

Cuz Why?

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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So this is how the conversation went every Sunday morning in our house:

Me: Do I have to go to church today?

My mother: Yes.

Why?

Because.

Cuz why?

and the congregation shall say together: Because I said so.

I think now, some 45 years after the last time my mother and I had that conversation, it has come due to find a better answer. Now that there is no one (other than Nancy, who writes my paychecks) who can *make* me go to church why is it that I *do* go to church? Why do you?

I imagine there are almost as many reasons as there are people here today for why we forego another cup of coffee and put down the crossword puzzle to come be together, to sing together, to seek together, reasons why, if even for these few short moments in our weeks, we put the state of our souls before the state of our to do lists, our bank accounts and the inconvenience of getting everyone up and out the door on time.

There are reasons good and bad. It is a constant source of disappointment to me as a minister that having chosen to serve in the Universalist tradition I cannot hold the threat of eternal hellfire over people's heads to get them to show up. But there are still plenty of other bad reasons to go to church. In his essay "What Church People Want" the Rev. Dr. Bob Leroe writes this:

Do people come to church for wrong reasons? Of course. Some are seeking respectability, business networking opportunities, a spouse, or a place that'll baptize their kids or perform a wedding, or provide a funeral. They may find the music and preaching "entertaining", and want to catch a "good feeling". Some come hoping to gain God's favor. In the course of attending for such reasons we can only hope the Holy Spirit will speak to them and help them see that there's more to church than some of the above "fringe benefits". Regardless of why people attend, all are welcome; we take them as they are.

Amen to that. And in all fairness to Bob this short paragraph comes after two pages of wonderful reasons why we seek out religious communities. But I really want to talk less about why we come and more about what we can rightfully expect to find when we do come. What is the *purpose* of the faithful life in community?

Now I have to insert my public service announcement here and say that the church, the congregation and its minister are not here to simply hand us everything we seek just because we put church above coffee and the crossword. We may find what we are looking for in some moments and not in others. It may take a concerted search of years to get even partially to where we hope to go. The question we need to pose to ourselves is not “what will the church provide for me?” but rather “what have I brought with me?” If you find worship or the music or the religious education consistently disappointing it may be as much a matter of what you yourself have brought to it as what has been offered. And likewise, if you find yourself delighted with the things of the church, ask yourself what is it I brought with me that lets me delight in this or learn from this so that I can bring it again next time! Church, like all forms of growth, is an interactive process. You cannot successfully navigate liberal religion with a consumer mindset that sees spiritual good as a consumable. You must become a shareholder and co-creator of community in order to find something more rewarding here. There endeth the preaching. We will now return to the topic at hand.

One of my favorite popular culture religion books is *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. In it, Gilbert talks about the four brothers of Balinese Hinduism. Here is a passage from the book:

... the Balinese believe we are each accompanied at birth by four invisible brothers, who come into the world with us and protect us throughout our lives...

The child is taught from earliest consciousness that she has these four brothers with her in the world wherever she goes, and that they will always look after her. The brothers inhabit the four virtues a person needs in order to be safe and happy in life: intelligence, friendship, strength and (I love this one) *poetry*. The brothers can be called upon in any critical situation for rescue and assistance. When you die, your four spirit brothers collect your soul and bring you to heaven.

Well, the four brothers, the virtues they represent, their philosophy for creating safety and happiness seemed as good a metaphor, as good an organizing principle, as any for what we do here. And I love the idea of four brothers who never stick frogs down your back, but exist just protect you and be companions on life’s journeys. So intelligence, friendship, strength and poetry.

Intelligence and the intellectual is a lot of what we do here. We come to seek using our reason, testing the ideas of the world’s religions against our own experience and rationality. We come to learn from each other, to deepen our understanding of the spiritual life, of the secular life and how the two can meet. We learn about how to interact with other people and how other people view the world differently from us. As we grow in connection to the church we may learn about how systems work, about leadership and democracy. We may even learn very practical skills like bookkeeping, how to run a meeting or how to make turkey tetrazzini for a hundred people.

One of the things that makes Unitarian Universalism both a joy and sometimes a trial is our emphasis on the life of the mind, on a personal search for truth that does not involve simply accepting untested what others hand us. We have been criticized as a denomination for placing too little importance on feelings and what transports us emotionally. It can be true, but on par I think it is a strength that we stress that in order for a spiritual path to be authentic, sustainable and valuable it must stand up to the trials of experience and reason.

