

WHAT?

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – February 24, 2008

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What is the purpose of this Fellowship? How do we serve our members and friends? What is our role in the wider community? What does this Fellowship contribute to the world?

I think that from time to time, it's good for any community to ask and answer these questions.

And while I could spend the next twenty minutes pondering that question, I'm hoping to do something a little different today. I'm hoping that today, you'll give some thought to these questions, and that our reflection and sharing time can be used to answer them.

Today, I will share some of my own thoughts on the subject. I mean them to give you a glimpse at how I view this community of faith, how I've experienced community in my life, and what Unitarian Universalism has meant to me.

But I can't answer the question of what this Fellowship means to your life. I can tell my story, but not yours—I can tell you what I think is meaningful and promising here, but not what feeds your spirit. So I'm asking you now to think about that, and to share your answer a little later.

First and foremost, this is a religious community.

In thinking about what that means, I think it's useful to unpack the word "religion" just a little bit. It's a word that has taken on all sorts of odd accretions in our modern-day society.

The word religion comes from the Latin root "religare," which literally means "to bind together again." The root is the same as that for ligament, the anatomical connector that binds bones and organs together in the body, and of obligation, a binding promise.

The purpose of a religious community is to bind together again that which has become separated. Religion, therefore presumes that something is broken—be that within us or outside of us.

Since we're not just any kind of religious community—we're a Unitarian Universalist religious community, we don't have easy answers to point us to what is broken, and we certainly don't have easy answers to tell us how to fix it. It is up to us to figure out what it is that needs re-binding and how we're going to go about doing that work.

For some of us, we arrive in this place already knowing what is broken in our lives. For others, we need a safe place to explore it. For some of us, it's a deep hurt within, for some it's the effect of societal injustice on our lives and the lives of those we love, and for others the pain of broken relationships, of broken promises, of broken dreams.

Theologian Dr. Rebecca Parker, in her book *Blessing the World*, writes:

“We need to see the longing for spirituality among us as an expression of our awareness of broken covenant, of something that is failing in our culture - a promise unfulfilled. All of us who have come into Unitarian Universalism from another religious context know something of promises broken. All human beings have experienced the impasse and anguish of violated trust... Patient pursuit of what we need, even the willingness to wander without direction or relief, will bring us fresh vision. The place of limit becomes the place of revelation. The path to deeper spirituality begins in the experience of promises failed, covenant broken, hope suppressed. It begins with disillusionment, impasse, grief, and it passes through the fire to a new revelation.” (Rebecca Parker, *Blessing the World*, p. 87)

Parker goes on to challenge us to realize that we are “part of a universal love...something that will not let us go.” She writes, “Regardless of how we come to this love, the experience of brokenness is the place of revelation, and that revelation is what will fuel a new covenant.” (Rebecca Parker, *Blessing the World*, p. 88)

So we are a religious community, whose purpose is to bind together that which is broken—be that our own spirits from a society that beats us down, or the relationships we have with others. We bind together that which is broken through our use of covenant—the sacred promises we make to one another about how we will be in the world. And our covenant is based in an understanding of the power of love to heal wounds of the spirit.

As a Unitarian Universalist community, we are also a community without specific dogma or creed, so fundamentally, ours is a religion of choices.

My colleague the Rev. Barbara Wells tenHove, writes: “We espouse a religion that honors our responsibility and our capability to choose. Because we know that others too must do their own choosing, we value diversity and try to embody a loving acceptance of life’s differences. We take responsibility for our religious choices and change them if new knowledge or understanding deem it appropriate.” (Barbara and Jaco ten Hove, *Articulating Your UU Faith*)

Rebecca Parker notes that one of the many choices we are faced with is whether we will use our gifts to bless or to curse the world.

This choice is part of human experience. It is based in how we live our lives, and not in how we watch others live their lives. It is based in how we teach, and not what we learn. It is based in what we do, and not what we think (or what we think we should do).

