

“The Learning Community”

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered November 19, 2017
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When Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic and leader of one of the most important medieval Kabbalistic schools, was asked by one of his students why he didn't put his teachings in a book, he is said to have replied:

“Because it is impossible, because all things are interrelated. I can hardly open my mouth to speak without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and overflowed. How then shall I express what my soul has received? How can I set that down in a book?”

These are the words of a teacher. When all is said and done, when all the books ever written are read, when all the places to see are visited, when all the greatest speeches – and sermons! – ever delivered are heard, what do we have left to learn? Plenty. Rabbi Luria might say that's when we really *start* learning. That's when our learning spirit comes out of our heads and enters every other pore of our bodies. Indeed, it's when we embody the learning that we have undertaken cognitively. This is the learning that we get by experiencing – experiencing life, experiencing relationship with others, and experiencing ourselves as part of a fluid and infinite whole.

I've used this quote from Isaac Luria before in sermons aimed at recruiting teachers for a Religious Education program – that ministry that happens typically with young people on Sunday morning in places we call classrooms. The intention of the quote was to help people see the importance of genuine human relationship as a mode of teaching and, more importantly, learning. Religious

Education – unlike some forms of more traditional education – relies on this sort of relationship; similar to the way that Rabbi Luria oversaw a whole school of Kabbalistic thought that influenced Rabbis and others for generations to come – indeed, still does today – not by writing things down in a book or by giving grand speeches but by engaging in conversation and relationship with his students. In this way, making a decision to spend time on a regular basis with young people in this congregation on Sunday mornings could be one of the most important and rewarding ministries you’ll ever have a chance to partake in. After all, the word “Rabbi” itself literally means “teacher,” a word that is often applied to Jesus of Nazareth as well.

So it could be that as I engage in this sermon on learning – the fourth of the four core values we identified in our visioning process last year – you might think I will say something similar, that this could be an invitation to each of you to consider volunteering your time in teaching in our Religious Education programs for young people. With the resignation a couple months ago of our Director of Religious Education and lead teacher, there is certainly an immediate need for some of you to take on that ministry. So I will say that, but I also want to take a look at the bigger picture, to try to understand what it means to “learn,” particularly as a religious community. For even as people like me have been preaching for years about the importance of supporting our Religious Education programs, there is a growing movement of people from churches of many faiths, including Unitarian Universalists, who are asking the question: Is it time to kill off Sunday School? Is it time to let it die?

First, a recap: I began this series talking about the most prevalent value we identified in this visioning process: community. Acknowledging the irony, I talked about how talking about community isn't the same as actually experiencing community. I suggested community was not a static state of being, but a product of deliberate intention – specifically, the intention of communion, or individuals seeking to become a part of something larger than themselves. To take part in communion, though – whether we think of it in traditional Christian terms with bread and wine, in contemporary Unitarian Universalist terms with water and flowers, or in some broader transcendent way of connecting with a fluid whole – communion is, at heart, a spiritual practice. It is a practice in which we as individuals are transformed. When we yearn for community, then, we have to be willing to be transformed in the process, we have to be willing to let go of a part of ourselves in order to join in the whole.

Then I talked about spirituality, the second of the four core values. Again, I talked about spirituality by suggesting that it is something that is more or less immune to being talked about, like when E. B. White suggested that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog – you can do it, but the frog dies in the process. Spirituality, I said, means many things, but at heart it involves the same willingness to become part of something larger and to be transformed that I claimed for communion. But I also acknowledged that spirituality for those who often feel disconnected might mean stepping into closer connection to others, while for those who live under closely yoked social constraints, spirituality may be more like freeing oneself from the bonds that choke them. Already, we can see

there's an interplay here, between community and spirituality. One without the other, in a religious congregation especially, is anemic.

Then last week I talked about justice, the third value. I talked about justice, about social justice, and about the key concept for a religious community: spiritual justice. I pointed out that if we read the statistical summary of all these expressions of values we gleaned from our cottage meetings carefully, we see that "justice" is the one for which there is by far the greatest gap between past/present reality and our longings for the future. In other words, speaking with my marketing hat on: justice is our growth industry.

