



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Why Are We Here?

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When I talk to kids about college, I tend to not mention that it took me almost 7 years to get my Bachelors Degree. It's just unnecessary information, I think. I usually say that "I spent a long time thinking", and then I just breeze past all the pesky little chronological details.

I spent a long time thinking. That's actually a perfectly fair way to put it. The academic bug had bitten me rather late. So when I finally graduated with my nifty new degree in Philosophy, I was really just starting out. The Great Questions that I'd finally discovered — why are we here, how did we get here, where are we going? — those questions simply weren't done with me yet, so, I enrolled in the PhD program — and then got to keep asking them for several more years.

At the time I eventually left grad school, I was a walking cliché – a liberal arts major with a mountain of debt and no clue on how to pay it back. A recruiter learned that I could spell "personal computer" and – poof! – the next thing you know, I was an IT professional. Ta da! See, Dad! Instant payback plan.

I had every intention of going back to finish my dissertation. But as John Lennon said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

I suppose enrolling at Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary may not have been a surprise to many of my old friends, even though I'm pretty sure that this is what the dictionary entry for "mid life crisis" looks like. But as I said to my advisor, it felt

more like those questions that I'd left on the table all those years ago had finally tracked me down, and jumped me in the dark alley of a job transition. A philosophical mugging, I called it.

In many ways, a Unitarian Seminary is pretty much what you'd expect. The students are all smart and politically savvy. Some are very young. Some are very not. They come from all walks of life, from all over the country – and in some very interesting and notable cases, from all over the world. There is a lot to say about the folks that select seminary as their next path, and someday I'll do that.

I did discover, somewhat to my chagrin, that seminarians aren't all introverts. Between and around breaks, I was drawn into some remarkably gentle but thoroughly personal conversations.

Seminarians are always curious to know what brought you to seminary, what it is that you're seeking, or more pointedly, what it is you're hoping to do when you leave. The Unitarian Universalist Association's credentialing body, the ominous-sounding Ministerial Fellowship Committee, calls this "The Call to Ministry". Near the end of the process of getting the UUA's stamp of approval, every seminarian is going to have answer that latter question -- first in an essay, then, in a rather excruciating interview process. So, perhaps it's not surprising that we obsess about it.

When I was asked by these kind and earnest people, I shared my story. My path. What it was that brought me to seminary. And they shared theirs.

What surprised me was how many of them were there for Justice.

Social Justice is a recurring theme here at UUCF, and rightfully so. Looking at the order of service, the word 'Justice' closes out our tagline, and every week, we find at least a couple of ways that the interested can become the involved. You could say that Social Justice is kind of "built-in" to the modern conception of Unitarian Universalism. For example, more than half of the UU Principles either are explicitly or implicitly targeting Social Justice work. Take a look at the back page of the Order of Service:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

Skipping down

6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

With this sort of “launching pad”, it’s not surprising that my seminarian colleagues, when I asked them that “Why Are You Here” question, they told me that they *needed* to work on some larger cause, that they wanted to fix ... something. The “something” varied – many of them mentioned race, some referenced climate, but the theme of “injustice” and “witness” threaded through, regardless of how they completed the equation.

But, noble as the response is, it is also a little odd.

I asked my climate justice focused colleagues why they didn’t, instead, volunteer for the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club, as you probably know, has done some tremendous work in New York, shutting down legacy coal plants, blocking fracking, and they are aggressively moving forward with sustainable energy through wind farms – something we in Maryland really ought to have been able to lead on -- but that’s another sermon.

My point – and I do have one – is that there are lots of ways to engage social issues. Seminary, at least these days, seems a bit roundabout, especially if the issue is above-the-fold, like Climate Change, Gun Violence, or the issue of race – speaking of which, don’t forget to see the Order of Service for today’s call on getting engaged with Black Lives Matter.

Rather, if our call is to throw our bodies at the varied work that needs to be done to advance our society, onward and upward, forever – why are we *here* and not *there*, on the front line with those organizations? Honestly, preaching to you about all – well, at least *some* of these issues -- is very much preaching to the choir.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s good to share our dreams, our pains, our hopes, our outrage at what’s happening in and to the world at large. Giving these thoughts wings, out loud and in public, can create movement, movement generates momentum, and

momentum can create change. That is good, and right, and necessary – and that is why we do it.

But recruiting for causes great and small is not why we're here – at least, it's probably *not* why we come *back*. It's quite possible that there may be no particular cause at all that brought you here, and causes generally may have nothing at all to do with why your neighbor, sitting next to you, came.

And that's okay.

Not too long ago, my wife and I were in search of a church. I'll confess that I wasn't terribly helpful in this process. Sundays were for sleeping in, which I'm sure I offered up at some point along the way – okay, at *many* points. But she was determined. She knew, as I did, that what we needed as a family was to put down roots. That meant community.

To us, Frederick was a new town. Our kids were very small. We wanted a place where our kids could have what we both had, growing up – a community of “others” that was loving and supportive. We also wanted to find “our people” – a community that shared our values, that would help us be better people; a place to belong, to be known and to be cherished. Eventually, we found UUCF, and we've been thrilled with what we've found here.

I suspect that this story isn't all that alien to some of you.

Well, it turns out that it might be.

