

Why We're Here (and not someplace else) Part III
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

In my opening words, I mentioned how Hans Elfert astutely observed how eye-catching our damaged sign is to passing traffic on Oak and 49th, and that maybe we should leave it askew as a way of attracting attention. It got me thinking about how competitive mass and social media are; how journalists and editors (and their advertisers) feel compelled to focus resources, layouts and broadcasts on eye-catching drama, tragedy, folly and disaster as principal means for grabbing us—our eyes, time and emotions—and thus creating an audience and holding on to it—even if the impression they create about our world is, at times, actually false.

This phenomenon was underlined last week by Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* where he pointed out that only 1% of people surveyed in the States realized that extreme global poverty had fallen, in the last thirty years, from 44% of the world's population to less than 10%, that in that same period adult illiteracy had fallen from a majority to less than 15%, and that as girls are educated and have access to contraception, in places like India, Indonesia and Mexico, birthrates tumble. Perhaps, he wrote, we (including journalists) should pause for a second to acknowledge “the greatest gains in human well-being in the history of our species—not to inspire complacency, but rather to spur our efforts to accelerate what may be the most important trend in the world today.” (Nicholas Kristof, “The Best News You Don't Know,” *NYT*, September 22, 2016)

Don't expect that “the best news we don't know” is going to change the look of media. It certainly also should not and will not divert our attention and efforts to meaningfully address climate change, the plight of refugees, the scourge of racism, and inequities and inequalities in all their many dread guises. Nor do I expect to see any sea changes in the media's coverage of religion—it will continue to zero in on radical fundamentalism, clergy malfeasance, and wide

spread idiocy. Believe me, I'm not saying it shouldn't—but if there's any news out there about whatever good that religion may bring to individuals, families, communities and society at large—we're going to have to look closely for whatever crumbs may fall from the table.

That's the problem with good news generally, and religion in particular. For example, while billions of eyes were fixed on the Brangelina break-up, the 1st Baptist Church of District Heights in Maryland collaborated with a local laundromat and a gas station to provide a day for residents to wash and dry their clothes and fill up their cars for free; Muslim neighbours in the farming village of Khalsabad, Pakistan, helped Christian families there rebuild a Catholic church that had been destroyed in a storm; and hundreds of UU clergy across North America signed letters of support for the Standing Rock Sioux Nation and its opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline that's threatening their primary water source and destroying cultural landmarks and graves.

Good news at 49th and Oak as well, the kind that keeps us coming here, and that may attract others to seek us out. Question: *how many of us have told our friends, work colleagues, strangers, and family members why we come here and why we're Unitarians?* And if so, *did they hear and feel from us the difference for good, hopefully, that it's meant in our lives?* Just wondering....

I was a missionary in France for two years back in the day; I know it's hard to talk about religion. It's not usually very polite dinner conversation, is it? And good heavens, how do we begin to talk about a religion like ours without sounding vague or off-puttingly earnest? And so, we quietly repair that sign on 49th and Oak and put it back in place without fanfare, and not, as Hans suggested in jest—*but he had a point!*—of leaving it all askew, and thus attracting attention our way.

We tend not to be a sound-bite, attention grabbing faith; though, when UUs in the States created the motto—*Standing on the Side of Love*—in the heat of the marriage equality struggle there, that principled position and their taking-it-to-the-streets efforts were compelling and effective. As well, here in Canada, as Unitarians begin to say: “*our interdependence calls us to love and justice*”—if we mean it, and then creatively put it into practice, it too, may become a more compelling and effective vision for our religion, our nation, our planet. The *fact* of interdependence—stretching from vast cosmic structures to affective, social relationships between us and all of Nature—*should* be transformational; it *should* find its *truth* worked out by us in words and deeds of compassion and justice. And may it be so!

Nearly twelve years ago, the religion writer Tom Harpur said that the most commonly asked question in the tens of thousands of letters he had received over the years was: “Where do I go to find a place of worship where there is a kind of spirituality you are writing about?” He went on to say, that of the roughly 20% of Canadians who say they’re among the NONEs—none of the above—that is, people not having a religious affiliation, the “vast majority remain deeply spiritual” but are “frustrated in their search for a fellowship of the like-minded.” Over the years, he’d encouraged those who wrote him to “go to their minister, priest, or rabbi and ask that their needs and aspirations be met by some genuine” efforts. The results though, he concluded, have not been encouraging.

