



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

New to Neighborhood

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Senior Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Think back for a moment with me. Do you remember your first time coming to Neighborhood church?

Some of you are long time members, maybe you were even born into the church, or first came as a child as a part of your family's weekly experience. Maybe you had already discovered Unitarian Universalism in another place, and found your way here after relocating, like Dinandrea Vega. Last Sunday, Dinandrea shared her experience of "coming home" to Unitarian Universalist congregations in Maryland and Washington DC after years of struggling to find a place within her family's Christian religious heritage. When she relocated to Los Angeles, her initial positive experience helped her find Neighborhood when she went looking for a new church to call home.

And maybe you were a seeker, someone on a journey like in the story Greg told. Someone who was looking for community, friendship and support, and a place to explore meaning, purpose and beliefs.

When you first came to Neighborhood, what did it feel like? What did you hear or see? Who welcomed you? What was happening in your life? Maybe you were bruised or wounded by another church, and you decided to give this one another try. Maybe you had a major life transition—a loss or divorce, a job change or move. Maybe you were looking for a place for your kids to grow and learn in a community.

When you were first new to Neighborhood, what made you come again? Was it the power of the sermon's message which challenged and motivated you? The feeling of peace lighting a candle or the emotional release of singing? Was it the conversation on the patio? Or the way your kids brought their religious questions home with them from church Sunday morning to the weekday dinner table?

Maybe you are a seeker today, and encountering Neighborhood the first time, coming with your questions, your hopes and expectations. Maybe you are wondering if you will want to come again after today, maybe this place could truly be your spiritual home.

You would not be alone. We are a nation of seekers, shifting in our religious identities. The Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life is our nation's think tank for global trends in spirituality. In their latest 2014 survey, a startling 70% of our country identifies as Christian, with 20% Catholic. 1% of our nation defines themselves as Unitarian Universalist, surprisingly the same percentage as identify themselves as

Muslim which, while small in the United States, is the fastest growing religious movement in the world. The emerging demographic in our religious life is that 22% of Americans identify as “no religious affiliation,” or “nones” a conglomerate of atheists, agnostics, and the catch all phrase “spiritual but not religious.” In California, 27% identify themselves in this category. This is a category made up of seekers, many of them in their 20s, 30s and 40s, engaged in a spiritual quest of some kind but not necessarily attached to any particular community or group.

Unitarian Universalist congregations have always been a place for the spiritually curious to seek, a place to explore beliefs and discover community. Throughout our liberal religious history, we have taken pride in our adventurous spirit of inquiry, the challenge of “choosing” our faith. Our fourth principle states that “We covenant to affirm, uphold and promote the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

In her introduction to our Unitarian Universalist pocket guide, quoted for our morning reading, professor and political commentator Melissa Harris-Perry writes: “Building a truly expansive intellectual, ethical and cultural community is not for the faint of heart.” I believe that Harris-Perry meant her comment to be affirming for us, an empowering assertion of our unique role in the liberal religious landscape. And I certainly believe this is true, and a worthy assertion for us to promote as a signature strength of our religious life. But I wonder if in some ways it limits our accessibility, especially to seekers.

You see, I bet many of us are feeling a little bit faint of heart these days. After Wednesday afternoon’s news of yet another school shooting, this one at a Community College in Oregon, I was feeling pretty faint of heart, even broken hearted. Not again, I said, not another. I was left asking questions, feeling helpless, angry, even cynical. I bet you were too. Maybe those same questions brought you to church today. And my guess is that for most of us vigorous debate on the existence of God was not what was on your mind when you walked into the sanctuary. I am imagining many of you came to church today seeking a place to come together as a community to find a message of hope, to mend that broken heart of yours and gather courage to make a difference. This is our seeker’s heart. I think we forget that it’s there sometimes when we are so wrapped up in the business of being a church. We forget that on the edges of beloved community are those longing to come in and find home, to put down roots just as we have. “Roots hold me close, wings set me free” we sing every Sunday.

When Rev. Arvid Straube, retired senior minister at the First Unitarian Universalist church in San Diego came to lead a workshop with us in March, he decided to worship with us not as an established minister, but as a seeker. He was surprised that he was not easily oriented to the space as a newcomer, and had trouble finding people to chat with

on the patio before and after worship. He was a bit disturbed by this experience, as was the transition team when we heard his report. His final report from the weekend included the following recommendation:

I strongly urge that the church recruit several "mystery worshipers" (like mystery shoppers) who are unknown to members and can visit the church anonymously on different Sundays and report honestly on their experience of welcome. Every church thinks they are friendly, and so they are to those who are already integrated into the life of the community. You really need feedback from an outside, unbiased source to truly understand how you are coming across to visitors.

