

“Why Are We Here?”

a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

We are in need, of others. Others, are in need of us.

“We shall love one another,” sang the choir this morning, “with all our heart – and we shall care for each other with all our soul.” Annie Foerster speaks of prayer as a relationship, and as a call to “go out into the world beyond ... to begin yet another prayer.” Sarah Lammert calls it a “*crazy notion*, that we can live separate and aloof from one another.”

The common denominator, the underlying theme, in every reading and song, every story and prayer, that we have heard this morning, is just this: That we need one another, yes – but also that *others*, are in need, of us. We are – each of us, each and every one of us – but a small part of an intricate web of life and existence, that holds us in its embrace, and somehow *connects* us, to each other, and to God.

Today, as we celebrate “homecoming,” as we recognize and remember the power and beauty of community – the beauty of *this* gathered community – we are reminded that no one, is an island. No one, truly, stands alone. Yet this is a particularly difficult truth, for Unitarian Universalists, to accept. More frequently, it seems, we collectively aspire to be something that I personally consider to be an oxymoron – an *individualistic religion*. The historical figures we celebrate, and the themes we lift up, bear this out: Emerson, and his essay “Self Reliance;” Jefferson and his solitary practice of Unitarianism; Thoreau and his trip to the woods, to Walden Pond; the Transcendentalists and their emphasis on the individual’s direct experience of God; the 20th century Humanists and their manifesto.

Yes, our tradition is rooted, throughout, in a foundation of individual belief, of individual *thinking*, of the celebration of the individual. Thus it has always been true – just as true in Emerson’s time, as today – that there is a certain, given *tension* between the individual, and the community, in a Unitarian Universalist church. Sometimes, in our congregations, “me” is even allowed to run roughshod, over “we.”

Which begs the question – *why are we here*? What is it that has drawn us, called us out from our many singular rooms, as Kenneth Patton puts it, to come to *this place*, as to a homecoming? What makes our gathering here today, or on any given Sunday, any different than going to the movie theater, or to see a play or a concert? What makes what we’re doing here in this sanctuary, any different than what takes place at a Toastmasters meeting? What makes the act of joining this congregation – a solemn step that several of you will be taking, next week – any different from joining a political party, or the PTA?

To begin to answer that question, I return, for a moment, to this morning’s prayer. There is a recognition that this place where we meet, is holy ground – not because it is a church, but because of *why* we are here. There is an acknowledgement that at the center of the gathered community, lies the sacred. It is this recognition, this acknowledgement that we are part of a bigger picture, that there is something more at work here, than the individual – something which we meet and experience as holy, when we encounter it in others, in community, and in service – it is by this, that we become *religious* community. The word “religion,” of course, at its root, means to “re-connect” – reconnect with our fellow travelers, on this journey of life; reconnect, with our common Source.

At this point let me clarify an important distinction I tend to make, between being “spiritual,” and being “religious.” You have no doubt heard – and perhaps you have said yourself – that well-worn Unitarian Universalist apology, “Well, I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Here’s how I look at it: To be “spiritual,” is, at its essence, to be *alone*. Whether it be taking a solitary walk in the woods, sitting in a quiet room in meditation, or standing atop a mountain, the spiritual experience, ultimately, tends to be a very *private* experience.

On the other hand, the *religious experience* takes place in community – one by one, we gather, says Annie Foerster; two by two we come, until we are pulsing like a hundred heartbeats. We are re-connected with something larger, we step into the flow of Grace – we bring our own little light, our own lamp, and together, they fill every corner. As a result, we are illuminated, we are drawn *out* of ourselves, back into the greater whole. Thus do we covenant – not with *ourselves*, but with each other, and with God.

Yes, one way I would answer the question, “why are we here?”, is to say that we are here with an intentionality to create, and participate in, a particular and distinctive *kind* of community – a religious community – a community that is, by definition, covenanted.

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams said that we “become human by making commitments, by making promises” – by entering, into covenant. Thus, one reason we are here, is to become more human.

