

## On the Importance of Being Religious

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

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Once upon a time, the Reverend Galen Guengerich, minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan, says, once upon a time, about fifty years into the future, his yet-to-be-born granddaughter will be at Duke or Harvard or the University of Chicago Divinity School, writing her doctoral dissertation on the failure of Unitarian Universalism. This granddaughter/scholar of the future will offer three reasons for the demise. Unitarian Universalism failed to become a movement of lasting consequence, she will write, because we turned out to be *spiritual but not religious*. Because we focused on *the personal rather than the institutional*. And because we were on a *quest not a mission*.

That once upon a time, as well as being just one man's vision of the future, has yet to unfold. And our actions each moment of our lives shape the unfolding of all future once upon a times. As a partial part of my attempt to ward off that particular future for the faith I serve and deeply love, this morning, and on two Sundays later this fall, I'll address those three potential sources of failure.

*I'm spiritual but not religious.*

I wonder how many of us have uttered those words, or chosen the "spiritual but not religious" choice on a survey or questionnaire or other form. I've been tempted to select it myself, when other options seem unsuitable. I'm not Christian or Jewish or Moslem. I'm not Catholic. Trouble is, I'm also NOT "spiritual but not religious." I am religious. Very religious. And my religion is Unitarian Universalist.

I get it. I really do. I get it that religion has a bad reputation and the spiritual seems infinitely superior, or at least more benign.

*Religion*, after all, is the opiate of the masses. Religion, oversimplified and misunderstood, is mistaken as the sole root cause of all sorts of conflicts throughout history and in the present day. Religion means arbitrary or outdated rules, meaningless ritual, blind obedience, boring sermons, dry, judgmental, or worse, disconnected ineffective authority figures, in groups and infidels.

When it comes to religion, haven't most of us, at one time or another, felt like Mary Chapin Carpenter when she sings:

*I sat alone in the dark one night, tuning in by remote  
I found a preacher who spoke of the light but there was brimstone in his  
throat  
He'd show me the way according to him in return for my personal check  
I flipped my channel back to CNN and I lit another cigarette*

*I take my chances, forgiveness doesn't come with a debt  
I take my chances, I take my chances every chance I get*

*Spiritual*, by contrast, at least among religious liberals, conjures images of peacefully meditating Buddhas, Gibran's Prophet answering the people's questions poetically, the ecstatic Dances of Universal Peace, harp music, gentle chimes, labyrinth walking, cleansing fasts, following one's bliss, and inexplicable smiles on the faces of enlightened ones.

Who wouldn't rather be spiritual rather than religious? Given what so many of our Unitarian Universalist sisters and brothers experienced in the religions of their childhoods-rejection, judgment, denial, threats of damnation-should *spiritual instead of religious* be our shining goal rather than a potential cause of our failure?

Galen Guengerich convincingly argues *no*. The spiritual, he argues, concerns us but not those around us. If this is true, then I would argue that not only shouldn't we strive to be spiritual rather than religious, we already at our best moments are emphatically NOT spiritual rather than religious. When we insist on an inclusive approach to selling plots in Mount Pisquah cemetery, when we march for marriage equality, when we answer the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to Selma, when we join the annual Good Friday counter-march in support of Planned Parenthood and provide escorts to the women who seek the *legal* services of abortion providers, when we partner with churches in Transylvania or African American congregations in inner cities, when we stand against the death penalty and march for workers' rights, in these and so many moments, our Unitarian Universalist faith is *all about the other*, all about stepping outside our limited self-interest in full recognition that the other is us and we are the other.

Let me be clear. I recognize and hold up the value of spirituality-in my life and in the lives of others. We are, each one of us, in a real and vital way, called to care for our own spirit. To seek stillness when stillness will calm us, center us. To go deep into silence when silence will speak to us. To move gracefully with the rhythms of the universe when dance will free us. Intensely personal even when practiced among or alongside others, each of these spiritual acts, practices, experiences can be life-saving, life-restoring. Not one, however, is a substitute for religion. The very word *religion*, we

are told, originates with the Latin *religio*, meaning ‘obligation, bond, reverence,’ and is perhaps based on Latin *religare* ‘to bind’. But it is not the etymological distinction between *spirit*, meaning *breath* (an individual act) and *religion*, with its connotation of relationship, that Guengerich (and I) find important, when arguing that Unitarian Universalism will survive or fail on the extent to which we are religious rather than spiritual. Unitarian Universalism will thrive when we embrace and celebrate religion because religion is, in Guengerich’s definition, *a way of life practiced by a community of faith*.

