

UNITED IN OUR SPIRITUAL ESSENCE
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January 9th, 2005

The reading on which this sermon is based is a story called “Partners” from Rabbi Marc Gellman’s book “Does God Have a Big Toe?”. The story is a midrash (the Jewish tradition of telling stories about stories in the Bible, in other words filling in the holes) on the story of creation. Gellman’s midrash describes our relationship with God as one of partnering “to finish the world”.

I think you must be almost as nervous this morning as I am. There’s such build up to a new minister coming. Yikes. And a first sermon. Firsts are always insanity producing, at least for me. I can’t wait until January 23rd when I won’t be doing a first sermon.

One thing that makes a first Sunday awkward is: There’s no “we” here yet, no you’all and me. But there will be. What will that look like and be like? I imagine you’re wondering as much as me.

I’m very interested in that word “we”. We Unitarian Universalists...what does that mean? Whom does that include? We at UUCP. I’ve decided that I’m going to tell you a little about me and my relationship to some of the “we’s” in my life for this first sermon. It feels a little self indulgent to take up this whole sermon with my own story, but I want you to understand why I may do some of the things I do and say the things I say, and struggle with the things I struggle with. And over the next months I will be learning I hope the same things about many of you.

So here we go.

The defining milieu of my childhood was the church. A liberal Christian church: Congregational. My father was a minister. He was considered very intellectual, charismatic, handsome and there he was up on the pulpit, close to God. My mom, my three siblings and I always marched up to sit in that pew there, the third one on the right. And we preachers' kids sat there through the whole service, and we were good. We were very, very good.

My mom's job, and it was a perfectly acceptable one in those days was to take care of her family and support the big man so he could be successful. In the Black Church, one of my former parishioners told me, she would have been called "the First Lady."

When I sat there in my pew, fiddling with the order of service, and stabbing the quarter for the offering into my palm, I stared at a huge multi colored Tiffany stained glass window of Jesus holding a little lamb. That window is burned into my psyche. I still love Jesus because of that window and the stories I heard about him. He was gentle, kind, he loved children and lambs, and he only yelled at rich people, and then only if they were taking advantage of others.

When I was growing up in the 60's to be a liberal Christian meant trying to live like Jesus. Everyone in my world seemed to be trying to act like this Jesus fellow, including people who weren't Christians. On the weekends we would often march somewhere in our own neighborhood in the Bronx, or go into Manhattan and picket so that African Americans could rent the building across the street in our largely Jewish neighborhood, or other neighborhoods. We would sing: Black and white together, black and white together, we shall overcome some day.

Once or twice my father went south and joined other ministers and lay people to pray on courthouse steps. Jesus always prayed before the task, Martin Luther King said to pray before the task. Then they went about the task which was to march through towns to places black people were not allowed to go, where people screamed and spit at them. In Albany Georgia my father was thrown in jail where he shared a cell with Martin Luther King and others. He claimed that the both of them shared pictures of their four children; which made me feel almost famous. Martin Luther King was the next thing to Jesus in our house. And I'd have to say Dad was next in line after him.

I have two defining memories from those very formative years. One is of my parents waking us up in the middle of the night, joyous, jubilant, wanting us to share the news: that the Supreme Court had made one of its landmark civil rights decision. "We" had won. Black and White together. "We" would overcome. I went to bed content. I was sure that with the Supreme Court and MLK in place justice would always roll down like a mighty stream. By the time I grew up the adults would make the world right with itself.

I think that was the last time I felt, however naively, so whole, and so a part of a "we" that felt big enough. One that felt big enough to include the whole world.

The other memory only came back to me a few years ago. This one tells me that, already, my sense of which "we" I belonged to was getting more complicated than I knew how to process. My parents had sent my older sister and I to what was called a Freedom School. It was a particular day set aside to learn about the struggle for freedom and Black history.

Now, back then "Negro" was a word that African Americans were just beginning to use and it was taking some getting used to but it was considered a matter of pride to

use it. My sister and I went into this classroom and it was crammed with maybe 30 or 40 kids. At some point, I don't remember when, was it the minute I walked in, or later on, Kim and I realized that we were the only white kids in the room.

The teacher lectured while striding up and down the room and speaking in a passionate voice. I remember her vividly. "Our people were brought here as slaves" she is saying as she shows pictures. "Our people are the victims of Jim Crow", more pictures. More history. And she'd fire out questions at the students who shouted back the answers, though one at a time. I'm not sure how she managed to orchestrate that. I imagine hands were lifted. I knew some of the answers but I wasn't sure if I should raise my hand.

Then came the final dramatic moment, the ending to a day which was about pride and passion and building a sense of solidarity as a people. She asked everyone to repeat after her: "I am proud to be a Negro! Say it with me: I am proud to be a Negro! I am PROUD to be a Negro!" The voices swelled louder and louder. "I am proud to be a Negro!"

Now my sister and I were, remember, such good little preacher's kids that if a teacher, and adult, said: say it with me, by God that meant say it with her.

