

"THE INDIVIDUAL SEARCH WITHIN COMMUNITY"

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Some of you may know the American cartoon character, Preacher, from the comic strip "Kudzu" by Doug Marlette.

Preacher is a Baptist minister who is constantly seeking to market religion by using the latest selling techniques. For instance, he installed an answering machine in his church, with this recorded message:

"You have reached the First Baptist Church of Bypass, Oklahoma. If you have called to ask for a prayer, press 1. If you have called to ask for pastoral counselling, press 2. If you would like to know the date of the Harvest Fair, press 3. If you would like to make a substantial donation to the church, please stay on the line and an operator will take your call immediately."

Preacher has read all of the latest articles on promoting church growth. He knows that some contemporary church shoppers want their religious experiences short and tasty, with a minimum of inconvenience and with a great deal of variety.

Preacher knows that these shoppers apply the same standards to their choice of religion that they might apply to their choice of supermarkets or fast food restaurants. He decides to create "McChurch".

So, we see him leaning out of the window of a drive-up booth - like the one you might see at the take-out window of a McDonald's restaurant. This booth has a cross on top. The first parishioner to visit McChurch orders "An egg Mcprayer, with grace and redemption on the side."

Preacher says: "No problem. Thank you for your order. Please drive up to window two and pay your pledge."

The next car appears. Its driver says: "I'll have a sermon on a bun, medium rare, hold the sin, hold the guilt." Preacher says: "You must be looking for 'Unitarians R. Us.' They're right down the street."

Cynical? Yes. But, accurate? Perhaps. Are there preachers and congregations with just this sort of desire to shape their message and its packaging to whatever it is the public seem to want? Some people would say it is accurate.

And, is that cartoon a compliment to Unitarians? It is a back-handed compliment at best.

But the Preacher cartoons reflect much that is happening in the contemporary religious scene - perhaps more so in America than here, but not exclusively. And they reflect one of the ways in which our part in — and our contribution to - the contemporary religious scene is misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Many people are looking seriously for a religious home that is right for them. Why? One reason is that, in the middle of the most technologically advanced civilisation we have ever known, many people feel terribly lonely.

We have lots of people around us. There are lots of institutions, organisations, clubs and causes of all kinds asking for our attention, our support, our involvement. There is plenty of information, and plenty of means of communication. We have access to more news

and chatter of all kinds than any other generation has ever had in the whole history of humankind.

The problem is that what we hear, so often, is only chatter, chatter, chatter.

Chatter - without meaning.

Chatter - without real concern.

Chatter - without depth.

Chatter - without appreciation for any ultimate purposes.

Chatter - without connection to any sources of quiet strength or calm or purposefulness.

Chatter - without relevance to anything that rises above what might be discussed on a Wednesday morning talk show.

So, for some people, there is a renewed interest in religion. But, it is not a rising tide that lifts all boats.

Some denominational boats are so tightly anchored that they cannot rise on the tide; and the rising sea is beginning to overflow the sides, and people in the boats are leaving for their own safety. The renewed interest in religion is the search for spirituality - a spirituality that can touch people, and move people, and really animate their lives.

What many people seem to be looking for is something that they can see or experience now: a sense of integrity, a hope of community, a feeling of peace.

Many people seem to be on a spiritual search that transcends denominational barriers, that is not bound by the traditional literalisms, restrictions, rules and

regulations of some of the conventional mainstream religions.

A lot of those people seem to be seeking the "McChurch" of Doug Marlette's cartoons. Some of the large, evangelical Protestant congregations offer easy answers in short bites, all carefully packaged for those with the most limited attention span. "Whatever the question, Jesus is the answer"!

Doug Marlette makes fun of drive-in religion, but he knows that in America there are some large, highly successful congregations which started out with people sitting in their cars at a drive-in listening to the service over the drive-in speakers.

That's not the Unitarian way, much as we might rather envy those churches their numbers and their energy and their conspicuous wealth.

The Unitarian way involves a basic attitude of acceptance: an acceptance that offers a welcome to people who feel enough urgency about their spiritual search that they do not want to fit into the theological pigeon-holes that some churches offer them.

Unfortunately, our commitment to accept people who come to us as they are is often and easily misunderstood. The impression is sometimes formed that each Unitarian creates his or her own separate religion: a religion that is infinitely porous, that accepts all things, believes all things, has no boundaries and finally stands for very little.

That's a false and misleading impression. We are not 'Unitarians R. Us', a fast service religious store where you can have just about anything you want, right off the rack, hot and ready to go.

Unitarianism is founded upon three principles which John H Nichols describes as "just fundamental to the search for any religious understanding. " He writes:

"The FIRST is that the test of any religious idea is the experience we have that it is working on our lives. Sometimes, we have to rethink and re-evaluate that experience. The SECOND is that the world in which we seek comfort and challenge is populated by strangers, many of whom could become friends. Only when we can make friends out of strangers, and enjoy those friendships at some depth, can we ever really be trusting of the world. When we gather together only with people of like belief, we still have the world outside of our community to fear. The THIRD builds on the first two. Fear of strangeness, fear of differences is the last barrier to the religious search the purpose of which is to embrace all of the life we are given and find the strength there is in it."