And part of being human, is to care for each other – again, to care for each other, in the words of our choir, with *all our soul*. We come to know what it is to be human, each time we comfort another who is experiencing loss or facing surgery, each time we reach out to another who has celebrated a marriage or birth, each time we embrace another, who has lost a job. We know – because we have experienced it – the *power* of what happens here, at this altar, each Sunday. It is part of what makes us a religious community. It is one of the primary reasons, we are here.

Another reason – one we are certainly aware of, today, as we prepare for that “Homecoming Hoedown,” right after the service – is simply to *have fun* together. Being with one another – laughing, breaking bread, enjoying fellowship – is plenty enough reason, to gather in community.

Yet we are here, as well, in the words of our covenant, to “serve humankind in fellowship.” Our human brothers and sisters – those who are not part of this gathered congregation, those whose lives have never even brought them to this sanctuary – are *also*, in need of us. Each day, people go hungry, in this land of plenty; each night, people sleep on the streets. This is why we partner with Inter Parish Ministries, and the Interfaith Hospitality Network. This, too, is why, we are here.

As a distinctly Universalist church in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we are here to witness for our highest value – the value of *inclusion* – inclusion in a world, and in a society, where minorities of race or religion or sexual orientation are systematically oppressed, repressed, and excluded. When a religious group in our community is without a home, whether due to discrimination or simple circumstance, we are here to open our arms and hearts, and provide sanctuary – in every sense of that word – as did the Heartsong Christian Church in Tennessee, which I spoke about last week.

When someone threatens to desecrate the scripture of another religion, we are here to take a stand against hatred and fear, as did the Amarillo UU Fellowship in Texas, whose story I emailed to you yesterday. When a couple – straight, lesbian, or gay – is denied a minister to officiate at their wedding – because of their religious beliefs, or sexual orientation, or because they are divorced or already have children, or are living together, or any of the other numerous rationales many mainstream clergy use to decline to perform marriage ceremonies – I, as a Unitarian Universalist minister, am here to offer them a *religious* ceremony – in every sense of *that* word.

And in all this, let us not forget that we are here, as well, in order to *teach our children* – to impart to them our ideals – in the words of one passage in our hymnal, to hand down the heritage of heart and mind, from generation to generation. On this first Sunday morning of a new Sunday School year, let us

remember that it is no accident that what is taking place, in those classrooms, is called *religious* education. It is about teaching our children to walk the path of life with integrity and purpose, with compassion and tolerance, with a deep and profoundly grateful awareness of our interconnections – with each other, and with a whole that is far greater, than the sum of its parts.

We are here to teach ourselves, and others, responsible stewardship of the earth. With the inspiration of our seventh principle, which is based on the words of the Native American tribal leader Chief Seattle, we are here to witness to the religious, as well as the practical, reasons that it is *imperative* for our species to turn the corner, and turn back to a lifestyle that is more in harmony with the natural world, one that respects our environment as – itself – an expression of the sacred, as much so as any one of us. We are here, to live and work and play in as “green” a manner as we possibly can – and to teach others to do the same.

A few years ago, during the process that led to our congregational mission-vision statement and our strategic plan, there was some concerted effort put into answering – as succinctly as possible – the question, “Why are we here?” The result was a short, easy to grasp, easy to remember “sound bite,” if you will – six simple, yet powerful words that cut right to the chase, and summarize everything I have been saying this morning, everything we seek to do, as a congregation: Celebrate Life. Create Community. Seek Justice. That, is why we are here.

And we aspire to do all these things, while living harmoniously, *in covenant*. No easy task, that! When we say we are here to celebrate life, create community, and seek justice, we are striving to accomplish *ideals* – not in the manner a civic group, or a professional organization, or a non-profit agency might – but rather, in the way religious communities do – in covenant, as an ongoing, ever-evolving *community of people* who have made certain commitments. Living in covenant, in other words, is what distinguishes a *religious* community.

