

One Sunday morning, when I was young child, My grandfather told me a story about a time he wanted to move the family into a particular neighborhood just outside of The Bronx, only to find out that they would not allow Jewish people to buy a house in that neighborhood. He told me the real estate agent suggested to him he change his last name and act less ethnic, then maybe he could pass as non Jewish. He said that he could not do that. He told me that I should never deny who I was. He said too many people have worked too hard and too many people had suffered for too long, for us to hide who we were. Then he got this twinkle in his eye and he said, Anyway, I got the last laugh on them....I bought two cemetery plots in that town. So although I cant live there while I am alive, at least I can live there after I am dead!!

Now I wont get into the theological issues about the afterlife that raises right now, but I think the story speaks volumes about how we choose our communities, and how we choose our religious community. We often tend to join groups that are homogenous. Now in my grandfather's case he meant that he could not deny his Judaism. I agree we cannot deny who we are. But it is important for us to think about who we are, and what we believe.

And we can change who we are, and growth often requires change and change sometimes means breaking away and finding a new way and a new community. Now I have often been asked due to my religious upbringing do I still consider myself Jewish or Unitarian or both. At times I have been called a Jewnitarian. Because I maintain a meditation practice and have studied Buddhism, I have been called JUBUUU. But after long discernment, although I may draw more heavily on particular sources, I am 100% Unitarian Universalist. For you see if I have learned one thing about religion, and having a religious life, is that religion is a practice. It is not a belief. Have been a practicing UU for over 25 years

Oh we may hold beliefs, but I want you to think of religion as a verb. The word religion stems from the latin word which means to bind together. Religion is not about what we believe, but what we do, and who we bind ourselves to. And like my grandfather, I cannot deny who I am, and what I believe, even if it may not be what he believed. It is a very difficult thing for many to do, to choose a religion not of our birth, but we are here because we know who we are, or we have found that this community allows us to search for who we are, and what we believe in. Becoming a member of a Unitarian Universalist Congregation was my first acknowledgement of that choice.

Now of course, I know there are some of you who were born UU's and I hope my and all the children who are raised Unitarian Universalist, remain in our religion, but ultimately it is our wish that they too find who they truly are, so that they can be fulfilled and find wholeness. But if we are active in our practice, then I believe they can be fulfilled and find wholeness here.

How does one become a member of this congregation? As with most questions of this type Our bylaws or policies will give us an answer. In this case this our bylaws clearly set out the requirements of membership. They are actually quite simple. They require you to sign the membership book, to make a pledge, and to make a payment on your pledge. That's it. Now those things are important, but what it means to be a member is a much more complex. What are the benefits of membership? Membership as they say does have its privileges. Of course in our association there is the benefit of voting. It is something that is unique to our way of governance compared to many other religions. We do not have a bishop, or a presbytery to answer to. We answer to ourselves, each person individually to their conscience, and each person in relationship to other members. We vote on very specific things. Calling or terminating a minister, which happens hopefully once every twenty years or so. Members vote each year for individuals who are nominated for the board of trustee, and members vote on the annual budget. But of course it is much more complex than that.

Now I have said a couple of times it is much more complex than that....in truth it doesn't have to be. Many people just come on Sunday mornings to participate in worship. There are some members who never attend and who just send us a check once a year. The truth is it can be

as simple or as complex as you want it to be. It can be as distant or as engaged as you want it to be, and either way you are not judged by your choice.

Every person comes here under different life circumstances, with different needs, and different abilities. There are members who no longer live in the Quad Cities area, but they feel so strongly about the relationship they had when they were here that they still support us financially. There are those who cannot attend due to physical limitations and they support us to show the love they felt for and from this community. There are people who travel for work, and people who are raising children that limit the time they can commit. And although we make no requirements of activity for membership, there is an expectation of activity for membership.

There are opportunities and expectations to be engaged for members, but it is an individual choice by each of us as to what we do. By becoming a member we create a psychological commitment to being a part of this community. It is a public statement of identity we make when you become a member of this community. And of course the more you engage with the community, the more you will become committed to the community, and the more chance you will have to be changed by and grow from your experience here. And it is important to grow.

Our fourth principle is the Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. But merely having a principle in of itself is not reason to grow. What is the substance behind that? I have always thought that to be an interesting juxtaposition of phrases. We accept you for who you are, but it is important to change who you are. But I do think it is important for every person to always try to improve ourselves. Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "No stream rises higher than its source. What ever a person might build could never express or reflect more than they are. They could record neither more nor less than they had learned of life when the buildings were built." In the business world, we used the phrase the Peter Principle, which by the way was named after a Mr. Peter who stated and in a more negative way "in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to their level of incompetence". But this last statement presupposes that a person has an inherent limit of competence. I often say, I don't know my limits until I have tried to pass them. Because the truth is we usually underestimate what we are capable of doing. We need to push ourselves and each other to improve, to reach the full potential of our humanity.

