

The Inherent Mirth and Dignity

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Just as I was beginning seminary, my congregation moved to a new building.

I was on the board at the time, and also a general busybody with my nose in everything. I was involved somehow in renovating the space to make it suitable for Unitarian Universalists. First and foremost that meant removing the giant wooden cross from the front of the room. It's not that UUs are against Christianity—there are lots of people who are both UUs and Christians. But it would be weird to have one perspective lifted up like that and—you know. You know that a giant cross looming over us every Sunday would be a bit too much Jesus, probably, for a UU congregation.

So, the theology of it was clear. But the practicalities of implementation proved a bit trickier. Which is often how it goes, with religion.

Turns out, wood is heavy. Even getting the thing off the wall was a feat of engineering and a near death experience. But... then what? A ginormous cross doesn't exactly fit in the back of a minivan. It would need to be cut into pieces. But you can't use the circular saw in the building because sawdust flies everywhere and the building committee had already told me "no more power saws in the sanctuary", and...

This was the line of thinking that led me to a conversation with my friend Anne, who is a Minister. Her perspective is different from mine.

"This is a sensitive time for your neighbours," she explained, "with the loss of the old church that shrank down until they couldn't afford their building. Your new neighbours will be grieving, but there's also great potential for new connection. For inviting people in. And... Liz. The community's introduction to Unitarian Universalism cannot be you taking a power saw to a cross on the front lawn of their old church."

Anne has always been more touchy feely than practical.

I am not sure, actually, how the cross was removed. I think maybe someone had a workshop and they used it as reclaimed wood, which is a whole other wonderful metaphor I'd like to unpack. But in any case, the cross was gone. Phew.

But here's the thing. It had hung there for many years. Many lovely, sunny years, under huge vaulted windows. With rays of light that fell across both cross and wall had transformed what they'd touched. Over the years, the paint around the cross had grown distinctly lighter... but the paint *behind* the cross had not. Immediately behind the pulpit was a clear stencilled outline.

This could be solved by repainting, of course, but in order to do that we had to agree on colours, and paint colours couldn't be chosen until the fabric for the new chairs that would replace the pews had been chosen. And the pews couldn't be removed until we talked about who we are and how we want to embody that identity, and also the chairs committee had run into some administrative challenges and we were all re-discussing our covenant of right relations, and so...

For many months we did not worship under a giant cross. Instead, we worshipped under the very conspicuous shadow cast by its absence. A giant, metaphorical "Jesus was here" symbol, stencilled above our heads.

In more ways than one, actually. On the literal wall, of course, but also in the conspicuous role that the protestant tradition we come from played in everything we did. The tunes of the songs we sang, and the piano accompaniment and the format of a sermon, and the fact that we were meeting on Sunday morning led by a professional in a building that was owned for that purpose. We'd expanded our theology, but we kept embodying it in the same ways we'd done for centuries.

To me the shadow of the cross on the wall on Sunday mornings was a physical manifestation of a structure that was frozen in time. It said "we have decided to do things differently, but we aren't actually doing that yet, because the details are still stuck in committee".

4:30

This might seem like a funny story to you, but it was deeply personal to me. I was stuck in committee myself, at the time. Deeply in love with Unitarian Universalism and its values and expressing that love by going to seminary. Where we talked about this shadow of the cross stuff—we wouldn't have used that language, but we talked a lot about the rapid pace of change in society, and how we might be able to meet it.

But we had those conversations in a University. Mirroring the old ways of doing things with every detail of our structure. With all the expense that goes with academia. And the inertia, and the gate keeping. We were taking down the cross, but continuing to function within the confines of its shape.

I sucked at all of it. Even when I am not critiquing the very premise of school, I am a terrible student. Forcing my brain to study has always felt like trying to wrestle and active toddler into a car seat. I had long since received an ADHD diagnosis, and medication, and all the messages that go with that. The very walls of seminary dripped with those messages. The messages every school whispered to people like me. You are disordered. Broken. You are the wrong shape. But if you try hard enough, you can redeem yourself by squeezing into what is asked of you. This is what school says to me. And to be honest, with our process and our meetings and our email chains, this is what my religion often says to me, as well.

