

Why We're *Still* Here (and not someplace else)

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Exactly five years ago and midway into our first decade together, I gave a sermon with the title: “Why We’re Here (and not someplace else).” We need to do this every so often, I think—to think and feel our way and reflect on why we persist in our commitment to being publicly religious people in just *this* way, this Unitarian way. Another half decade has rolled on; we stand again at the beginning of a new church year; we’re fast approaching a half a century as a congregation in these buildings; and I return to this subject like a salmon heading upstream to its spawning ground—one river running, sea swimming cycle coming to an end, another on the verge of begetting anew.

So today, it’s “Why We’re *Still* Here, and not someplace else.” But before we set forth, I can’t help thinking that not all who were here five years ago are among us today. Some of our members have moved, declining health and death have taken their toll, others decided to continue their journey elsewhere. Of those, I wonder—where are they now? And is it still for us to reach out, to amend, to renew the journey together?

A couple of weeks ago, the *New York Times* published a review of the last book Christopher Hitchens wrote before he died. Hitchens, as some of you know, was a prodigiously gifted essayist, public speaker, political gadfly, and contentious atheist who thought that religions were either harmless or dangerous hokum. What I didn’t know was that he had a gift for friendship, fellowship and prophetic insight and urgency. At the verge of death, he wrote the following:

“Another element of my memoir — the stupendous importance of love, friendship and solidarity — has been made immensely more vivid to me by recent experience. I can’t hope to convey the

full effect of the embraces and avowals [I have received], but I can perhaps offer a crumb of counsel. If there is anybody known to you who might benefit from a letter or a visit, do not *on any account* postpone the writing or the making of it. The difference made will almost certainly be more than you have calculated” or can imagine. (from the review essay of *Mortality*, by Christopher Hitchens, *NYT Book Review*, September 2, 2102)

Let’s sit at the loom of our lives for a moment and run our hand along its fabric. Most times its smooth enough, finely woven—we’ve laid down established patterns of thought and behavior seamlessly; habits of the day, cycles of life, our traits of character and action—they’re well and snugly fitted and sewn. But then comes a time, and a stitch stands out from the cloth—a knot of joy, a hitch of woe, or there’s a tear in the cloth, and what was smooth and indistinct among the field in the fabric of life suddenly stands out, in Hitchens’s words, as “immensely more vivid.” That’s a mysterious, stop-us-in-our-tracks experience so uncanny and deep that we, as Hitchens himself averred, find ourselves at a loss for words to describe it. Even Hitchens, who was a master of the written and spoken word, is compelled to say: “I can’t hope to convey the full effect...”

But what is certain is that experiences *will probably* occur in our lives—experiences that stand out, arrest the flow and smoothness of its weave—and without warning or willing it, what was just *life*, unmagnified and seamless, becomes achingly acute, or shot through with grief, with mystery, or resplendent joy. *And not only that*, when those occasions of “immense vividness” happen, though we find ourselves inadequate and fumbling to describe them, we are compelled to act, to move out beyond ourselves in redemptive and prophetic ways.

Note Hitchens’s language and its imperative tense: “If there is anybody known to you who might benefit from a letter or a visit, do not *on any account* postpone the writing or the making of it. The difference made will almost certainly be more than you have calculated” or can imagine.

I'm not trying to say that Hitchens was a religious person; he would contemptuously spurn the idea. However, given my framework, my experience and outlook—as well as our shared experience together—his language and that to which he refers: how life, at times, becomes “immensely more vivid,” how we struggle find mere words to express it, and the way those depth experiences call us, compel us to action—all of this points to a spiritual or religious dimension of our lives—its mystery, its depth, its desire for expression in word and gesture (“do not *on any account* postpone the writing or the making of it”).

We are **still** here for a profound, deep reason—being religious, the feeling and doing of religion privately and publicly, arises from an awakened spiritual consciousness and an aroused moral conscience. It is shaped by our history and by symbols of meaning that would link our intimate experiences with ultimate reality—the kind that arise with immense vividness in unexpected, life changing ways at potentially transformative moments in our lives.

Think about it: as the poet William Blake wrote: “joy and woe *are* woven fine.” We witness the birth of a baby, a marriage collapses, we graduate from school, we lose a job, we enter a grove of trees and a sense awe ascends within us, a loved one dies leaving us grieving and bereft, we witness or receive an unexpected act of kindness, a religion becomes implausible, or toxic, the sheer extent of the cosmos makes us feel insignificant or fills with wonder, the apparent stark mindlessness of natural forces great and small appalls us, or mystifies us, the moral and physical courage of others inspires us to reflection and action.

