

First Unitarian Church

January 3, 2016

Happy New Year!

I hope you all had happy holidays. Some of you traveled. Maybe to warmer places.

Some of you stuck it out here in New Mexico, like me. Brrr.

And if you celebrated the holidays with family, maybe it was a learning opportunity.

There's a story that has been making the rounds among preachers for years, about a family in which there was a particular, traditional way of preparing a roast for the holidays.

Many of us have traditions like that—sacred traditions that you'd better not mess with too much, or everyone will get upset and the holiday won't feel right. Yeah?

In the family in this story, the roast would be a particular cut, prepared with spices and left to sit just a certain amount of time, placed in the heirloom roasting pan, and then, just before it was put into the preheated oven, the top two inches or so of the roast was trimmed off, and placed along the sides. Only when it was all nestled in in just that way did it finally go into the oven to cook while all the traditional sides, and maybe *one* new one, were prepared.

One year, a child in the family asked the cook why the meat was prepared just so.

Why that kind of roast? It had the best texture when cooked.

Why the spices? For the special flavor everyone knew and loved.

Why the pan? It reminded the family of all the holidays they had spent together over the generations, and they felt thankful.

And why trim the top of the roast?

Hmm, said the cook. Well, that's the way my dad taught me. Go ask him. So the child went to the cook's father and asked him.

Hmm, said the father. Well, that's the way my mother taught me. Go ask her.

So the child went to the father's mother, who was the child's great grandmother, and asked.

Hmm, said the great grandmother. That's the way my older sister taught me. Let's give her a call and ask.

Well, the great, great aunt was very happy to hear from the young child. But when they explained to her the nature of the call, and the child asked why she always cut the top off the roast, she burst out laughing. "Ha!" she said. "You've been cutting the top off the roast all this time? Why, I only did that because that's the only way a roast that size could fit in our old oven!"

You know, sometimes it's useful to approach our lives with the mind of a child.

There's a line in the bible, in the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus's disciples come to him asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

The disciples were always asking questions that sounded like they were looking for easy answers. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Yes, but what is the most important rule? Jesus usually gave them frustrating answers, like you must lose your life to gain it. Or saying things like, "If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away!" which isn't realistic, they thought to themselves, and so he must not have meant it literally... they hoped.

This time they are being a little bit sneaky, asking not what is the best or most important thing they themselves could do, but who is greatest in heaven?

And Jesus gestures for a child to come over to him, and puts the child "in the midst of them." I picture him with his hands on her shoulders, and the child wondering whether to be happy or nervous to be in the center of attention like that. And then Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

I have sometimes heard people argue that this story refers to purity. That Jesus was saying only the purest, most sin-free people would enter heaven. But there's no evidence that's what he meant. In fact, the next thing he says is, "Whoever *humbles* himself like this child is the greatest in... heaven."

What is humble about a child? A young child does not think they already know everything. They ask questions that sometimes seem obvious, but can actually teach us adults a lot. They aren't afraid of seeming foolish.

Once my sister was grieving the loss of a dear old friend, who had died after being ill for some time. She was crying, and she said, "I just wasn't ready yet." To which my son, who was six at that time, gently replied, "Well... when would you have been ready?" She laughed and said she guessed he was right. That it was always going to be hard to accept that loss, because she had been lucky enough to love someone so much.

We would do well to be as curious as children. About our family traditions, and about our spiritual lives, too.

I called this sermon "Ex-Religions," or "A New Take on Ex-Religions," depending on where you look, because so many Unitarian Universalists are what we call "come-

inners.” They’ve come into Unitarian Universalism from some other spiritual or religious background. Another way to say this is that they’ve *converted* to Unitarian Universalism, but that sounds weird. We don’t really try to convert people. At least not the way it sounds when you say it like that.

But many of us are “come-inners,” and that means we arrive at this church with other religious experiences, and along with those, some previous customs, assumptions, and concerns, that we might not even be totally aware of.

From our ex-religions we may bring habits, things we love, inclinations, moods. (such as ecstatic moods, embodied religion, or contemplative). We may bring assumptions, about how churches work. How ministers behave, or whether they are called pastors, ministers, priests, or some other name, and how to address them. (In this tradition we usually say minister, and ministers go by their first names unless we are giving some kind of fancy public address out in the wider community).

And we may bring some reactions we are still carrying around with us. You know what I mean? How we can have a reaction to something, and even after we’ve moved on with our lives, the reaction is still with us? You can feel it in your body if you think about it. Like if you bang your toe really hard on a piece of furniture, and after that you cringe a little in your mind whenever you walk through that same place in socks.

