

## Reading

Our reading this morning comes from journalist Gary Dorsey's wonderful book:

*Congregation: The Journey Back to Church*, which is the story of the year he spent with the First Church, Congregational, in Windsor, CT and the story of his own faith journey away from institutional religion and then back again and what he finds.

*"Most people think what is done at a mainline church is largely private. That's correct. It is. Most churches do not sell a product. They are not charismatic. They do not evangelize. Most members do not even know they have a story to tell. No wonder the world outside assumes that what churchgoers really do well is consume lots of coffee, gossip, talk a lot of talk, hold meetings, fuss and work out compromises, sing with verve and mix a punch that looks like antifreeze. Believe me," he says, "that's true."*

*"If you ever decide to go back to church, even despite yourself, you will eventually find yourself in a place where you can learn about mystery and timelessness. You will become a part of a tradition of stories and verses and gossip greater than you can imagine. Circling and turning with a carnival of small-time saints, whose tales and homespun customs marshal wisdom out of a religious calendar, you will become a character, too, and a player in a cast."*

*"A church is like an enormous wooden calliope," he says, and it is "a light that slips across the surface of things that inspires people to come here on a Sunday. They spend their time in daydreams. They have visions, suffer silences, sing songs, dance, laugh, practice and forget to hope. They curse and tell stories. They go round and round."*

*"Their life," and now he is talking about you and about me, "their life is made of that raw material of daily tasks – a steady attention to the quality of life they create as well as seek. Knowing the needs of others, encouraging constancy, patience, reading, wise direction, bread-baking, money-raising, service. The church is a tenacious institution. One generation's vision is the next one's tradition, the next one's problem to be resolved. It was in church," Dorsey concludes, "that I experienced the miracles of wonder."*

## **“Spiritual But Not Religious Enough: A Sermon of Sabbatical Reflections”**

There I was, in the village of Wollaston, in the heart of England; it was evening.

I was at the bottom of a hill, with the small village of 2000 souls spreading up

Before me, green everywhere on either side.

The houses are low there, and close together, and because there are more

Fields than trees you can see sometimes for miles on a clear early evening in late

Spring.

In fact the only thing that centered my vision, that always centered my vision

These last five months, was the stone steeple of the village church,

built in 1085, a date which has made me re-think our historic meeting house here

as something more like new construction.

In England, where only 5% of the population attends religious services on an ordinary Sunday,

Churches are often sleepy, eerily quiet places,

But that evening I heard a sound coming from the steeple.

What was it? Singing? Voices? I strained to listen harder.

Bells! But not the pounding, monochrome of a clock bell,

Telling me the time, telling me I was late,

but song, melody, almost like a choir.

Whoever was in that steeple rung the bells for 20 minutes,

And I learned later, would ring them every Thursday evening this spring.

I found a bench; I sat and listened. I went back every week.

And in that time my thoughts returned again and again to you,  
to our congregation, to this Unitarian Universalist faith we share.

I have missed you. I have missed your faces, yes, and I have also missed  
What belonging to a vibrant religious community does for me and you and the  
world we share.

Because while I have engaged in many spiritual practices these five months,  
I have also, it is fair to say, not felt religious enough.

But before I tell you what I mean,

First some appreciation.

For the ministry of Ken Reeves, who preached and pastored in my absence with  
wit, skill, and tenderness;

For the ministry of Laura Randall, who in our eyes has become more minister than  
student, and I doubt can know how much she is going to be missed when she  
finishes her time with us next week;

For the music of the choir and Laura Jensen – I just listened to the Music Sunday  
CD; wow!

For the Religious Education inspiration and dedication given by Kate Holland and  
all of our teachers;

For the ministry of membership and communications – for it is a true ministry –  
given by Maureen Gormley;

For the tenacity of our leaders who have spoken and emailed the words: Building  
Expansion, Sprinkler Law, and Septic System more than anyone would care to  
count.

And cognizant that sabbaticals are for congregations as much as they are for ministers,

Appreciation for all of you, the members, who discovered new things about your church,

New strengths, who came together for worship, raised money, housed the homeless in our rooms,

Welcomed new members, went on a youth work trip to New Orleans, passed budgets,

Made and delivered meals, staffed the Good-As-New-Shop, led adult education classes,

Attended imagination groups in preparation for our next Strategic Plan, offered pastoral care, held hands, listened to each other, reached out, reached in, and showed up again and again

To one another in body and spirit.

Sometimes in performing all these activities for a church,

and I now I am speaking about myself

As well as about you, it is easy to forget that one of our central missions is, as Emerson says,

To help us grow a soul.

