

“The Great Good Place”
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Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
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“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community,
and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.”
– George Bernard Shaw

Reading from “On Going to Church”

Our reading comes from the Rev. A. Powell Davies, who was the minister of All Souls Unitarian in Washington, D.C. in the 1950s.

Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe my fellow [humans]. I must not only hear about it but feel it. [And,] in church, I do. I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world—unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Workaday enthusiasms are not enough. They wear out too soon. I want to experience human nature at its best—and be reminded of its highest possibilities, and this happens to me in church.

It may seem as though the same things could be found in solitude, but it does not easily happen so. In a congregation we share each other’s spiritual needs and reinforce each other. In some ways, the soul is never lonelier than in a church service. That is certainly true of a pulpit, for a pulpit is the most intimately lonely place in the world—yet it is a loneliness that has strength in it. Perhaps this is because the innermost solitude of the human heart is in some paradoxical way a thing that can be shared—that must be shared—if the spirit of [the divine] is to find a full entrance into it.

We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls’ deepest yearnings. But in church we do—in a way that protects us from all that is intrusive, yet leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual loneliness, the same need of assurance and faith and hope. We are brought together at the highest level possible. We are not merely an audience, we are a congregation.

I doubt whether I could stand the thought of the cruelty and misery of the present world unless I could know, through an experience that renewed itself over and over again, that at the heart of life there is assurance, that I can hold an ultimate belief that all is well. And this happens in church.

Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places. The soul will always seek its nurture. For religious experience—which is life at its most intense, life at its best—is something we cannot do without.

Sermon: “The Great Good Place”

It begins the same way most every Sunday morning.

The sun comes up.

The alarm clock buzzes to life with little discernible effect.

Eventually, a stern but patient voice calls out from the kitchen, announcing that it is time to get up.

But the man just grumbles and groans, and only pulls his blanket tighter over his head.

When his wife comes into the room to insist that he get out of bed, he explains that he just doesn’t want to go to church.

When pressed, he complains that the sermons are boring, the coffee is too strong, and the people aren’t friendly.

And, his wife then says, “while all that may be so, you’re going to church this morning, so get out of bed. You are the minister!”

* * * * *

I am happy to report that three years into being a minister, this isn’t a problem I have.

Yet, I suspect some of us wrestle – with our partners, or parents, or children, and, sometimes, even, with ourselves – every tug back and forth, a way of asking the question why – why do we come to this building, to be with this congregation, engaged in the weekly work of worship.

It may be a question that you're starting to ask yourself even now,
as you're wondering why I'm bringing it up.

So, go ahead, take a moment to ask yourself
just why it is that you come? What is it that you come here for?

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A recent survey of Unitarians revealed that people report, overwhelmingly, that they come seeking community.¹

In fact, the search for community surpassed all the other reasons combined.

And, that no surprise.

The urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg has written
of our deep need for a "third place" in our lives -
a place that "host[s] regular, voluntary, informal,
and happily anticipated gatherings of [people]
beyond [what he calls our regular] realms of home and work."²

He says we need those "'third places'
which lend a public balance
to the increase[ing] privatization of [our] home life."

His term, *the third place*, derives from considering our homes
the "first places" in our lives,
and our work places, if we're still working, to be "the second."

Like pubs in England, cafes in France,
coffee bars in Italy, and beer gardens in Germany,
"third places are nothing more than informal public gathering places."

Oldenburg says that, "The character of [these] third places
is determined most of all by its regular clientele
and is marked by a playful mood. . ."

"Though a radically different kind of setting [from] a home,
the third place is remarkably similar to a good home
in the psychological comfort and support that it [offers]...

¹ Reported by the Rev. Peter Morales, Jefferson Unitarian Church, Golden, Colorado in UUA video, "Listening to Experience."

² <http://www.pps.org/info/placemakingtools/placemakers/oldenburg>

[While third places] are the heart of a community's social vitality, . . . ,
sadly, they constitute a diminishing aspect of [our]. . . social landscape.”

“Life without community has produced, for many [people],
a lifestyle consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. [But, he says, our]
social well-being and psychological health
depend upon community.”

Yet, community can be hard to find —
even where you would most expect it.

When I surveyed my own congregation in Toronto last year
about the topics they'd like for me to preach on,
the subject of loneliness cropped up over and over again.

It was a fascinating thing to hear:
that surrounded by millions of people all around, they are still lonely.

