



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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### “Why Church?”

a sermon given by student minister Dawn Fortune  
on May 20, 2012

Yesterday I served as a usher at commencement exercises at Andover Newton Theological School. It is the season for that kind of thing, caps and gowns and degrees and conferring of such. It is the season of commencements, of graduation, of leaving communities of learning for bigger and better things. It is a time of new beginnings, and of endings.

The title of my sermon this week is “Why Church?” and I had approximately 1600 words written about that subject by yesterday morning. Now, the words didn’t necessarily like one another, nor did they flow well on the page or from my mouth, but sometimes sermons – like papers – only get to be “done” instead of “great” before it’s time to deliver them. Those words and I had wrestled for days, and I was about to concede defeat and just come read them to you this morning, but last night, after the speeches were done, the graduates congratulated, the friends and relations met and greeted and dined and sent home, the words didn’t sit as well as I liked. So, at midnight, with my windows open to the night air on the quiet campus, I sat down to write this. Some of the original words made it in, but they seem to work better now.

Why do we do church? There are a thousand reasons to belong to a church. We named many of them last week: community, worship, justice, love, healing, the divine in all its forms. This morning we welcomed new members to the congregation of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill. It is always a powerful and moving thing to witness people joining a church.

For people in more orthodox faith traditions, joining a church means declaring a particular set of beliefs, and perhaps swearing an oath to obey a bishop or pope some hierarchical structure from which leadership or authority speaks.

For those of us who don’t have a strict doctrine, who don’t have a hierarchy, and who don’t have leaders so much as trusted servants, joining a church has a very different meaning. Yes, we are joining something bigger than ourselves, yes, we are joining others with similar values in a community that has a covenant with each other and with the world about how we will be in relationship, but there’s no creed to recite before witnesses, no oath of loyalty or obedience to be sworn.

Why is it we get up on a Sunday morning, get dressed – sometimes even dressed nicely – and come into this space for an hour? What is it about this experience that makes it more valuable than an extra hour of sleep on a weekend morning, or an hour of just about anything else?

We come to church seeking something. Each of us is human, and as such, we are broken in some way. We are imperfect. We are wounded, but life or love or circumstance. We are mourning, we are lonely. We are seeking others with whom to surround ourselves so that we feel

safe, and loved and like we belong. We seek shelter from the proverbial storm that is our world. We seek shelter, and safety, community, love, acceptance, affirmation, enlightenment, transcendence.

In the course of a seminary experience, prospective ministers spend a lot of time studying the origins of things like ritual and theology and writing papers about those heady – if often terribly dull topics. This spring, I examined closely at the development of ritual, but through the eye of my undergraduate psychology major.

Psychologist B.F. Skinner studied behavior in rats and pigeons in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his observations were met with a mix of accolades and derision. Many scientists of the time profoundly resented the notion that humans were not superior to animals and would respond differently to stimuli than mere mice, but others were able to see past this human-centric mode of thinking to realize that we might not be as evolved as we'd like to believe.

In my paper – and I'll spare you the 16 pages of buildup – I hypothesized that early religious ritual likely developed as a result of random reinforcement, much like Skinner's pigeons. In an experiment you may remember from a basic psychology course, Skinner studied what reinforcement did to the behavior of pigeons. He put them in a box with a little push-plate. If they pushed the plate, a gadget dispensed a food pellet. Soon the pigeon learned to tap the plate when it was hungry. It could also learn to tap the plate two times or three times consecutively to get the treat. According to the report, Skinner and his staff set up the pigeons in their boxes with the pellet machines set on timers to dispense food at randomly-generated time intervals ranging from every minute to every hour. And then they went home for the night.

When they came in to the lab the following day, they found a most alarming site. Every pigeon in its own box was going through its own version of an intricate dance. Some were hopping and turning in circles, some were bowing and scraping, some were making complex vocalizations – well, as complex as “coo” can get, but you get the idea. When Skinner rigged the pellet machine to dispense food via a timer set to random intervals, a remarkable thing happened. Whatever behavior immediately preceding the appearance of a pellet became reinforced by the reward. And was repeated in an attempt to get more food.

They were responding to something that was utterly unrelated to what they did. Skinner called this behavior “Superstitious Ritual” and studied it further, learning that even after a regular timed pattern of feeding was established, the birds would still engage in the ritual behavior, regardless of the fact that they no longer were being rewarded.

You may be able to see where this was headed in my paper. I am most grateful to have a professor who appreciates my ... irreverent approach to theology.

