



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Everything I Know in Less Than 2,400 Words

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January 25, 2015

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It was exactly 10 years and 50 weeks ago that I sat on the chancel at the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara waiting to give a sermon. Earlier that morning John Blue and Joyce Turney had picked me up at Fuller Seminary Guest House and drove me via the 134 and 101 to Santa Barbara. I had been to Pasadena several times before, had lived in Orange County for nine years once, but as soon as we passed the Figueroa exit and the chaparral hills rose up on the right and Eagle Rock and the downtown skyline on the left, I was filled with wonder. The hills were wild and just right there. What a beautiful place I thought.

There were two services that morning; the first was somewhat informal, with the second the main show. John and Joyce were joined by Bob Harrison, Mary Fauvre Holmes, Kim Hayden, Alyssa Bellew, Ned Racine and Irene Burkner – the whole Search Committee of Neighborhood for the second service. I was pre-candidating that weekend.

I was a bit desperate. I had been fired from my previous church, was working as a Hospice Chaplain – a job I did not want to be my life's work, and I was just shy of 57 years old – and so I sat there. I felt pretty alone. The first service had been fine, but the second service was the big show. And I sat there, and thought of my family and the twenty years I had spent in ministry; I thought about my Mom and my Dad, and about myself. I thought about failure and success and what they meant to me. No other church had wanted to interview me, so this was it – sink or swim, do or die and so on. I wanted this job.

And I sat there, looking out at the members of the Santa Barbara congregation, trying to find the Neighborhood people, and trying not to find them, too, and I remember saying to myself: "Jim, you can do this."

I know there are lots of similar stories to mine out here. I am not the only person to lose a job or feel desperate, or have confidence shaken or wondered whether you are up to the task. I know there are stories of loss and disappointment, and failure and success out here. I am not alone in this.

The sermon that day was about prayer. It seems a bit humorous to me now. I don't think I appreciated the irony then. But apparently it worked – my prayers were answered after all. In the sermon, I told this story. In some ways, this story brought me here.

It comes from Patrick O'Neill, my good friend and colleague who tells a story of having been called one Sunday, after he had gotten home after church, tired and ready to rest, by a local farm family about doing a memorial service for their mother who had just died. This was in Yakima, Washington, and while the family was not connected with the church, they had a neighbor who once had been a UU and suggested they call the local congregation.

The woman was elderly and had been a widow for a number of years. She and her husband had homesteaded the land back in the 1920s when land was cheap and not very productive. It

is very dry there, lying in the rain shadow of the Cascades, and they had barely eked out a living through the Great Depression. In the forties, however, with irrigation the land became very valuable as it was perfect for growing apples and within several decades the Yakima Valley became the center of a worldwide agribusiness, their apples becoming the standard around the world. So, this couple who had lived so close to the edge, were able to leave to their children a very sizable fortune.

Patrick said that when he arrived that evening the daughter was sitting in the living room, softly weeping, several large crates open in front of her. She said: "I found these in the closet. These are two sets of Wedgwood china that my mother apparently bought from a catalogue thirty or so years ago, and promptly stored in the back closet. They have never been used, not once. In fact they have never been taken out of the boxes they came in, even to be looked at. Isn't that sad? My mother was so afraid that she might chip or break even a single plate that she never once dared to take them out of the carton. That's how she was."

That's just how she was. Wouldn't it have been wonderful if once, just once, that elderly woman in Yakima had had a cup of tea or a dessert on that exquisite china? To let something go unused because of fear – well, isn't it sad as the daughter thought?

The story about the old farmwoman is not just about her, of course; it is about all of us. It's about the little fears that rob us of a full life. It is about living on the scarce side of life. I know I do sometimes, and perhaps many of you do as well. We all know people who all too readily see the scarcity of life, who look around and see only the half-empty glass, the cloudy sky, the empty chair – sometimes it's that person we see in the mirror each day.

One of the reasons Unitarians and Universalists broke away from the orthodoxies of their time was their belief that the orthodox were stingy with both love and belief. The old saw is that Puritans were those people who feared that someone, somewhere was having a good time and it was their duty to root it out. Jerry Lee Lewis said that being a Baptist – or Puritan – didn't keep you from sinning; it just kept you from having a good time doing it.

But the essence of religion is abundance, and the early Unitarians and Universalists knew this - they looked for places where the Holy was, not for places where it was not. It was John Murray, the Universalist who said "Give them not hell, but hope and courage." They sought out blessings rather than looking for sins. They broke out of doctrinal constraints, proclaiming that God was love rather than judgment, insisting - as Emerson and Whitman and Dickinson claimed - that the holy was in the world.