As William Faulkner famously said, “The past isn’t over... it isn’t even past.”

The past is always with us. It’s how we became who we are.

What other religious labels used to belong to you?

Presbyterian, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Agnostic, Atheist, Mormon, Baptist, Methodist... Buddhist.

Maybe one of them still does, and you’ve hyphenated it now. We have lots of Buddhist UUs. Atheist UUs. Lots of other hyphenated UUs too.

Or maybe you wouldn’t claim any label, but you were involved in some way, for example, you were baptized into a certain tradition. Or you attended a youth retreat. Or went on a mission trip with a friend. I did that in high school. We provided a little bit of relief to people living in a shantytown in Mexico by replacing their cardboard or particleboard homes with corrugated metal and wood ones. It wasn’t much, but it kept the rain out. I tried so hard to convert to Christianity then. Peer pressure! Small, conservative home town. But I had been raised UU, and... I was a UU through and through. They knew it by how subversive I was. I’ll come back to subversion or rebellion in a minute.

Now, an increasing number of adults actually have no formal religious past. It used to be that everyone seemed to go to church somewhere, for example in the 1950s and 60’s, because in a lot of towns the neighbors would talk if you didn’t. And they

might not let their kids play with your kids. But nowadays it's just as normal not to go to any church or identify as religious in any way. So some of us do not have an ex-religion. But we all have spiritual journeys behind us, and I'll come back to that in a few minutes, too.

First, I want to acknowledge that when we leave one religious tradition to come to another one, sometimes it is not a happy process. There's a reason you left.

Some of us bring upsetting, or even angry, memories of other religions with us. Some people were forced out of their childhood tradition for not fitting in. That's a painful experience, even if you were thinking of leaving anyway. Some of us have experienced the kind of religious bullying where you're told that if you leave, or even have any doubts, God will be angry at you.

One of my favorite stories comes from Kate Braestrup, who wrote a memoir about her work as a chaplain with the game wardens in the state of Maine. That means she accompanied the wardens out into the wilderness, or spoke with a family, whenever someone went missing or died out in the woods in Maine. One time she was there to accompany a man whose sister, I think, had gone missing. I'm telling this story from memory and may not have the details down perfectly, but here is the gist of it.

The man's sister had gone missing, and it turned out she had committed suicide in the woods. The man was worried that suicide was such a bad sin that his sister would go to hell for it. To which Kate Braestrup reminded him that she and the wardens had spent hours in the cold and rain trying to find the woman. And, she said, she found it hard to imagine God was any less kind, compassionate, or loving than a Maine game warden.

Fear mongering can stay with a person for a long time. It can be hard to break free, hard to trust that God, if there is a God, is kinder and more loving than a bully's projection.

And, among past religious experiences, it is important also to name that some of us may even have experienced abuse in a religious context. We know all too well these days that such a thing can happen, and it has happened.

I'm going to be talking about how we look back on our ex-religions or past parts of our spiritual journeys, and specifically about finding some value in them that we may have overlooked. But serious abuse is in a whole different category. Although with healing we can find meaning in being a survivor, that kind of process is too complex to address in a sermon like this, and so please know these remarks are geared toward more typical kinds of situations. If you like, I'm available to talk in person about the more complicated stuff.

Now, behind any question about ex religions is the broader, very important question: how did you get where you are? Each of us has a spiritual journey that includes deeply personal things, some of which happened when we were alone, others while we were in community with others. We've experienced peaks and

valleys. Times of breathtaking growth, and desert phases. There have been many moments that left an important impression or impact on us.

If you were to tell your religious or spiritual autobiography, what would it sound like? Often times in UU circles, personal stories of faith sound like stories of rebellion:

“I was raised [fill in the blank] but I left that behind. It didn’t make sense to me anymore.”

Or “it was hypocritical.”

Or “I was tired of checking my brain at the door.” These are sentiments I’ve often heard. Legitimate ones!

And one thing we know, one thing we really embrace, in the Unitarian Universalist church is that rebellion is an important part of faith. Rebellion is part of faith. It’s important to mature faith.

Now, if you’re suspicious of the word faith, if you’re having a little reaction to it that you can maybe even feel in your body right now, as though you had whacked your toe on it, that may be a good example of an ex-religion rearing its head! Maybe the word faith reminds you of being pressured to adopt a set of beliefs that you weren’t comfortable with. Maybe a set of beliefs that your logical brain howled in protest against! That’s not what I mean in this context, of course.