But there are also multiple types of intelligence, and all of those are honored and engaged in fully alive community. Psychologist Howard Gardner identified eight, possibly nine, different types of intelligence. They include the linguistics and logic that we may first think of as intelligence and that we all got tested on in school, but there are also visual, musical, and body forms of intelligence; there is an intelligence of knowing the natural world and of communicating with other people. All these forms of intelligence should be part of what we do here. It isn't just about discussion groups, committee meetings and creating the budget though we would certainly hope intelligence would be active there. It is about the full person, and all different types of people each experiencing and contributing in their distinct ways.

Combining all these different types of intelligences and skills, we do what I consider the single most important task of religious community. We make meaning of our lives and our world. We use our individual and shared experiences, our individual and shared reason, our individual and shared love to make of existence more than a solitary pursuit devoid of purpose. Here we make of ourselves, our lives and our community the most that they can be.

Note that while I hold up individual experience, reason and love I equally affirm the shared aspects of all of them. For friendship is the second of our four virtues, and one of the strongest pulls we have as human beings. We are essentially and inherently social beings. Simply, we need one another. To survive, to love and be loved, to comfort and be comforted, to rejoice, to mourn, to be fully human we need one another. We need each other when the going gets tough, in the darkest, hardest, most painful moments of our lives. So we gather when times are good to build the shelter of beloved community that will see us through the inevitable storms.

Our society was once structured so that we were tightly knit into communities of all sorts—our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, civic and religious organizations, sports teams and choirs, bowling teams, bridge clubs and book groups. These have, more and more, been replaced by an ethic of solitary pursuit. In the last 25 years there has been a 25% drop in the amount of time children spend playing with other children. And things for adults are hardly better. In 1985 Americans reported having three close friends in whom they could confide matters of importance. Twenty years later the number was down to two close friends, and one in four people surveyed said they had no close confidants at all.

The great Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker told us that we need community in order to realize our full spiritual potential. I would add to that the idea that community *is* in fact our full spiritual potential, that we are so inextricably linked to all existence that to think we are ever solitary is to ignore our true nature. We have more than those four brothers, we have everyone and everything stuck like crazy glue to our souls. Even when we are not physically in community we are a part of it, we are inseparable from it.

And so we must do everything we can to realize the greatest potential of that community. Not just this community right here, but the fuller, wider community of the world. We cannot know everything that needs to be done. For that we have each other. We cannot do what needs to be done. For that we have each other. We are both called to action and aided in that action by the fact that we are part of a community. Friendship.

Strength is the third brother, the third virtue, and a very important reason why we come to church. We come to gather the strength of others. We come to offer our own strength to others. We come to this place to heal the wounds of our souls and to find peace. In this there is strength.

Many people say that what they hope from the Sunday service is something that gives them respite from the week just ending and renewed strength to face the week ahead. I love that idea and would be forever grateful if it were consistently so, but I believe we need to back to the well more often than once a week. And so I would hope for a church that gave you not a once-a-week spirit infusion, but the tools to tend to your spirit each day.

And that leads us neatly into the fourth virtue—poetry. Because poetry is not a thing only of the intellect, not only about friendship and strength though it has elements of all three. Poetry is about the soul. It incorporates the creative, the liminal and the numinous. It is what reaches to the depths of our being and equally lifts us wholly outside our being. We can find intelligence and friendship and strength at the Rotary Club, at a Save the Whales rally or in our community theater groups. These are all useful, necessary and fulfilling pursuits. But the poetry of church takes us into what is of ultimate meaning, ultimate concern, to what is the ultimate ground of our existence.

This is what makes church different than any other organization, group or pursuit. This, what we do here in this church, is no less than grapple with the Infinite. That is a poetry unlike any other.

And *that* can be life changing and life saving. If the call to a life of the spirit seems too esoteric for you let me offer one more reason for coming to church. You'll live longer. In the book *Blue Zones*, Dan Buettner offers eight lessons he learned from studying the longest-lived people on earth. He writes that "The simple act of worship is one of those subtly powerful habits that seem to improve your chances of living more good years. It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu. Studies have shown that attending religious services... may make a difference in how long a person lives... As a group attendees had a longer life expectancy, with an impact about as great

as that of moderate physical activity.... It appears that people who pay attention to their spiritual side have lower rates of cardiovascular disease, depression, stress, and suicide, and their immune systems seem to work better.” Now you can’t beat *that* for a reason.

So why is it we show up and do this every week, year after year? I imagine you all have your own unique response to the question, but if some Sunday morning when the couch is too comfy and the crossword puzzle too engaging I suggest you ask your four brothers what they think.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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