Throughout this series, I've been attempting to draw the lines that connect these four values in a way that only a religious community can, and to underscore how important it is for us to embrace not one over the other, but all four interconnected. So, for example, I spoke of people feeling like they want to work for justice, but feel inadequate doing so alone, so we come into community. And when we come into community, we are changed in a spiritual sense. And when we are changed in a spiritual sense, we learn. And when we learn, we come back to our initial urge: to do justice. So they all work together, not only on us as individuals, but in community – spiritual community. Or should I say an always-learning spiritual justice community?

I've also emphasized throughout this series the thing I said about community – that talking about it is inadequate. Same for spirituality and justice – I've been trying to help us get out of our heads and into our hearts and bodies in order to experience these things. But when it comes to learning, it could be argued that that is the one value that is well-suited to talking. I've tried to urge us

on different occasions to allow our Sunday worship services – the main activity of this religious community – to not always conform to the traditional expectations of highlighting a central sermon or presentation on a given topic. How many of you might have, when considering whether or not to go to church today, found yourself wondering, “Well, what’s happening at church today?” and found the answer on our website or in the newsletter, “Oh, Ken’s speaking about learning.” And maybe you made your decision based largely on that information. But I ask you: is that all that is happening at church today? Or is it even the main thing? What if we had no sermon or presentation or topic. Dozens of us would gather, share our joys and sorrows and our generosity and commitment, we would sing songs and hold hands (maybe) and greet one another and engage in conversation and welcome the stranger and friend and gather our hearts and minds in a meditative spirit to contemplate the meaning of life as we know it. We do all that every Sunday, even without a sermon or presentation or guest speaker. Isn’t that enough for us to experience community, spirituality, and justice? I believe it is, and I also believe that sometimes when we put so much emphasis on the sermon or presentation we lose sight of that. (Pancake breakfast)

But with learning, of course, we see a little more direct relationship to the centrality of discourse, of preachers preaching and teachers teaching, talkers talking and listeners listening. This mode of religious community in which sermons and Religious Education classes are two of our main “products” is strong in our tradition, and it is one of the things I love about us. But these traditional methods of presentation and learning are not the only way to learn.

Which brings me back to this question of “the death of Sunday school” as one controversial paper circulating through the UU noosphere is titled. Is it time for us to embrace other modes of learning?

The basic idea presented in this paper – which members of our Board of Trustees have read – is that the traditional model of children’s and family programming in UU congregations is failing. Failing because of time constraints on families, on budgeting and volunteer capital constraints in congregations, but perhaps most important, it is failing because this model is not meeting the needs of young families in the same way that it did for generations before. So the idea is: let’s abandon all this effort we put into presenting classes for different ages of kids every Sunday while their parents sit in a sanctuary and listen to a preacher. Instead, let’s focus on “family ministry,” in which communal worship involves everyone of all ages regularly, and our “faith formation” -- to use the newer UU vernacular – our faith formation programs are centered on giving families tools they can use at home to foster conversations among themselves and in small groups. I admit I have for a long time found this ideal appealing, hearing, as I did back in seminary from one of my teachers, that the main function of religious community is to teach families how to worship together. But the actual practice of this kind of community is elusive – for all the talk this “Death of Sunday School” paper is generating among Unitarian Universalists, a recent informal poll I saw in a UU Minister’s social media group found that no congregation has, so far, actually implemented such a program, at least not fully. We are, I think, quite attached to this “head” stuff; we don’t want to lose our Sunday morning

presentation topics, our discussion groups, and our concept of learning through the medium of traditional religious education programs.

But there are efforts to change, including one here at UUCY. This past fall, Kathy Lambert, our volunteer upper elementary teacher noted that the kids in her class could often not attend on Sunday mornings, so they started meeting at her house every other Friday to have a meal together and talk “faith formation.” It’s an interesting and courageous idea, and maybe has the potential to teach us about a whole new way of doing learning in religious community; maybe it will teach us a whole new concept of what “church” is.

This brings me to the main point I want to make about learning: it is not just something that happens with individuals, as when we attend a good class or listen to an informative lecture or sermon. It can, and should, happen in community as well. In other words, what are we learning as a community? As a spiritual community? As a spiritual, justice-seeking community? What is ahead of us, waiting to be learned? What are we becoming? What are we learning together? What are we learning not so much by what we’re saying, but by what we’re doing? What are we learning about ourselves?