It can be hard to be a seeker. To be a seeker is to know what you are looking for in a religious setting when you find it, and to judge quickly when it's not right. Ross Parsley is an evangelical Christian church planter whose beliefs are about as far from ours as possible. But he really gets church in a way that I know we can learn from. He writes:

The pathway to finding a new church is littered with snares because it makes you the reviewer, the critic, the secret shopper! You look at everything through more critical eyes. You don't want to admit it, but you actually end up like the young, single, college student making a list of qualities for the perfect, unblemished spouse of his or her future. The problem? There are no perfect spouses. I believe becoming part of a church family is a lot more like realizing you've come home and less like going down a checklist or joining an organization.

Parsley's movement is called "Messy Church," and invites seekers and religious leaders to consider how our dedication to our practices as religious institutions can hold us back from sharing a more authentic experience of belonging to family, spirit and community with those who seek to join us. Ultimately, Parsley intuits, I think correctly, that people come back to church because of a "feeling," a feeling of belonging and connection.

Harvey Cox is the Hollis Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard where he has taught since 1965. His most recent publication, the culmination of his life's work in religious and theological studies, is called *The Future of Faith*. In it Cox argues that the "Age of Belief," which began in the Renaissance and progressed through the Enlightenment is reaching the end of its dominance in our religious and spiritual lives. This "Age of Belief" in religious institutions, conservative and liberal alike, focused on the structural maintenance of religious life, the habits, practices, creeds, laws, and governing structures to support church life.

In its place is what he calls the “Coming Age of the Spirit,” which includes the destabilizing of religious institutions as the locus of religious life, and a flourishing of grassroots movements based in community, social justice and, most centrally, spiritual experience. Cox thinks seekers, within and outside of religious institutions want the same things from their religious life—to experience a life-affirming sense of faith, a “deep seated sense of confidence” in uncertain and troubling times, on what theologian Paul Tillich calls the “ultimate concerns” of life, what the book of Hebrews called “matters of the heart.” The religious focus on exploring beliefs, he thinks, will become more and more unsatisfying to the evolving religious landscape. While the focus on beliefs may initially draw seekers into community, Cox predicts it will not ultimately hold them in community and help them to put down roots. Cox says “We can *believe* something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our *faith* only in something that is vital for the way we live.”

This is why even though more and more people are fleeing traditional churches, more seekers are yearning for meaningful communities that will make a difference in how they live each day. It’s also why the Pew forum on Religious Life keeps reporting a rise in people practicing forms of prayer and meditation, regardless of their belonging to a religious institution or their belief in a particular God. In their latest surveys of atheists and agnostics, 6% say they pray daily and 11% pray weekly or monthly. Of all Americans who say they don’t believe in God—not all call themselves “atheists”—12% say they pray. What I take from these studies is that belief in God or religious affiliation is not a prerequisite for prayer and other spiritual practices that have the potential to transform our daily lives, turning us towards gratitude, resilience and compassion and away from fear.

This turn towards the Spirit is why we see religious life finding its way out of the buildings which have typically housed its activities and into the public sphere. This week, in Beacon, New York, for the festival of Sukkot, a harvest festival, The Beacon Hebrew Alliance has created the “Open to the Sky” project on Main Street. The sukkah is an open air dwelling, built as a symbol of impermanence after the “homecoming” of the Jewish holidays. Within the Sukkah, the Alliance invited poetry readings, public talks, yoga classes and performances. The Sukkah project is taking religion out of the synagogue and onto the streets where people encounter one another in the rhythms of daily life.

Another place where we can see this “Coming Age of the Spirit” is in the recent visit of Pope Francis. I think what made Pope Francis’ message so accessible and appealing was his insistence on the “being the church.” He spoke frankly and plainly, celebrating Catholic rituals and liturgies in public spaces like Madison Square Garden and Central Park. He spoke to the seeker and prioritized the marginalized and vulnerable:

immigrants, refugees, poor people. While counting on those who were already listening and felt connected to the message of Catholicism, he spoke to the deep yearnings of all people to be loved and cared for in line with basic human rights.

Many progressive people of faith reveled in Pope Francis' moral grasp on immigration, poverty and the environment, while mostly ignoring his implied positions on reproductive freedom, women's ordination and LGBT rights in the midst of what is arguably the most intense battle for women's reproductive freedom since Roe vs. Wade. If we are truly moved by Pope Francis' ability to cross borders between secular and sacred space to usher in a new Age of the Spirit, perhaps we can challenge and support the Pope and his churches in moving beyond the constraining borders of creed and doctrine. If the Catholic Church ultimately hopes to get a boost from Pope Francis's visit, they will have to shift their paradigms to embrace those who are moved by the Pope's spirit and repelled by the constraining doctrine, creeds and discriminatory beliefs.

This is an exciting time in the religious life of our nation and of our congregation. The winds of change are blowing, and with them, an opportunity. We have the opportunity to widen our welcome and embrace seekers in our midst, to offer an authentic sense of belonging and home. We have the opportunity to grow the bright center of our beloved church, expansive and beautiful. Let's embrace that with openness and curiosity, remembering our tender seekers hearts. Let's be gentle with one another, even as we embark upon this adventure of the spirit we call church.

Blessed be and amen.