

“Finding Your Place”

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Our survey begins with questions relating to when people started out with the Unitarian church. We figured that when Communications Committee is considering what kind of messages to put out there about UCE, and where might be the best places to put them, it would be helpful to have a sense of who we are usually talking to. Is it young adults? Seniors? The semi-retired? Well, it's probably a lot of different age groups, but it is helpful to have some sense of when and why a lot of people start looking for a church community.

For example, we're pretty sure that the crowd between the end of the teenage years, say 18 or so, and the mid 20s is not one that is currently clamoring for church membership. We've sort of noticed that there is a lull in church interest at that time, and so putting out a lot of messages targeted to that age group just wouldn't be all that productive.

I've always had a sort of talent for not fitting the mold. I started to look for a church community in 2004, at 21 years old. I'm a rebel like that. I was suppose to be off partying, living up my newly won freedom as a young adult without parental rules to follow, and pursuing my dreams with wild abandon, right? Globe-trotting or out drinking or reading Nietzsche or Marx and having them “blow my mind”. Well, independent thinker, trend-setter that I am, I decided what I needed in my life was some good, old-fashioned church.

Why? Well, facing the great void as a young adult wasn't as appealing to me as it ought to have been. All of the freedom of choice that I knew I had to study whatever I chose and to become whatever I chose was just overwhelming. I really lacked a sense of place, that somewhere I was supposed to be or something I was supposed to be doing; something to belong to, something to feel deeply connected to; something to be a part of.

The first and most fundamental way that most of us discover a sense of place is in our own families. Families offer that multigenerational community we are always talking about here; the young and old and in between that give you a sense of continuity. There are people to look up to and there is a path to follow through life; there are actions to imitate. Our families are the base where we celebrate our milestones and observe holidays, affirming our lives as significant and special.

One of the main reasons that I think we're always emphasizing the multigenerational community here is that concept has been largely eroded and changed in our culture. Generally speaking we have smaller families, most of us are off focusing primarily on our careers, and when our kids grow up there is no particular reason to stick around in the town where you were born. This creates a gulf between the generations that is usually only traversed when we get big chunks of time off work.

My own experience was certainly like that. My mother and father left their home towns to find work in Northern Ontario. They essentially severed any ties they had to their extended families, and as a result the family I experienced was very small. I grew

up without a single cousin. I had contact with an aunt and an uncle and one set of grandparents about once or twice a year and that was pretty much it. My sister and I were the only children at any family gatherings. Of course my family was loving and supportive, but we were no extensive, powerful clan by any means.

I have always been envious of those people who have tonnes of uncles and aunts and so many relatives they can't remember their names. If you are a part of that, you are a part of a giant network that has weight and substance and its own history. We were actually the only Hutterites in the whole phonebook in Sudbury where I grew up. For me, one of the major draws of a church was that it would be sort of like having that family; that multigenerational web spread across a city.

Another major draw of a church community was some sort of collective culture to relate to. Our cultural affiliations offer us distinctiveness. They are the way that we stand out in the world; they are how "our people" do things; our traditions and our legacies.

When I was growing up I felt an ominous lack of history or tradition. My family is totally secular. We celebrated Christmas and Easter, sure, but in the most commercial, mainstream kind of way, without any sense of deeper meaning or substance. There was nothing particularly unique or "ours" about it.

We didn't have any particular ethnic ties either. You see I grew up in the hey day of Canadian multiculturalism; at the birth of 'heritage days'. Now don't get me wrong, I deeply appreciate the fact that we live in a country where we embrace the stories and cultures of a wide variety of people. It's just that when all of your ancestors are of miscellaneous, intermingled Western European descent and have been Canadian since before Confederation, it does present quite the challenge to the kid growing up in the public school system.

Year after year we would do projects celebrating our 'cultures', and year after year I was reminded that I was culture-less. I didn't belong to any other group than Canadian, and to be Canadian was to celebrate that other group you were suppose to belong to. In the country that takes pride in representing the coming together of people from everywhere, a kid can feel like they have no place because they don't come from anywhere but here.

