

CABIN FEVER

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt

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It was only a hill, though it looked like a mountain to my alarmed eyes when I turned around at the top to survey the snowy expanse I would be crossing on my first sled ride. All too easily I could imagine myself down at the base of the hill scattered in pieces everywhere.

I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Texas, where neither hills nor mountains exist and snowfalls come on an average of once every ten years. Sledding is an unknown pastime. But because I came to live in hilly, snowy, Minnesota as a young parent, and because I felt it important for my son to partake fully of his culture and climate, I had summoned my courage to take him sledding. One cannot endure a Minnesota winter and stay sane without finding ways to savor the winter, with sledding being one of those ways.

Obviously I survived the experience, for here I stand years later. My son did enjoy his sled ride and, I think, on some level appreciated his mother's willingness to step beyond her Texas boundaries on his behalf. But more was at stake in that sled ride than simply a native southerner's first taste of winter sports.

For I am not just reluctant to go sledding because of a childhood with no snow. I am gun-shy in the face of most new experiences, and risk-taking runs contrary to my deepest instincts—not just because of some innate conservatism nor an introverted personality, but because of childhood training. My parents moved my five siblings and me out to the country to seal us off from a world they regarded as untrustworthy because it had shown itself, in their own growing-up experiences, to be dangerous and untrustworthy. Sins of the father and mothers are visited upon the children, and cautious, risk-averse parents produce cautious, risk-averse children. My parents taught us that we could only be certain of being safe if we remained close to home, both our literal family home and the metaphorical home of conservative values and a conservative church that they taught us. Some of us did, in time, wander away from this literal and metaphorical safe haven; others of my siblings have stayed nearby, still convinced, as my parents were, that the world in general is not to be trusted and danger is present at every moment.

All that childhood training has not left me, however, and still manifests in my habitual ways of functioning. For instance, I know many of you are familiar with the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator. A popular personality inventory, the Myers–Briggs uses the results of forced choice questions to sort an individual in four categories depending on how s/he perceives the world and makes decisions. I fall strongly into the “J” category of the Myers–Briggs, a judger. This does not so much mean that I am judgmental, but rather that I like order and completion, a task list with clear indicators of what is to be done, and when, and by whom. And I like finishing things: as one writer put it, a “J” does not really like doing anything, but rather prefers to have done everything. What this means in actual life is that I will never not have a sermon ready for you on Sunday mornings because I always make deadlines, I will probably never plan a service that runs past an hour (and if it does, it is the Worship Associate’s fault for choosing too long a reading), and I will usually be the one in meetings who starts sighing and shuffling papers when others want to keep on discussing a business item. “J”s do not like doing, they like having done—

--which means I am not readily suited to being a minister in a Unitarian Universalist church. Everyone knows that UUs prefer process over completion, tend to start meetings late, seldom wind up a Sunday service in an hour, and always want to keep discussing no matter what else is on the agenda. I like to think my “J”ness is a helpful corrective rather than a nuisance.

Perhaps because persons like me, who are “J”s, are a bit more common in the population, it seems we have ruled in matters of the spirit right along. Order, clarity, precision, finality: such “J” qualities show up in churches of all kinds through bureaucratic hierarchies, creeds that set forth what one must believe to be a member, commandments that define how one must live to be considered a good person. And despite evidences to the contrary, that same order, clarity, precision, and finality shows up in images of God again and again, even when God behaves in the most disorderly fashion imaginable.

Unitarian Universalists entered this setting so perfectly suited for “J” types and insisted that in matters of the spirit it was not, never would be, appropriate to come in with creeds and hierarchies, black–and–white thinking, strict boundaries, exclusionary tendencies, and hope to remain a living, vital spiritual tradition. We dare not fence the Spirit, we insisted. Freedom and spontaneity must instead be the guiding forces. So again and again, throughout our history, we rebelled against those who sought to make spirituality an experience of

certainty and completion, of having done rather than doing, of checklists and tasks. We offered faith, not beliefs, covenants, not creeds, cared more about what we did during the week than what we said on Sundays, wanted to know how to love, not how to think.