Yet, loneliness is not the same thing as being alone, of course.
And, proximity isn't the same thing as being close.

It's connection that matters most.
The meaningful connection that is not only the antidote to loneliness,
but at the heart of being human, and at the centre
of what we're trying to create in coming together on Sunday mornings.

I know many of you find it here each week.

I know that many of you make it here every Sunday,
come hell or high water, just to renew and savour
the deep bonds of affection you've forged
with one another through the years.

But, I also know that for others it's something of a struggle
to find that comforting sense of connection in our congregations.

So, to you, if that's true for you,
I would encourage you to try digging a bit deeper.

Reach out - with an open mind, an open heart, and an open hand,
knowing, as the poet Margy Piercy tells us,
that “connections are made slowly.”³

³ Margy Piercy, “The Seven of Pentacles.”

For, as it turns out, creating a third place in our lives requires a great deal more than just having a building and some people who gather within its walls.

Building authentic human community takes intention and effort, and it takes time.

A case in point.

Some twenty-five years ago, a man named Howard Schultz was on a business trip in Italy.

He had recently become the marketing director for a small chain of coffee shops in the Pacific Northwest.

While visiting Milan, he was struck by the Italian zest for living – their enviable balance of work, and rest, and play.

He saw people enjoying life – and it saw it on clear display in the infectious conviviality found in Italy's 200,000 coffee bars.

Schultz's mind started to spin, as he dreamed of creating similar places back home, where people could find casual community. A place where all were welcome.

As you might have already guessed, he came back to Seattle and founded what, today, is known the world over as Starbucks.⁴

Over the past quarter of a century, of course, Starbucks have spread to most every corner of the planet.

Where some see the great potential for new third places for everyone, others see these coffee shops as a fussy, over-priced scourge on the land.

Now, this isn't a sermon about Starbucks, so I'll leave it to you to sort out the pressing questions of where to get your coffee.

But, I do want to offer an observation.

Though I've enjoyed, through the years, some wonderful, lively chats with friends

⁴ Story found in the Reverend Ginger Luke's sermon, "The Third Place," River Road Unitarian Church, March 12, 2006.

in Starbucks stores all over North America,
rarely have I been in one of these shops and gotten a strong sense
that I had just wandered into a genuine community.

What I've seen more often, is a lot of people,
tucked safely behind newspapers and laptops,
probably wanting some deeper connection with each other,
but seemingly unsure of just how to make it happen.

Now, maybe I've gotten it all wrong.
Perhaps the parties all break out when I'm not around.
But, it seems that some essential ingredient is missing,
some vital element that keeps every Starbucks from truly being a third place.

* * * * *

A few years ago, when I was working
at Arlington Street Church in Boston,
the staff and the ushers noticed a curious trend on Sunday mornings.

Fifteen to twenty minutes into the service,
a small crowd of people would arrive, coffee in hand
(and, I'm not making this up,
it was from the Starbucks just around the corner),
and they would place their cups somewhere at the back of the church, slip into a pew, listen
to the sermon, and then leave!

Long before coffee hour,
and, certainly, well before the offering, they were gone.

Now, on one hand, I wanted to be gracious.

I wanted to be grateful that they seemed to have recognised in themselves some spiritual
hunger which could be fed by, quite literally, dropping in for the sermon.

But, I also wanted to tell them that they were missing the best part.
That they were missing the point: that a congregation is a set of relationships – a set of
complicated, at times confusing,
and at its best, life-changing set of relationships.

And, that, I believe, is what we ultimately come looking for in a congregation, whether we
realise it or not.

It's what we get when we say we want community or connection.

And, it's what Starbucks is trying so hard to manufacture with mixed results.

But, real community takes an investment of our time, and of ourselves.

My hope is given enough time,
every coffee shop might truly take up the challenge
of becoming a genuine, third place,
of becoming what Oldenburg also called our "great good place."

Our "great good place."

I can think of no better expression
to describe what every congregation, at its best, aspires to be –
a place of connection and commitment,
an enduring community of memory and hope,
that calls each and every one of us to the highest purpose of our lives.

So, what surprises me, then, about Oldenburg's work
is that for all of his talk of our need for public places to make meaningful connections,
he never mentions congregations as a possibility.

To me, biased as I am, that is the great flaw I see in his work –
that he misses entirely that all around are communities like this one,
doing precisely what makes for a great, good place:
a regular, voluntary, and happily-anticipated gathering
of a regular group of people in a playful mood
who come together for comfort and support.

