

“Four Components of a Healthy Church”

SEPTEMBER 11, 2016

This morning I want to preach a sermon on what makes for a great church. We’re kicking off what ought to be an upbeat, vigorous year here at the Pacific Unitarian Church, with multiple opportunities to become a healthier, stronger community, to refine some of our systems, and eventually (there’s really no great rush on this) settle a new minister. In conjunction with your search, the congregation will soon embark on a major self-survey. Things are clearly in transition. Consequently, today is a good time to ask, “What are we doing here?” Let me take this morning to tell you what I think we’re doing here, or at least trying to do: to nurture and keep alive a thriving, creative, truly liberal Unitarian Universalist congregation here southwest Los Angeles County.

What is the key to such a community? What will enable our efforts to flourish and bear good fruit? I think there are four ingredients, four dimensions. When I started thinking about this, years ago, the image that initially came to mind was that of a four-cylinder internal combustion engine; an engine in which—when it’s functioning properly—all four pistons are moving smoothly and in synch. A few years later—in the early ‘90s—I came across the image on the cover of today’s Order of Service, discovered in a book by the Reverend Dick Gilbert, Minister Emeritus of Rochester, New York’s First Unitarian Church. I’ll employ the mechanical (four-cylinder engine) metaphor some, but mostly Rev. Gilbert’s wheel image throughout my remarks this morning. The four-cylinder engine model makes sense in that automobiles have many parts and many sub-systems that all need to be in proper tune for the engine to run smoothly. From time to time one sub-system—the electrical system, something about the timing, or what have you—gets out of whack. So the mechanic (the minister) tinkers with things until he or she gets it all running smoothly again... at which time some other part could probably use some attention. When everything’s working perfectly—even if only for a short time—the congregation can really hum: people are joining, programs expanding, and the coffers are full. A good minister *keeps at it* without too much anxiety, believing that her or his hard work will, eventually, bear fruit. But like the good mechanic, one has to keep paying attention by checking in, listening, and keeping all the component parts well oiled.

Now let us consider Dick Gilbert’s Wheel... At the center: Worship and the Celebration of Life. “Worship” is one of those words that some Unitarian Universalists struggle with. But the etymology of the word, as I understand it, is worth-ship: the act of *making* (or re-making) *worthy*. Archeologists and anthropologists describe the content of ancient worship as *ritual*, and as *dance*. This is where religion probably began—celebrating shared joy with music and song.

The single most frequently mentioned aspect in common among growing churches is that they’re festive; they *celebrate!* Coming-of-age ceremonies, honoring elders, anniversaries of important congregational milestones. What are we celebrating? Ultimately, our connectedness to one another.

The great turn-of-the-twentieth-century Oxford Classicist Jane Ellen Harrison used to quote Aeschylus in claiming that *ritual* was one of humanity's three great inventions*:

1. Fire
2. Habitations
3. Ritual (Worship)

A people's educational and cultural values are passed on in worship by way of ritual. Worship, then, celebrates our connectedness to

- each other
- the culture
- and also, something even deeper...

There's an ancient myth that gives us a clue to the deeper connections that rituals *can* and sometimes do get us in touch with, the Egyptian *Myth of the Mad King*.

The story goes like this: Once upon a time a great sovereign sends his child on an important, secret mission. The youth is to go to Egypt, blend in, mingle with the people, and await further instructions. And so the young heir obeys, journeying abroad to that ancient land, finding a place to live and a trade, and settling down. To become fully integrated into the life there, the child learns the language, makes friends, finds a spouse, and starts a family. Moreover, life is good. In time, our hero all but forgets about the mission. Indeed, was it not for occasional dreams and vague memories she would have forgotten altogether. It goes on like this for a long time until one evening on her way home a man in uniform introduces himself as an emissary from her father the King. "It is now time to return home," he explains. "Follow me." Confused by the abruptness and unexpectedness of the encounter, she dismisses the man. Moments later, retracing her steps in search of him, he has vanished. Except for—is it his business card lying there on the street? —a note on the back of which reads: "Your heart knows the way. Follow it home."

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The ancient world organized social life to ensure that we all got word from our homeland and started back to regain our rightful throne. The process was called *initiation*: initiation into our deeper mind, our Collective Unconscious, or—to use the Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson's term—into our *true*, capital "S" Self.

Some years ago, while serving a church in suburban Pittsburgh, I led an Adult RE program, the Cantic of the Cosmos, in which we watched and discussed a 12-part video series narrated by the mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme. In it, Swimme describes the human condition in the language of cosmology, quantum physics, biological science, and traditional wisdom. The earth is an intelligent, self-regulating planet and we—human beings—are products of the earth.

* *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903)

Let us, for a moment, contrast two images of humanity: the biblical image many of us grew up with and a model fashioned in accordance with the understandings of Brian Swimme and other quantum physicists—some of them quite open to the mystical ideas that also informed the Transcendentalists like Emerson, Whitman, and Margaret Fuller. *The old image* of human beings is that of heaven-sent strangers on earth who, after suffering nobly upon this mortal coil, are released (if we've been good) to return to our rightful home, in heaven. But this image is hopelessly out of date, for the truth is we do not come *into* this world at all: we come *out* of it. *The new image* of humanity is as a natural product of the earth. For indeed [as Alan Watts once observed] our earth is "peopling." Just as the apple tree "apples" and the vine "grapes," our earth is peopling—if we are intelligent beings then we are the products of an intelligent earth, symptomatic of an intelligent energy system— "*for you can't gather figs from thistles, or grapes from thorns.*"

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Some people, I suppose, never come to this insight. Others do, but—uncertain and unsupported in its meaning—dismiss it. Nevertheless, insights can be nurtured. And, that's what worship is all about—nurturing our connections, including one's deep internal connection to the creative heart of life: to the Self, the still, small inner voice, the heart of hearts, the Atman, the still point at the seat of the soul....

