

“The Transformative Power of Religious Life”
Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
October 19, 2015

“I didn’t know what I was missing.”

She had never been a part of a faith community and then, led by friends, she landed at All Souls. And things began to change. *She* began to change.

And that’s what it’s all about: changing. Transforming, if you like. Sometimes in ways that you never would have imagined.

All these years later, Jan Larson is surprised that she is, indeed, a “church lady.” And she’s as great a church lady as they come.

We have a quite a few of those around here: great church ladies ... and some of them are men! And all of us, if we admit it, are just a little bit surprised to find ourselves identifying as such.

Then again, we may not so much be transformed as we are claiming what has always been true.

Either way, such is religious life and life here at All Souls: opportunity to grow into your best self.

Some of you are right now pushing back against this idea. I hear you and you’ve got a point. One need not necessarily be part of a faith community in order to grow into your best self. I know you’re all thinking of your favorite person who would no sooner step into Unity Hall than join a club that would have them as a member... as Groucho Marx once quipped.

I just think it’s more likely in community. You look around and into the faces of the people who also make their way here on a Sunday morning and reflected back you see the same sorrow you’ve endured and joy that you have relished. And suddenly you don’t feel so alone. In fact, you feel a little braver. You’re in a place where there is a collective receivership of a message of hope and struggle.

I’m beginning to learn more about struggle and I’m slowly being convinced that struggle is the better gift. Even better than hope.

And there’s that: the minister who for as long as you have been attending has described the goal of religious life as keeping hope kindled. And then on this Sunday morning she says, “Maybe struggle is more important than hope.” There’s the constant reminder that perspectives change - even the ones that we hold most dear.

And this change is at the core of the life we create and share here. Many of you know that I preached at Lane Campbell's ordination two weeks ago. Here's a little bit about what I said about religious life.

Church is where we can see how it feels to go the extra mile to help someone we don't know. It's where we test the limits of our privilege and see how it might feel to give it up. It's where we are challenged by ideas that differ from our own and we remain quiet a little longer than we otherwise might have just to see how the idea settles. It's where you sing the hymn that makes you cringe without griping and at full voice because the person to your left just said, "Oh! I love this hymn." It's where you bring the brownies that you managed to bake without gluten, dairy, or nuts hoping that the allergic kid in the R.E. class you're teaching can take part.

All these things may cause you to take stock and think, "How did I get to be this person I am?" and the answer at least in part is that you made your way to a life in religious community.

So here's an amazing story for you.

Remember Christa Swensen was here the Sunday I was in Columbus for the ordination. On Monday I got this message from Christa:

You know, FB does that thing of insisting that the world is actually really small, pointing out over and over again that people we know surprisingly know other people we know. Proving over and over again that the Kevin Bacon principle is too generous – must be less than six (degrees of separation). I learned from FB yesterday that you and another of my FB friends checked into First Unitarian Universalist of Columbus for the morning service. Imagine.

That someone was a friend ... from college. That someone was among the Board member of the "Christian Fellowship" organization that ensured after I came out that I was no longer part of the organization but was certainly "prayed for." That this someone found the strength to leave the conservative, exclusive church he was part of; that this someone found a home in a UU church; that this someone was sitting in the same sanctuary as you on a Sunday morning as I led from your pulpit, seems no less than a holy transformation.

Almost unbelievable.

Except it's not. Holy transformation is available and we are ever reminded simply by being here. Wouldn't we love to hear Christa's friend's transformation story? Wouldn't we love to hear the story that brought that young man now grown from conservative Christianity to Unitarian Universalism?

Religious life is narrative. It's stories. The ancient ones and new ones. Your stories and mine and the ones we share.

Remember the day the left the old building?

Remember the day we dedicated 19 Jay Street?

Remember the service when Sandy Geaman shared that as a Girl Scout she prepared and sent boxes to her young peers caught in war-torn Europe. And then she sat down and Elga O'Dell got up and shared that as a child in Europe, she was a recipient of those boxes.

Remember on September 12th, 2001 when we lit candles and stood on the steps on the old building singing hymns?

Remember on the 5th anniversary of the war we rented a bus and went to Hartford to witness for peace?

Remember when we rented a bus and went to Hartford together to advocate for sane gun laws?

Remember when we rented a bus and went to Providence to worship together with 4000 other UUs at General Assembly?

Remember the day the Homeless Hospitality Center moved into the Krag Wing?

Remember every year serving the HHC guests pie the Wednesday before Thanksgiving?

Remember Caitlin's installation?

Remember all the children who have been dedicated with these words: "May you be embraced by love".

Narrative. They get under our skins, these stories, and into our hearts and we're changed for them.

Who of you never imagined you'd ever board a bus and travel to Hartford on a rainy, freezing winter day to dream that peace was possible?

But you did it because there was a bus to board and people you trusted going along. People who you sat with at the memorial service or in the small group ministry circle. You built a relationship and got a little braver and you got on the bus.

You were changed.

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And there's this:

I ran into Chris Soto at the MLK Scholarship dinner Thursday night. Chris is the founder and executive director of Higher Edge, one of my favorite local service organizations. Higher Edge was a recipient of a recent Good Neighbor Offering (as is the NL Public Library today). Chris made a point to thank me for the generous contribution the congregation made to Higher Edge's good work. In fact, the next day I received the organization's annual report and there was All Souls on their donor list in the section reserved for "Heroes". By ourselves few of us are heroes. Together we leap tall buildings in a single bound.

We put our money together. We put our commitment together. We put our voices together and we are more powerful.

And we are changed for it. Because we can't believe what we can accomplish together and it takes away the awful feeling of overwhelm we must always resist.

We will conclude with a prayer that strikes at the heart of the aspirational pursuit of our best selves. Of transformation. Let's rest in this prayer as we imagine who we are called to be.

From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us. For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven.

From making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured.

For telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected.

God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting, and insurgent lives, help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be. Henry Meserve

Amen.