As an allegory for this concept, I want you to realize that for recorded existence up until 1954 no one had ever run a mile in under four minutes. Many believed it was impossible and would never be done. Then in 1954 Roger Bannister, set for himself a rigorous training schedule and ran the mile in under 4 minutes. Poignantly I think they had two of the fastest runners pacing Bannister, which pushed him to run faster. Within two months after Bannister broke the 4 minute barrier, another runner John Landy ran an even faster mile than Bannister. Now of course, a 4 minute mile is considered the standard in professional track and field and has been recorded by over 1,000 runners in competition. What was once considered impossible is now considered standard. Remember that when someone tells you that something is impossible or the task too large or the road is too long.

If we are to build a just and compassionate life, community and world, we will have to become better human beings, all of us, in our thoughts, in our words and in our actions. We will have failures along the way, and some days it may seem impossible, but if we set a course for ourselves and are intentional about how we want to be in the world, then one day being just and compassion will be the standard by which all will live. But first we have to believe that we are capable of achieving this,

And then we have to set a rigorous training to become the people and the community we hope to become. I believe part of that training is being an active member of this religion. This is where we come to focus on issues such as the purpose of our existence and the meaning of life, and how we want to be in the world.

And there is that constant tension, the tension between looking inward and looking outward. Looking inward to explore, to understand, and then looking outward to put our

understanding into our lived experiences in the world. Then there is the tension of being challenged and finding Sanctuary. Here in a trusting, loving environment, we can explore and move out of our comfort zone to look at our lives and the world in new and different ways, without fear, judgment, or condemnation. And then there are times, after the stress of facing the world and the constant bombardment of challenges we are facing, we often just need some time to relax with friends, to find our center, to find our peace, to rebuild our strength so that we can go and be challenged again and go out and do what we need do in the world. There is also the tension of learning from the wisdom of our elders from their life experiences, and being open to hearing new voices from younger people, and new voices from our own newer experiences of the world as it is today. These tensions are things we are always trying to balance. And if we don't balance them, we will find ourselves, either burned out from constant challenge or we become too comfortable and we don't put our values into action at all. So we need to find that balance, and we need to help each other find that balance. We need to pace each other, to push us to be our best in all ways.

And that can only happen when we are in good relationship with each other, and in truth, that to me is the theology of membership. It is an unstated agreement to be in right relationship with each other. How we act with other, how we treat each other. Particularly in our pluralistic theological tradition, and particularly because of the progressive nature our religion, we are sometimes confronted with ideas that are challenging to us and with people who have different ideas. How we deal with this is that we are in covenant as members together. For those who have been to the social justice discernment sessions, you know that I have at the beginning of each session repeated what we agreed to as a group in the first session as to how we would be together as a group. And although this isn't a congregational statement, I think it has some truths that we all can learn from.

This covenant included cultivating attentive listening. Listening to understand and suspending judgment; Respecting the contributions and circumstances of each other; trusting each other's good intentions, To accept and respect those with differing opinions. To be willing to learn and change, to be intentional in inviting everyone's opinions, and probably the hardest, at least for me is to speak from our own personal experiences, and not to extrapolate our ideas as the norm for others. We can be a place where the whole is the greater than the sum of its parts. Such as a choir which has different voice types, such as soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass.

Each on their own have their own beauty, but together as they blend their individual voices in wonderful harmony with others they create something that can be even more beautiful than they could ever be alone. We as a congregation are an organic entity. We are changed by each new member, that joins us with their unique gifts, talents and experiences. We are all here doing this together. We can only be successful if we are all doing this together. For ours is a shared ministry, empowering all to be given responsibility for fully participating in the religious community, finding and sharing your unique gifts with others to help create the harmony and wholeness that we seek.

Membership should be a covenant and commitment not to the organization, but to and with all the other members of the congregation, and to and with all the past members of this congregation who created what we now have here, and it is a covenant and commitment to all future generations of members of the congregation to create for them something to build from and so that they too can have a place to search for truth and meaning in their time. For the future WILL be different than the present. We can help create that future, A future when all people respect the dignity and worth of all beings, a future where people from all races can live together in unison with equal opportunity, a future where people from all ethnic backgrounds can share and enjoy the richness of each others culture, a future where people of all sexual orientations are welcome at the courthouse in every state of our great country, a future where people from all religious backgrounds can pray together in peace. We have to believe this is possible. It may not happen in our lifetime, but we have to believe it is possible!!

And just like my grandfather who pre-purchased his burial plot in New York to plan where he wanted his remains to be for eternity, he eventually ended up being buried in Miami Beach, because his journey led him in unexpected ways to unexpected places. For that is how life is. We never know where this journey of life is going to lead us. And that is why it is easier to journey together as a community, than it is to journey alone. May it be so.