But what does that look like? How do we do that? What helps us?

These were the questions driving me during my sabbatical,

Most of which was spent in England, where my family is spending the year,

and most of which had me experiencing this distinction between spirituality –

which is personal, and involves our own private nurturing of connections to something larger than ourselves,

and religion – which in contrast is communal, and is rooted in symbols, and stories, and practices of a community.

How many of us have heard the phrase or said about ourselves: *I am spiritual, but not religious?*

Well, that is a line that describes your minister well over these months,

But perhaps unlike how you have heard this line before,

I discovered, or maybe re-discovered, how much of our religion I was missing.

So let me explain:

It was in late early February, not quite a month into my time away

That I travelled from London to Tulsa, OK (and if there are two more different places on earth I'd like you to show me),

And there I spent five days of learning and study at All Souls Unitarian Church, our largest congregation in the denomination,

where I heard the minister, Marlin Lavenhar, share four types of spiritual practice he learned from Andrew Harvey, a Rumi scholar, that he explained are necessary to being fully alive and fully awake.

They became the frame around which I structured the next four months.

First there are what we can call Cooling Practices.

These, said Marlin, are the practices that help us cool down when we are too angry, anxious, distracted, or afraid.

They're anything we do to help ourselves find calm or feel centered,  
And can include things like silent meditation, prayer, breathing exercises,  
Or even sitting on a bench listening to bells peel out from a steeple.  
You could say sabbaticals are like one long session of cooling after the heat  
Of working and leading,  
Which of course is why everyone deserves one.  
So I sought to honor this gift of cooling.  
I lit my chalice with you every Sunday.  
I listened nearly every day to sermon podcasts from some of my favourite UU  
preachers.  
I felt led by Thoreau's and Emerson's example to cool the sometimes restless,  
anxious spirit in me by going outside into the peace of nature's sanctuary.  
Sometimes we ask: Why do bad things happen to good people? What about this  
worry or that fear? What can I do with my anger about this issue or that tragedy?  
And in the midst of these and other questions  
Cooling practices help us take a breath, find our feet, stay grounded.

Next are heating practices.

What helps you when you are feeling complacent or lethargic? Apathetic or un-  
inspired?

When your spirit, as Marlin told us, is too cool?

Spiritual practices that heat ignite our passion again, they stir our mind and heart,  
They keep us from thinking our vision is the only vision.

For me they included reading this stack of books I shamelessly tried to impress you with,

And the multiple conversations I had with the conservative Baptist minister

In the village on all things theological (high heat),

And the two trips I took back here to study with and be challenged by two of our most dynamic multi-cultural congregations – Tulsa, as I mentioned, and then in April when I went to All Souls Church in Washington DC.

They also include practices like women’s drumming (next Sunday you will hear them), and dancing,

Mission trip to New Orleans, Music Sundays and occasionally hot, uncomfortable sermons;

Heating practices are practices that ask us to get out of our comfort zone, that teach us there is more to life than working too hard, or posting too often on Facebook, or watching too much TV. What is our purpose?

What are called to serve, to do, to become?

Heating practices heat us up so we can answer.

Third are Physical Conditioning Practices. These practices keep our bodies strong

So we can meet the challenges we confront in life with both grace and strength.

I ride my bicycle, you may do yoga, or walk, or even run marathons.

Practices like these that get our blood moving and heart pumping help us sweat out the stress and strain, they remind us that we are alive, and tell us that we need our bodies to lead lives of both reflection and action.

And finally fourth is a practice that we will call “Shadow Work.”

*“Everyone has a shadow side,” Marlin told us, “We all have blind spots. We all have areas where we carry old wounds and traumas, that express themselves in issues like Addiction, aggression, fear or other undermining behaviors.*

*Shadow work, he said, includes intentional ways to help us uncover our blind spots and become accountable.*

*It often requires the assistance of others, like a minister, therapist, or gatherings like 12-step groups or men’s or women’s groups.*

I have a shadow side. You have a shadow side. I hope you will know

That my office is a place you can come to find and face your shadows.

I have ministers who help me find and face my shadows.

I tell you this because I believe religious communities are

One of the few places we can be asked not to pretend, where we can risk

Becoming whole again, and whole means being aware of the light and the dark,

Of accounting, and being held accountable for, the triumphs and the traumas.

So we have Cooling, we have Heating, we have Physical, and we have Shadow,  
and over these last five months I have been practicing each.

And of course, I also sometimes did nothing.

Euro-Disney with my wife and kids didn’t offer any Great Awakening,

But it sure was a lot of fun.

