision of the good that can happen now, today, and day by day, year by year, sometimes without our even knowing it.

I went in search of our old membership book wondering if I would find Dr. Perry’s name. It wasn’t there. Before accepting your call to serve here, I tried to learn all I could about our congregation and wondered whether my teacher might once have been a member here. I even asked a former minister who had served then, but “No,” the minister said, “I knew everybody. I don’t remember him.” My teacher may never have been counted in your official numbers or recognized as one of your own. I don’t know how often he made the drive to Little Rock to come here; the evidence suggests that he must have, at least a few times.

From where I stand today, I know I need to say thank you – thanks to all whose vision all those years ago brought this church into being, thanks to all whose faith through the years kept this church going, thanks to all of you here now who give of who you are and what you have so that each Sunday, our doors are open here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock, ready to welcome anyone with our message of love for all humankind. In church life and in our lives, the truth is: we may never know

the good we do or the blessings we give. This church made a difference in the life of my teacher, who made a difference in my life, all those years ago. You blessed my life long before I ever stepped foot inside your doors and I thank you all. Looking back at my life, “looking behind me,” as a Native American prayer goes, “I am filled with gratitude.”

And now, here we are together, you and I, our lives more intertwined than we had known, looking together, as minister and congregation, at where we might go and what we might do together. Wherever we go and whatever we do, I hope we will never forget that we are here, together, to be a part of something larger than ourselves, to bless one another and to bless our world. “A person is a person,” the African proverb reminds us, “because of other people.” None of us are who we are or where we are solely because of what we, ourselves, have done – and all we do, and all we say, has the power to touch other lives. It is both a scientific and spiritual truth that all life is interconnected. It is true: we humans need one another.

When, in the words of the poet, *“we manage to unite and move together toward a common good”* here in our church, we build something together that will outlast us- something that will go on giving and loving and blessing long after each of us have taken our last breath. We come here on Sunday mornings to find wisdom that might guide us through our days, and some of our days out in this world are hard. Both this week in our land, and again today in our world, the news is hard. Work, and school, and life at home – all can be hard. We can along with the poet, look out into our world *“with its cruelty and fear/its apathy and exhaustion.”* And yet, we choose to come here because, in our bones, we know that there is more to life – that there is another way, the way of *“mercy and tenderness”* the way we humans can *“manage to unite/and move together toward a common good”* so that we might pass on to those who come after us the way of *“mercy and tenderness,”* that they, too, might pass on our legacy of a faith that teaches us to honor all beings, everywhere, no exceptions -- a faith whose foundation is love for all humankind, *“What will survive of us,”* Philip Larkin writes, *“is love.”*

“Looking forward” another line of the Native American prayer goes, “I am filled with vision.” I am here today because I believe with all my heart that we *can* join together and, like the birds, curve and soar together and make together a new sound – the sound of a people united for the common good, ready to bless one another and to bless our world. “This,” I believe along with the poet, “is how it’s meant to be.” I pray that we will never cease to let blessings flow in our souls and out into our world, to do more good than we may ever know.