In this church, faith is the degree to which you have a sense of your life’s meaning and are able to be at peace with it. It is deeply personal. That kind of faith—that sense of your life’s meaning and your peace with it— is something that you can draw on in bad times, and that heightens the pleasure and joy of good times.

And a little rebellion helps you hone it.

Spiritual or religious rebellion is a time of testing your own faith. It can take the form of questioning core beliefs. It can look like a break, long or short, from spiritual practice or from church. Or it can even take the form of pure *cynicism*. Cynicism. Flirting with the idea that nothing really matters.

Your heart howls in protest to that. But it’s important to try it out, so that you learn to listen to your heart *and* your logical brain.

After we’ve rebelled for a while, when we recenter ourselves in our spiritual lives (and, I’d like to think, we return to church) we come back to our faith, our sense of meaning, with a deeper connection. It becomes more time-tested and personal. It’s no longer just something we’ve been handed, or that we adopted without knowing whether it will really truly work for us. It’s something we’ve personally grappled with, tested, explored, and come to a deep understanding. It is becoming *mature faith*.

Religious or spiritual rebellion may be useful multiple times in our lives. However, it works best if we don't just launch from one thing to the next, throwing the old away. It works best if we move forward, *and reflect back*.

It is a paradox of the spiritual life that we develop mature faith partly by being more childlike—by being curious, open to learning, and asking questions that might seem silly.

All of your life is a spiritual journey.

Whatever you have been drawn to—or handed— along the way, those experiences are rich with wisdom about what kind of seeker you are, about what your deepest questions look like, and about what you've learned about yourself and others. And they shape us. All of our experiences shape us. The same past church that we stormed out of in a huff may have taught us also to love our neighbors. Or the value of intergenerational relationships. Or it may have been rather terrible through and through, but it acquainted us with our own inner moral compass in a way few other things could have. You learned who you are.

In his book, *Spiritual Autobiography*, Dan Wakefield shares some of the stories students in his *Spiritual Autobiography* class have shared.¹ In one, a man in his forties tells about another boy who had had a profound impact on him in high school. The other boy was confident, strong, dominant. The man had admired his classmate and looked up to him, while at the same time being afraid of him. Many of us can relate to that.

As the man wrote the story down in the class, though, he began to see it from a new angle. He realized the boy's characteristics were the same ones that could become obstacles to mature adulthood. And the man began to look back at his high school self not as less manly or less successful a person than the other boy, but—for the first time—the value of his own way of being came into view. His character reflected not weakness, but early maturity and sensitivity that would serve him well later. So it is also with many religious experiences along the way to mature faith.

We are all like the student, Daiju, in the book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

Daiju visited the master Baso in China. Baso asked: "What do you seek?"

"Enlightenment," said Daiju.

"You have your own treasure house. Why do you search outside?" Baso asked.

"Daiju inquired, "Where is my treasure house?"

Baso answered: "What you are asking *is* your treasure house."

¹ Wakefield, Dan. *Spiritual Autobiography*. Beacon Press: Boston, 1990. (21)

Daiju was enlightened! Ever after he told his friends, "Open your treasure house and use those treasures."²

What you are seeking has been with you all along, and your journey has invited you over and over again to see it. Each part has helped you get where you are now.

This is true in religious or spiritual paths, and it is also true in our personal journeys. You are who you are because of all that has come before. And whatever is happening in this moment, this morning, whether you are content or restless, hopeful or hopeless, clear-minded or confused, it is important both to be present to it, and to recognize that it's also a stepping-stone. Perhaps a crucially important one.

I'm going to close with a reading. It's by the artist and poet, Jan Richardson. It's called For Those Who Have Far to Travel.³

She writes:

If you could see the journey whole,

you might never undertake it,

might never dare the first step that propels you from the place you have known toward the place you know not.

Call it one of the mercies of the road:

that we see it only by stages as it opens before us,

as it comes into our keeping, step by single step.

There is nothing for it but to go, and by our going take the vows the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to the next step;

to rely on more than the map;

to heed the signposts of intuition and dream;

to follow the star that only you will recognize;

to keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path;

to press on beyond distractions, beyond fatigue, beyond what would tempt you from the way.

There are vows that only you will know:

² As recounted by Wakefield. (54)

³ © Jan Richardson. janrichardson.com.

the secret promises for your particular path and the new ones you will need to make when the road is revealed by turns you could not have foreseen.

Keep them, break them, make them again;

each promise becomes part of the path, each choice creates the road that will take you to the place where at last you will kneel

to offer the gift most needed— the gift that only you can give— before turning to go home by another way.