Let me give you an example of one of these questions, relating to the innovative way Kathy met her students – our kids – needs by meeting with them on Friday night. The question is, why do we meet as a congregation on Sunday mornings? Every now and then, someone raises a question and many of us engage in conversation about whether we should change our name from “church” to something less Christian, like “congregation.” We could do that, but if we still hold worship at ten o’clock every Sunday in this sanctuary building that was

originally designed as a church with stained glass windows and all, isn't that like calling a duck something other than a duck? Aren't we still a church? Here's a thought experiment – let's say a visitor from another land who spoke no English but pretty much knew all the customs of religions in America came to visit us. She would not be able to understand what specific words we were saying, but I bet she would confidently conclude that she was visiting a Christian church, albeit a rather curious one that doesn't have a cross or a crucifix in the sanctuary.

One thing that was very clear in all these cottage meetings was that you all certainly want this congregation to survive, and not only survive, but to thrive. You want it not so much for yourselves, but for the wider community and for the generations to come. You want there to be a strong and visible and vital Unitarian Universalist congregation in Yakima in the years and decades to come. And much of the work we do today, including our financial contributions but also our work at maintaining this facility and our ministries and reaching out to our wider community, is done with this aim in mind. But the question I want to pose to you is: why? Why is this important? I don't ask that to suggest that it is not important, but to ask what about this liberal religious community is important to maintain for future generations? Is it this building? Is it our Sunday morning rituals? Is it the human community we have created? In a word, is it the form of the church or its spirit that is important? As I've said before and as you all know, religious communities of all sorts are undergoing tremendous change in this country these days, and nobody really knows what we are changing into. Maybe if we start holding religious education classes on Friday evenings at people's houses over a meal and personal sharing time, at some point we'll start thinking

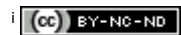
that maybe that's what "church" should be: groups of people gathering in informal, personally-relevant places to share. If that's the case, do we even need a building? Do we even need a Minister? Do we even need a staff? Do we need regular gatherings in which all are present, young and old alike?

These questions I pose relate to our visioning process. Or more specifically, to the unfinished business of our visioning process. Yep. Hate to tell you, the work is never finished. When we first started this work, our Pacific Western Region consultant, Rev. Jeanylese Doran Adams, charged us with holding these conversations -- not just with each other but also with the wider community. The plan was to go out and interview all the ex-UUCYers out there, and people who we think might be in sympathy with our view but don't often come to church, and those we consider our partners and tenants and neighbors. Anyone, really, that might be affected by our presence. Although the team we assembled did do a little of that, it was very little. It's hard to get lots of people who don't have a large stake in our vision to engage in our visioning process. So for the most part, these comments were compiled in cottage meetings held after church services on a number of different Sundays, with the assumption that it would be easiest to get people who are already here to participate. So everything "we" learned in this process, all the comments I've devoted four sermons to, and all the breakdowns of percentages we've been looking at, are -- it is important to remember -- basically a summary of the thoughts of those who are *already* here. It's no wonder, then, that "community" ranks at the top -- for it was asked of people who are already *in* the community. I wonder how it would rank if we asked people in our wider community these questions. So our learning, in this sense,

that we still have to do is to try to discern what needs our world has, and in keeping with the famous dictum by Frederick Buechner find our vocation as being that in which our strongest desires meet the world's greatest needs.

I've heard people ask: "what are we going to do now?" And "What will we do with all this information we've gathered?" Those are good questions. All along, I've tried to emphasize that the process itself is important – that even if we don't do anything differently we still will learn some things, and will still build community through our conversations. I still believe that to be true. But now that we've gone through that, we've looked at the information, and we've hopefully reflected on the importance this community and our spiritual lives have on us, I'll take the easy way by turning these questions back to you. What are you going to do now? What have you learned? What do you still have to learn? And how will you open your heart to the learning that is yet to be?

This is where we go from here. I'll offer a hint – the answers to these questions won't be found in a book. The answers will only come through each of us, in community.



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