Emerson told us to feel the fullness of life and see the sacred in everything. He said that faith is about abundance; it is about hope; it is about those moments in life that break in with unutterable beauty and joy. If we see the glass as half empty, we will miss those moments and despair and bitterness will be our companions. Emerson told us to take the good china out of the closet and use it. He told us to hear that voice within.

The purpose of our faith, after all, is to help us to live fully and with passion, to encourage our lives to be larger. Encourage - to bring courage in! Isn't that what we need? Does anyone here want help in living a smaller life, in being more timid, in believing less, in hoping less, in living more fearfully? Who here would like to be a spiritual miser?

Our faith is about abundance - intellectual abundance, social abundance, abundance in music, in art, in relationships, abundance in service, spiritual abundance. We saw it all last night - the abundance in the human spirit.

Here is a place where we take out the good china and use it - those things some of you keep packed away, your talents, your beliefs, your hopes, your dreams and ideals. This is a place where life, not death, should rule, where hope, not despair, should live. This is the essence of faith - it is about life, about abundant life. It is about the open heart and the open hand. It is about hearing the song of your own heart.

It is what Whitman says when he wrote: Love the earth the sun and the animals. It is what Murray meant when he said "Give them not hell, but hope and courage." This is what I try to tell myself over and over again - live, use the good china! You can do this, Jim, I try to say. I have tried to use my faith, and the tools of my faith to live more fully. I have tried to listen closely to my own heart, to look into the closets of my life - to take out the china, to listen to what Wendell Berry said was the deep heart's core.

When I sat there in front of the congregation in Santa Barbara, I was faced with an inner dilemma. I knew the seven Neighborhood members were asking whether I might become their own minister and become the minister of the church they loved so dearly. They were there, I knew, to sit in judgment of me. I knew they felt the weight of their responsibility. But I was damaged goods; I had been wounded and I was not sure I wanted to or would be able to trust a congregation.

There is a line in the Hebrew Bible where God says to the ancient Israelites: "Today I have set before you life and death," and the Israelites had to choose. As I sat there I had to choose as well - I had to choose to trust others or not to; I had to choose to believe in myself or not to believe in myself; I had to choose between the future and the past. It was all there, in that sanctuary in Santa Barbara, California, on February 8, 2004.

Who would I be? Would I be willing to risk my heart and my mind to others; would I take the teacups out of the closet and use them?

I know you know what I am talking about because this has happened to every one of you in one way or another. You are asked to choose, and so you do - you are brave or you are cowardly; you take out the good china and use it or you hide it away. We are faced with this over and over, in small ways and big ways. Sometimes we hide the china - I have - and sometimes I regret that. But then sometimes we take it out, and we break down the barriers between ourselves and the world.

So this is what I know – in less than 2400 words [2292 to be exact] - and have tried to do in these ten years with you. It is to help break down the barriers between ourselves and the world; it is to open our hearts and our minds and our hands to the world, to each other and even to our own deepest souls. It is to trust ourselves and others even though we might get hurt; it is to use the good china even though it might break.

I don't know what else to say. I have failed at this way too many times. But I do know that here – and it began that day in Santa Barbara - I decided to open my heart to you. I decided to trust you, to be present when I am here. I decided to open my heart to you.

You will have to decide if you have done the same.

This is very hard today, for me, ending this time with you, but it is joyful as well. I feel very fragile and vulnerable today but perhaps stronger than ever. After all, it is only in becoming vulnerable that we find our strength.

I have arrived at a place where I am not so concerned with what I believe as much as where I belong. I have found a home in our congregations if not in our faith. I have found a home here with you. If my life has meaning or value, it is because of others. I know that I should live a good life, be kind to others and to the earth. And that is enough.

I know there are a lot like me here. You're looking for connection, for belonging, more than for belief. You are looking for courage and trust and love. A place to belong – how precious is that!

This poem I love – *St Kevin and the Blackbird* - captures it for me. I used it that Sunday in Santa Barbara. Heaney says things fall to us, whether we are saint or sinner, and we stretch out our hands, we open our hearts to the world, and in doing so we are linked into the network of eternal life. Things fall to us and we have to decide. We are asked to break down the barriers between ourselves and the world, our hands thrust out of the cells of our lives. And then we find ourselves standing by the river of our life – love's deep river Heaney names it - and we pray, not knowing what our prayer is for. We have forgotten, in this moment of surrender and trust, in this moment when the barrier between ourselves and world comes down, we have forgotten our fears, our shortcomings, and then we can love our own selves and each other.

So, sometime in the future, maybe when you are not so sure of what to do, think of me and take out the good china, whatever it may be, and say "Here's to you, Jim." And I will do the same.

So here's to us. I love you all. Good bye and thank you and Amen.