My seminary years were a wrestling exercise between my student self and my firework brain. Student self wanted to study sermons about privilege like we were supposed to, but firework brain wanted to watch stand up comedians. Firework brain argued that the comedians were unpacking those same themes using more accessible language, and isn't that worth learning?

Maybe the side stuff I was doing—the ad hoc gatherings I helped create or the media experiments or the online groups... Maybe those things were not me failing to buckle down at school, so much as they were.... Me experimenting with how to expand beyond the shadow of the cross.

Firework brain is pretty wiley. She can make a good argument, if it might get her out of school. She is brighter than you'd expect, given how little she reads. And the farther I moved from the powerless position of a grade school child, the more assertive firework brain became.

I would sit in my school lecture and the usual messages would run through my mind... “the problem is that I need to be better at paying attention” and now there was this little voice that argued back. That argued “Maybe the problem isn’t that I need to work harder to pay attention. Maybe the problem is that he <gesture> needs to work harder to be interesting.”

When it wasn’t dry, the stuff I was learning was also, kinda... not what I expected. I had always had these stories in my head... like that of Michael Servetus, the Unitarian martyr, chased and persecuted for his brave act of speaking the truth to John Calvin. It turns out, if you read Servetus’ writings in his own words, he is... Well, he’s very smart and very articulate, but he’s also obnoxious. And he doesn’t just tell his truth. He stalks John Calvin. Writes him letters arguing every little point. Writes and distributes books. At one point, Calvin has a warrant out for Servetus’ arrest, and Servetus goes to one of Calvin’s talks and sits in the front row. Servetus didn’t deserve what happened to him—nobody deserves that. But after reading his actual words, dripping with arrogance and condescension, there was a part of me that did sympathize with John Calvin.

Or Emerson and Thoreau—I had always admired the transcendentalists, and how they forged these intentional, beautiful lives full of integrity. Learning a bit more about it... Thoreau could retreat to the woods to suck the marrow out of life because he was living on land Emerson gave him for free. Where did that land come from? The narrative of Thoreau as the bold and self sufficient explorer, choosing a life that anyone could choose... That only holds as a story if you didn’t talk acknowledge the stealing of land, the genocide, and the broader context of slavery.

Thoreau went on long walks and wrote down his thoughts because he had all the time in the world... A whole system supported him in that. He had no kids to take care of, “free” land, and Emerson’s wife did his laundry. Louisa May Alcott, meanwhile, is living a few miles away, making all the same theological points about simplicity and intentionality in what became her best selling novel *Little Women*... But she wrote them in a way that wasn’t academic or prosaic. She took responsibility for being easy to pay attention to. The same concepts as the philosophers, but accessible, and funny. Probably because she knew she’d need to

sell them to feed her family while her father sat in his study reading philosophy. Oh, and she did all that while doing her own laundry.

Humour was my outlet for this frustration. Not just mine, either—I was not the only prankster or the only frustrated student. We found each other. One time, when the UU Lucy Stone housing cooperative posted online that they were accepting applications for new room mates. A few of us applied as various mostly dead mostly unitarians and universalists. We applied as Micheal Servetus, and under “food allergies” we listed “barbecue”. We applied as Emmerson, listing “Thoreau” under pets. We applied as the people we thought were missing from our mainstream history, too. Rev Olympia Brown—the first woman in the US to be ordained. And Dortha Dix, whose tireless lobbying transformed conditions for institutionalized people in the United States, Canada, and several other countries. These women’s names are not our well known heroes... But when you line their lives up against Thoreau in the woods or Servetus writing his letters, you cannot deny that their stories deserve at least as much acknowledgement.

Our applications were answered very civilly, and we were invited to attend Sunday night singing and meet our potential housemates. Since we were, dead, this was tricky, but we claimed to have attended. The holy ghost, who was one of our fake applicants, wrote in his note that he was there but nobody seemed to notice him. This happens a lot at UU gatherings, he wrote.

We sprinkled our email with little details we could only have known if we were ghost attendees invisibly hovering in the dining room... Or if we’d had an insider spy, which by that point we did.... Anyway, all of this was followed by a week of messaging and coordinating and giggling and pranking, that left me feeling warm and connected. Connected with my peers, and with my UU heritage—gently poking fun at things that I thought deserved to be knocked down a peg or two, and lifting up stories that aren’t always told. The prank connected me with my values, too—as we coordinated to know just how far to push things, wanting the prank to be just as funny for the prank-yes as it was for the pranksters. Above all, that prank left me feeling a part of Unitarian Universalism—we understood the shared jokes

because they arose out of shared stories. This was a space that had room for me. Where I didn't have to change shape, to fit into a prescribed shadow.

