

All I Wanted Was Everything

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

October 27, 2024

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The alarm went off at 7:30am and I jumped out of bed...and as my feet hit the hardwood floor I thought to myself, "I'm doing this, I'm really doing this!" I rushed to shower, dress, and grab something to eat; then, with freshly printed directions from MapQuest in hand (Yes, this was BI, before iPhone), I hopped into my car and made the twenty minute drive to the large Colonial Revival building at 433 Fern Street in West Hartford, Connecticut. I emerged from the building an hour or so later certain I had arrived home and in the spirit of T.S. Eliot, knew "the place for the first time."

The large Colonial Revival building that stands at 433 Fern Street in West Hartford, Connecticut is home to the Universalist Church of West Hartford, the church who helped nurture, shape, and support me as a congregant, then aspirant, then candidate for ministry. The community where I was ordained...a community I love and am grateful for.

The night before I walked through the doors of the church on Fern Street for the first time I spent several hours surfing Beliefnet, a popular religion website I mentioned a few weeks ago in another sermon. You see, I had found myself in a difficult position: my heart, once filled with hopes and dreams, was slowly and painfully dissolving in an acid bath of hatred.

This hatred that was growing inside me was my response to... or defense against... the rising homophobia and xenophobia within the government and the court of public opinion following 9/11 and the advancement of marriage equality in Massachusetts. I experienced the homophobia in particular as akin to the painful bullying I had endured in my youth, something I expected to be behind me as an adult.

Initially, I attempted to channel the hatred consuming my heart into political and social justice involvement. I joined or increased my involvement in groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Human Rights Campaign. I soon realized that while writing letters, signing petitions, and donating money to political action and social justice groups convinced my mind I was doing something worthwhile, my heart, rather than healing as I had expected, was hardening.

I needed to do something; and so when, as a gay man and former Roman Catholic, CHURCH popped into my mind I thought I had completely lost it. How could I expect church to even be an option? Religion, as I knew it, had not been kind to people like me.

But there I was on the Beliefnet page combing through the basic philosophies of everything from Baha'i to Zoroastrianism. It was there that first read of Unitarian Universalism, and it seemed, based on how it was described on Beliefnet, to be the only

religion out of all the others I read about where I could bring my entire self and be safe. Indeed, it seemed like the place Douglas Taylor writes of in our reading from this morning, a religious community of hope and love, a place to change the world, make life sweeter, and even save lives.

I don't remember the sermon or the hymns that first Sunday, all that mattered was that I was home and I loved being there. A few weeks later the honeymoon ended. I realized one Sunday that few people ever came to talk with me at coffee hour. The minister did, but that's her job, right? Then came a sermon that didn't really speak to me. Increasingly, I began to overhear people attempting to reignite what seemed like age old battles over things like the stained glass window behind the chancel that depicts Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount or the color of the carpeting in the parlor.

Soon I started to notice things that irked me too and I seriously considered giving up on the church and not returning. A month or so in, I found myself saddened and frustrated.

Why did this seemingly perfect church have to go all human on me?

I mean, all I wanted was everything! Had I expected too much?

William Shakespeare called expectation, "the root of all heartache." This seems often true enough and it surely seemed to be true with regards to my experience with the church. But in looking back I realize that the frustration and heartache I felt over the church was not the result of expecting too much, but, ironically, of expecting too little.

When I sensed that wonderful feeling of being home the first time I attended a Unitarian Universalist service I hadn't expected to be confronted with the "inconvenience" of other people's humanity. I hadn't expected disappointment or disruption and the tension that came with them. All I wanted was everything, but I hadn't expected enough; I had not made room for disappointment.

When there's no room for disappointment, disappointments become an impassable obstacle to personal spiritual growth. This is why, for people who come to church to escape or control life rather than engage deeply with it, as I had initially done, the bickering over things like the color of the carpeting or the minister's use of words that rub you the wrong way will either drive you away or keep you fixated on superficial things... things that have no power whatsoever to nurture and sustain that unmistakable experience of being home... or whole, no matter where or in what circumstances we find ourselves... that something I like to call salvation.

And now that I've mentioned it, let's talk a little more about salvation. It is said that, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions", a truth we are consistently reminded of in the form of so many of our "modern conveniences." ... microwaveable meals, 24/7 news, cars and even homes run largely by computers; phones that ensure we're always reachable. But if the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the road to salvation is, in my view, paved with *tension(s)*.

All I wanted was everything when I came to Unitarian Universalism; all I expected was instant salvation. But unlike frozen dinners or text messages, salvation does not come in a box or with a gadget requiring little more than the ability to push a button.

Salvation, it turns out, is more about commitment than convenience...commitment to journeying into those places of tension and paradox in our lives... places that reveal to us our deepest humanity. Yet these are also the places of the heart and mind we often resist... places that scare us... places that challenge us... the realm of the soul.

Church, being the delightfully human institution it is, can be, and I argue, ought to be, one of those places where we can expect to not only experience tension and paradox, but where we are brought through those experiences in community... a community of hope and love.

What a gift such a community is...a pearl of great price!

A sentiment echoed in the words of the great Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams who called church, “a place where we get to practice what it means to be human.” Indeed church is not a place to flee from our humanity; it is a place to welcome it, to love it, to touch, and transform it in ways not possible by ourselves alone or in the shrinking, yet increasingly impersonal world around us.

Exactly why I did not leave the church when I found myself disappointed there I cannot fully articulate. It would be easy to tell you that it was because the disappointments were minor, and that’s true, most of them were, but the fact is I didn’t leave the church because I came to expect occasional disappointments and the tensions that arose from them not only as a given, but also as an opportunity...an opportunity to go deeper...to live into, rather than above, life.

The church on Fern Street and the larger community that is Unitarian Universalism have given me a place to “practice what it means to be human” and in doing so freed my heart of the hatred that threatened to dissolve it. It has proven to be a community which, in the words of the French geophysicist and spiritual thinker Xavier Le Pichon, “educates the heart.”

At some point in life we find ourselves standing at the edge of a chasm between who we have been *told to be* and who we are *called to be*. The task of a religious community is not to help us cross over this divide, to live *above* life, but to descend to the chasm floor with us, to live *into* life, and journey through it together. For in its depth, the chasm holds all possibilities, possibilities unimaginable from distant heights...very real possibilities of changing the world, making life sweeter, and saving lives.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be