

Beloved on the Earth

A sermon by Rebekah C. Ingram

delivered at First Church in Boston on March 9, 2008

An article published in *The New York Times* on February 25, 2008 says that according to a new survey, “more than a quarter adult Americans have left the faith of their childhood to join another religion or no religion.” Apparently, an increasing number of Americans are viewing religion as something to choose rather than something that is inherited. This is fascinating, particularly when we think about how poised Unitarian Universalism is to appeal to these discerning, choosing Americans. Now is the time to let people know what Unitarian Universalism is all about.

This fall, when you opened up *Time* magazine, you may have seen some advertisements for Unitarian Universalism. One of these advertisements, which ran in the November 5th issue, reads in large print, “Find Us and Ye Shall Seek.” Below, in smaller font, are these words, “If you are searching for a spiritual home where questions are as welcome as answers, find us. We are a loving, open-minded religious community that encourages you to seek your own path, wherever it leads. To nurture your spirit and find your own truth and meaning. Welcome to Unitarian Universalism.” I got goosebumps when I saw the ad. Hey, that’s MY religion!

I hope that whoever finds this faith resonating with their heart, their soul, and their mind will choose it, and spread the good news because we’ve got good news, too! And what about the people who don’t find us? Just the other day I heard a fellow UU say, “I think that a lot of people are Unitarian Universalists; they just don’t know it yet.” What a shame. I can’t help but wonder how many Americans who chose no religion or who chose another religion would have chosen Unitarian Universalism if they knew about it. Imagine wanting to experience worship like this, to be a part of a community like this one, to be able to take a course called “Building Your Own Theology,” to be accepted for *all* of who you are, and imagine not knowing that such a place does exist. How sad. Imagine if that quarter of adult Americans who have left the faith of their childhood chose Unitarian Universalism. Imagine how diverse and vibrant our congregations would continue to become. Imagine how powerful this liberal religious voice could be in American politics.

I think most of you know that I was raised Unitarian Universalist, so it is easy to assume that I am one of the lucky few who inherited this UU identity. However, this isn’t the whole truth. I am quite certain that I both inherited *and* chose Unitarian Universalism. During my middle school and early high school years, going to church on Sunday mornings was not a priority as it had been while I was in elementary school. So aside from Christmas and Easter, I did not attend church during those early adolescent years. At that point in my life I considered myself non-religious. I didn’t believe in God or feel that I belonged to a faith community. However, all that changed during my junior year in high school when I spent the fall semester studying abroad in Beijing, China. I was about as far geographically from a UU church as possible, yet I found myself thinking more and more about religion, and about the church of my childhood.

Two things about China, in particular, led me back to Unitarian Universalism. First, on weekends, I had the incredible experience of traveling all over China with the other students participating in the study abroad program. Many of our destinations were

ancient monasteries, temples, and shrines. At each and every sacred place, I noticed that no matter how foreign the religion was to me or how alien the physical space, I felt peaceful. I felt I was at home. This intrigued me, so when I did actually return home, I also returned to the UU church of my childhood armed with a religiously curious mind. I was encouraged to ask questions and to learn more about these Eastern religions I had only briefly tasted. Even though I was still skeptical about my identity as a UU and I certainly didn't want to be involved with a faith community just yet, the minister and even the community welcomed all of me. "Find Us and Ye Shall Seek," the advertisement declares. That was certainly true for me.

The other experience in China that moved me closer to a Unitarian Universalist identity was a friendship that developed with another young woman in the study abroad program who is very proud of her Navajo ancestry. Even though we seemed an unlikely pair – she grew up on a reservation in Shiprock, NM and I grew up in Framingham, MA we immediately became close friends. Having learned a little bit about indigenous religions in my religious education classes, I was eager to learn more. However, her religious experiences challenged me in new ways. I had a hard time believing in God let alone the spirits whose presence she felt daily. I didn't understand how someone so intelligent could, in light of modern science, still believe in spirits.

Very quickly, I realized, who am I to say that another person's faith isn't valid? A small space in my heart opened up, leaving room for possibility, and I realized how much Unitarian Universalism, despite its commitment to Science and Reason, also taught me to leave room for the unanswerable. When I returned home, I ran back to Unitarian Universalism because my questions and confusion were welcome there. When I turned eighteen, I chose to become a member of First Parish in Framingham not because it was the religion I knew as a child, but because all of me was welcome, particularly my questioning mind and yearning heart. Find Us and Ye Shall Seek. I had the experience of both inheriting and actively choosing Unitarian Universalism.

When I read the reflection cards that were distributed during the service last week, and which invited you to write down your thoughts about why you come to First Church in Boston and what you like about this place, I noticed that words such as home and family frequently appear. One person wrote, "...this is my spiritual home." Another wrote, "I feel at home in this community. And another, "Because you are all part of my extended family."

G. Peter Fleck, a Unitarian Universalist minister who became ordained at age seventy-five wrote about how wonderful it is to be able to come to church just as you are:

At the far end of the Cape, in Provincetown, stands one of the most beautiful church buildings on Cape Cod. It is the Universalist Meeting House, built in Greek Revival style in 1851. Near the street is a sign announcing next Sunday's sermon title. At the top of the sign are the words "Come as you are." They have been there for many years. Their meaning is clear: You do not have to dress up to be admitted to the service, you are welcome as you are.

