

Something Good

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First Unitarian Society of Plainfield

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“...Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead--as if innocence had ever been--and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.”

-- Annie Dillard, from Holy, the Firm

“Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it's less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you've lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that's good.”

— Elizabeth Edwards

I started my time as a UU minister in Florida, my home state, some twenty years ago. The Florida UU's have been notorious for holding on tightly to the endless and wearying debate between those who have no use for any reference to god and those who range from tolerance to embrace of religious language. I am imagining that the debate may have subsided somewhat during and after Irma!

That same debate can be found in UU congregations far beyond Florida.

Perhaps there were UU's who were calling out to some version of god during the hurricane in Florida and Texas. It is interesting how the atheist/theist debate subsides during a traumatic event!

Yet, it has been business as usual in many UU congregations to let the debate go on.

At the small congregation where I last served as a called minister in Eastern North Carolina, I had just finished my 2nd sermon of candidating week, the one after which I would leave and they would vote to call me as their next minister. I asked during the worship service for those present to offer, as they felt moved to do so, their reflections on my topic for the day. The first person to speak said he hadn't been able to "hear" whatever I had said because he was so upset that we hadn't sung the amen at the end of the doxology earlier in the service. His comment was followed by a much longer and more heated one from a young neo-pagan who forcefully reminded him and the rest of those in the room that any mention of amen, or God, or Jesus, in any service would mean she had no congregational home. And how dare we exclude her by not respecting her need to exclude all theist references.

The rest of the congregation sat there shocked that the long running debate that the search committee had tried so hard to shield me from, had erupted in the middle of this particular Sunday service. They seemed to collectively hold their breath waiting to hear how I was going to handle it... I told them that if they did call me, we would be exploring the power of religious language and how best to understand it and to use it in what was surely a theologically diverse group.

Secretly, I was already convinced that avoiding the use of religious language, (or as a past president of the UUA would say, the language of reverence), within congregational life was akin to not being allowed to use the word snow when one lives in a northern climate.

(I was aware since I had served Florida UU congregations, that the fundamentalist atheists would have said; we don't live where there is any snow, so NO has a good reason to use that word anymore!)

Of course, there are many snowbirds in Florida congregations. I wonder if there is a reason harsh former climate reason why so many seem so convinced that an aggressive atheist position is the only way to be UU.

As many of you know, when I was a senior in high school my Dad suddenly died. It was soul numbing. It was as if all that had given meaning to my life up to that point was suddenly ripped away.

Eventually, I stopped believing in God, certainly in God the Father. It didn't take me very long to also stop believing in the comfort and perhaps even the healing that ought to come from participating in congregational life. My church home, at the time of my dad's death, cared for me in a focused way for about 30 days then they seemed to expect me and my family to be over it.

Of course, I wasn't. My faith in God and in them was shattered.

Sometime later, not yet a UU, I would read Annie Dillard. WE are the ones. There are no perfect people. Her words made sense to me and I so wanted some sense. It took me awhile to find the right “we” that would hold me and help me move into more expansive truths.

In the meantime, it was clear to me that there was no higher power kept me safe, no god keeping me from suffering. For a long time, I knew no “believing community” that could hold me close in the loving arms that might have replaced what I had lost. So, leaving who I had been, it seemed fitting for me to call myself an atheist. I did for a long time.

But the thing is, I didn’t stay there. Over time, I found a new sense of spirituality. The god that emerged for me was very different from the god of my childhood. Yet, there were some fundamental characteristics of my relationship with “the holy” that very clearly did stem from my childhood.

Some of what I had previously rejected, been rejected by, returned.

“Something good”, something very good can come from a traumatic experience.

Bill Sinkford, the former UUA President that talked about a language of reverence, once said in a sermon that no UU on their deathbed, or during a traumatic event, recites the 7 principles. Instead, they return to whatever the comfort language was that they recall from their childhood!

During my journey, during my long years of gaining a kind of spiritual maturity, I heard people who meant to be reasonable, who only meant to be factual, dismiss my reality. And, not without blame, I have heard myself dismiss other’s realities.

Perhaps, that is part of growing up, of defining who one is by being very clear about what one is not.

Perhaps, it is more useful to be clear about what is gone.

People in Florida are having to do a lot of that now. Expressing grief for what is no longer. Praying, calling out to the holy, seeking out/helping each other regardless of theological identity...

I think the debate between those I call fundamentalist atheists and everyone else is about over in UUism.

It is good that, as a faith, we are learning to allow, even embrace other’s reality/truths, other hard found identities...other than allowing one to be dominant, excluding all others.

I believe that the ability to find something good after grief and struggle, is way more important than clinging to what for a moment seemed “right”. And I believe that is the way we “ascend the hill”.

Resilience is the opposite of enshrining something in concrete...which is what fundamentalists do. It is not our way.

An article appeared in the UU World magazine this June, that I think we all need to read and reflect upon. It was written by a black UU, [DeReau K. Farrar](#), Director of Music at First Church Portland, Oregon. I will tell you that I have been wondering when someone was going to say what he does.

He cites a recent Pew Research study that clearly says that only 2% of American black adults say they do not believe in God. (Interesting that the same study shows that 6% of Latinx adults say the same, they do not believe in God.)

Farrar says ... “any movement in Unitarian Universalism to make God unwelcome in our sanctuaries is effectively akin to posting “Whites Only” signs on our doors.

If we are serious about being inclusive and racially diverse, we are going to have to stop the sometimes violent God-hating in our places of worship.”

I was still in Florida, when one of the larger UU churches called a black UU woman as their next minister. She was brilliant. She came to UUism from a first career in mass media. She was already well known and well-respected in the UU world by a lot of leaders, and certainly by many UU ministers. She was by no means a traditional Christian, but she loved gospel music, spirituals, and certain God language made sense to her.

Surely the Florida church knew who they were getting when they called her? She was masterful at community relations and political organizing, quickly held in high esteem in the city she served. But EVERY single Sunday someone at church, at her UU church, took offense at her readings, her prayers, her spirituality, her! Every single Sunday. Every single Sunday someone told her she didn't fit!

She didn't serve there very long. Took another offer in a California UU congregation as an assistant, a position where she wouldn't have to preach very often, wouldn't have to engage in public worship in a way that required vulnerability, that at the very same time reminded her that she did not belong, in what was in effect a “whites only” space.

And we wonder why the numbers of people of color in UUism has been so low for so long, only very recently growing to any reasonable expectation of what the numbers should be?

As Farrar says we don't have to put a "whites only" sign out. It is obvious when we demand that God language be excised from our worship space, that we don't allow those who don't fit. We don't see hear who they are. His words... "As long as society unjustly favors white lives, people of color will need to lean upon their gods for strength, endurance, and peace of heart."

Signs that we highly value atheism, that the reliance on the god of strength, endurance and peace of heart is silly, unreasonable, even wrong, denies those who need that space. Why would we be so uncaring? Because we are focused on us, not them.

Farrar goes on "It is our duty, if we mean what we say about pluralism, and if we indeed affirm the first, second, third, fourth, and sixth Principles, to provide a warm home for them, where they can fully express their spiritual selves without being judged or marginalized."

Safe space does not judge or marginalize those who come seeking love and justice.

Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord? Indeed, Annie Dillard makes a reference to a passage in Psalms, a passage that points out the distance between creature and creator. A false distance.

If the goal of our faith to create the world we wish to live in. Who shall ascend? We will....

Take heart my friends, the way may be hard, but we will get there. We need to learn to open the doors wider, ever wider to those who would be here if we only learned to invite them in.
