

**“And Now for Something Completely Different”**

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**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**

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On Friday, as I am wont to do, I took a break from sermon-writing to peruse *The Boston Globe*. Did you happen to see the article that day about the church that is closing in Waltham? Last Sunday, on Halloween, as we were kicking off our annual stewardship campaign with a bucket brigade, the members of that congregation were voting to dissolve their church.

“It’s been in a state of decline,” said the minister. “For quite a few years they were trying to figure out how to turn it around.” The article cited “financial realities and weariness of a dedicated corps of church members” as the final triggers. The minister reported that “...average Sunday attendance has been 40 people, and the same small group of people has been shouldering the bulk of duties required to run a church.”

This was a newsworthy story, in large part because it doesn’t happen often. Congregations, even very small and struggling ones, seldom make the decision that this one made. They have a very nice website and it’s clear that they’ve been working to invite newcomers to join them. And 40 people on a Sunday, well, honestly for many churches, that’s a good turnout. Quite a few of our Unitarian Universalist churches in central and western Massachusetts get by with far fewer. When I was a student minister, I once preached to a crowd of 12, which I was assured was a crowd, indeed.

This church in Waltham has a very different theology from ours, but it shares the same congregational polity (or governance) and a very similar organizational structure. Of the committee leadership positions listed on the website, quite a few are “TBA.” And from the article, the congregation’s complaints are familiar. There is not enough money and there are not enough people to do the work. It sounds like they just burned out.

Burned out is not something you might expect people in churches to be. It’s certainly not something for which any of us – lay people or clergy – come searching. No, we come to churches in search of something entirely different. We come with longings in our hearts and although we can’t always articulate what those longings are, they certainly aren’t for the sorts of things that lead to burnout.

Thomas Bandy, a church consultant and author, has written quite a bit about a couple that he likes to call “Bob and Sally Public.” And according to him, when Bob and Sally Public are inspired to come to church, this is what they might say they want. They might say:

“I want to be different. I feel empty inside. I am locked into a job that I hate, and a marriage that is rocky. I am addicted to alcohol, sex, cigarettes, materialism, and a

hundred other self-destructive habits I haven't even identified yet. My kids ask me questions I can't answer, my parents tell me to do things that are pointless, and my company may lay me off at the mere hint of a recession."

They might say:

"I want to be different. I want to be changed, whole, healed, healthy, and full! I want to feel like somebody special! I want to like myself for a change! I want to be going somewhere valuable, doing something important, and personally connected with an enduring meaning! I want a 'fresh start,' so that I can 'boldly go' wherever I am 'meant to be!' I want to be transformed!"<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you can relate to some of those longings, if not all of them. We haven't asked you recently, but in surveys taken in this church in 1994 and 2000, when you were in search for new ministers, you essentially said that you came to church looking for "new paths for personal growth" and for help understanding yourselves better. You said you wanted help coping with life. You said you wanted to be changed...perhaps not so different from Bob and Sally Public after all.

The reading this morning made me laugh the first time I saw it.

She caught me off guard when my soul said to me,  
"Have we met?"

So surprised I was to hear her speak like that  
I chuckled.<sup>2</sup>

I think one of the reasons we come to church is because we're like that man in the poem...that hardworking man "who used to worry so much" that he wasn't doing enough...doing enough for his family, doing enough for his friends, doing enough for his community.

We are worried...we are sick with worry sometimes...that we're not doing enough, that we are not good enough, worthy enough...and we want relief. We want to be healed. We want to become reacquainted with the still, small voice within, with the voice of our own souls...that voice that will lead us deep into the forest and say, "Dig here." That voice that will help us rediscover, or discover for the first time, the strength and beauty that lies within.

We come to churches to dig deep, to be changed, and to be freed. We don't come to serve on committees. Am I right?

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<sup>1</sup> Bandy, Thomas G. *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches* (Nashville: Abington, 2001), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> St. John of the Cross, "'Dig Here,' the Angel Said," in *Love Poems from God*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky.