(pause)

Well we didn't. We disobeyed. Picture deer in the headlights. What would have been the response if we had? Probably good natured laughter from the kids. They would have gotten the humor in it.

I will never forget a little girl sitting opposite me in the circle whose eyes never left my face the entire time I sat there feeling simultaneously invisible and extremely

visible. I still wonder what she was thinking. I have spent much time imagining and assuming, what she did think.

At that time my sibs and I were attending Fieldston Ethical Culture School. At that time Fieldston was largely Jewish and my sibs and I were among a small minority of *goyim*. At times I would go to Temple with my friends or to Sunday School. I remember a teacher there too. A woman as passionate as the teacher at the freedom school: “Our people were slaves in Egypt” she said, and then continued on through several thousand years of the Jewish history of oppression.

At Fieldston, whenever questions of Christian theology arose they were brought to me for arbitration. “Was Jesus tied or nailed to the cross!?” Debbie Rosan and Linda Shaler demanded to know. It was on the playground and apparently they’d been debating this for most of recess. I must have had the soul of a UU already in place. Judiciously, I gave forth my verdict: “Some people say he was tied, some people say he was nailed”.

A note on God might be appropriate at this point before I move on: He was a distant figure. Jesus, cross or no cross, was more immediate and accessible. But I already had my own name for a higher power. I called it the Presence. It’s impossible to explain what it was to me but that name fit the bill perfectly for me. I don’t know if I thought of it as a good metaphor for God. I think not. I think God was still guy in the sky for me. It was however, most definitely, what the theologian Paul Tillich would call “the ground of being.” It was quite literally a presence I was able to turn to that always re-centered me and reassured me but I never gave it a shape or a face.

In 5th grade my world shifted. We moved from the Bronx, to Greenwich Ct. No more Ethical Culture. Which was a huge loss, I had no way of knowing I needed to mourn. And the Ethical Christianity changed. It became more abstract. Partly that was Greenwich, partly it was the times. Now civil rights seemed to mean white suburban youth groups going into city neighborhoods to “help” clean them up. Even in 5th grade I knew there was something wrong with that picture. I remember being acutely embarrassed and in fact refusing to go on such youth group trips. It was a time when the “we” I had made childish assumptions about was clearly becoming an us and a them.

We were only three years in Greenwich, followed by 9 months in Westport, before moving to a new parish in a small town in N.H. for two years. Somewhere along there “The Presence”, became occluded by adolescent concerns. I lost touch with that center which seemed to be both outside of me and inside of me simultaneously.

The church continued to be the place where I belonged, however. It was the only consistent “we” that I was a part of.

I was aware in Jr. High and high school, of a vague disappointment with my parents. I suppose all adolescents see their parents as failures of some kind. My father had begun to slip from the pedestal in my eyes, for numerous reasons. For one he started getting angry at his family a lot more often than at injustice. On another level: What had happened to the passion and promise of the 60’s? To civil rights? To that wider “we” he had once been a part of building?

When I was in 11th grade we moved to El Paso Texas where I attended a Catholic Girl's school. Here I was one of a fairly small minority of Anglos. "We" Loretto girls sang a school song together and we were coached in school pride. In the dining room my friends all spoke Spanish and I learned a kind of mangled Spanglish. My best friends *tias*, (aunts) made us tortillas and laughed uproariously at my attempts to communicate, but in a loving sort of way. I was both of, and not of, the "we" that was Loretto and the Hispanic community.

By now I was losing interest in church, though I dabbled in the Jesus Freak movement, for about a day. So I was losing the "we" which had been my bedrock. I was adrift as so many are in those years.

Then I went to St. John's College where we "Johnnies" studied the Great Books. The 100 great books. The greatest books. The only ones worth reading: Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, and on through the Greeks to the French philosophers. No women, no eastern philosophers, probably no writers of color...Except I didn't make it that far.

An anger had been building in me for a long time. And over the next few years it came out. I think it was a rage which sought to burn away the fog of invisibility that surrounded me both in my family and in the world, as a female person. I didn't know what it was about until I had one of those by now oft written about feminist awakenings. When I took my first women's studies class I understood. There was more to greatness than the 100 great men's voices. I'd been betrayed. There were women who had done things in the world. And why did their voices keep getting plowed under as history turned over and over on itself?

I had found an unqualified “we” to belong to. It was women. They were my people. The problem was, as Black women often pointed out, the “we” of feminism often didn’t include them.

I came out as a lesbian in my early twenties. Now I had an even more radical “we” to belong to. When I was in that “we” I felt completely a part of something. In my particular circle in Chapel Hill N.C., there was a pretty good mix of black and white women in the lesbian community, at least in the political and artistic enclaves of the community. We struggled within it to understand what that meant to work and live together in a racist culture. Still we were a “we” doing that. And it felt, I guess, like something now distantly familiar.

I had other worlds I was a part of. My religion was now social action. I ate and drank it. I was at meetings every night. I was an organizer. I organized the town of Chapel Hill to go to demonstrations against the US involvement in El Salvador.

