

To Transform Lives in a Profound Way

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Does our congregation have a soul? Does it possess a distinctive, animating spirit? Does it embody moral, spiritual, social and intellectual qualities that speak profoundly to our needs, to our values, and aspirations? Do we look forward to coming here? Would we feel comfortable and confident in inviting our friends here? Do we think the wider Vancouver community should know about us and show up at 49th and Oak? What difference would it make to them in their lives?

Picture with me in your mind's eye the following: think about the buildings, this Sanctuary; imagine the people who attend Sunday morning services and with whom you meet and talk in the second hour in the Social Hall. Picture the faces, the personalities of elders, adults, youth and children who sit in these pews, congregate in the foyer, the social hall, the offices and classrooms. Do you know them? Do you look forward to greeting and talking with them? Remember those who have been here, and who have now passed away from us. Think about the music, the singing, the religious education classes you have taken, the meals eaten together; the working groups and Boards on which you've served. Picture this. Remember: what have you felt and learned in this place? Has it made a difference in what and how you believe and walk in this world—at home, work, and in the wider community? Has it called forth from you your better, deeper, truest self?

Hold these questions, this picture with me in your minds for a moment: faces, place, music, learning, worship, service, and fellowship. OK, perhaps *some* frustration and tedium, a

cranky person here and there, a committee meeting that went on too long; I don't want to romanticize excessively, because if I do, you might not take me seriously.

Some students of religion have made a good argument that the overriding purpose of religion is to provide an all-encompassing, transformative interpretation or vision of life: what life is and ought to be, what hinders us from realizing that vision; and then, religions work to identify and make available distinctive ways to help make life deeply meaningful and worth living. In spite of deeply flawed histories, we still strive through our many religions to make three basic assertions: a) that there is an essential *problem* that thwarts genuine human flourishing; b) that a religious vision of life contains an *ideal* that we ought to seek in order to overcome the basic roadblocks to our deepest needs and aspirations; and c) that there are effective *means* available by which we can be transformed in order to attain our ideal, our essential goals (think of religious communities, music, worship, ritual, education, practice, etc.).

(see Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, *Religion: An Introduction*, 1985, pp. 99-104)

I think that our Seven Principles roughly sketch out a Unitarian world-view, an encompassing vision of life. These Principles express our beliefs and values; our take on life and its purpose. They identify an essential *problem*; claim an *ideal* way of things which, if achieved, will overcome that roadblock to profound human flourishing; and the Seven Principles suggest the *means* at hand for achieving our ideal, which, if put into practice, could bring about the kind of transformation, a compelling vision and way of life, that our religion can, or should provide.

But can we say that this is so? Have we been transformed for the best, and found a distinctive meaning and purpose for life, by becoming members of this congregation, by becoming Unitarians? This brings me back to my first question: *does this congregation have a soul?—and does it speak to our deepest selves?*

I want to propose to you what this congregation, and what our Unitarian movement should be doing, and the role they ought to be playing in our lives.

So here we go: First, I think that this congregation and our Unitarian tradition should be able to offer a compelling *vision* of a way of life worth living; they should play central roles in our life story—and this goes for adults, youth and children alike. In a religiously plural world, we need to be *able to answer* the leading questions that bring us to these doors: How can I lead a deeper spiritual life? How can I engage in something beyond day-to-day secular, consumerist living? How can I be part of a community of meaning and purpose?

Second, this congregation and our Unitarian community need to provide authentic, nourishing, *compassionate fellowship*—a place and with people where we can detoxify from a culture that is noxious in its materialism, egotism, superficiality and violence.

And third, this congregation and our wider Unitarian community should provide us with the tools to empower us to go out and make the world a better place, in ways modest and grand—at home, work, and in the public sphere. We are a community of faith called, not to focus primarily on our own individual self-discovery and enlightenment; rather, we are *called to lives of dedication and service* beyond ourselves, inspired by our values, and backed up by a community that knows and cares for us.

In sum, our religion should be a great, nourishing adventure; an authentic church that can transform our lives for the better in profound, fundamental ways; a church community dedicated to providing an inspiring “third way” between religious dogmatism and secular consumerism, so that we and our young people can grow up to achieve our truest, deepest selves.

For this to happen, we have to be ready and able to make good on our three-fold promise and our calling: strive to answer the questions that bring us to this place, and thus offer a *vision*

of a way of life worth living; provide compassionate, nurturing *fellowship*—a kind of warm homecoming that we, and any visitor here, would experience *the moment* one walks through those doors and through life's changes from birth to death; and, last but not least, being here should help us to discover and nurture our selves through service to something bigger than ourselves, and thus we become ministers on behalf of justice and compassion.

Now, once more, picture with me in your mind a congregation that embodies and makes good on its three-fold promise of vision, fellowship and service.

Having difficulty bringing it into focus?

Let me suggest four things we could embrace and practice that will blow clouds of abstraction away, clean the lens, and bring a promise keeping congregation into clearer view. Imagine the following: a) we attend worship services regularly; b) children, youth and adults are enrolled and participate regularly in religious education; c) members do something for themselves—join the choir, a women's and men's group, a committee; and d) we reach out to congregants in need, or an outreach effort beyond the congregation that serves the wider community. Can you see that in your mind's eye?