We, Unitarian Universalists, value democracy very highly. We even have a principle affirming it. We affirm “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” We believe that democracy is a good thing...and it is! It ensures the freedom of our conscience. Our religious ancestors stood up for and sometimes died for that right – not simply to believe what they must – but also to follow the call, the song of the soul...to do what they felt was best in response to that song.

We value democracy and the freedom that it guarantees, and we want to protect that freedom. And so we organize ourselves in ways that will afford us protection. We work hard to ensure the right of everyone to believe freely and to participate fully in our churches. And yet, the way we’ve organized ourselves is only one possible democratic way to do so. It is not in and of itself “democracy.” It is bureaucracy. And they are not the same.

Democracy protects the rights of the people. Bureaucracy protects the institution. Radical idea, I know...but whereas democracy is good for the conscience, I would submit that bureaucracy is sometimes bad for the soul.

When the founding fathers designed the federal government with all of its checks and balances, they did so very intentionally to calm the passions and to prevent change from occurring too fast. And they did it to protect democracy, to avoid revolution and the rule of tyrants. They did it to maintain some control. They were afraid of too much enthusiasm. And remember that the word “enthusiasm” comes from a Greek work that essentially means “possessed by God” or “filled with God” or the Spirit. Incidentally, enthusiasm was something of which our religious ancestors, the Puritans, were also terribly afraid.

Recall our opening words from this morning...

When were you last really happy?  
Let that experience ferment,  
Bring it to mind once  
In a while.

Surely in the genesis of that past moment, when you danced,  
You would not have wanted a constable  
To have knocked  
On your  
Door,

Or have said, “You just entered  
A restricted ground.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From Meister Eckhard, “Why So Many Souls?” in *Love Poems from God*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky.

I'm sorry to say it, but I'm afraid that too often the church historically has played the role of constable rather than cheerleader. I don't mean our church in particular, but most churches in general. Church consultant Thomas Bandy, again, only half jokingly summarizes what he calls "the journey of a creative idea in the program church," by saying that between committee meetings and board meetings and council meetings, it takes 115 lay people 275 hours over the course of 10 weeks to say "No!" to a creative idea.

This is the point in the sermon at which I make three true confessions:

First, when people come to me with an idea – a passion, something about which they are **enthusiastic and gifted and which is meant to serve others** – I don't usually send them to committees and I don't usually send them to the Board for permission, although they usually do ask if they need permission. Instead, I usually say, go find one or two others who share your passion and just do it!

Second, I'm terrible at recruiting people to join committees. Unless someone clearly seems gifted and enthusiastic about serving on a committee – and sometimes people are – it just doesn't feel right to ask someone to sacrifice time and energy to work at something that other people believe needs to get done.

And third, I'm not much better at persuading people to join the church...to become official members. It just sounds so silly: "If you sign the book, you can serve on the Board and vote at congregational meetings!" Of course, I'm glad when they do join! I'm glad when they are excited about making a commitment to something that is meaningful to them; but I also worry that they won't find service on committees fulfilling...that church work won't satisfy their longings. I worry that they, too, will one day burn out.

This week someone in the congregation told me that she'd once given a plaque to Malcolm Sutherland, a much-beloved former minister here, that read: "God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee." (Thank you for that!)

As it happens, I had just read a version on an alternative creation story in one of Tom Bandy's books on church organizational structures, which goes like this:

In the beginning, earth was without form and void, and the Spirit brooded upon the waters of the deep. And God said:

'Let there be a long prescriptive mission statement.  
Let there be a clear ecclesiology to separate the church from the world.  
Let there be committees that yield fruits of every kind.  
Let there be programming by day and by night.  
Let there be parliamentary procedure and interoffice memos, creeping or flying between administrative units.  
Let there be elected officers of every kind, and let the pastor be the CEO.'

And on the seventh day God rested from labor and saw that [the Church] was very good.

And church people have been exhausted ever since.<sup>4</sup>

Now, take a deep breath. Take another one. And try to imagine that there might be another way...