I recently travelled to New Orleans for a conference for Unitarian Universalist Directors of Religious Education. I had the opportunity to spend some tourist time in the city, as well as to explore the post-Katrina New Orleans and the challenges that people in the area face in terms of equity and social justice at the conference itself. What is truly striking about that city, whether you are exploring the French Quarter or talking to locals about their experiences in rebuilding after the flood, is the deep and powerful sense of place that people have. The citizens of New Orleans identify almost universally in a very intimate way with their city and its unique heritage, cuisine and music. Louisiana is probably not so dissimilar from Quebec in that way, a truly different place in the first world North American context that offers a strong sense of belonging and pride.

A church can offer this opportunity to stand out against the majority too. To belong to something, even in small numbers; even in the face of persecution at times. It's an interesting thing to consider when we think of extremist church groups that hold disturbing or obviously irrational beliefs. The very fact of their being so distinct and different, of offering a unique place in a bland and impersonal society, can be what

makes their membership so fiercely loyal.

Now in our society many of us have liberated ourselves from restrictive traditions. We don't tend to accept being held back by thinking that is unmodern and often our attitude is that we don't owe allegiance to the collective, even if we did happen to be raised with a sense of one. I think people in our society often mitigate the shifting away from familial, religious and cultural affiliations through work, hobbies and special interests. If we can't or simply don't want to find our collective identities in what we were born into, we may as well find it in our career, in a football team, or through stamp collecting, skateboarding or whatever it is that we get to choose to be interested in and identify with.

I've always found this absolute freedom of choice to be quite intimidating, actually. Growing up I flipped around from activity to activity like the best of them. I was the kid who was scheduled into a class every evening of the week: ballet, girl guides, figure skating, basketball, baseball, violin lessons, piano lessons, singing lessons, sailing lessons, cross-country skiing, summer camp; you name it, I probably tried it once. My parents had the very best of intentions. They wanted to give me every opportunity to learn and grow and find my way to the right place for me in life.

The problem is that having every opportunity is a lot to have to wade through and having a piece of yourself in everything can leave you feeling like none of it is really a part of you. Religion seemed to me to help sort some of this out. People who belong to religions that tell them that they must prioritize Sunday morning, that ultimately the God they worship must be the most important thing in their life, and membership to some special group constitutes the most holy of all memberships to any group, could at least organize their thoughts.

The problem for me was that, until I discovered Unitarianism, I thought that there was a trade off that had to happen if one wanted the comforts of a church community. All I knew of were churches where you had to adopt some belief that to me seemed completely arbitrary about things that can't possibly be proven. There is no objective framework to use to decide which version of beliefs about the afterlife or some higher, invisible power one ought to adopt.

Sure, if I had been born into such a community I could at least say that these were 'my' customs, and maybe overlook some logical inconsistencies and a lack of any evidence backing up claims about the nature of reality for sentimental reasons. It isn't the same when you are starting as an adult from square one. I thought my options would be to either suppress my intellect and reason in order to gain a place in a church community, or continue to try to navigate on my own, integrity intact but without the benefits of this familial, distinctive community and the structure that it could provide.

I was very frustrated because there was no way I could see myself suppressing my mind, negating my sense of self, for the comfort of community. Of course this is true for many people who do happen to be 'born into' a particular collective identity. The identity ascribed to you at birth is not necessarily going to be the ideal one for you. That big giant family can be oppressive and overbearing, traditions can be a prison if you are stuck adopting a role or are subject to collective rules and beliefs that don't fit who you are. Finding a way to strike a balance between the "roots that hold us close" and the "wings that set us free" isn't really easy for anyone.

At 21, when I found my way to the Unitarian church, I had had way too much freedom and not enough in the way of roots. My story represents the other side of a spectrum, after all of the 'repression of the group' is removed. I was so completely liberated from the bondage of collective identity that I yearned for one.

I did, of course, find Unitarian Universalism, our quiet little religious loophole. The 'I'm okay, you're okay' religion, as I heard it described by one of my friends. I found the church by taking a Belief-o-Matic quiz one day on beliefnet.com, a website where you can answer a whole bunch of spiritual questions and be diagnosed with a religion. Thank goodness for the internet age.