Which brought him to make a modest proposal: there is “one denomination,” he wrote, that may be the place for the “hundreds of thousands of Canadians currently looking for a spiritual home”....people who want “a truly living experience of the transcendent” and “meaning now and a future hope.” He was speaking about us; about Unitarians in Canada.

He pointed to how Unitarians treasure personal experience, conscience and reason in our spiritual journeys; he credits our non-creedal faith for enabling us to be open to the best of the world's store of faith traditions; he singled out our autonomous self-governance; as well as our embrace of atheists, agnostics, pagans and those who value roots embedded in Judaism and Christianity. He backed up this assessment by pointing to the program at the Canadian Unitarian Council's Meeting and Conference being held back then in Hamilton, which highlighted workshops and presentations ranging from "Demystifying Meditation," to popular democracy, from "Exploring our Place in the Cosmos" through a contemporary origin myth based not on scriptures but on science to "Wise and Wild Artists."

In sum, Harpur wrote, "Unitarians, as the name suggests, reject the Doctrine of the Trinity and the Divinity of Jesus, but you have to be impressed more by what they're for than what they reject from the past. They believe in the duty of each to foster the nourishment and maturing of our own soul, and to hear the divine call to work for the healing of the planet and its inhabitants." (Tom Harpur, "Unitarians could fill a vacuum," *Toronto Star*, May 21, 2005)

Well, that article was published in late May 2005, and I came to church in the following weeks expecting this *flood* of new people... Turns out, maybe not so many spiritual seekers in Vancouver read the *Toronto Star* or gave a toss for what Tom Harpur had to say.

Still, that article's kind of haunted me for over a decade. It's one of the few oldies in a file I return to over and again. I sit and think about those hundreds of thousands of people looking for a spiritual home; I chew on his moving recommendation that they could just possibly find it here and among Unitarian congregations across this country, and wonder over how that connection just doesn't seem to be happening all that much, or as much as it could. We're the

poorer for it—and I'm not talking money; and those NONEs who remain deeply spiritual *and* frustrated in their search for fellowship?

It's not as though we've lost our way, given up our principles, and changed beyond recognition from the portrait painted in words by Tom Harpur back in 2005. Far from it.

Just last week, here, in an afternoon forum, when asked by our UCV Vision Taskforce, “Why do I keep coming to the Unitarian Church of Vancouver,” and “What my dream is for this congregation down the road,” the responses confirmed and went beyond what was said of us by Tom Harpur back in 2005. Here's just a sample: *we take time each week to remember deeper spiritual issues and give thanks for life's gifts; we value explorations in thought and life and worth; we cherish openness and appreciation for the ideas of many cultures; ours is a compassionate and sharing congregation; here my core values are reflected and enacted by a diverse community that it engages in the real issues of life; we enjoy art, worship, beauty, and music and friendship—the melody of gentle souls and compassionate minds; I keep coming because it's a vibrant and caring community that enables me to think freely and take action on social justice and the environment.*

Stand back for a moment with some reverence and appreciation—these are extraordinary statements! People are the best, truest experts of their own lived experience—and if these and other statements being generated by our Vision process speak for what is commonly experienced here—then we have, we do and will continue to offer a place for those deeply spiritual people who nevertheless have been frustrated in their longing and quest for an authentic religious home and faith community. But crossing the bridge from here to there?....

A host of reasons: ineffective outreach, an indifferent media, bad timing; maybe it was just an off week where we weren't welcoming, or the sermon wasn't up to par; maybe someone

showing up for the first time didn't see enough people here from their own cohort: not enough others their age, race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity for them to truly feel "at home." And maybe there were those expecting a jumbotron and a big band, or an hour of silence...and didn't get it.

