

I'd been home about 5 minutes when the phone rang this past Thursday morning. Before that, I'd been officiating at a graveside service in Brooksville at the request of a family member I'd gotten to know through hospice at some point during the last year. The person on the phone was my colleague Eliza Galaher. Eliza serves the Wildflower UU Congregation in Austin, TX, and she was just checking in, touching base about her plans to visit over the summer. (She'll be here, leading worship again on July 15th, something I'm looking forward to, and hope many of you will have the chance to experience, too.)

At some point in our conversation, she asked how I was doing, and that was exactly the invitation I needed. In seconds flat, I confessed to her the absolutely awful, horrible, terrible thing that I'd done, and how unbelievably embarrassed & sorry I was that it had happened. Does anyone here want to guess what it was?

Then let me tell you:

After getting through most of the graveside service—giving what I thought was a good eulogy, helping this family celebrate together who this person was (though I'd actually never met her) I proceeded in usual form to conclude my remarks by offering a prayer. With just two lines left in the prayer, I said out-loud, for everyone to hear, the WRONG name of the person who died—(Can you tell I'm still cringing inside?!)

In fact, I said the name of the person whose service I had led two weeks earlier in another beautiful cemetery in Brooksville, probably with some of the very same people in attendance. This, of course, is the kind of thing that other people do—priests, for instance, that are called up by funeral homes and asked to officiate at the service of a person who was raised Catholic, but hasn't attended church in decades. This is not something I do. But, I did. It was me. And I tried to recover in the moment, and I did to some extent, AND I am still horrified, and you can be sure, that that will never, ever, happen again (knock on wood).

Eliza, of course, in good colleague form thought the whole story was very funny, pleased with herself, no doubt, too, that *she'd* never made this kind of mistake.

In this moment, as I begin these remarks about the nature of our liberal religious communities—and some of the challenges & tensions we all live with—I'm not sure exactly why I've told you this story, except that in my mind, it does have something to say about church and ministry, and how it goes sometimes. How all of it, and all of us, are rather imperfect; capable of screwing things up, at any turn; of making embarrassing, unfortunate mistakes, though that's the very last thing that we want, or intend to do.

It occurs to me, too, in this moment, that there's something else often true about us; that nine times out of ten, when someone asks a Unitarian Universalist “What do you believe?”, that person—quite possibly you or me—is inclined to begin their answer by saying exactly what it is, that they do not believe. I don't believe in God, for example. Or in the Trinity—that explicitly Christian belief held by many that Jesus was the human-divine son of God who died to atone for our sins. A majority of 21st century UUs in this country, I'd guess, would also be quick to explain that they do **not** believe in heaven or hell, at least not in any real **traditional** sense of the words; heaven, as that place with pearly gates, or hell, engulfed in wretched flames; two of three possible places (purgatory being the 3rd) where some believe our spirits **go** after we die, once God has judged and determined the **true** state and worthiness of our souls.

Re-state the question, and ask again what he or she (or you or I) do believe in, and you're likely, at least for a moment or two, to get silence, some squirming perhaps, and then a person's best, and often clumsy effort, to answer such a question.

In a sermon she wrote some years ago now, the Rev. Victoria Safford recalls a time when she overheard a young girl from her congregation in the grocery store. This girl was maybe 6 or 7 years old, and she was responding to her friend's question, “What does your church believe in?” “Well,” the kid said, “at my church we believe in trees, and recycling.”

True answers, I'd guess, for most of our congregations, but also a bit lacking in depth or explanation especially about how we believe; and about the space we grown-ups intentionally try to make in our church communities, for all of us, to question and reflect, and consider together what it is that we do believe as individuals, and how that kind of relationship, exactly, or even approximately, fits into our lived experience of being connected and bound together, in religious community.

Two and a half months ago, when I traveled with four members of the Board of Trustees to a weekend-long workshop on COVENANT, a word I'll say more about today (and in sermons and services to come), Matt Slater was the one who first described an epiphany-like experience that he'd that evening; what he said to the rest of us was a new insight for him about what it is that does hold us together in community, especially given that we have no shared, or creedal statement of belief that we affirm together.

Over the course of the last five or six years he's been attending UUCE, Matt explained to us, that he's loved working with the seven principles, but it was only that night, in the UU Church in Saco, at that workshop, that it occurred to him, for the first time, that he'd actually been skipping over a critical part of what it is that we say we aspire to do; how each of us is called to commit ourselves to working together with others in this community, as we try and seek to live by the Principles & Sources we embrace. "We covenant to affirm and promote," it reads, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; the acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, etc..."