So, the first principle is that we have to experience what we say we believe before we know whether we really believe it. When we attend a worship service, the preacher may entertain us with ideas; we may be moved by the music, or the words of a prayer. We may be moved or stimulated by a denominational leaflet, or by an article in a journal.

But, in the final analysis, the religious journey takes place - in large part - when we are alone with our thoughts.

John H Nichols writes:

"The religious journey begins when we can be alone. It begins when out of our solitude we begin asking questions like: "What is my life telling me? why do I remain hopeful? what do I hope for? why do I value myself? what do I want others to value in me? what is it that starts me anew when I feel as if I have reached a dead end?" A preacher can give us lofty answers to these questions. A good preacher can spell every one of these answers out for us, and it can have no impact thirty minutes after the service is over, unless the impact is that we begin to feel guilty that we do not live up to the preacher's vision of our lives. The religious journey begins alone."

He writes:

"The truth is that we have to learn to be alone in order that we not be lonely. When we are lonely we seek other people to complement what we feel we lack in ourselves. We try to become what they want us to be or we try to make our friends become what we need them to be. In either respect our intense need for them to fulfill us may drive them away. Loneliness arises out of our fear of being alone. Alone with our thoughts, our impressions, our hopes and dreams. Alone with our humanity -- alone in our struggle to accept that humanity with all that it is telling us about weakness and strength."

We need to find ways to be alone. We need to find ways to accept the acceptance that is there for us, and the love that is there for us, and the peace that is there for us when we can still the chatter of our own anxieties. It isn't always easy.

I hope that our worship services and our other activities provide some direction; but, in the final analysis, if we are serious about a genuine spiritual direction for our lives, it will begin in a place that only each of us can know for ourselves.

Preachers cannot touch it. Denominational opinions cannot touch it. Doctrines cannot touch it or influence it much.

In our Unitarian way, religion is, among other things, a one-to-one experience with the meanings, weaknesses and strengths of our own lives. That does not mean that we are just highly individualistic. We do respect the separateness of each person's religious search, but we also cherish a sense of community and strive to foster the individual's search within a loving and supportive community.

Aloneness, of course, is not all of it. Alone we recognise that the world provides us with many gifts:- more gifts than we can ever really accept. These gifts are a part of the richness of life. They are also a part of the strength of what some of us call God in our lives.

Alone, we recognise that there is a world apart from us that we would like to encounter. It is different. It is alien in some respects. It is even fearsome. But it is also a part of the strength of life that exists for us.

And so: to the second principle: that the world in which we seek comfort and challenge is populated by strangers, many of whom could become friends.

Gathering strength from our aloneness, we are able to invite other people even, strangers, into our lives and to entertain them unafraid.

People may ask: Does that mean that, in a Unitarian church, agnostics and atheists and Christians and theists and mystics worship together at the same time? The answer is: Yes, absolutely. We believe that the goal of a congregation is to draw people together, to learn from each other and to strengthen each other in a community of understanding which has only one boundary - but that boundary is vitally important. It is the boundary of respect for the worth and integrity and potential of each person.

John H Nichols writes:

"When you invite people into your home for a time it would be nice if they admired your furnishings and enjoyed your cooking, but it isn't essential. What you are really looking for is a human exchange, words of laughter and seriousness, of thoughtfulness and frivolity, which leave hosts and guests feeling that they have made a positive and fruitful connection with each other. This is called hospitality. We find it interesting that the Bible speaks more about hospitality to strangers than it does about friendship. Perhaps this is because it regards friendship as a gift and hospitality as a responsibility in a world that can be very uncaring."

The Catholic scholar Henri Nouwen put it this way:

"Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to

lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to offer a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not a method of making our God and our way into criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way."

Nouwen goes on to suggest that the way of hospitality is to offer people "a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his/her own."

Gathering strength from our aloneness, we are able to invite other people, even strangers, into our lives and to entertain them unafraid, in the hope that the blessings which they are and the blessings which they have discovered may become a part of our lives as well.

And so, finally and briefly, to the third principle, which builds on the other two.

That third principle is that the fear of strangeness, fear of differences, is the last barrier to the religious search the purpose of which is to embrace all of the life we are given and find the strength there is in it.

We do not know - we cannot know - just what Creation intended when it set into motion this whole circus of life. But to many of us it seems clear that behind all things there is some kind of purpose and some kind of divine justification to be here.

Our task is to learn to enjoy this variable and changing life in all of its phases and manifestations. When we are frustrated in that task, we are divided amongst and against ourselves, against life, some would say against God.

Unitarianism is an attempt to understand and to embrace the whole of this life, with the conviction that there is some kind of wisdom behind it.

Of course, we do this imperfectly.

As do all human beings, we approach this responsibility hesitantly at times. Sometimes it is only on our best days that we are truly welcoming of other people into our lives.

We need the support and the encouragement of those who have gone before us and those who are willing to stand with us. It is not an easy thing to do. It is not a wisdom easily gained. It can be hard to find the patience to maintain a reverence for Creation in all of its differences and inconsistencies.

That's why we gather in congregations. That's why we meet together week by week.

May we continue to do so, in love and trust, and may we continue to be welcoming to the stranger, unafraid.

Amen.