That, I believe, is what coming to church is all about. Fleck continues:

To come as we are and to be who we are also demands courage, the kind of courage that enabled Luther to post his ninety-five theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral and to exclaim, ‘Here I stand; I can do no other.’ ‘This,’ he seemed to say, ‘is what God intended me to do.’

Here is the rub: “If we are to come as we are, there must be those who receive us as we are. On the cosmic level, the universe embraces us as we are. On the human level, we depend on others to welcome us as we are. And those who welcome us will in turn be welcomed by others.”¹

One of you wrote the following words about First Church in Boston on your reflection card: “I feel welcome and I feel that I belong. This is a place I feel affirmed as a person outside of my job or my public face.” Amen.

I encourage all of you to read the reflection cards which are hanging in the narthex on your right as you exit the sanctuary. I think you will notice the profound fact that we all choose Unitarian Universalism whether it is because it feels like home or because we can come as we are or because we are welcomed over and over again.

We will most likely feel welcome inside an empty sanctuary for its pews and seats beg to be filled, the organ yearns to be played, the hymnals long to be opened. The true test is if we feel we have been received by the community. Someone wrote on their reflection card, “I came to this church for Stephen’s sermons. Now, I love the community...”

Choosing to be part of a religious community is a spiritual practice and it takes discipline. So why do we bother? Why do we choose to belong to a religious community? There are so many reasons, and after reading your reflection cards, I think there is something so incredibly basic and fundamental about being in community that we often don’t name it or even realize it. I think we choose to be part of a religious community because we have been welcomed, we feel that we belong, and we want to do what we can to make someone else feel that way, too.

Jeanne Nieuwejaar reminds us just how important the practice of being in community is. She writes:

In religious community both child and adult have their faith and their beliefs stretched through images and stories, thoughts and insights. Because the sacred will always remain just beyond, we will always need new and different ways to catch glimpses, to know in part, to draw closer. We need religious community for the fullness of celebration, for joining our voices in singing, and for the depth and energy that come in shared worship. And, we need the thinking of the community as a corrective to narrowness and distortions that are inevitable when one is left alone.²

I have long been troubled by the word “community” because defining who is “in” community inherently results in a definition of who is *not* in community. My theology

¹ Fleck, G. Peter. Come As You Are: Reflections on the Revelations of Everyday Life. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993. p. 85-86.

² Nieuwejaar, Jeanne Harrison. The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children. 2nd ed. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003. p. 94-95.

works towards inclusion, not exclusion, so the beloved community becomes theologically problematic. Part of how I practice being in an inclusive rather than exclusive community is to notice the constant and often subtle changes that are inevitably and always occurring. Change is scary, and the more comfortable a community is with it, the more inclusive and welcoming it can be. For example, I picture communities as rooms that have numerous seats for the taking and leaving. Learning how to welcome and say farewell to members of a community is a spiritual practice, reminding us all that human groups - including church communities - are constantly changing and becoming and this is a *good* thing. Each gathering of people, in any moment, is sacred, unrepeatable, and unpredictable.

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of taking a course with Thandeka, a UU minister and theologian who was a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School for an all too brief semester. One of the first exercises she gave the class was for us, in groups of three or four, to make up skits that illustrate why someone who visits a Unitarian Universalist church might not feel compelled to return. I've never laughed so hard in class partly because we had fun exaggerating the scenarios and partly because they were true. It only took a few minutes for us to run through a typical UU worship service in our minds, but from an outsider's perspective, to notice all those little things that might make a visitor feel lost, confused, or just out of place. One of the skits acted out a practice that is common in many UU congregations where the minister or lay leader asks any visitors who are present to stand up and introduce themselves. (I might add that this is an extrovert's dream and an introvert's nightmare.) At coffee hour, even though everyone knows this person is visiting for the first time, not one person speaks to him.

Another group acted out some very discombobulated words of welcome, which were so riddled with the church's own culture, particularly anachronisms and confusing committee names that the so-called "words of welcome" did just the opposite - they reminded visitors of the fact that they are just that: visitors. Another skit demonstrated how hard it can be to find the church entrance. This is not just a problem here! Even the old New England meetinghouses with the obvious and enormous white doors don't always use those doors to enter and exit through. Oftentimes the entrance is tucked away at the side or back of the church.

What did we learn from that exercise? That being in community is a spiritual practice; we are always learning and practicing how to say *welcome*; and we must always leave a few open seats for whoever may wander through the door and choose this faith, this church.

One of you wrote on a reflection card that one thing you like about First Church in Boston is the accessible bathroom. Something as simple as that can make someone feel welcome. It can make someone feel like they belong, and that they may come as they are. Thank you for reminding us that it is indeed the seemingly small things that bid us welcome.

Before you exit the sanctuary today, take a look around at the beloved community that is gathered here. Each gathering of people, in any moment, is sacred, unrepeatable, and unpredictable. Treasure this moment. Know that you belong here. And keep your arms outstretched that the stranger may come as she is.

A poem by Raymond Carver asks:

And did you get what
you wanted from this life even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.

May this church be a beloved place on earth for all who seek and all who choose.
Amen.