

**“Breaking the Bubble without Jumping the Gun”**  
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**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**  
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This week, in preparation for our Bingo lunch, I decided to look into the history of Bingo. I learned that the game can be traced all the way back to the year 1530 in Italy, where it is still played every Saturday as a state-sponsored lottery game. From Italy, it moved to France and eventually to much of the rest of Europe.

It arrived here in this country in 1929, and was called “Beano” because it was played with beans. Soon after, a New York toy salesman renamed it “Bingo,” and hired a Columbia University mathematics professor to increase the number of different card combinations that could be played. It is said that the professor came up with 6000 unique combinations in one year and, in the process, went insane.

The Catholic Church originally opposed the lottery game in the 1500’s in Italy and then later in France, but overtime it reconsidered its position. The game, after all, seemed to be a sure fire way of getting people, including nuns, to spend more time in church.

I don’t know if Unitarian Universalists have ever had a particularly strong relationship to Bingo, but I figure it’s not too late to start developing one. This morning, as a way to get you excited to spend more time in church this afternoon for the Bingo Lunch, I thought we should play a game of Sermon Bingo. You’ll see that in the pews there are stacks of Bingo cards and pencils available for anyone who would like to play. The cards include various words or phrases that you’re likely to hear in the next 10 minutes. When you hear one, go ahead and make an “x” through it.

If you get a line across or down, feel free to yell out “Bingo.” But don’t stop playing because the game is not really won until someone gets a card with every square filled in. When you have every square covered, I definitely want you to shout out “Bingo.” Okay? Ready to go?

Although our Bingo games today are purely for fun, you’re probably aware that churches have been using Bingo as a fundraiser for a long time. In fact, it was in the 1930’s that a Catholic priest in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, started raising money for his parish that way. Still, some in the Catholic hierarchy have always seemed to feel conflicted about it. It’s a good way to raise money, yes. But it is also a form of gambling, which enables and exploits addictive behavior.

I recently read an article from a few years ago about a Catholic priest in Virginia who was challenging the practice of using Bingo as a fundraiser in his parish. Like others before him, he didn’t feel it was compatible with Catholic teaching. But what I found most interesting in the article was the perspective of a layman named Jim Sciortino who, as the president of the men’s

club, manages the Bingo program his church. He sees Bingo as a vital contribution to his parish, as one of his responsibilities to the church.

As he explains his commitment,

"I'm 56 [years old]. When I was 30, my father came to my house and said, 'You're getting ready to put a kid in parochial school.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'That school is supported by bingo.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I expect to see you there Friday night.'"

[And] Sciortino has been there ever since.<sup>1</sup>

In 2001, his men's club raised \$61,000 for the school.

Jim Sciortino got me thinking about our responsibilities to one another as part of our covenanted relationship as Unitarian Universalists.

When people attend our Path to Membership class before making the decision to become official members of our assembly, we talk with them about our expectations, about what we – the membership committee and I – understand to be the responsibilities of membership. I tell them that I'd like to see them attend worship regularly. I tell them that I'd like to see them take advantage of the opportunities they find here to pursue their own spiritual growth. Both of those things are good for them and, hopefully, will feed them.

In addition, I tell them that we expect that they will pledge at a level commensurate with their income and other financial commitments. I tell them that I hope that they will perform service of some kind or another to the wider community of which we are a part...perhaps by making a commitment to bring canned goods for Loaves and Fishes on the first Sunday of every month...or by helping to prepare or serve dinner for people at the Community Café in Clinton...or in any number of other ways.

I tell that that I hope and expect that they will find a way to connect with the larger Unitarian Universalist movement – even if that is simply by reading the articles and letters to the editor in the UU World magazine that comes to all members of our congregation 6 times a year. All of those things are good for them, too.

And finally I share with them our expectation that they will join in the work of the congregation, whatever that work is at whatever time. Right now, of course, the major work before us is the building of our new Fellowship Building and all that that entails.

The other thing we talk about during those Path to Membership classes, although there never seems to be enough time, is the concept of Personal Gifts. We try to convey our underlying philosophy that everyone has gifts, capacities, and abilities, and that the church is here, in part, to encourage the unfolding and to support the development of each person's gifts.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2001/08/Bingo-Vice-Or-Virtue.aspx?p=2>

We want each person to discover his or her gifts and then to use them, to live and contribute from the core of those gifts. For we believe that unless people live from that core, they will never be as powerful or as joyful as they are meant to be. When I speak of Personal Gifts, I also try to emphasize that because we are each unique and graced by different gifts, we need one another in order to be whole.

I know that all too often we feel like we have little to contribute, but the truth is that in every case we have more to contribute than we know. I understand that sometimes we feel like we just can't give anymore of ourselves, but I also know that when we share our gifts, we often end up receiving far more than we give. When we share from our core of giftedness, our reward lies in knowing that we've contributed to something bigger than ourselves and in feeling like our lives have a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

To choose to live from that gifted core is to answer a calling. As theologian Frederick Buechner has put it, "The place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet." When you choose to become a member of this assembly, we want you to give – we need you to give – but we need you to give from your place of deep gladness. If you find yourself resisting the giving, I would suggest you haven't discovered that gifted place of deep gladness yet, and I would be delighted to meet with you and talk with you about how to find it and tap into it.

This week, as I've been pondering the meaning of membership and personal gifts, I've begun to develop what I'm going to call "a theology of bingo." It's very simple, really. It begins with the card itself, which represents the religious community of which we are a part. The card is the assembly. Each member of that assembly is represented by a square on that Bingo card.

There is a unique terminology in Bingo. For instance, there is the phrase "breaking the bubble." The bubble is the absolute minimum number of balls you need to get bingo. If you are playing a five-by-five card and the winning pattern is a line across or down, then the bubble would be 5. But that's not how it works here.

Here in religious community, in Unitarian Universalist religious community, the only true winning pattern is "every spaced covered." We believe in the priesthood and prophethood of all believers. Only together can we make a winning card.

When we contribute ourselves and our gifts, we add to the whole and we contribute to the possibility and potential that ours will be a winning card. But when we hold ourselves and our gifts back, when we don't jump in and contribute, we almost guarantee that the whole card won't ever get filled in, and that we, as a community, will never be able to reach our full potential or achieve our mission or make manifest our collective vision.

There is another phrase in Bingo - "Jumping the Gun" – which occurs when someone calls "bingo" before they actually have it. It is sort of like saying, "Mission accomplished," when it is not. And in truth, our mission will never be accomplished until everyone is participating in it in some way, large or small. For our calling as a religious assembly isn't solely to accomplish missions. Our calling is to help people discover their gifts, uncover their gifts, develop their gifts,

and live their lives to the fullest in community. That is our vision. That is our hope. That is our noble task.

May you find here – members, both new and old...and friends alike – a fertile ground for growing in spirit and growing in love. And may we together – all of us – incarnate and make manifest our dreams of a better world, both within and beyond the walls of our assembly.

So may it be. Amen. And Blessed be.