We earnest ministers, and let me now speak only for myself,

Sometimes undervalue FUN. So I’ll add that to my list of practices,

For us to remember to remember Bill Coffin’s line that angels

Can fly because they take themselves lightly and know how to have fun.

But still, all along I must say I felt something was missing.

And now pivot with me from the private, personal practices that has us nurturing  
My spirit and your spirit,

To the religious practice that has us belonging, week in and week out,

To a community and a movement that through a blend of tradition, symbol, shared  
values,

And shared story commissions us to love in ways that I doubt we can do on our  
own.

The pivot happened for me many times over these months,

Many times when I missed the molding and holding and shaping and guiding that  
our religious community and our UU movement provides.

It happened first in late January, not three weeks after I left, when the earth shook  
In Haiti, and the world crumbled for thousands, and the TV and internet lit up with  
tragic stories,

And on the following Sunday this church and thousands like it passed the plate,  
said prayers,

Lit the chalice, and sat together in solidarity with the Haitian people who are  
among the world's most poor.

Not all of us, not even many of us, can offer much beyond financial help in  
moments like these, but I missed sitting in the pew with other Unitarian  
Universalists,

we who say there is worth and dignity in each person,  
we who are provoked by our faith to ask not only How I can help?  
But also, what is fair? How we can have so much and they have so little?

It happened again in February when on a solitary visit to the pub – hey what can I say, I was in England? – a man who was younger than me, but looked so much older, sat down at my table, and quite without my probing, proceeded to spill out his life, his broken family, his lost job, his dim prospects.

Generous to a fault, he offered to use his dole money to buy me a beer.

It would be too easy to say that all he needed was a friend;

What he really longed for was to be transformed.

And more than anything what I wanted to do was invite him to our church.

I wanted him to sing with us the hymn we will sing in a moment that says

*'there is more love somewhere, there is more hope somewhere.'*

I wanted him to light our new chalice and see in it the symbol of a healing cup

That is given to all who are thirsty.

I wanted him to look around at others and instead of comparing himself to them, and feeling less than them, I wanted him to see a community around him

dedicated to offering mutual support.

I pivoted again toward our religion in March, deeply, and with an aching heart,

When I learned that Tom Weaver, one of our youth, had succumbed to cancer,

And watched when I returned to the lead the service as the sanctuary in a church in Hopkinton filled to nearly 1000 souls as we marshalled our Unitarian Universalist

faith to celebrate his remarkable life and support his family and each other as we said goodbye.

I pivoted again toward us when, on the very day of Tom's funeral, Bob Lavell, one of our newest members,

Also passed after a long battle with illness,

And I knew that Laura, and Ken, and our lay Pastoral Care leaders would be there for his wife Hannah and their children.

And I turned yet again toward our religion, missing us, feeling the distance, when the immigration law

Passed in Arizona, and our leaders, including President Peter Morales,

Asked us as faith leaders to preach against the rallying cry that says: "We're in; They're out!" Being married to an immigrant,

And being a brother to an adopted sister with brown skin, I want my religion to stand with the people I love.

In the midst of these losses, these overwhelming issues,

I thought of us and our faith again when a

A family emailed me to ask if I would bless, later today at 2p.m.,

their newly born daughter, Elena, in our church, a fairly ordinary church of fairly ordinary folks

Who are somehow guided by our religious values to bear witness to beginnings and endings,

Joy and pain, justice and injustice, new life and too-soon death,

And between all that, so many miracles, so many daily tasks unnoticed,  
So many small-times saints, as Gary Dorsey calls you, whose stories  
And actions and passions create a sustaining hope and love that would otherwise  
not exist.

*“If someone tells you,” says Thandeka, UU professor and preacher,  
“that she or he knows pain, loneliness, loss, or fear,  
But does not know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider,  
Deeper, and infinitely vaster than the sorrows, hear these words as a commission.  
Hear your commission to love, to create community, and to heal.  
One at a time in personal relationships, ten a time in covenant groups,  
Hundreds at a time in our congregations, hundreds of thousands at a time  
In our religious movement, millions at a time as we take our commission  
Deeper and deeper into humanity’s heart as a justice-loving people  
Who can transform the world.*

*That is the Good News of our Faith.*

In the coming months I look forward to renewing this commission

And sharing this Good News with you.

Yes, I have missed you. But even more than that,

I have missed what we are called to do and be together as religious people.

Say with me: Amen! Say with me: Blessed Be! Say with me:

Let’s get moving!”

And let us stand in body or spirit for our final hymn, # “There is More Love  
Somewhere”