As well, and I want to say this, and it's kind of missing from the Tom Harpur article—I agree with what James Luther Adams, the Unitarian minister and ethicist, said decades ago: "a purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion"—spurious?—that means ingenuine, inauthentic, not worth the name. It may be that those who Harpur called "deeply spiritual" people don't resonate with an embodied, historical and socially complicated and imperfect faith community. You see, I don't believe in "the power of now;" I don't think I ever have. We are profoundly historical, social and embodied beings. We are enriched, vexed, challenged and blessed by the past. We are the heirs of many families, stories, traditions and cultures—with all their prejudices and failures, all their achievements and abundant glories. We rage against them; we're thankful for them. But alone? in the precious "now"?—truly, alone "our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed." (Mark Morrison-Reed)

That's why we're a *show up* group of people, why we're here and not someplace else. With other Canadian Unitarians, "we envision a world where our *interdependence* calls us to act for love and justice." That interdependence is cosmological; it's subatomic, biological, physical, social, emotional, cultural, and political. We want "spirituality"?—dive into the unimaginable *but real* depth, breadth and complexity of the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part—and we'll get *spiritualized* alright with humility, wonder, and reverence. We want justice and equity, flourishing biodiversity and environmental sustainability?—dive into that

vast, intimate realm of interconnection—and we'll get agitated, energized and equitable alright, for interdependence calls us to act for compassion and a world more decent and fair.

For an embodied—that is a tangible, real—spirituality, it truly helps most of us mere mortals to have a time set a part and a place to meet, a discipline to master, a people with whom we can travel and converse, and a ritual and art that celebrates, solemnized and affirms where we've come from, who we are, what we believe, how we laugh and how we grieve. And for that...we need a house of worship, a house of study, a house of celebration, creation and fellowship, a house from which we can go out into the world, and we need a people willing and able to fill the house and breathe life into it.

For the sake of the past that brought us here and for the future toward which we journey; thankful for the gift of histories that we yearn to mend and bless in their myriad brokenness and strength; thankful for the gift of the future into which our bodies lean and our minds leap forward—bearing our hopes, and our children and our children's children.

Which brings me to a more recent article written by the novelist Jane Roper, entitled “Why I finally joined a church.” Roper begins the article by saying “our family just joined a church,” and then, continues: “this may not sound like a radical statement...but hearing these words from my mouth feels about as natural as saying “I've just joined the Marines.” She explains that she'd given up long ago on both the Christian faith and community she grew up in, as well as on organizations of all sorts, period. She was tired of meetings and obligations, arguments over process and bickering over minutiae. In addition, she'd married a secular Jewish man, skeptical about religion and religious institutions.

So why join a church—and the church they joined was a Unitarian Universalist one? In a word, she said, it was their children. Though now, Roper writes, they were only asking

questions like “Where’s my Cookie Monster doll” and “why can’t I have more raisins?” She knew that soon they’d be asking what happens when people die, why do so many bad things happen in the world, and whether or not there’s a God. Another question, closer to home would be: “Who’s that lady in the blue dress standing in a clamshell in our neighbor’s yard, and can we get one too?”

By being part of a UU church, and attending RE classes, she explained, our girls will learn about their Jewish and Christian heritage as well as other religions. “They’ll be given a framework for thinking about spiritual matters and be exposed to principles and ideas we value, in a context other than our own parenting.”

But there’s more to it than even this, she said, because there’s more to a church than the big metaphysical questions, worship services and Sunday school—“there are fundraisers, social events, service projects, study groups, retreats, and, of course, committees. Oh, the committees!” This is “precisely the sort of join-o-rama I’ve avoided for most of my adulthood. But although there’s a part of me that still resists, quite fiercely, I’m trying to embrace it again.”

Why? Because “I want my children to see that a group of people can work together, give of their time and talents, support each other through life’s joys and sorrows not because they’re family or even friends, but because they believe that it’s an important part of being human.” “I want to expose them to good, old-fashioned community in a world where, increasingly, community happens only in virtual spaces...for there will [never] be a substitute for sharing the same physical space with a group of people—having conversations, making music together, offering each other a handshake, a smile, or a word of sympathy.”

“My girls,” Roper writes in closing, “will figure out irony and irreverence and how to craft a pithy 140-character dispatch on their own” soon enough. “But before that happens, I want to make damned sure they understand kindness, empathy and respect for other people.”

“Joining a religious community isn’t the only way to do this. But it’s a way to practice and think about these values on a regular basis, with intention. Lord knows I could use the practice too.”

http://www.salon.com/2010/04/25/family_joins_church/

And so do I, and so do we all, I think. And that’s why we’re still here, and not someplace else September 25, 2016. And may we be here for many years to come!