A soul needs a body; otherwise it's a poor, homeless, abstract thing. A soulful congregation, a congregation with a soul, needs worship and education to bring light to it; buildings and programs to house and nourish it; people—you and me—to breathe life into it—amazing, diverse, venturesome, visionary, welcoming, compassionate, justice seeking, transformative life.

Does that happen in a Unitarian church?

About fifteen years ago, I knew a person who was soul-sick, alienated from his life-long religious tradition, and disillusioned by organized religion in general. One Sunday morning, he

decided to attend a Unitarian worship service, and then never looked back. Week-after-week, he returned to worship and to enjoy fellowship in a community that embodied his values and need to belong to a progressive, thoughtful, outspoken, radically welcoming, and inspiring faith community. Before too long, he was invited to preach a sermon, join the social justice committee, and read Beat Poetry with a jazz group.

Vision, fellowship and service—he found all three at the First Unitarian Church in Salt Lake City, Utah, and he became an active member of the congregation. What happened during that eventful year transformed my life profoundly.

For some months now, I've wanted to share a story sent to me by Tom McCormick. It appeared in an April 2010 on-line issue of *Salon* magazine. It's an article written by a journalist and novel writer named Jane Roper. Her story, though expressed in a kind of mocking self-awareness, is, nevertheless, a sincere account of the kind of transformation that religion can bring into a person's life; for that reason I am going to quote it at some length. As well, it may be that some of you will recognize something of yourself, your own story, in hers. The story's called "*Why I Finally Joined a Church*"

"Our family just joined a church.

This may not sound like a radical statement...But hearing these words from my own mouth feels about as natural as saying, "I've just joined the [Army]."

The church in question is Unitarian Universalist, a faith whose central tenet is that all religions have wisdom to offer, and that we must love one another -- and recycle. But it's still a religious community, a culture I haven't been a part of for more than 15 years.

When I was growing up, my family was active in a Congregational church...But by my late teens...I considered myself Christian only in heritage...

I'd also grown wary of organizations, period...tired of meetings and obligations and bickering about minutiae. For the next 15 years, I avoided extracurricular commitments of any kind. I was captain of my own ship. Joining a church would have been unthinkable.

My husband, meanwhile, has a Jewish mother and an Episcopalian father, neither of them very religious....

So why, now, have we gone and joined a church? We who, until recently, couldn't handle being members of anything...?

In a word, children.

Our twin daughters are only 3. Currently, their Big Questions are mostly along the lines of "Where is my Cookie Monster doll?" and "Why can't I have more raisins?"

But it won't be long before they'll start asking what happens to people after they die, and why so many bad things happen in the world, and whether or not there's a God. There will be other, less metaphysical religious questions we'll need to answer [as time goes by].

By being a part of a U.U. church and going to religious education classes, our girls will learn about their Judeo-Christian heritage and any number of other religious traditions. They'll be given a framework for thinking about spiritual matters and be exposed to principles and ideas that we value, in a context other than our own parenting. They will get, we hope, a spiritual grounding that will allow them to choose ...their own paths as they get older.

But there's more to our decision than just this heady spirituality stuff. Because there's more to a church -- this one, anyway -- than just services and Sunday school. There are fundraisers, social events, service projects, study groups, retreats and, of course, committees. Oh, the committees.

It's 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.

I want my children to see that a group of people can work together, give of their time and talents, and support each other through life's joys and sorrows not because they're family or even necessarily friends, but because they believe that it's an important part of being human.

I also want to expose them to good, old-fashioned community in a world where, increasingly, community happens only in virtual spaces. I'm a huge fan of blogs, Facebook and Twitter, but I don't think there will ever 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.

I know how earnest this sounds, and the cynic in me cringes to type the words. But the rest of me believes this is the stuff that matters. My girls will figure out irony and irreverence...on their own -- probably sooner than I think. But before that happens, I want to make damned sure they understand kindness, empathy and respect for other people. Of course, 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.”

(Jane Roper, “Why I finally joined a church,” *Salon*, April 25, 2010)

Transformation. We come here in youth, in our mature years, and as children; single, as couples, as families with backgrounds religious and secular. What we bring here however, is a common aspiration and need—a life transformed by spiritual vision and depth, by fellowship in company with a religious community that shares our values and that will be there for us in times of joy and sorrow, and a place where we can serve a cause greater than our selves, and thus contribute to making this a better world in many ways. We’re here and not someplace else for a reason.

However, the kind of transformation we seek, and that I’ve been talking about, can only take place if we show up to worship together, to learn together, to serve together, and to reach out beyond these walls and bring some outspoken hope and light into the wider world. We can make this a transformative faith community; but it’s up to us. The truth, the value of Unitarianism can only be achieved if we make it so. This year, our congregation provides myriad ways for us to engage in a transformative life: weekly worship services, religious education for young and adults, social events, letter-writing to our MPs calling for a national, affordable housing policy, singing in the choir, pastoral care to the sick, and hospital and home

visits, joining a book group, a taskforce, and by extending our warmth, our welcome and our gifts to one another, week-in, week-out.

If we will do this---life-enhancing, meaning-bestowing, purposeful transformation can and will take place. Will take place such that the next time I ask, “does our congregation have a soul?”—there will be no doubt in our minds; we see it clearly; we have made it so; we have been transformed ourselves, and together, we can respond to that question with a resounding “YES.”

May the blessings of our vision, fellowship and service to one another abide and be with us today and in the year before us.

May it be so.