I didn't want it to end, so on a whim I created a Facebook group, and named it UU Hysterical Society. A play on the UU Historical Society. Who have changed their name like three times since then so nobody ever gets the joke. They just point out that the word Hysterical has a troublesome history. Used as a weapon to discredit and sometimes harm women.

Throughout history, the symptoms of hysteria have been very varied. Sometimes it was a woman who was struggling with what we'd now call a mental illness or a disability. Sometimes it was a physical condition like epilepsy, or a life choice like deciding not to get married. Often, it was a woman unwilling or unable to tow the line in some way. Sometimes it was a woman who was an awesome firebrand warrior pioneer of strength. Hysteria was a catch all word for any woman who was being inconvenient. Who must be "treated".

A Hysterical woman is a woman who is the wrong shape.

And I, who was struggling so hard to fit into the shadow of the cross... I loved my UU Hysterical Society. Of all the experiments that firework brain ran in those days... That one was a favourite.

It wasn't actually one of the experiment, though. Unlike most of the things I did at that time, it wasn't intentional. I didn't go from theory to a plan, and take notes, like I did with some of the others. The Hysterical Society was just a thing I did.

It wasn't a part of my formation process. It was a break from that formation process, because it was breaking me.

For years, I didn't think of it as anything more than my own personal refuge. By the time I clued in, we had around 20,000 members. Someone posted that she nearly drove her car off the road after spotting a UU church. She said she thought we were a joke religion made up for the purposes of the UU Hysterical Society, and that seeing a real UU church was like spotting a Unicorn. She almost drove her car off the road yelling "they're real! They're real!".

I thought. Wow. We are telling 20,000 people about what Unitarian Universalism is. Then I thought oh no. 20,000 people are learning about what Unitarian Universalism is from us.

I'm not actually the right person for that job. I didn't finish the assigned reading.

Fortunately, I didn't have to be the right person for the job. A religious educator named Kathy joined the team at about that time, and over the next few years she and a growing team honed the moderation to become more consistent and more grounded in UU values. She brought some of those pieces that I couldn't. In order to be able to offer Kathy an honourarium, I wanted to apply for a grant. I asked my friend Fulgence, a UU Canadian Minister originally from Burundi, what organization I should partner with, to be allowed to apply. He answered that I should create my own not for profit?

For a Facebook group? Except, by then, we were a Facebook group and an online store, and an organization that had raised thousands and thousands of dollars for refugees. It was fun, sure, but it was also a way we came together to help people build a new life.

Under "name of not for profit" I wrote Mirth and Dignity... In honour of the inherent mirth, and dignity. And over the next several years, we slowly added things to our roster of activities... The videos, the worship program, the podcast... And as things grew, a realization started to form.

I was wrong about the shadow of the cross idea. It's not true that we are trapped in an outdated shape and have to find a better one. That's not it at all—we just need more types of shapes. Lots of different things going on in addition to traditional congregational life. Not instead of it, but intertwined with it. We need an interconnected web of things, so that more types of people can find a spot in Unitarian Universalism.

And the fact that I didn't fit? The fact that every time I tried to squeeze into the shape that was being asked of me, I cracked a little bit? That wasn't because I was weak. I wasn't breaking. I was hatching.

Where do you struggle to be the right shape? What do you struggle most to do? What would happen if you reframed that a little. Not as an "everything happens for a reason" or "think of the glass half full" idea, but as a "what are the strengths that go along with this struggle". Sometimes, there aren't any—some things do just suck. But sometimes, you find gems in there. Sometimes, the same traits that make you bad at what you think you're supposed to be doing actually makes you great at something else.

Where are the places we struggle most as a UU faith? What would happen if we rethought things... If we were open to the idea that maybe we aren't breaking, either. What if we became open to the idea that we might just be changing shape?

As we like to say, the cracks are how the light gets in. But they're also—sometimes—*how the light gets out.*