In a split moment that evening, Matt recognized, and was able to articulate for the rest of us to hear, that it is not enough to simply embrace & work on these principles in our lives as individuals, but instead, that we are called in our congregations to COVENANT together—to seek to grow as individuals with different beliefs & understandings through our thoughtful, considerate & committed relationships to each other. In our tradition, what is part and parcel of the larger, liberal religious tradition, we claim it is not enough, and some would argue, not even possible really, to live faithful, engaged lives; lives guided by the principles we embrace and espouse if we are not being attentive & accountable to each other; to the relationships of trust and care, of encouragement & challenge that we create & extend to each other here; relationships guided, too, by our respective commitments to honor that abiding center, whatever we call it, where we experience the holy, or God, or some kind of felt-sense, depth of connection with a Love or Unity that is greater than ourselves alone; with a grounding and life-affirming ethic that calls us, again and again, when and where we falter, to care for others, and for ourselves.

In a commencement address he gave at Virginia Theological Seminary earlier this week, the liberal Christian writer & political activist, Jim Wallace reminded a new flock of mostly Christian, divinity

school graduates that at the heart of Jesus' teaching & mission is the call we are challenged to hear, to align ourselves (and the respective faith communities we serve), with the work & service of helping to create **the Kingdom of God** here on earth; what he went on to explain as a place we help create among us, in this world, where our neighbors concerns, their rights and interests, their freedoms and well-being, too, are seen & treated as important, as our own; a place in our lives, where we beckon & encourage each other, as Jesus so did, “ to love...God, [however we translate, or understand that], with all [our] heart, mind and strength, and to love [our] neighbor as [our self.]”

To try & live this kind & quality of a liberal Christian faith, Wallace goes on to say, is to be willing to heed the call to enter into a new & transformative kind of relationship with the Holy; one that changes all our other relationships, and challenges us, too, to be transformed from more self-interested, self centered kinds people, to people committed as much, if not more so, to the well-being of all others & the earth as a whole; people dedicated in their ways of living together, to search out & stand up for the larger, common good, for what is possible, here & now, as we seek to create a better & shared life together; what are, and need be, new ways of living, that compel and call us to challenge & change the status quo, particularly as members of faith communities, to remain committed, in belief & action, to offering unexpected hope to the world; hope to each other, for sure, but hope, also to people most vulnerable & in need.

Our church communities in this way, Wallace concludes, must never be willing, or simply oriented be content with what is. None of us can afford to become cynical. Each of us, together, must choose to be engaged in ministry in ways that help realize changes for the better in society; we must committed to building ways and capacities in our congregations, to work together, and across the many divides we create; to work toward the vision, realized piece by piece, and bit by bit, where there are fewer winners and losers at every turn, and whole societies where none are left behind or forgotten.

In his book, which we heard a brief passage from earlier, Dr. Carl Hammerschlag reflects on the time he spent working for the Indian Health Service in the Southwest, and the insights he gained there about the true nature of medicine and healing; lessons, in my mind, that translate at least in some measure, into instructions or sound and trust-worthy guidance about how we can and ought to orient ourselves to living and working together in religious community.

Here, in this congregation, where we seek intentionally to make room for the expression of our varied

beliefs, we are brave and engaged in ministry, when we practice & share our own tentative dances of belief and understanding; the first and second and third first steps of right-livelihood, of gratitude & care for others that we encourage each other to hear, knowing, too, that the music and dance steps we try must eventually become our own.

Here, in this church, where we engage in a kind of shared ministry, and shared leadership, we encourage each other to participate in community; to risk making mistakes as we offer ourselves, our gifts & talents, our resources and passions, to nurture growth & living in ourselves that is strengthened by the relationships we build among & between us; relationships that help us to grow into people who see more clearly, and more often how it is that we are called to live; what purposes we seek to aim toward, alone & together. We can, and need to teach each other the different dances we know; ways tried and true over time in our lives that conspire with healing, and inspire compassion and joy, the courage to be dedicated in action to help realize the well-being of all beings.

How we go about doing this is a question worthy of consideration; a question that challenges us to live into answers that encourage us to respond to the many pressures and tensions that would, and sometimes do, divide and diminish us, by re-committing to each other to share in the responsibilities of nurturing our communities, not simply for ourselves, or our own well-being, but instead, for the sense of courage & conscience such living together can inspire in each of us to be more generous people.

May we remember this truth, and recommit ourselves to living together in community, in ways that nurture & challenge us, and hold before us, a commitment to care for others.

Amen.