The coalition work involved in leftist politics was exhausting. I remember going head to head with the Communists who said that feminism was bourgeois and *lesbians*, well they couldn’t seem to say the word as I recall.

Everyone, including me, seemed to feel it absolutely necessary to convince every other party that we had the correct world view, and the one right path. I have a memory of running with a bull horn up one side of a group of demonstrators yelling feminist based slogans while my nemesis from the CWP ran up the other side, also with a bull horn, screaming something about “the masses”. A term which still makes my skin crawl.

I found a little bit of peace a few years later on the Working Committee of The War Resisters League. And in Women’s Pentagon Action. We worked hard in some of

the groups I was in, particularly WRL to link all the oppressions, to leave no one out. To say to no one: your “we” is less important than mine. But there never seemed to be enough time or energy for all, for everyone and sometimes those negotiations were all we did, not much in the way of action.

My spirit rebelled. I burned out on leftist politics. I went inward and took some much needed time to take care of myself, and my spirit. I began to develop a spiritual practice: Yoga, meditation, journaling, women’s spirituality groups. And I began to do the arduous work of sorting out my personal issues from my political fury.

I did not know in what direction to head, but I said to myself: I will not go back into social action until I figure out a way to do it which feels whole, inside and out. I will wait until that become more apparent. But I didn’t want the 60’s back. Amazing as they were, we move on and we grow up and we see the flaws revealed: sexism being one. Another being the lack of that very wholeness which I now was seeking. While the civil rights movement was so deeply informed by the injunction to “pray before the task”, in my own world at least, social action had not been informed by much self observation or humility. What I learned from my adult experiences in social action was that action without adequate self knowledge and spiritual growth usually created more violence, more disconnection, less justice in the long run.

A couple of years later, at age 30 or so, I found Unitarian Universalism. I’d like to say that my problem was solved. In a way it was. Especially when I followed my call to ministry at age 32. I mean here was a spiritual community which valued social action. And it included women in its leadership. And it was welcoming of gays and lesbians,

some congregations more than others. And it was actively trying to be inclusive racially, some congregations more than others.

The problem was, while those two sides of my life could now co-exist in one place, those two sides in the UU congregations didn't always seem to want to talk to each other. Once again, the split. As if the two are mutually exclusive: spirituality and activism. The inside and the outside. At times in Divinity School I would wonder if I should just go back to being in the Christian Church. At least there activism was informed by a *theological perspective*, by a particular spiritual story.

I had rejected Christianity as an adolescent. But in Div School one comes face to face with real religious diversity. Even at Harvard. In my div school dorm, on my floor alone, our communal kitchen was shared by a Jamaican Christian, a Black Baptist, A Korean Presbyterian, A Tibetan Buddhist monk, three or four assorted white Protestants and Catholics, and a couple of UU's. That was the real classroom. Conversations were sometimes difficult but *all of us* changed as a result. The conservatives became less so about all kinds of social issues, or else they left, eventually for a denominational seminary. And we UU's began to question our own categorical thinking, particularly about Christians.

I needed to better understand what I had rejected so I took some Christian history classes, and some classes on mystical Christianity and meditation practices. And I realized that Christianity is much more complex, and richer than I had ever known. While theologically I felt no call to return to Christianity I no longer actively rejected it. In fact I've re-integrated many pieces of it back into my personal practice.

But, still UU felt like home. So I stayed.

To some extent I have been able, during the nine years, 11 counting my internship, that I have done parish ministry to integrate spirituality and social action in my own working life. But I am not yet satisfied though with how “we” UU’s do this dance between our insides, our personal spiritual growth, and the outside world.

I’ve taken so long now in this talk, to get to us and now I’m going to have to wrap it up quickly. But when I got here finally, last night, I realized it may be just the right place to end. It is appropriate to leave us at this is the cusp. Because I believe that UUCP and I are at the same edge.

I don’t think it is any accident that I am ending up at a congregation which, from all I’ve been able to ferret out about you, is trying to resolve this very issue. Psychology and spiritual practice will tell us that we are drawn to partners in our personal lives who present us with the very issues we need to work on.

It is my hope that we will be partners together. That you will be partners with each other. That we will give each other space for both work and rest and rejoicing. That we will find compassionate, open and effective ways to partner with the world.

Last but not at all the least, I pray that we can seek, together, a way to partner with something that is greater than ourselves. Which I call God. But, of course, you don’t have to. As they say in twelve step programs: “you don’t have to believe in God to be here, you just have to know you’re not Him”. Or Her.

“A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think

you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal" (Gellman, Does God Have a Big Toe?)

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Postscript: I feel that since my partner is here today I need to tell you just a little bit more of my story. I had thought I would get to it but I didn't have time in the body of the sermon. This work of continued identity seeking in my personal life has resulted in my recently becoming partners with someone named Michael. He is a man. As you can probably see. He also is Jewish and a carpenter. That makes him a Jewish Carpenter, but that isn't why I love him, just because he has the same job description as the man in the Tiffany window.