

**The Heart of Us  
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When I was a kid, my family used to go on trips through the Great Plains. We would drive for miles through seemingly endless prairie, seeing more cows than people. Sometimes we would stop by a country church just to check them out, or even to attend services. I remember one of these visits in particular. We were seeing my father's family in a small town in South Dakota, complete with one whole intersection and four stop signs, and we were invited to attend their local Lutheran congregation. It was housed in a white steeple church on a dirt road, full of what looked like mostly farmers and ranchers. I was curious about the service and sat contentedly through the singing and the readings. It wasn't my tradition, but found myself enjoying the sense of community and togetherness.

Soon it was time for communion. I had gone to communion before, in other churches, but this was different. I was handed a card that asked me whether I was a certified member of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, the congregation's denominational affiliation. If not, I was informed, I would be unable to receive communion and should remain in my seat. I watched from my pew as my relatives and the whole congregation stood up, walked to the front, received the bread and wine, and sat back down.

My childhood self didn't understand why I had to stay behind. I felt set apart and left behind, even slightly embarrassed, for being the only people unable to take part. We were different, it seemed.

The feeling of not belonging among the religious has been a persistent one for me. Faith has never come easily and ministry even less. If you had told me that I would want to be ordained ten years ago, I would have thought you were crazy. Or that, in the intervening years, I had gone crazy.

Even so, I grew up with religion all around me: my extended family's Lutheranism, my childhood Unitarian Universalism, my high school Presbyterianism. But I was always an outsider looking in. Religion just seemed strange, sometimes irrational, hurtful, or even silly, something other people understood that I could only guess at.

I was interested enough to major in religion once at college and by that point my respect for it had grown. It was fascinating how religion affected people and how it made them passionate and secure and confident. But I did not consider myself religious. And I didn't go to church. That was for the people who believed in God, or who liked to pray or who read the bible before bed each night, or wanted to live like a monk. I didn't believe or want to do any of that.

Because of this, my first experience of ministry happened by accident. In college, I needed a job. I knew the chaplain's office was hiring, and since I was a religion major I thought it would be a good fit. I imagined it would be a nice chance to learn about interfaith work, a secular academic place where I could enjoy working with others who actually believed things. After accepting the job, I learned I had misread the job description. I remember receiving my first email from the chaplain, which she had casually signed "in

faith,” and realizing with growing concern that I had joined an honest to god religious organization. I soon learned I was expected to lead things like spiritual discussion groups and give reflections on my own religious ideas. It all made me quite uncomfortable.

But I stuck with it, at first because I had to, and later because I found myself wondering if maybe I could belong there. It started after reading a book by a philosopher named Ludwig Feuerbach, called *The Essence of Christianity*. The book suggested that we human beings created God as a reflection of our own highest ideals, an idea that was widely condemned for attacking the core idea of the Christian God. And yet, Feuerbach didn't see it that way. Even as he essentially dismissed centuries of church teaching, he ended his book in a very strange, but I think, profound way. He ended it with the word “Amen.” Here he was, denying the core of acceptable doctrine, but not abandoning his right to call himself religious. He was carving out a space for himself. That his pursuit of truth, heretical as it was at the time, was worthy of the word “amen.” It was a refusal to be defined by another's categories and having the confidence to claim a new religious path.

This is the path of many religious liberals. It has been mine; a long and winding one. It's a path that centers around the questions of, “Do I belong here?” “Am I actually religious?” And “who am I, to serve as a religious leader?” These questions stem from a deep need to be true to one's self and to uphold the integrity of our hearts and minds. They stem from refusing to pretend that we are someone we are not, a desire to be sincere and honest. What I would eventually discover as the good news of Unitarian

Universalism is that people with these questions and these concerns, always, unconditionally, do belong. The door is always open and there are no second-class believers here.

This is our faith at its best: a place where no assumptions are made and no religious authorities are trumpeted as greater than the simple sensations of the human heart; where people can bring their whole selves, even the complicated, messy and worn parts.

Above all else, this is what makes our tradition most special. Of course, we do many other wonderful things. We do social justice well, we are thoughtful and loving and hopeful. We have helped oppose harmful and hateful doctrines. But in these virtues, we are not distinct; many other faiths do them just as well. What makes us truly unique, when people think of what distinguishes us from others, is this ethic of radical pluralism: that all belong. That we have Christians, and atheists, and Buddhists, and pagans, and those just looking for hope and purpose and love in their lives.