Alice Blair Wesley, today’s leading Unitarian Universalist authority on, and proponent of, the concept of covenant, has *this* to say, about the power, and the potential, inherent in true religious community: “Strong, effective, lively ... churches – [those] capable of altering, positively, the direction of their whole society – will be those ... churches whose ... members can say clearly – individually and collectively – what are their own, *most important loyalties*, as church members.”

There’s a lot to unpack, in that one, short quote. Certainly Wesley is asking, in her own way, the same question I am asking today – “Why are we here?” What, when all is said and done, is our *ultimate* commitment, as members of this church? And just how *strong* is that commitment, that loyalty? For unless it is strong, we will never be able to build a healthy church community; unless it is strong, we will not be capable of helping the world, beyond these walls. Until we can not only

articulate our commitments, but *own* them, and *embody* them to an extent greater than we have perhaps to date imagined – we will exist, only for ourselves.

Wesley's language is pointed; she speaks of our "most important loyalties, as church members," "individually, and collectively." Here, she alludes to that inherent tension, which I mentioned earlier, between the individual, and the community. Sometimes, in a church – and this is particularly important to remember, I believe, in a Unitarian Universalist church – sometimes, the individual must set aside his or her own needs, the needs of "me" – for the good of "we." I'll say that again: sometimes "*we*" are called to put the well-being of the group, the needs of "we," ahead of "me." This is difficult for us, as highly individualistic UU's, to accept – which is precisely why it is so *important*, from time to time, that we be reminded – that we remind one another – of this reality: One of the primary reasons we are here, is *for* "we."

It is no coincidence that there's a very similar philosophical, existential, and – I would even go so far as to say – *theological* question facing America today. Though the political dialogue seldom puts it in terms like this, when find ourselves debating the relative merits of health care, or outsourcing, or government regulation – we are really asking the question, "Why are we here?" What is our purpose, as a society? And isn't it interesting that one of the most popular putdowns, one of the most widely used pejoratives today, in our political debate, is to call someone a "socialist." You've probably never stopped to think of it in these terms, but I will submit to you that the most socialistic institutions in any society, are its religious communities.

When I speak of teaching our children about our belief that there is something beyond the individual, that is worthy of our reverence; when I talk about lifting up the holy, not only in each, but in all; when I preach about seeking justice, and serving humankind in fellowship – I am talking about the same kind of radical inclusion, the same kind of radical *community*, that Jesus spoke about – I am talking about acts that bring us out of the narcissism of "me," and squarely into the sacred realm of "we."

Listen one more time, to Alice Blair Wesley's comment, on covenant: "Strong, effective, lively ... churches – [those] capable of altering, positively, the direction of their whole society – will be those ... churches whose ... members can say clearly – individually, and collectively – what are their own, *most important loyalties*, as church members."

All our lives, we are in need – and others, are in need of us. In a culture that is so me-centric, so *consumer*-oriented, I say to you, this morning – don't let your church, don't let Heritage Church, be about "me." Don't let it be just another place, in the modern American marketplace, where you "consume" something. Let it be, instead, a place where you *give*, where you embrace, where you *engage*, where

your ultimate commitment, is to something bigger. In doing so, I assure you, you will find not only that you are able to feed others who are in need – but that you will be *fed* – fed in ways only dimly visible, now – in ways both powerful, and profound.

As the poet Annie Dillard wrote, “We are here to *abet Creation*, and to witness to it – to notice each other’s beautiful face, and complex nature – so that Creation need not play, to an empty house.”

As we come home, once again, this morning – come home, to Heritage Church – let us be reminded of this reason for being together. Let us remember *why*, we are here. Let us celebrate the part we play, in the greater whole. Let us truly see, as if for the first time – in the faces and smiles and bright eyes of each other – the holy. Let us feel, in the energy and exuberance of this community, the very Spirit of Life itself. And let us be grateful, for the opportunity, to serve others – the opportunity to *covenant* with each other, and with God.

May it be so. Amen!