It would be lovely if that were the end of the story. I found this faith, signed up the next day and happily enjoyed my new sense of identity and place in a community. The problem is it's never that simple. The survey that we are presenting to you today not only asks you about when you found the church, it also asks you whether you decided to stick around right away, and that's a really important question.

I didn't stick around right away. My first experience at a Unitarian church left me feeling rather empty. I entered and attended a few services, but ultimately encountered a group that was already whole without me. I felt like I was just watching someone else's social club. Going to services was fine, but I went to classes all of the time at University and there were plenty of lectures for me to listen to there. Ultimately I felt awkward and unsatisfied, which was really disappointing because Unitarianism seemed like it had been the answer to my prayers.

Granted, I was shy. When you are a person with a strong sense of your place in the world, I think it's a lot easier to walk into coffee hour and present yourself to strangers. But when you are feeling vulnerable and kind of lonely, stepping into a community of people, most of whom are decades from your age, just isn't easy. I really didn't feel I had a place there at all.

I didn't have anyone to go to church with either. Unfortunately, I think it would have been a lot easier to get to know people if I had already known someone who was there. I couldn't convince anyone I knew at the time to go to a church. Most people I knew held the same assumptions about churches being restrictive and irrational that I had, and even if they could acknowledge that this one seemed harmless, they had no use for it.

There was also the problem that the church was so open to new ideas that I had trouble feeling the weight of history that I was looking for. I couldn't find a purpose in it in a sense of powerful tradition. In the absence of the dogmatic observance of rules to live by there was for me, at first, emptiness. I didn't have to believe in anything. I didn't even have to attend church on a regular basis; I was still completely free to jump around from activity to activity and just slot this one in there somewhere, as unimportant and indistinct as the rest of them.

So, after finding my miracle religion that was supposed to offer everything that I needed, I dropped out.

It was later, at 25, when my daughter's need for community drew me to the RE program that I discovered what I had missed the first time I came. They needed people to teach Sunday school and I was a teacher so I volunteered. I found something to do for the community.

Volunteering changed everything for me. I wasn't preoccupied with what I was suppose to be getting out of the experience and how it was going to feed the rest of my week. I was just too busy taking care of little ones to think about that. A concern for the rest of the group, an outward focus, started to emerge. I started to understand that really becoming a part of a collective means giving something of you to it. Think not about what your community can do for you, but what you can do for your community.

As much as I had always yearned to be less individualistic, my entire approach to group membership before had been that of a consumer walking into a store, appraising what it had to sell me. In order to gain a deeper experience and feel like this place was my own I needed to step outside of myself and give something to it. There is a suppression of the self, the ego, that has to happen in all group membership, but it doesn't have to be to the exclusion of reason or personality. It can come through giving.

Love may be the spirit of this church, but to tap into it, it really helps to get into that service part. Service is its law because it takes the place of mindless ritual binding us together. It gives us a role, a part to play. It allows us to be needed for something. It took me a while to realize that in order to find a place somewhere I had to be able to put my critical faculties aside to a certain extent and invest myself in something, and have a little faith that giving would in fact result in getting what I needed.

It is such a good thing that in our 21st century world we are able to think critically about our place. We do not have to blindly follow; we are able to be critical about what ideas to support, how best to use our time, and which agendas to further. I find it overwhelming, though. There is a point at which in order to find peace we have to be willing to join; willing to connect and make some group the priority or some cause bigger than ourselves and our own life story. I found peace in being willing to put myself aside to find a spiritual home; to adopt some practices to the exclusion of others in order to find some connecting point.

It doesn't have to be just one. I've taken these lessons that I've gained from church and been able to extend them to membership in other groups in my life, and to my relationships as well. The pattern for me is the same, though. I feel peripheral, don't quite feel like I belong, until I have gotten past the stage of consuming and critically assessing the value of others and I am able to give something to them. I need to be able to let go of my own ego and contribute something.

With our surveys really asking how you got here. What were you needing or looking for when you came? I'd also really like to know what it was like for you when you got here. Did you belong right away? Do you feel like you belong now? What is your place here?

We've included lots of extra lines and a section on the back of our survey for 'other thoughts'. If the questions we have asked have not really given you the opportunity to share your thoughts, please feel free to use so that we are able to hear your story.