That choice is also intimately related to a theology that understands “salvation” not as something given to us by a supernatural being, but as something we experience every day. I believe that such a theology is unique to Unitarian Universalist communities—because we don’t have a dogma that tells us how to achieve salvation, what it means to do so, or when one knows one is saved, “salvation” in our hands becomes something concrete in the present, and not something saved for after our death.

The choice to use our gifts to bless the world is part of the covenant of Unitarian Universalism—part of the covenant that makes our Fellowship exist.

It is part of this Fellowship’s mission statement, printed on the cover of our Order of Service each week (but rarely read), in which we say that here, we encourage “love, acceptance and understanding” in a diverse community, and in which we claim to “provide service to those in need inside and outside our community.” Our mission calls us to bless the world.

But let me repeat something I’ve just said so it doesn’t get lost. Something I want you to think about when you think about what this Fellowship means to you and your life (or could mean, if you let it).

It might be controversial to use this language, but I believe that Unitarian Universalists *experience salvation* directly every day.

I know that I have experienced it. It’s not something I talk about a lot, and it’s not a story I will probably tell again and again from this pulpit, but I think it’s a relevant story to this discussion of purpose, of religion and of community.

In my teenage years, not too far from here, I struggled to find my own self-worth. As a young gay man, I felt all alone in a society where who I was was deemed unacceptable, wrong, unworthy. I was taught, again and again, by one after another religious organization, that if I wanted spirituality I had to find it on my own, because no religious group would let me in just the way I was. I was taught, again and again, that I might as well not even exist—as I struggled with the pain of hiding who I was, I sometimes thought that perhaps I should just give up.

It was community that saved my life. Being held—literally and figuratively—by those who knew that I was whole and worthy, who told me again and again that I was beautiful just the way I was, saved me. One day, a friend of mine played me a song he’d recently heard. He didn’t know all of what I was struggling with; he just thought it was a beautiful song.

The song, called “Everything Possible,” was written by Fred Small. You might know it. You might have heard our choir sing it at my ordination. This story is the reason I asked them to do that.

“Everything Possible” is written as a lullaby to a child, meant to let the child know it is loved, to let it know the strength and power and importance of love. While verses make it explicit that being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender are possibilities for a whole and worthy person, here’s how the chorus goes:

“You can be anybody you want to be, you can love whomever you will. You can travel any country where your heart leads, and know I will love you still. You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around, you can choose one special one, and the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you’re done.” (Fred Small, “Everything Possible”)

“Everything Possible” helped save my life, too. Fred Small, then a folk singer, is now a Unitarian Universalist minister, believe it or not—he serves our congregation in Littleton, Massachusetts. A few

years back, I had the opportunity to thank him for that song and to tell him just a bit of this story. I will never forget the look on his face that night.

Just a few years after I heard that song, years after the community I was a part of helped heal the brokenness in my life, I walked into a Unitarian Universalist congregation. There, I found that there was a place for me. I found that there was a religious community that accepted me just the way I was, that embraced me, my theology and my sexuality, my questions and my doubts, and even my insistence on testing things to see if they worked for me. I thought at first it was too good to be true. I know now it wasn't. Finally, I could be my whole self somewhere—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. In finding Unitarian Universalism, I experienced salvation one more time.

I believe that Unitarian Universalists *experience salvation* directly every day.

Barbara tenHove writes, “We believe and live as if life, indeed all existence, matters.... [Life] is ours to make something with. Life matters not because people alone matter; it matters for itself alone. And because it matters, we find ourselves living life in a way that enables us to make the most of this great gift.” (Barbara and Jaco ten Hove, *Articulating Your UU Faith*)

Barbara is writing—in her own ways—about what I would call the experience of salvation.

I'm sure others have stories like this one, too.

I'm sure some of your stories actually take place in Unitarian Universalist congregations. I'm sure some of your stories take place in this very Fellowship, among these very people.

I know that I'm ready to hear them. So collect your thoughts, and choose one of the stories you have to tell. You'll have a few minutes to think about what you'd like to share, but I'd like to encourage you to do so.

What is the purpose of this Fellowship? What does it mean to you? How has your life been changed by the experiences you've had here? I'm looking forward to hearing your stories.