Isn't that what happens here?

If we didn't already have places like this, we'd need to invent them.
But here you are, in Haverhill, working week after week
to be a great, good place for each other.

But, remember, too, that your calling as a congregation
must extend beyond who is sitting here now.

There is a world of hurt out there,
full of people in desperate need of a great good place
just like this one.

So reach out.

With some 90% of us having come from other faith traditions,
or no tradition at all, we bear a debt of gratitude to the generations before us
who laboured to make this third place possible for us.

And, we repay that sacred debt by reaching out,
by doing what we can to assure that this great good place lives on for generations to come,
serving not only ourselves, but all those who search for a beacon of hope.

One of my favourite stories of the transformative power of reaching out comes from my
remarkable colleague, Rebecca Parker.⁵

Years ago, living in Seattle (there's that coffee thing again. . .),
Rebecca was at the end of her rope.

One night, she had come to the end of her will to live.
She just wanted the anguish to stop.

It was spring. A cold, clear night.

Living at the top of the hill far above Lake Union, sometime after midnight she left her house
and started walking down the hill.

She knew the water would be cold enough.
She would walk into it, then swim, and then let go,
sinking down into the darkness and, as she put it, "go home to God."

Comforted by that notion, she had no second thoughts.
She was set on her course.

At the bottom of the hill, she had only the small grassy rise
at the edge of Kite Hill to cross before coming to the water's edge.

She crested the familiar rise and began the descent
to the welcoming water when she was caught short
by a barrier that hadn't been there before.

It looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses,
laid out to the left and to the right, the width of the grassy field.

In the dark she couldn't see a way to get around either end,

⁵ Paraphrased from Rebecca Ann Parker's own telling, in her book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, written with Rita Nakashima Brock.

but it looked like she could climb over the middle.

So, she quickened her pace, impelled by a grief that wouldn't let her go.

As she got closer, the dark forms before her eyes seemed to be moving. She squinted to understand what she was seeing.

The odd bunchy shapes were a line of human beings
bundled up in parkas and hats.

The stick shapes weren't sawhorses.
They were telescopes.
It was the Seattle Amateur Astronomy Club.

Before she could make her way through the line,
one of them looked up from his eyeglass
and, presuming her to be an astronomer, said with great enthusiasm,
"I've got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look."

She didn't want to be rude or give away her reason for being there,
so she bent down and looked through the telescope.

And, there it was: Jupiter – banded red and glowing!
"Isn't it great?" he asked.
And, it was great.
Jupiter was astonishingly beautiful through the telescope.

That amateur astronomer didn't know Rebecca,
or know why she was there.
He just assumed that she was there
because the night sky is a wonder to behold.

Across the sheen of dark water, the lights of the city shimmered.
And, overhead, the sky was wild with pinpoints of fire.

Rebecca knew she couldn't kill herself in the presence of these good people who had gotten
up in the middle of a cold spring night,
with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes,
to behold the wonder of the planets and the stars.

Looking back on that moment, she recalled the stunning words of the poet James Agee:

Sure on this shining night
Of starmade shadows round,

kindness much watch for me
This side the ground. . .

“Kindness much watch for me this side the ground. . . “

That night, the poets, the amateur scientists,
and the splendid night sky kept Rebecca in this world.

But she is quick to say that it was not overwhelming beauty that did it.
It was more that she simply came to feel more than she had.
Her capacity to feel broadened. Her senses expanded.
And, while life’s hurts remained,
she was able to embrace pain, and sadness, and despair, with a larger heart.

As she puts it,
“The ordinary inclination of human beings to share what pleases them, the delight of being
awake to the beauty of the night sky,
the cool air, the grass beneath my feet—
these returned life to my senses.

[That night,] the commonplace translated itself into a deeper knowing.
[That] there is a web of connection we live in
that is greater than [our] senses can tell.”⁶

Friends, people walk down a great hill of despair every week
and enter the doors of this building in the hope
that they will find here some reassurance
that life is precious and good,
that our days have meaning and purpose
and that we are connected through and through
by a wondrous spirit of life.

My prayer, for you and for them,
is that the doors of this great good place, stand ever-open,
ever-ready to receive them – and each other –
all who come in search of the enduring hope
at the heart of this beloved community.

So may it be. Amen.

⁶ *Proverbs of Ashes*, 114-115.