But before we were Unitarian Universalists we were humans, and human nature cannot not try to assume and maintain control, even in matters of the spirit, even with very different upbringings that the one I experienced, filled with caution and averse to risk or experimentation. While not insisting on a particular set of beliefs to be one of us, we have sort of assumed that of course you will espouse traditional liberal political beliefs, right? While not insisting that you adhere to a certain theological position to be one of us, we have sort of assumed that of course you will be a humanist who either does not believe in God or at best holds to an agnostic position on the God question, right? And whenever we run into someone who deviates from our unspoken but very clear expectations of what a Unitarian Universalist will look and sound like, then we work hard, often without success, to stifle our first response: “How can you believe something like that?” Because how else would we respond to having our expectations defied? How do we respond whenever anyone, anywhere, does not behave as we believe they should behave, when we ourselves do not conform to the usual expectations we have for ourselves and our lives? Do you honestly enjoy being taken aback, surprised, caught off guard, thrown for a loop, any of those ways we describe experiences of having control thwarted? And especially, especially when it comes to your experience of church, how much do you count on seeing the same people, having the same order of worship, singing the same hymns, making decisions in the same fashion, keeping the same office hours, keeping the same décor in our shared spaces, communicating the same messages in the same ways with the same frequency, before you become uneasy? At what point does disruption of my expectations move from being interesting or surprising to unsettling, aggravating, downright wrong?

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin. . . . But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you? Do not be anxious about tomorrow.”

I have always found it ironic that the prophets and teachers and wise men and women, including our own UU ancestors, whose names are typically invoked whenever a call for greater order and conformity is issued, were actually

consistent in teaching disorder, wildness, spontaneity, all the kinds of behaviors and lifestyles that their followers insist on condemning.

“Nakedness, matted hair, fasting, covering oneself with dust and ashes, lying on nails—none of these things can purify a person. There is no such thing as ‘enlightenment.’”

Our own preoccupation with order and control and doing things a certain way moves us to assume that the saints and saviors and gurus must surely have called for greater discipline, careful attention to rules and appropriate behavior. But this assumption is quite misguided.

“The wise person knows how to do nothing. How useful it is to be useless!”

For though we convince ourselves that the source of our difficulties and the cause of our suffering must surely lie in being outside the bounds of proper behavior and our lack of discipline, we go in precisely the opposite direction from the teachings of those people we most admire and seek to emulate. Not yet has a great teacher or prophet come along to call us back to order; on the contrary, the challenge given us by teachers and prophets is a challenge to loosen the order, to think outside the box of rules and conventions, to act up, to set aside our usual cares, to go a little mad, to be crazy. Though lack of order and consistency in existence once seemed to be proof of the absence of the sacred, the opposite may well be the reality: lack of order points toward, not away from, what is most precious, most meaningful.

During my years of living in Minnesota, I was most impressed by seeing the natives deal with a winter that typically lasted from October to early May by marking the midpoint of the season with a 10-day celebration called the Winter Carnival. This event typically included a host of outdoor activities that went on regardless of subzero temperatures, activities such as a parade, a kind of community-wide scavenger hunt for a hidden medallion, nightly performances of music and dance, and the construction of an enormous ice castle on one of the area lakes. The shape of the castle varied from year to year, its construction determined by a competition to submit blueprints for it, and seeing how it turned out was always a matter of great anticipation.

Every year while we lived there, my son clamored to go see the ice castle (usually more than once), especially at night when it was lit with colored lights. Going out in the dark and -10 degree cold hardly sounded like fun to me, no more than riding a sled at breakneck speed down a hillside had. But whenever I

yielded to his pleas and took him out, I was invariably glad I had done so, came home feeling strangely pleased with myself.

Though this has been a relatively mild winter for us thus far, you may by now be feeling some of that unpleasant impatience with the season that typically goes by the name of cabin fever. Enough already of cold, early dark, piling on layers of clothes just to run a quick errand; we long for the ease and warmth and freedom of springtime to hurry up and arrive. And though this church has been through many changes in recent years, and though Unitarian Universalists in general tend to be open to ongoing innovation in religious thought and practice, you may still be experiencing a touch of spiritual cabin fever, the inevitable result of staying too long with a comfortable perspective, the same set of values practiced in the same ways, the same beliefs.

So I would invite us all to take a cue from the Minnesota response to literal cabin fever with their reveling in the snow and cold, and do some reveling of our own here. Spend time with a new collection of church people, volunteer for tasks you've never done before, set aside your meditation practice and try dancing instead, go back and see whether it still makes sense to discard any belief in God. Remember that a church was never intended to be a place to be comfortable, and the life of the spirit has never been about being done, being finished. Even when we can see only darkness, feel only cold, there is still so much warmth and beauty out there waiting for us to discover and celebrate it.