UU Minister Paul Razor, in *Faith Without Certainty*, a painfully methodical textbook assigned to my “Liberal Theology” class last Fall, explored a 1998 survey of some 10,000 Unitarian Universalists. Here are some of the items he discussed from that survey:

Question: “What factors most influenced your decision to join a UU congregation?”

Answer: More than 60% of respondents said ‘searching for a belief system and faith community that made sense *to me*. To *me*. The emphasis here is mine.

Question: “What do you get out of attending a UU worship service?”

Answer: The two largest responses, nearly equal in distribution, were “to remember with gratitude and celebrate what is most important in *my life*” and “intellectual stimulation”.

At first blush, these responses probably wouldn’t give any of you pause, would they? But there is a concern here. Consider this

Question: “What role has your congregation played in your life?”

Answer: By far the largest single response was “It supports *my views* and upholds *my values*”. It’s interesting to note that this was in rather stark contrast with the second-largest response – which, way down at 25%, was: “It is a beloved *community* of forgiveness, love and spiritual growth.”

The problem, according to Razor, is rather broadly hinted at with the title of the chapter that discusses it, “The Problem of the Self”. Razor lays much of the failures of the liberal religious movement at the feet of the distinctly American notion of rugged individualism. This is the thread that he lifts out of the responses to the surveys – in nearly every instance, he argues, respondents chose answers that were highly personal, extremely individualistic, and almost always at the expense of the answer that was community-based. For whatever it’s worth, it’s this individualism, he continues, that hampers both the growth of the movement – our movement – even while it gives it its identity and character.

Turn back to our Seven Principles for a moment. If we zip through, we get the following: what we are, how we should behave, what we should do, how we should do it, why we should do it, and that doing it is smart and right and good. There is really only one stumble, right around the second half of Principle number 3, the part where we should encourage each other to grow, where we get the notion that we *might* be better off together.

That is a little curious. Isn’t it?

And it’s something of a challenge – something that Razor takes some pains to underscore.

Now, I will also admit that the survey data *is* a bit dated, but even with that said, what *is* there *is* pretty clear -- we, as UU's, tend to go to church, but it's not for justice, and it's not really for each other.

So I think it's worth asking: what the heck *are* we here for?

To say that this survey represented something of a revelation, and that it also made for some *very* lively discussions at school, well, that would be a rather interesting understatement. I think that morning, late in that very first week of that very first class I took at seminary, we all did some serious questioning.

But what struck me then, and struck me as particularly hopeful, is that when the light was shown on the choice – the choice between “rugged individualism” and “community”, every single one of my peers lifted up the latter as important. As a goal. As something that was inalienably a *good thing*. It may not be the *only* thing that plants us like corn in these rows, but I think it is certainly *a* reason. Not either/or. Both/and. For every single one of them. Even those that were there at school girding for battle.

And maybe it's true for you, as well. Just as it is for me.

Because I *am* here for the society of like minds. I *am* here for the remembrances of the Something More, beyond what my normal, everyday, businessman-like life might ignore. I am here I am here for all of that.

Once, I was a philosophy student. I'm not sure that ever really goes away. It's like getting your nose broken – you carry that dent regardless of what you do or who you become. Philosophy asked me to frame questions squarely, and then, to pull them apart. Dissect them. Analyze the remains. Pour in skepticism, hit it with doubt, and then, toast tasty marshmallows of rhetoric over the embers.

But I'm older now. Twenty years of living, outside of grad school, has changed me. Intellectual stimulation aside – and that's a *huge* thing for many of us in this room to put aside – I found that I'd come to a place in my life where I didn't want to just *know* a truth. To tear it apart. To push the pieces of it around on a tray. Instead, I wanted to *feel* it. To *live* it. And it was here, right *here*, that I saw a way to do that – and that's why I applied to seminary. Because to me, on day early last summer, sitting here in *this* church,

in *our* sanctuary, I answered my question differently; I said, “I am here because of all of those things, but mostly – mostly – I am here because of all of you.” That is *my* call.

So, here I am. I’ve been up here, thinking out loud for a little while now, and I’ve rolled up on the time when I ought to be drawing to a conclusion. And much like my college career, I kinda feel like I’m just getting started!

There’s a lot to say about the value of community. Life Coach and author Martha Beck has much to say about the role of “other people” in our lives, but this will have to suffice for now. She says “Basic human contact -- the meeting of eyes, the exchanging of words -- is to the psyche what oxygen is to the brain. If you're feeling abandoned by the world, interact with anyone you can.” That sounds like solid advice. And a good jumping off point. For now.

So, let me ask you what I asked my new friends at Meadville Lombard. In particular, I’d respectfully ask that you play with that big question, especially if it’s weird, or feels funny. Ask yourself, “Why *am* I here? Why am I *here*, in this time and this place? What is it that holds me here? What brings me back?” The answer, I invite you to consider, might be in the room.

So. Take a moment. Look around – right now is fine. Look to the person to your left. To your right. Across the aisle, up and down. And later, after the music has stopped and you’re up and about, having a cup of coffee and wandering amongst the wonderful art we have on display in the gallery, take a moment and consider your fellows. *Your* fellows. Yes, claim them as yours! Because they are. This is *your community*. And, if you dare – ask one, or maybe even two of them, why it is that they’re here with you.

Maybe they’ll even tell you.