There are times I think our tradition forgets that this is our greatest gift. I hear it when folks complain about us being wishy-washy or hard to define, or that our great sin is that our diversity of theologies and religious experiences leads us to not knowing who we really are. That we are lost unless we articulate a clearer identity and set of beliefs. I'm not opposed to this clarity theory, I think this can be done well, knowing who you are is important. But in practice, when religions turn towards concreteness, I worry it leads to something else...to narrowing. Where one way of being human, or authentically Unitarian Universalist, is privileged

over another. And then we lose that beautiful pluralism that lets people like me be here.

I've found that often the desire for certainty and clarity comes from an anxiety around our own sense of who we are and how we talk to others about it. It has to do with our desire to grow as a faith. Some argue that we will never reach our potential as a religious community unless our identity becomes clear, that we become one thing, a faith that is well-defined and easy to understand. I've talked to folks who worry that it's hard to explain to their friends, or co-workers. They feel awkward or embarrassed or misunderstood. How do you invite a friend to church, if you can't even say what you believe?

About a year ago, I was working for a little start-up church, birthed from an older congregation in the city of Boston that wrestled with these questions a lot. What was our identity? How should we present ourselves? Our goal was to offer some new kind of worship experience for progressively minded young people. Our community attracted the attention of Boston Magazine, who profiled us in an article. They were especially interested in how we were re-inventing liberal religion, and in "our branding:" how we were marketing ourselves to the world.

I remember shuddering a bit at what they ended up writing. Not because they ignored our good work, but because they misinterpreted it. They suggested that church growth, like what we were doing, meant narrowing. They wrote how in being intentional about our mission, we were wisely inviting theological exclusivity. When you sell a product, and the title of the article was in fact "Selling God," you need to have a

clear sense of what you are selling. You need a product, you need something that is easy to define, easy to understand. Something that you are, and something that you are not.

The problem was that I love our tradition, but for the very reason that it is indefinable. For the very reason that we are many things all at once. I love it because I can be confused and uncertain, because I can be one thing and another, because the person sitting next to me will be different and because my questions are honored, as is ambiguity. Maybe that makes for a harder sell, or harder conversations with strangers and friends, but we have to stay true to ourselves, if we lose our soul in the process, it doesn't matter whether our churches are overflowing.

Our faith is about radical openness, welcoming; not narrowing, but broadening. If it wasn't, I wouldn't belong. We have a good religion here, full of skeptics or agnostics, or people who cringe at words like God or prayer. It's a good religion even though it's harder to explain and doesn't make a good tag-line. And it's good because we are these things, not in spite of them. They are signs that we think and feel deeply, that we try hard to do what is right, that we are honest with ourselves, that we love and welcome all who would come. That's who we are and that's what we should be proud of.

What unites us is this spirit of broadening and deepening. And it can come alive in our churches. When I am asked why I want to be a minister, despite my struggles with religion, I like to talk about my fondest memories of church, attending services on Christmas Eve. I think back to how it felt, to come in from the dark winter, full of anticipation, to

hold candles, sing Silent Night and have the light fill the church, to smell old pine and hear a wonderful story of a special baby born of simple means. And I see, often, that the person I am talking to shares those fond memories, and smiles, and I say that as a minister, I get to be a steward of that spirit, that magic. I get to help children feel love and wonder and joy and remind adults that they can still feel them too. What could be a more special way to spend one's life?

This is beyond belief, beyond knowing or certainty. It is the creation of magic and wonder, the very things you can't package, or sell, or market. We all know that Hallmark has tried, but it will never figure it out. Because any religion worth having is too big, too deep, too real for that. It's about depth, realness, that it is powerful and lasting and never flashy and never cheap. It takes risks and time and love. You can't force it, you can't pretend. All you can do is embrace the magic that is there and let your heart go.

This love of mystery and wonder and realness is what brings us together, different as we are. We can have our doubts, we can wrestle with our religion, but we all know what it's like to be moved, touched and inspired. We can all feel the warm glow of candlelight on our faces and can marvel at the stars in the sky, to feel uplifted by a loving friend on a rough day, to feel alive in the midst of a rainstorm. Even if we've struggled with where we belong, whether we are religious enough or not, we know beauty and goodness when we see it. And so the religion I believe in calls these things sacred and asks us to love them and serve them and help others do the same.

It is not an easy faith, or a convenient one, but that's ok, because good religion was never going to be. It needs to be deep and intimate and mysterious. It needs to defy our easy understanding. We come to church to witness a glimpse of the infinite and see where it takes us, hoping to have fine company along the way. So take heart, have hope, for this is enough and it is good. May it be so. Amen.