As we heard in one of this morning’s readings, Unitarian Universalist Association President, the Reverend Peter Morales, also ties the future of Unitarian Universalism to an embrace of religion. And he, too, focuses on the communal aspect of religion. “My religion,” he writes, “isn’t about me; it is about us. It is through the practice of our religion that we create community, that we strengthen the bonds that sustain us, and that we build compassionate connection to the wider world.”

We’ve all heard people say, of themselves or of others, “He’s/she’s a Unitarian Universalist. He/she just doesn’t know it. Just doesn’t come to church.” Or “for years I was a Unitarian Universalist without realizing it.” Guengerich’s definition of religion helps me make sense of the vague unease with which I have always reacted to such statements. It is indeed possible to hold similar beliefs, ask similar questions, explore similar ideas to Unitarian Universalists without ever walking into a UU congregation or experiencing the Church of the Larger Fellowship through the mail or on the internet. It is indeed possible to begin attending one of our congregations, to start worshiping with us, to gradually participate in more and more of our programs and activities and feel a deep sense of homecoming, of having found a missing piece of one’s self. But, I would argue, such experiences are not the same as being a Unitarian Universalist.

We become Unitarian Universalist when we join--either formally or through regularly participation and informal but lasting commitment--a Unitarian Universalist community. Without a creed, without baptism into the faith (baby dedications welcome children into the *community of faith*), without a sacred text or sacramental act at the center of our faith, what makes us Unitarian Universalist, what sets us apart and holds us together, is our participation in the life of a Unitarian Universalist community of faith.

In Puritan American there was for a time a clear distinction between those men and woman who comprised the church and those men and women who comprised the parish. The local *parish* included all those who lived in a particular geographic location and worshiped in a specific congregation. But the *church* included only those who testified to a personal religious experience. Here at Nora Church we have a similar though unofficial, unspoken distinction. Our membership roll includes people who live in

other states and people who live nearby whom we seldom see. We hold these cherished folks dear and never ask them to resign their membership. But the heart and life blood of Nora is made up of you-members and friends who live locally, who attend services regularly, who show up for Clean Up days and lefse making and meatball making, who practice a way of life together week after week, year after year. Nora Church fulfills all parts of Guengerich's definition of religious: we are a community of faith and we practice, regularly and consistently a common way of life.

It is our *lived* faith, our practice as a faith community, intentionally and over time, that makes us strong and viable and appealing. Increasingly, over recent decades, people have come through our doors seeking avenues to serve the world. They can be, we can be, spiritual at home. But serving the world is religious work, and it can be lonely, arduous, often discouraging work. Those who seek to undertake it need companionship, inspiration, support and direction. Our individual churches and our larger faith movement are, will be, as strong as our welcome of such workers, as vibrant as our art in refreshing such workers, as resilient as our ability and grace in the intricate dance of sending such workers out and calling them home again according to the need of the world and gifts of the workers.

I wish you all could have seen the illustrations for this morning's story. As Joseph's beloved blanket morphs into a story, passing through jacket, vest, tie, handkerchief and button along the way, scenes of community life support the action--a bagel salesman, the tailor grandfather, the family of mice beneath the floorboards who utilize the fabric scraps, the mother who gives birth to a baby sister who is giving her own blanket--all unnarrated but visible. Families are the repository and well of our personal stories. Religious communities are the repository and well of our faith stories. The stories that remind us who we are, what we hold sacred, where we've been and where we might go.

The story of this faith community has unfolded on this hill for one hundred thirty years. The men and women who made the painful but inevitable decision to leave Lake Hanska Lutheran Church were on a religious mission--not a spiritual one. They followed a new star of truth, sought new ways of being a community, but they didn't abandon faith. It was that religious mission that has brought Nora through good times and bad and into the twenty-first century. Your personal faith stories, our personal faith stories, are woven into that larger story. May Nora's tapestry will wear well, its warp filling slowly with yet more stories, a thing of beauty and strength and religion until once upon a time a tiny church got religion and celebrated two hundred years on a hill outside of Hanska. Amen.