

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Our Spirit's Home

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from Kenneth Patton, Unitarian Universalist Minister

We arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets.
 We come to be assured that our brothers and sisters surround us,
 to restore their images on our eyes.
 We enlarge our voices in common speaking and singing.
 We try again that solitude found in the midst of those who, together with us,
 seek their hidden reckonings.
 Our eyes reclaim the remembered faces; their voices stir the surrounding air.
 The warmth of their hands assures us, and the gladness of our spoken names.
 This is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of fellowship.
 It is good to be together.

Our Spirit's Home

It is good to be together. We arrive out of many singular rooms, come from many singular places, to arrive together here. We arrive from different houses, neighborhoods, towns, from different emotional places, wildly different circumstances. (How could anyone in this room even begin to know the road, the roads, you've traveled all your life so far to happen to be here this morning, and the particular - not to say *peculiar* - baggage that you carry, your needs, hopes, expectations, convictions, resentments, prejudices, sorrows, fears, the unique gifts you bring, your longing to belong: your circumstances, so like and unlike everybody's else's?) We arrive from many singular points of departure, theologically, spiritually, politically.

We comprise, on any given Sunday, people in their 10th decade of life on earth, and people just starting their tenth week. There are children here and teenagers and young adults who have just gone back to school; parents who have just bid farewell to college students whom, they know, if all goes well, will not be coming back, not in the same way, not as children. There are people grieving here, some mourning recent losses, some bearing the permanent mark of sorrow, which may or may not be visible. Some carry illness, or mental illness, in their own being or in people they love; some were married this summer (they've still got glitter in their hair); some are planning weddings and unions. Yet others are in the process of ending a marriage, the awful, inevitable sad process of dissolution. And others have been standing on the street, standing on the side of love, lobbying and marching for marriage equality. Some are watching and worrying as older parents age, right before their eyes; some here welcomed new babies, and at both ends of life, the changes seem impossible to comprehend. We arrive from many and various financial districts, and you know it's hard to tell when you look at person whether she's lost her job in the past month, or whether he's lost his house, or lost their health insurance, or lost their bearings, their sense of identity, sense of worth, their sense of trust, in this hard, hard economy, and so

wherever we've come from, we enter here now with renewed compassion, renewed gentleness, renewed generosity of spirit. It is good to be together.

There is a beautiful short story by Raymond Carver called "Cathedral," in which a man, the narrator, unwillingly agrees to accommodate a houseguest. The visitor is an old friend of the man's wife, who comes on the train with his suitcase for a night or two. His name is Robert and he is blind. At first it seems that the man is unwelcoming because he doesn't like that his wife has an old friend, and that's true, but it soon becomes clear that what he really doesn't like is Robert's blindness. He can't understand it, it makes him uncomfortable; he keeps saying awkward things, and resenting Robert's inherent gracefulness. They all eat dinner, and stay up late making small talk, until the wife goes to bed and the two men are left alone, watching TV, surfing the channels till they land on a documentary about cathedrals. They don't really want to watch it, but the man thinks it'll kill time till they go to bed. Suddenly he says to Robert, "Do you have any idea what a cathedral even is? You've never seen one. How can you even imagine it?"

Robert says he has some idea. He knows they're from the Middle Ages, they took centuries to build, they're Catholic – but no, he says, "I can't really imagine what they are. Is there one on the TV now? Can you describe it?" And the man tries, halfheartedly, but he doesn't want to do that. He doesn't know anything about architecture and he doesn't want to get into it with this guy. But Robert says, "Do you have any paper here, and a pen? Would you draw it for me?" The man is so flabbergasted by this, so taken aback, that he gets some paper and a pen. He spreads it out, and Robert puts his hand, which is large, over his own hand. "Let's do it," says Robert. They start out very haltingly, make a square, a box like a house, and then put a roof on it. They add a steeple. And then suddenly, they're making spires, flying buttresses, and gargoyles. Their hands are flying over the paper, adding turrets and great rose windows, ironwork, tiny statues of the saints, little trees down below dwarfed by the height of the walls, and ominous medieval clouds. They shade in all the stonework, make great wooden doors. At one point Robert tells the man to close his eyes, and when he does, he feels as if they're flying together, he and this blind guest, this weird, unwelcome guest, over the paper, into the air, between the great towers of the cathedral, and then down into the center of it, into a great room filled with colored light. He opens his eyes and looks a long time into the face of his companion.

They create by imagining it together. They construct a whole cathedral, hand in hand, and somehow in so doing, they begin to make the start or a possibility of a relationship, they come into one another's holy presence. There's something in that story that speaks to us here. We build this church together by imagining it together, by leading one another toward it, no matter where we come from, no matter who we are. We describe it to each other, what we hope it is and we come to know each other, and our own selves in the process.

When we say, "Come in," we say it with a certain mindfulness. When I say "Come in," I say it with a certain mindfulness. I know that for some the threshold here is very high. This is an unfamiliar place, and for all kinds of reasons, it may be a risk to come in. *It's too religious*, they say. Or, *It's not religious enough. I don't like organized religion*, they say. Or, *For a religion, this place seems really disorganized. I don't know anyone there. No one talks to me. Or: They're always trying to talk to me, trying to touch me, shake my hand. I don't understand what*

Unitarians believe. Or: I do understand that every person is invited and expected to build their own theology out of their own lived lives – their own experience and doubts and questions, their own joy and wonder, their own losses and regrets. I’m afraid of that, they say. For some of us, for many reasons, the threshold here is high.

For others, sometimes I think we’ve set the bar too low. We forget to mention that our community is just that, a community, where everyone is invited to participate in the thriving of the church, in the ownership of the church. Everyone contributes, by your presence, by taking part, by sharing your time, by helping to fund the institution realistically and generously, by teaching our children, pouring the coffee, pulling buckthorn, visiting someone in the hospital, making the supper on Wednesday night, or washing the dishes afterwards. We forget to say, “We need you to help us imagine it. We need each other,” which is, of course, the premise of our lives as human beings. For some of us, smart, self-sufficient Unitarians, it is the hardest thing ever to admit or speak aloud – *I need you* -- and so we’re grateful that this place gives us space to practice.

This is a house of hope and hospitality, a shelter for us when we’re grieving or lonely, weary and worn; it restores our souls with music and laughter, shared meals, shared work, shared prayers. This house holds memories, confessions, aspirations, and all the shining principles and values, the ethics and evolving faith we cherish and would hand over, soon, to children. It holds our beloved dead, our babies, vows of love and renewal. It is the place from which, when Sunday’s over, we greet the “Monday world,” and Tuesday and Wednesday... all those ordinary moments when we try so hard to truly “practice” our religion. A sanctuary is not a bunker, but a point of departure, and it may be that how we *enter* here is less important than how we *leave* each week, crossing the threshold back into the all the places where we may have a hand in making peace and making justice, our families, our work, our ordinary days.

This beautiful house is nothing but a building. It is sanctified, made holy, by your presence, whether you are a child or an adult. It is blessed by your intention, and blessed by the good and worthy uses you will put it to. Whether this is the very first time you’ve come here, or whether you signed the Membership Book in 1956, on the very first opening Sunday, may you find here safe harbor for your spirit, and steady, glad companions for your journey, comrades in imagination.

Welcome.
Welcome back,
and welcome home.
