



Unitarian
Congregation of Saskatoon

Freedom of Religious Thought

September homily - "Why am I here?"

Gary Groot – September 7, 2008

I don't know about you but I had a wonderful holiday time this summer. I had two weeks at home putzing followed by a week in San Francisco by myself, Cuul School in Vancouver and finally a week in Canmore with the family. To top it all off Liz and I had a four day weekend just the two of us in Victoria that was like icing on a delicious cake. Like is my habit, I took part of that time to reflect on where I have been and where I am going, just in case I need to make some adjustments en route. This year my mind quickly turned to Unitarianism. I have found myself becoming increasingly involved in the organization--a prospect that I had up until late worked hard to avoid. You see, I find myself rebelling against organized religion. I found it necessary to ask myself what I think of Unitarianism. Is it the right place for me? Even if it is does it justify the amount of time and energy that I find myself giving to it either directly via my own involvement or indirectly via Liz's? As I reflected I drew thoughts and experiences from a variety of sources that have been significantly influential for me over this last year. What I share with you today will be a smattering of those thoughts and experiences. Like the spokes on a wheel all threads will converge towards the center and the center will become clear (hopefully) so bear with me.

There is a national identity discussion that is going on and seems to have started around the time that I began my reflections. We are hoping to bring this discussion here in November. It seems that there has been some trouble identifying succinctly exactly what it means to be Unitarian.

When I ask myself why I am here at UCS the first thing that comes to mind is community. I don't know about you but I really enjoy the community of people that I find here. I like getting together and having fun. I like struggling together to try and do the "right" thing. I only joined this community after the conflict began with the loss of our last minister. It wasn't the conflict itself that attracted me but rather the integrity with which people worked to resolve that conflict. I love the potlucks. I love death by chocolate. But, if I am honest with myself, I can and do find community in other places as well—at work and at school for example. So I find myself returning to the same question—why be so invested in Unitarianism?

The next thought that jumps to my mind is that this is a place where I am able to experience "freedom of religious thought". There is no doubt but that this is true. When I left the Mennonite church I was very much in need of a place where I could freely ask all of the questions that I needed to ask without judgment and this was most certainly a safe place for me to explore. But let's be honest, at the same time as this is a safe place to be as heretical as you wish we do a lousy job of helping people explore what they believe (I think we can do a better job but that is a whole other Sunday service!). I was in truth just as safe in my own home. All that I needed was to be away from people who didn't feel comfortable with the questions that I was asking. And so the question remains.

I want you to put yourself in my position now for a moment. I have started on this self-reflection process. So far I have identified two reasons why I am here. On the other side of the ledger I see my dear wife quickly being pulled into the Unitarian suction machine to the tune of 40 + hours per week. I in turn am finding myself pulled into that same machine to the tune of 5-10 hours per week. On top of that we give significantly of our finances to help this all happen, not only locally but also nationally. Again I ask myself, why am I here? Is this the right place? Is there a better use of my time and energy? Should we retreat to a smaller group that doesn't spend so much money on a building? Should we find a different venue to channel our time, energy and money?

I went to CUUL School this summer. It wasn't planned to be. Liz approached me sometime just before our holidays and asked if it was ok for her to be a facilitator at CUUL School. When she told me the dates I gently mentioned that we had a condo booked in Canmore during that time and that it was our holidays. To make a long story short, we managed to shift our condo booking, I switched calls with a colleague to accommodate the change and I went as a participant so that we might at least see each other and we went. I tentatively shared with the group that I got to know there my concern about involvement in the movement. "You see, my problem is that I find that there are people in our community that don't think like I do and I struggle to accommodate them, I would like to be in a community of like minded people". No one responded. I brooded. And then I reflected some more—during my holiday in Canmore.

I took a course this last year with Kathryn Green entitled research methods. In summary it was a course that looked at how we in the research world go about

developing new knowledge. I grew up viewing quantitative research as the way to definitively create new knowledge. The prospective double blind study as being the quintessential definitive way of confirming truth and knowledge.

Kathryn challenged the view that I had come to accept as true and by the end of that class I has a very different perspective on knowledge and truth and how one can find it.

I went to the AGM this spring. For the most part I went to be supportive of Liz who was trying to make in roads to the active people in the CUC. I did however go to one session in which I hear Ray Drennon speak. Ray is a semi-retired minister and he was talking about professional ministry in Canada as a panel member. He is not one to tow the line and had a number of somewhat heretical things to say which I found both interesting and intriguing. I took him aside after and had a wonderful visit. He summarized a confluence lecture that he gave a couple of years ago about what Unitarianism is which complemented what I saw. For him the principles are the core. He sees various people coming to those principles via different routes—some vial humanism, some via Christianity or Islam or other theist traditions, some via mysticism etc. The common ground being the principles and from those principles the common struggle to find expression for them in our lives.

I did a dinner in conjunction with Nazeem this last year for a student who was interested in making a difference in the world. She was going to Sri Lanka to do some development work. We helped her raise some \$7,000. We found expression of our principles in our lives and this community facilitated that.

I went to two conferences this year, as is my habit. One was a surgical oncology meeting and the other a head and neck surgery meeting. At both of these meetings there was as a lot of time and attention devoted to recent developments around the genetic aspects of cancer. The recent completion of the human genome project and the emerging understanding of the importance of genetic mutations in cancer development have spawned an enormous amount of excitement and interest in the cancer research world. As I step back from the details of the papers that were offered at these meetings the thing that struck me the most is that those groups who are making the most exciting and interesting discoveries are the ones who intentionally and actively sought the brightest minds in a whole bunch of different yet interrelated fields and put them into the same space to work collaboratively together. One of the essential ingredients of success was the the individual players had to not only be expert in their own field but also be able to understand the experts in the other fields well enough to talk with them and be able to respect the expertise that they brought to the table. Interdependence. It dawned on me that this same concept translated into the context of Unitarianism resolves my conundrum. It is normal for like-minded people to want to congregate together, to ponder life issues from the perspective that they have come to know and understand. But to be able to get the whole picture, to have the best understanding of life and how to successfully life it we need to draw on the expertise of individuals who think and see differently from us. Just like the various players on the cancer team we need people who are experts but who have the ability to hear and learn from other experts so that the collaborative work they do together is better than the work that any individual does. Applied to Unitarianism this would suggest the need for a strong broader

community. No one congregation will have the breadth of diversity of which I am referring to. I suspect that at best any one community will have one or two areas of strength and expertise. Even nationally we lack the expertise and breadth that we probably would benefit from but again that is another conversation.

Now that you have heard all of the divergent thoughts that have percolated through my brain this year let's see if I can pull them together to answer the question—why am I here? I am here because:

1. I am drawn to be in community.
2. I deeply yearn to be in a community that, like me, endeavors to live a principled life. I want to be challenged to find expression in my daily life of what those principles mean.
3. At the same time as I strongly desire to be in community with people that think like me (rationalists) I cherish the diversity and breadth that is offered by people who likewise seek to live similarly principled lives but who come to that place from a different perspective. For me this requires the involvement of a broader community.
4. At the same time as I feel like this is my spiritual home not all of my family is home yet. For this reason alone I do not feel like I can retreat to a small fellowship.

So, in summary, I am here for good reasons and, in my mind, for the right reasons. I am happy to be here and am more than willing to continue to be here.

For me here does not just mean UCS but the national organization as well. The later is something that has not been on the fore front of my thinking until this year but the more I think about it the more I deeply believe that the things the Unitarianism offers society today cannot and will not be realized in the absence of a strong national organization which is responsive to the thoughts and needs of the congregations which it serves.