It is not a difficult stretch to make, then, to imagine that the earliest humans living in community might understand the random forces of nature as some sort of magic “food pellet supply” that dished out rewards or punishments according to the behavior of the people. Food was plentiful when this person was in charge, so that person must have god's favor. Food was scarce when this other person was in charge, so that was a message as well. Of course it begs the question then when Moses led folks in the desert for 40 years how he came out of it with such a glowing reputation. Must have been the manna from heaven. Couple instances of that kind of stuff can really make up for a lot.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying. Much of that early kind of hit-or-miss natural consequences rule-making made a great deal of sense. Some of the rules have long ago been made obsolete by scientific discoveries, but it is easy now to see where some of those ancient

codes came from. In the much-maligned book of Leviticus, for instance, there are scads of rules designed to keep people alive and to help an oppressed people survive. Lacking refrigeration in the hot Middle East, it makes sense to prohibit the eating of shellfish. When the early Hebrews did that, they got sick and some even died. When people used the same wooden bowls for meat and later for milk, things went badly and people got sick again and died. With limited understanding of human reproduction science, any behaviors that did not lead directly to the birth of more people, things like same-sex sexual expression and masturbation were forbidden. When the goal is survival of the species, these are the kind of rules that get made. They made a lot of sense at the time.

Today we understand the science of the trichina worm and eat pork in safety. We have a better grasp on germs, refrigeration and food preservation, so it is ok to use the same bowl for multiple food products, and to eat shellfish. And, with the world groaning under a burden of seven Billion people, I'm going to suggest that procreation is not the urgent mandate it once was and that people ought to be free to exercise their sexual proclivities in whatever consensual, non-exploitive, not-necessarily-procreative way floats their proverbial boat. If the last fifty or sixty years is any indication, seeing as divine thunderbolts have not yet come from the sky, I'm going to guess that those early prohibitions might be more of Skinner's "superstitious rituals" than actual commandments from the divine to not use the bodies we were given in ways that give us pleasure. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to ritual.

Ritual still serves us. It does something that we do not entirely understand. It gives – or perhaps adds meaning to events in profound ways. Every race and culture on the planet has some kind of ritual for welcoming infants into the world. Some baptize, some anoint, some, like us – pledge our support to the child and their family. Every race and culture in the world has rituals of some kind around death as well. There are variations of rituals for all manner of milestones in life. There is a bris, a first communion, coming of age, confirmation, graduation, Bar or Bat mitzvah, marriage, and other ceremonies. As our sensitivities change, our rituals adapt to meet those needs. People who are transgender have created rituals for claiming their "new" identity, including naming ceremonies.

Ritual is how we mark – publicly – the passage of milestones. Somehow, sitting at a desk and signing a marriage license in front of a witness does not carry the same emotional impact as presenting one's self before family and friends and proclaiming vows to have and to hold til death do us part.

Ritual is how we welcome people into our communities and how we bid them good-bye when they leave. Ritual is how we celebrate and how we mourn, and whether that ritual involves candles and bells or quiet contemplation, we all mark things in our own way.

But ritual does something else. Ritual has the power to bypass our intellect, to do an end-run around our powerful brains, and to directly touch our hearts. There is the kind of ritual we do that makes things familiar, and then there is the kind of ritual that reaches past our defenses and touches the most tender part of our hearts. Weddings can be like that. Baby dedications, too. Blessings of one kind or another are beautiful things and will often – nay, always – move me to tears.

So, as much as social justice is a part of why I come to church, and much as connection to the divine in each of us matters to me, and as much as joining in community to worship is important, I think for me, the reason for church is the way it touches my heart. It is the way that all of those things conspire to reach inside, to touch the tender bit, offering a caress that is loving,

even as it sometimes makes us cry. Church is where I get challenged to be my better self, to love more expansively, to judge less, to be open more, and to serve love in all its forms.

This is ascension Sunday. Who here knows what that means? The story of the ascension takes place in Galilee, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Satisfied that his work on earth is complete, Jesus commands his eleven remaining disciples to go forth and spread the good news of God's love and salvation, and he ascends bodily into heaven, saying, "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations ... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

That message was preached brilliantly during yesterday's commencement address as the speaker charged the graduates to go and do ministry where they are called. Today, the tables are turned. You have new members coming in, people who have just joined the church this morning, and one person – me – who is leaving, having finished the work I came here to do. We part charging one another to go and do ministry where we are called – me, at least for the summer, doing research and education around sexuality, and you, with new members and new life, a growing church with needs to meet and gifts to share.

There is an eclipse today. We won't be able to see it from where we are, but it affects us still. The two heavenly bodies that affect our lives more than any other – the sun that gives us light and warmth and around which we orbit, and the moon that affects our tides and our hearts – those two bodies will align today, casting a double-dose of energy at this small blue planet. It is fitting then, that as the two celestial bodies come together and then move apart again that we should come together one last, powerful and moving time, before moving apart. I have no doubt that we will spin around close enough to meet again, but there must be a rest – a time of separation – while we each get familiar with our own boundaries and strengths anew.

"I am with you always, to the end of the age." These words I carry with me, with the memory of my time here and the good people I have been blessed to serve. I dare say that I may have made some small mark upon the hearts of the people here and hope that whatever gifts I was able to offer may reflect the gratitude I feel for having shared this time and this opportunity with you.

You have new members. The future is already begun. It starts when you say we and you know who you mean, and each day you mean one more. Go, make disciples of the world. Do good works. Love one another deeply and with abandon. Serve love. And let us carry each other in our hearts, to the end of the age.

Blessed be. Namaste. Amen.