

## **Religion: A Question of Relationship** by Rev. Lori Staubitz

Story of A Survivor: I have never watched an entire episode of Survivor, or for that matter, any reality show that encourages "survival of the fittest, the prettiest, the best, etc...." However, I have often imagined a similar kind of entertainment....but one much more difficult one produce....

I imagine a reality where those of diverse cultures, religious and political views, and a wide range of educational and economic come together to do more much more than survive, I imagine that they flourish and rise above self interest, that together they create a wealth of beautiful connections and opportunities that emanate from their shared lives outward to others.

From the beginning of my call to be a minister; and especially in the decision to come to Southern Maryland, and then to join you in this intentional new start, I have been urged on by a vision of possibility and driven by a force of faith. I am here by the full force of imagination- mine and yours!

I come here to be in religious community because I want to discover and participate in life giving, life affirming power; I want to delve deeply into my own innate potential to be and do good and support each one of you in your spiritual journey. I am here to be a co-creator in beauty. But it is also here too that with you, I will be challenged to trust and forgive, to go deeper, reach higher and stay centered. I come because I believe all this is possible.

We may have different reasons for being here this morning, however, there is one thing that is essential to our purpose if we aspire to be in religious community. Surprisingly, it has very little to do with "what we believe". In fact, if we each shared the intimate details of our personal spirituality, we would discover a wide variety of religious experiences and beliefs.

Perhaps you even think that being deeply religious has a great deal to do with individual spiritual practice and scholarly pursuit. While these are foundational to religious growth and learning, they are not in and of themselves the one essential practice on which our purpose, meaning and future depend.

If we are to survive, We must be willing to be in relationship; to do the hard work of linking arms and make commitments. The key to our "survival" will not be found in our ability to out-maneuver; out-grow, out-do, out-caste, out- number or over-power. Our future depends upon our ability and willingness to Up-hold and support the common life we share with all others.

### **Beyond the Seven Principles: The Core of Our Faith**

Rev. David Bumbaugh-Professor Meadville Lombard-Chicago-teaching ministry to our future ministers.

He begins by quoting Earl Morse Wilbur, author of a (lengthy) history of Unitarianism, (-required reading for all professional ministers.

" at one time or another our ancestors have embraced almost every theological position imaginable. When left to their own devices, he argued, they abandoned confessional statements and embraced a practice of "freedom, reason, and tolerance."

David continues with these words

"Mulling over this historic insight, I found myself remembering the myth of Parsival and the quest for the Holy Grail. You may recall that in some versions of the old legend, (at an opportune moment, he is standing in the grail castle, with the vision of the grail floating before his eyes, Parsival failed in his quest for the grail because he was unable to ask the right question. The question was not, "What is the Grail?" or "What do I believe about the Grail?" or "What understanding of the grail do we hold in common?" or "How can I grasp the meaning of the grail so I can explain it to others?" The right question was "Whom does the Grail serve?" Solving a riddle, often depends upon asking the right question.

Perhaps the core of our faith cannot be captured by a confessional statement which seeks to answer the question, what beliefs do Unitarian Universalists hold in common? Perhaps the core of our faith is not theological but rather experiential. Perhaps the foundation of our (Unitarian Universalist) faith can best be grasped by asking the question, "Whom do we serve?" - adapted from original question /quote "Whom do Unitarian Universalists serve?"

I would like to reframe that question here with you this morning and ask "Who do we belong to?", because I think the question of belonging not only calls to consider the implications of being at home, but also imply much more spiritual depth and commitment than the word "serve".

Historically, for the past two hundred years or more, we have been guided by a theology of independent, individualism. Many in our congregations today found their way to congregational life by asking the questions "Who am I and what do I believe".

While these two questions are important to our development as human beings, We are just now moving to the larger questions of shared identity and purpose. Who do I belong to? Answering this question affirms both personal identity and relationship. It is a question of commitment (and willingness to subordinate =one's self interest to a larger sense of self which includes others. I had the opportunity to be challenged on this point last week in my neighborhood. A family was moving in next door and the word on the street was that they were from another country, and had several children. The mom would be staying here with her children with no family support. Now, first you must know that I take it upon myself to welcome all my neighbors. Perhaps this comes from making 16 or more moves in my adult life. I try to meet my new neighbors with a meal or baked goods. I give out my phone number and make myself available in case of emergencies. I offer to share household goods, especially since it can be so hard to find a match, hammer or screwdriver those first few days. This outreach is two-fold...for my life is enriched by knowing others beyond a casual hello. However, in this case I hesitated and at first, I wasn't sure why.

Questions arose: Is it my responsibility to reach out to my neighbors when I am not even a permanent resident of this neighborhood? What if we do not speak the same language? What if they misinterpret my visit and take offense? Will I be opening floodgates of expectation? What real meaning does this gesture of greeting have if I am unable to keep any kind of relationship going given my other responsibilities?

But there is more to my hesitation: I know what it is like to be a single mother with three young children-alone in an unfamiliar place. I know the loneliness and the needs. I am well acquainted with the shame of needing help and the pride of refusing it. I also know the fierce can do spirit that might not appreciate a stranger making gross assumptions about me as a single mother. It didn't take long for me to make the connection between my

values, my experience and the reason I was dragging my heels. The possibility of new relationship, no matter how casual, requires some measure of rational decision making and value judgments about personal commitment.

I am struck how similar my story is to the ways we tend to assess our relationships and commitments to one another, no matter whether we are newcomers or members. Relationship making carries with it so much possibility, but our past experiences may cause us to hesitate and use caution. If you are a newcomer, perhaps, you have come looking to fill a void in your life or make deeper and broader connections to others. At the same time, questions of how much will be asked of you may come to mind, especially here in this newly forming congregation. It is no secret that yes, there is great need here; and it is equally true, that here you may find what you are looking for.

Leaders; Board and committee members, I know many of you may hesitate to deepen relationships with newcomers and visitors, avoiding the appearance of being too needy or too pushy...or the other side of that: assessing the full breadth of responsible relationships and commitments that already fill your time and wondering if you can make one more meaningful connection just now. For the casual member, perhaps like me with my neighbors....you have made commitments that you hope to live up to but are tenuous about how you will proceed.

Well, once I got in touch with my fears and named them, my path became clear. Yes, I would welcome them in the same way that I would welcome others. I would not worry about the next steps, but I would remain aware of my own needs and limitations as I moved forward in relationship. I prepared home baked bread that night and made a plan to deliver it in the morning. I would include a note with my contact information and offer assistance in locating the grocery store and ask about any other immediate needs. I would remain open to the possibility of relationship and stay true to my values to do what I can for my neighbors. That night I heard sobbing coming from my neighbors home. I went to sleep that night very glad I took the time to bake that bread.

Closing words : Laura Lee

"A free and liberal church is a loving and covenanted and thinking community". "We need to say that at our best, we are a loving people joined in a covenant to find and live out together the ways of love. But God help us if ever we suppose these ways are easy to identify, or to live out." "God help us if we (fail to) confess that finding them and living in accordance with them requires that we think rationally about them together in our churches, hard and well.

Some say we have no test of membership. I say at our best we have a quite explicit test, one we need to proclaim clearly and spell out with courtesy and warmth. Our covenant—to find and live out together, insofar as we can, the ways of love—is open to all who will enter (this covenant) with us. Many, who visit our churches long to be loving people. Many are looking for a church that might help them be more loving people, and which—straight out—asks for their help and commitment. More will join us when we make clear what covenanted membership in a liberal religious community like ours means.

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