



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Filled With the Spirit,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on May 24, 2015

Today I invite you to be open to the Spirit, to breathe in life in all its fullness, to affirm that there is more going on than meets the eye. But isn't that the invitation every Sunday? And every day? To be awake to these lives we have been given? Like we sang a few minutes ago, to “become the place, wherein the holy Spirit makes a dwelling.”<sup>1</sup> Isn't that why we're here?

On Sunday, when worship has ended and coffee hour is all done and most of you have left the building, I head out the back door. At that hour, you can hear sounds coming from Calvary Baptist Church—singing, or the preacher exhorting the congregation, or maybe someone saying “A-men,” or “That's right!”

Most of us here come from cultures and traditions that taught us to be more reserved than that, to be quiet in church. I'm from one of those traditions, which have been lovingly described as “God's frozen people.” But is this who we want to be? What do we lose when we close ourselves off from the stirrings of the spirit?

The book of Acts describes a day when the wind started to blow, and the Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus—it was as if they had been touched with tongues of fire!—and they became filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages. Making so much noise that people began to gather. Some folks, threatened by this, poked fun and accused them of being drunk. But Peter spoke to the crowd, using some questionable logic: “These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!” No, Peter says, this is what happens when God's spirit comes upon people: “Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams” (Acts 2:15-17).

Church is meant to be more than a place for community and comfort. It's meant to be a place where we sense the stirring of the Spirit and get fired up; where we see visions, dream dreams and then do something with them.

Please notice that the Pentecost story is not about people's individual experiences. Too often these days we privatize spirituality; we think it's just about “me and my experience.” No, religious community is supposed to remind you that it's not all about you. It's about something much larger! That's what church and worship is for—to lose yourself a bit, to set aside your ego, or have

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<sup>1</sup> Words from “Come Down, O Love Divine,” #271 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

it be pushed aside, so you can be open to others, so you can feel the power and the glory of that Spirit which courses through the universe!

Last weekend I was at Tufts University for our son Will's graduation. The printed program for the baccalaureate service had this amazing array of religious symbols, representing all the traditions present on that campus. Different people spoke in the languages and sacred scripture of their own traditions, and everyone heard what was being said. It was a kind of Pentecost moment. That spirit continued at commencement, when the diversity of names and nationalities, of skin colors and perspectives and orientations were like a dazzling arrangement of flowers, each beautiful, with the whole even more wonderful than its many parts. I looked around at that beautiful and diverse gathering and remembered words from the poet Naomi Shihab Nye: "This is the world I want to live in. The shared world."<sup>2</sup>

These sacred experiences can happen anywhere. The invitation is to be open to them, to expect them, to seek them. The UU minister Rev. Burton Carley says "Central to biblical spirituality and our faith is religious experience. One area of religious experience is the encounter with the Holy. That experience manifests in times of awe, in times of encountering the Mystery that challenges the human ego boundaries. It breaks forth in visions of covenant and grace, and the urge to be in right relationship. It is discovered in expressions of hope, compassion and justice that draw us to stand with others in the struggle for human dignity."

"Now this is the question," he says. "Why don't we want to stay in the presence of the Holy Spirit? Why don't we cry agony when it is absent? Why aren't we doing everything in our power to catch it and keep it, to live in its glory, to be captured by it and to, yes, surrender to it? It is as if we have silenced the voice of the whirlwind and doused the flame of the burning bush, and we no longer can find that compelling voice that requires of us great things, that stirs us beyond ourselves. When we lose the capacity to speak in the metaphoric language of ultimate agency we exhibit a poverty of spirit."

At the worship committee meeting this week, we started a conversation about how our Sunday service could help you have deeper spiritual experiences. What need to change to help you be more in touch with the Spirit? We're going to continue this conversation, and we'd welcome your perspective.

One of our favorite prayer hymns here is "Comfort Me," and we sing it here in a deep and meditative way. I was part of a worship service at a minister's conference recently, where we sang that song, but differently—with drums and guitar, with the song leader singing over us. We really belted it out, and the song went on and on, and I was transported by that experience. Not just comforted, but moved to sing as loudly as I could, to dance, to pray, "speak for me."

You know I'm not a flamboyant or even exuberant kind of person. I'm a buttoned-down kind of guy. But I know what it's like to be filled with the spirit. To be moved to tears or laughter, to be pulled into deeper connection with others. I want this to be a place where we can speak of the

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<sup>2</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4," available online at <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gate-4>

Spirit, and encounter its presence; where we are not afraid to be lifted up by its power, where we are not embarrassed to sing loudly or live proudly or love boldly.

All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa has been transformed over the past few years, after they invited a folks from a nearby Pentecostal church to join their congregation. The Pentecostal pastor had come to the conclusion that he was a universalist; he had stopped believing in hell, and his theological shift had split the church. Those who left the Pentecostal congregation with their pastor and joined the Unitarians instantly made that church more diverse in terms of race and class and culture. All Souls started a contemporary service with drums and praise music, which invited more clapping and dancing and waving of hands. They kept their traditional service too, and that congregation is really walking the talk of diversity and inclusion. What they're doing in Tulsa represents the best of our faith tradition, welcoming people in their glorious diversity and helping them to be free.

Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, the senior minister there, says we UUs have something to learn from this more spirit-filled worship that offers joy, hope and surrender. The struggles and heartbreaks of life can wear us down and we need ways to be lifted back up. He says, "I have distinct memories of feeling my spirit held and lifted in Contemporary worship in ways that gave me the energy and enthusiasm to keep ministering and also to maintain my own sanity.... it was while singing in (that) service that I palpably recovered a transforming sense of joy and hope. After experiencing that profound awe in worship in the midst of deep grief, I had an "aha." I came to understand even more how this neoPentecostal form of worship is a powerful religious tool for healing, meaning-making and restoration."<sup>3</sup>

If you want to be filled with the spirit, you start by acknowledging that you aren't the center of the universe. That there is a power at work in the world, call it what you will, that is greater than yourself. It helps to acknowledge that you hunger and thirst for the Spirit, that you long to be with people and in places where it is present and alive and available. You have to be willing and able to let go, and let God, as they say—to give up the illusion of control and trust that Spirit will hold you up and carry you, the way surfers are held up by the ocean and able to ride the edge of those huge and powerful waves.

If you want to be filled with the spirit, you can start asking for it. Try this as your prayer: "Come Spirit, come. Come Spirit, come." Remember what Jesus said: "Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you will find." If you desire a deeper experience of the Spirit, then ask for it, start seeking it.

"There is a community of the spirit," Rumi reminds us.

"Join it, and feel the delight of walking in the noisy street and being the noise...

Open your hands if you want to be held...

Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?..."<sup>4</sup>

Will you pray with me?

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, "'Aha!' & 'Awe': Movements of the Spirit in All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa from May 2008—September 2012," available online at [http://www.prairiegroupuu.org/images/Lavanhar\\_Movements\\_of\\_the\\_Spirit\\_2008-2012.pdf](http://www.prairiegroupuu.org/images/Lavanhar_Movements_of_the_Spirit_2008-2012.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, "A Community of the Spirit," available online at <http://www.poetseers.org/spiritual-and-devotional-poets/contemp/rumibarks/1-2-2/>

Come down O Love divine,  
enter our hearts and minds.  
Fill us with your grace, help us become that place  
wherein the holy Spirit makes a dwelling.  
Help us to be so filled with your Spirit that we are then compelled  
to reach out in love and concern for others,  
so we will help heal and bless our world.

Amen.