"Say something spiritual," I am forever being petitioned. "...something intellectually stimulating, something that's hopeful, that's emotionally honest, and also—oh yes—up-to-date. All this, I try to do; all ministers do. But *whatever* we say, it also has to touch the *wellsprings*...or folks will eventually find something else to do with their Sundays.

So ***worship and celebration*** are at the center—at the very heart of what we do: the *taproot*. The outer circle, however, is *just as important*. Note that in this image of a healthy church, *all four components* of a healthy congregation *touch each* of the *other* three—in other words, all these aspects of congregational life link with one another, influence one another, connect with the other three.

What does this mean? Consider: a second element of a healthy church is that it's a ***Caring Community***. Members support one another, take care of one another in crisis and behave like—often as—a group of loving friends. Here at PUC you have an active *A-OK Team*. Indeed, you are doing a pretty good job organizing yourselves to look after one another by sending cards, checking in with one another, and helping out in special times of need. This is great!

But there's more; being a truly caring community also means being non-judgmental and understanding of another's views, ideas, and—within reason—lifestyle. Healthy congregations are communities where we nourish one another despite our political differences, bind up the wounds of our defeats and share our joys both personal and social. In 1983 the Rochester Unitarian Church voted 156 to 1 to endorse the nuclear freeze. In his newsletter column Reverend Gilbert wrote a "Note to a Minority of One,"

paying tribute to the woman—apparently everyone knew who she was—who had cast the dissenting vote. Her courage, Dick wrote, serves to remind the majority that conscience counts for something in liberal religion. The *caring* and the *ethical* are one...as we see in the image where they touch each other; for, as I pointed out earlier, all four components of a healthy church are interrelated and interconnected.

The third piston of our well-tuned congregational engine is ***Religious Education***. By religious education I mean more than just Sunday school. I mean *a lifespan community* of religious learning and growth. The main ingredient here is *attitude*. I am reminded of a self-portrait at age 80 by the Spanish romantic painter and printmaker Francisco de Goya; it shows the aged artist walking with two canes and is entitled: “I Am Still Learning.” Francisco de Goya’s attitude is the attitude we seek to foster here: an attitude that we can still learn, *and* that we can learn to see a religious *dimension* in all the situations that we’re learning about. Moreover, we can help one another model this attitude for our children and youth. And include our young people in the other aspects of congregational life. In our celebrations. And in our social justice projects.

Here—social justice—is the fourth component of a healthy church: ***Moral Discourse and Action***. A few years back I co-taught a class at one of our UUA Summer Institutes; the class was titled Social Action in the Local Congregation. One of the participants, Carolyn, was a strong UU from one of the district’s suburban congregations. At the week’s beginning Carolyn was adamant in her conviction that social action only created divisions within congregations. By the week’s end she felt completely different. The problem at her home church, as she eloquently expressed the last day, was that the social activists tended to act independently, off on their own. What she wanted was for them to be in dialogue with the whole congregation—so that everyone was talking about how to be better, more wholesome people. And helping each other learn new ways to *be* better people. Carolyn’s initial feelings were not all that off base, however. Too many Unitarian Universalist congregations are somewhat politically knee-jerk—and not safe for those who don’t share the majority view. But today I am purposely *not* focusing on the ways in which our congregations sometimes fall short; I am talking about something else: about religious communities that are *not* indoctrinating *or* neutral. And not political propaganda stations for the latest social action fad, either. To be a true church, the church must seek to penetrate the political order with justice, but at the same time it must not itself be co-opted into any political party or social movement.

Any church worth its name will include ethical reflection as a central part of its *raison d’etre*. In such a congregation, moral discourse is carried on in pew and pulpit, classroom and coffee hour, in office and seminar. It draws on historical “for instances” of ethical reflection and behavior. It delineates the moral traditions in which we stand.

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So how to get there? How to focus, and continually re-focus, your energies here at the Pacific Unitarian Church so that you’re running at full horsepower? Let me propose the following:

1. First, remember to keep Sunday morning celebrative. And worth-ship full. I've heard from a few people who have shared with me some of their hopes for worship here on Sunday during the coming year or two. I must tell you, I've been flattered, really, to be engaged by these folks so earnestly. Not everyone will agree completely with the modest changes I'll be making to the Order of Service. Others will like them. Either way, it's my propogative. As it will be for my successor. But that doesn't mean like it or lump it. It means talk to me. Ministry is a dialogue. Next month I'll preach as clearly as I can my understanding of what *worship* in a liberal church is designed to do. People want to be fed and inspired on Sunday. And we Unitarian Universalists have just the *message*, I believe, and just the *sacred circle* in which, to do it!
2. Second, whatever else we do here, let us always strive to *care* for one another. Even the one among us with an iconoclastic point of view.
3. Third, we have to keep our commitment to *Religious Education* high. For all of us, but especially for our young people.
4. Finally: We have to be comfortable recognizing that there is *an ethical dimension* to every decision we make. Let this place be one where we can struggle together to figure out what the most moral choices would be. And to support one another in making them.

Here at the Pacific Unitarian Church you are well on our way. But there are some ways to go, too. In the wake of the Radical Religious Right's many successes over the last thirty years we Unitarian Universalists will have to be focused and determined— "wise as serpents and gentle as doves"—if we want to articulate clearly an alternative message (one that's radical *and* caring, liberating *and* wholesome) regarding what congregational life is, or can be, all about. Please, over the coming months ahead, won't you join me in bringing that model to fruition here Palos Verdes and across southeastern Los Angeles County?

Thank you. And may it be so.

Shalom.

Namaste.

Blessed Be.

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