What if church were completely different?

What would it feel like if, when you became part of a church community – this one or any one – you were not asked to serve on a committee...unless you really wanted to, and some people do?

What would it be like if you were not informed early on in your relationship with the congregation of the many ways in which the church had need of you?

What if, instead, the church were organized in such a way that it could better listen to you...with fewer committees and more opportunities outside of worship to dig deep?

What if the church had better ears for hearing what you had to say about your longings...your doubts...your fears...your worries?

What if, when you first arrived, you were helped to discover other people within the congregation who shared a particular passion of yours? Say you like to knit...or hike...or play bridge...or garden...or watch college football...or sing madrigals...or talk about science and religion...and the church offered you an opportunity to connect with others within the congregation who absolutely loved doing the same thing that you most love to do?

What if you were invited to meet with those people, say once a week or once every two weeks? And what if when you got together, you had the opportunity to engage in that shared passion together?

What if you had the chance through that group to get to know 8 to 10 other people in the church very well over the course of a few months of sharing? Imagine the conversations you might have...about your children...or your parents...or your struggles at work or home...or anything else that mattered to you. Imagine how you might come to care deeply for one another.

Now imagine that part of that group experience also included some sort of intentional practice of spiritual deepening. Imagine that you spent a few minutes each time you met sharing in deep silence...or practicing meditation...or praying for one another and each other's families...or doing yoga or tai chi or walking meditation.

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<sup>4</sup> Bandy, Thomas G. *Christian Chaos: Revolutionizing the Congregation* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1999), pp. 25-16.

And imagine, too, that as part of that group experience, you had a group leader trained to lead you in some brief conversation each week about values or gifts or personality types...imagine that you had a chance to engage in learning more about yourself...more about your passions and your purpose...and about what is most meaningful in your life...about what is most sacred...

Perhaps you'd talk about what it means to be a UU, really connecting our Principles to your everyday life experience. Perhaps you'd read together some of the poems of Mary Oliver and talk together about what you intend to do with your wild and precious lives. Maybe you'd even read the Psalms and find comfort there...or some passages from the Tao te Ching or from Thoreau or Emerson and reflect on how those words might help you live better in the face of the inevitability of death.

Perhaps overtime you'd begin to learn new things and to grow in unexpected ways. Perhaps, after a few months together you'd start to gain confidence in your current direction or begin to discern a new one. Maybe you'd begin to discover ways in which you might bring joy and healing to others through the sharing of your passions and your gifts.

Imagine a group of book lovers realizing that they also had a shared passion for helping others...reading to the blind or to the sick...or tutoring children at a nearby afterschool program for low-income children.

Imagine a group of folks who loved to fix things deciding together to help build a house through Habitat for Humanity or to help insulate energy inefficient homes in poor neighborhoods.

Imagine a group of model train enthusiasts deciding to start an after school program for disadvantaged youth, to give them an opportunity to hang out and learn new skills and develop positive relationships.

Imagine a group of bakers making brownies and breads for coffee hour, and finding joy in serving the church together in that way.

And what if, when you came up with a brilliant idea for how to try to meet someone else's need - either within the congregation or in the community outside - what if the church didn't say to you, "We tried that once before. It didn't work then." What if, instead, the church always, always said to you:

Go for it. We will help motivate you, support you, equip you. We will help you refine, share, and build your vision. If ever you worry about stepping beyond the perimeters of our basic congregational beliefs, values, and vision, we will help you clarify your direction. If you fail, we will love you anyway and help you learn

from the experience to find another way to exercise your gifts. If you succeed, we will celebrate together.<sup>5</sup>

What if the church always offered to help you find the treasure that resides within your very soul and then helped you do with excellence whatever the voice of your soul called you to do? Imagine the energy! Imagine the enthusiasm! Imagine the chaos! Imagine the joy! Imagine the fun!

May we come again and again to feel that energy and that joy in our lives.

Amen and Blessed Be.

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<sup>5</sup> Bandy, Thomas, G. *Kicking Habits*, p. 97.