I think there *is* a wonder, a challenge, a mystery, a call at the heart of things given to us in moments and experiences such as these. Experiences that interrupt the smooth, routine flow of our habitual patterns of thought and action where we ask ourselves: *what is this mystery* that arises in the fabric of my life with such intensity? Why does it grip me, stop me in my tracks

with wonder, or grief, or reverence? And why, in response, must I feel called to act—to reach out beyond my comfort zone—to reach out in redemptive, prophetic ways towards others?

To press this a bit further, indeed, *who am I really?* What is the purpose of my life, my true vocation? What am I to do with it and with whom can I share this one and precious life—who will walk with me, what language, what stories, what gestures are available to me to truly express my woe, my joy, my aching need for meaning and purpose, and for a place and people among whom I can abide authentically, fruitfully through the remainder of my days? For truly, when these vivid experiences occur—and haven't they, for each of us at some time in our lives?—it is as if they bring us to a threshold and we see and feel with immense vividness what Hitchens calls the “stupendous importance of love, friendship and solidarity” that mere words can scarce express; and though we struggle to articulate what we have experienced and what we are feeling, we are compelled to cross that threshold into a more abundant, meaningful life.

To be sure, for many, love and friendship for and with family, friends, and colleagues, and solidarity with co-workers, with activists in political, cultural and social causes are more than enough to fill their days and satisfy needs for fellowship and action. So be it, and far from me to say otherwise.

But it is also the case that existential crises of loss, death, suffering—and immediate experiences with what we call “that transcending mystery and wonder”—take place in our lives; and for many, for us, it draws us here into religious community where we seek to connect our intimate experiences with ultimate reality through shared ritual, music, and stories; through prayer, learning, and service; through fellowship, art, and social justice.

We're still here because, not only have we felt, in Wordsworth's poem, “a presence that disturbs me with joy...a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused” in all things—

that's the intimate moment and experience—but more, in the words in Mark Morrison-Reed, for “the task of the religious community is to unveil” the way we are connected and interdependent; that we're not struggling or experiencing these deep, immense spiritual events in our lives on our own. “The religious community is essential,” he writes, “for 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.”

I'm here and not someplace else because of a Unitarian Youth group where my then teenage sons were fearlessly, openly invited by youth advisors to learn and talk about responsible sexuality and about solidarity with peers going through emotional crises. Here and not someplace else because of a beautifully flamboyant transvestite in Salt Lake City who said this is my church and I've been so welcomed here. I'm here and not someplace else because this congregation would take a stand against the Enbridge pipeline, because of the way Unitarians resolutely supported same sex marriage in this country and in the States, because of our advocacy for a national affordable housing policy, reproductive rights, a living wage, dignity in death, and more...

Here because, with you, I care for and love these buildings—the vision that inspired them, the sacrifice and work to build them, and the care in maintaining their beauty. We're here and not someplace else because we have grown to know and care for one another in times of joy and loss. We've taught each other's children, grieved together in sickness and death, survived—mostly intact—through conflict, disagreements and misunderstandings; we've sung from the same hymnbook, lit this chalice flame, served on committees, given generously at pledge time, and entered into meditative, prayerful silence together to commune with that which renews our spirit and creates and upholds life.

I'm here and not someplace else—and you've told me I'm not alone in this—because I ached to join my life's story with a greater, more meaningful narrative; with people who, for nearly five hundred years, has been described, in words by the historian Earl Morse Wilbur that I shared with last week, “by its steadfast and increasing devotion to three principles”: “complete *mental freedom* in religion rather than the bondage to creeds...; second, the unrestricted *use of reason* in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; third, *generous tolerance* of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity.” *Complete mental freedom, reason in religion, and tolerance for radical diversity*: “It is these conditions above all others that this movement has from the beginning increasingly sought to promote.” (Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism...*, 1945, 5)

We're still here and not someplace else, and this must be said, because we have made a promise, a covenant to affirm and promote seven key principles that are crucial to our faith, to one another, to our congregations, and—this takes my breath away—a promise to all that exists: a covenant to affirm and promote respect for that interdependent web of the cosmos—from least to greatest—in which we live and move and have our being. (*Name the “Principles of Our Religious Faith.”*)

We have promised ourselves to uphold our shared values and story, past present and future; our Unitarian way of being religious and its transformative capacity to reveal ways in which the invisible is enfolded within and made manifest in the visible, the intimate with the ultimate, the living history of a religion with its rituals, its language, gestures and action that mediate and express our encounter with mystery, our quest for meaning, and its impulse towards transcendence. It is worthy of our promise; it is incumbent on us to respect and enrich it and hand it along to generations to come as the pearl of great price that it is and is yet to be.

