

**“Unitarian Belonging” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
September 12, 2010 Unitarian Church of Edmonton**

This summer I attended the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists Theological Symposium in the Netherlands. The theme of the conference was “Belonging : Our Unitarian Identities and the Nature of our Relations”. It is a theme I plan to visit a few times this year in different ways.

This theme seemed like a good way to start this new church year. There are usually a few fairly new faces in this hall, so going back to the basics of our tradition and looking at the question of why we come to church makes sense. Consider this a ‘homepage’ sermon.

In our first reading my friend and ICUU colleague from Michigan, Rev. Jill McAllister wrote, “Religion is the human process of striving to understand what it means to be human. It is the process of coming to understand the nature of our relations.” Put another way, it is a process of understanding where we belong and to whom we belong. None of us lives in a social vacuum. There is lots of belonging even for the loneliest of souls. There are birth families, work or school obligations, neighbourhood connections, circles of friends, civic and political relationships and other social networks. There are even church communities! Martin Luther King once called it an “inescapable network of mutuality”. At the same time we also belong to nature and to nation, to economic classes and to cultures – both the culture of personal heritage and the culture of the place where we live today.

And finally there is something beyond human existence to which we belong. Some call it Principle, some call it God, some call it and think of it as something else entirely, and some probably don’t think much about it at all, but whatever it is that centers us and guides us is still there. One of the joys of Unitarianism is that each person is free to define that larger sense of where we belong – or even to reject the notion all together.

In this church, in this religion – for Unitarianism is a religion as it is indeed committed to Jill’s process of, “coming to understand what it means to be human”; in this church we start to define our belonging not with some idea of the divine from which we might spring, but with ourselves. In a few moments we will read the UU Principles included in your order of service. The second half of that document lists the Sources that we use to justify our beliefs. The first of these Sources is, “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

We start with direct experience...your experience of that thing, that idea, that image that is most central to your life, your morality, your values. We start with you seeking to name that to which you belong. The church does not try to define it for you. We don’t think we have the right to do that. I don’t think, as a minister, that I have a right to do that. Defining your center, defining your god, if you will, is your job. That is one reason why the world has so many religions that run from the very rigid and defined, to the very loose, open and even godless. No one has yet come up with a workable ‘one size fits all’ image of the divine – although wars have and are being fought and books have been burned in the name of trying to impose one god or another. In this house, there is no one dogmatic answer to the question: to whom do I

belong? Instead, members and friends of this community work together on Jill's other task of "coming to understand the nature of our relations".

How do we do that work? First, we establish a community where it is okay to think for yourself and, more importantly, safe for you to express both your firm views and the ones that are still forming. The beauty of the Unitarian religion is that there is room here to never get it all worked out. I have been part of this church for over 30 years and my beliefs are still changing, still evolving. There are lots of the big questions that I cannot answer, or if I do have an answer, it's only an answer for now and not for all time, an answer for me, not for everyone.

There is an old joke, that like many such treasures makes a nice point: A Unitarian Universalist minister moved to the deep south. The Ku Klux Klan –perhaps led by Pastor Terry Jones – was incensed. So one midnight they turned up in front of her house and burned a question mark on her lawn.

I don't know whether the joke originated inside or outside of our faith, but I am rather proud of it. Why? Well, for one thing the question mark suggests our openness to the kinds of uncertainty that fundamentalist religions detest. We are not people so desperate for security that we will believe absurd, unprovable and insupportable assertions about a god just so we can feel better.

Secondly, it speaks to the courage sometimes required by our faith to stand up against the powers of evil. Here in Edmonton the challenge is not really evident, but there are places in the world where being a Unitarian does take a measure of courage. I was once invited to be the minister of a congregation in the deep south. Had I accepted that call, I would have had to cope with losing a parishioner in the bombing of an abortion clinic. The man was a volunteer escorting women through the protesters' picket lines. He was living his faith. There are places where living our liberal beliefs is dangerous.

And finally, the joke reminds us that as Unitarians – that is, as people who choose to come to church – we choose to accept living in the margins. At the ICUU Symposium, Rev. Ann Peart of the UK delivered a paper on marginality. She wrote: To be on the margin voluntarily is a form of dissent, but it is to acknowledge a continued relationship with that which is different; it is not separatism... (There are)... two important characteristics of marginality; firstly that it is always in relation to the centre, and secondly that it is complex in that each individual life contains experiences of both marginality and centrality.

In our case we choose two different kinds of margins. First we are on the margin of North American religious expression. Although some parts of the United Church have moved ever closer to our views over the last few decades, our unwillingness to make a definite statement about the existence of a god makes us unique. A few of my colleagues in other traditions still make offhanded remarks that Unitarianism can't possibly be considered a real religion, and there are still occasional objections to our inclusion in various interdenominational events.

But the second area of marginality we embrace is that with our general pattern of social and spiritual views, we are a little weird in Canada because we DO go to church.

I have a sermon planned for next month that will go into this more deeply, but the Coles Notes version is this: Time and time again, surveys of social values about belief and spirituality show that Unitarian Universalist beliefs are very close to what the

majority of Canadians think. Yet that same majority seldom, if ever, goes to church. Last week Kat Hutter did an excellent sermon entitled Words and Phrases: Confessions of a Reluctant Religious Liberal.

She polled several young adult friends about several words like religion and church. Here are two reactions that capture an attitude towards what people think we do here:

Religion: "Not positively. When someone says religion, I think inflexible, rigid, unaccepting, judgemental. No freedom. From day one, religion wasn't going to be a part of me."

Church: "It has a negative connotation. It implies brainwashing and allowing yourself to be brainwashed. People go to church to have their fantastical beliefs reinforced; it helps shelter them from reality."

Well, I expect a lot of you here today would agree to a degree with those sentiments as far as other churches and religions are concerned. So while our attitudes about ideas may be quite similar, the fact that we are people who feel comfortable in this kind of community puts us on society's margins as well.

Don't you just love it? Religion doesn't like us because we aren't churchy enough and society doesn't like us because we are too churchy! What are you going to do, eh?

Well, I, for one, will not apologize. We may be on the margin, but because the margin is tied to the center, we impact the center. In her paper Ann Peart recounted a metaphor about how a stone dropped in the center of a pond radiates waves outward until they reach the margin...and then those waves are bounced back mixing and merging and influencing the pattern of all the waves. Our very presence stirs the waters. When I was in divinity school professors loved it when we took mixed faith classes. We kept asking questions that interested them, but that as denominationally appointed teachers, they could not put into their lectures from the outset. And I mentioned the leftward trends in the United Church. I am not sure how far they would have gotten had we not broken the ground for them.

Stirring the waters with our reflections on the center...I think I am okay with that. And I also know that, like many of you, I am most comfortable when I am in a community like this. I am too busy, or maybe too lazy, to do the serious work of deep reflection on my own. I need the framework of community. And I need to commit to it in the way Linda Hart, an old divinity school friend now serving in the UK described it in our second reading.:

"Joining a church isn't that big a deal really. Just signing a book, showing up once in a while, giving some money. And yet it is something so much more:

- it's taking a stand about what you value and how you express those values.
- it's committing yourself to the life of the church and its community.
- it's affirming that diversity that enriches us all.
- it's committing to create a deeper community, a deeper sense of solidarity with each other and with the larger world.
- it's believing in the power of love for one another that can bridge seemingly impossible differences.'

Friends, we are social creatures. Belonging is part of our make-up. But belonging is a two way street. When we become part of a marriage, or a community or a church, we both belong to it and it belongs to us. It is the give and take, the willingness to allow the giving and the taking, which brings richness and growth to the experience.