Two stories that seem to me connected with what I have been trying to say.

The British historian and novelist Francis Spufford recently wrote an essay about why he's still a believer and goes to church. While noting that he has heard all the arguments against Christianity, understands the objections of Dawkins and Hitchens, and realizes that at best it's a guess whether there is a God or not, still, even so, he's a person of faith and attends church. The reason he gives is a bit strange, yet strangely beautiful. Some years ago, Spufford and his wife had one of those all-night toxic quarrels. But comes the sun, a new day, life continues—she to work, he to a nearby café “to nurse,” he writes, “my misery with a coffee. I could not see any way out of sorrow...and then the person serving in the café put on a cassette: Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto*, the middle movement, the adagio.”

“It's a very patient piece of music,” the clarinet and orchestra “lifting up the same unhurried lilt of solitary sound...with a kind of...tenderness in deep waves...It does not sound as if the music is struggling to lift a weight it can only just manage. Yet at the same time, it is not music that denies anything. It offers a strong, absolutely calm rejoicing, but it does not pretend there is no sorrow. On the contrary, it sounds as if it comes from a world where sorrow is perfectly ordinary.... I had heard it lots of times, but this time it felt to me like news. It said: everything you fear is true. And yet. And yet. Everything you have done wrong, you have really done wrong. And yet. And yet. The world is wider than you fear it is...and it has this in it, as truly as it contains your unhappiness...[So] listen, and let yourself count...on a clam that you do not have to be able to make for yourself, because here it is, freely offered. There is more going on here than what you deserve, or don't deserve. There is this as well. [This] tune again, with all the cares in the world”; [and] it sounded the “way mercy should sound, and that's exactly the way I experienced it...” (Francis Spufford, “The trouble with atheists: a defense of the faith,” *Guardian*, 31 August 2012)

Second story. Giles Fraser is an openly gay Anglican priest and socialist who, for the past year, has been serving a small parish in an edgy, poverty stricken neighbourhood in South London. Just prior to that, he was one of the rising stars in the Anglican firmament and Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in the heart of London. Fraser was forced to resign his post by

the Bishop of London because of his outspoken support for the London Occupy movement camped out of the front steps and the square of the cathedral. For this, he briefly became the darling of the progressive, liberal community, religious and secular alike, until he spoke out in support of religious freedom for a community to practice rituals that some feel are strange throwbacks to the remote past. Those who had just praised him for sticking it to the man, to his church hierarchy, and resigning from a prestigious position on a point of principle, turned quickly against him with breathtaking, public ferocity. (see Giles Fraser, “No, I am not a liberal...,” *Guardian*, 20 July 2012) In response, Fraser wrote:

“If the essence of liberalism is a belief that individual freedom and personal autonomy are *the* fundamental moral goods, then I just don’t buy it. What we need is a much more robust commitment to the common good, to the priority of community...[As I see it] he continues: “from the 80s onwards, popular culture has morphed from an angry insistence on a fairer society...into a me-first relativism that is all about sex, shopping...and self-interest....Religion is an affront”..to this way of looking at things “because it dares suggest it’s not all about you....For socialists, Christians and other religious denominations, the community precedes the individual in so far as the individual is shaped by and responsible to something wider than itself. As Desmond Tutu once explained, using the African notion of *Ubuntu*: I am because you are.”

There is a wonder at the heart of the world that breaks through and wells up at times in our lives—intimate seasons of grief, times of joy, experiences of loss, moments of ecstatic awe and mystery. We feel the depth of our being, the precarious preciousness of our life—and we want it to *mean* something. Our religion—both intimate and public—is there, *here*, to embrace and validate and help us find expression for what is ultimately important and real to us. When we light this chalice week after week, break out in song, sit in silent communal prayer, gather in study, reach out beyond ourselves in service to one another, and covenant to uphold the very web of being, we add our own story, our whole lives to a nearly five hundred year old communion

dedicated to “*mental freedom, reason in religion, and radical diversity* that extends our capacity to touch the depths of life’s wonder and our empathy and service towards others.

These are some of the fruits of the faith we gratefully acknowledge at this time of advent of the harvest season. Together, they reveal a compelling portrait of a distinctive religious community; the kind of community which gathers us here, the kind of religion—perhaps the last—to which I can belong without apology, evasion, or a kind of fated gloom.

The harvest we name, see and honour this day is rich indeed. Sufficient to the season thereof, and to our abiding need for a living, credible religion to which we can belong. May we be mindful and grateful for it, and for the story we inhabit and claim as our own which lights our journey together like a star in the night.