

SUPER BOWL SPIRITUALITY

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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Christopher Raible, a noted Unitarian Universalist minister, composed a clever set of lyrics, set to the tune of *The Pirates of Penzance*, that characterize our liberal self-image with deadly clarity. Beginning with the statement, “I am the model of a modern Unitarian,” the lyrics sketch out many of our favorite qualities. When I ran across this parody recently, one line jumped out at me: “I formulate agendas and discuss them with the best of ‘em/But don’t ask me to implement, we leave that to the rest of ‘em. For I am the model of a modern Unitarian.”

As the minister newly called to serve this congregation, now hearing from many individuals and groups your ambitious plans, the dreams you have for this church, I want to believe Raible’s image is false. Yet too often in our congregations I have had the very experience he describes: we formulate agendas, discuss them with gusto—and leave those fine intentions for someone else to pursue. I would guess many of you have participated in such planning and discussion and then wondered, months later, what happened to all those plans, where those sheets of butcher paper ideas went.

That Unitarian Universalists tend to lack follow-through, however, is not a secret. Far from it: we actually signal such a tendency in one of our seven principles, those statements which capture some of our foundational commitments. Principle number four, which affirms our commitment to a search for truth and meaning, is probably meant to highlight our openness to a variety of beliefs and our readiness to subject those beliefs to ongoing scrutiny and revision when life experiences prove them lacking.

Unintentionally, however, the principle also suggests that we are likely to prefer seeking to finding, the journey to the destination, the discussion about heaven to heaven itself—and any discussion and planning to the actual realization of our plans. A commitment to openness can be a double-edged sword, bringing with it the virtue of ongoing personal growth and the vice, as captured in Chris Raible’s lyrics, of an inability or unwillingness to actually settle on anything and see it through to a conclusion.

We “formulate agendas and discuss them with the best of ‘em/But don’t ask me to implement, we leave that to the rest of ‘em”: contrast such a posture with the images that will fill our media today, that have already filled them leading up to today, in connection with the Super Bowl. An event marketed as a pinnacle of athletic achievement and commitment to implementation, the Super Bowl perfectly represents values that are central

in our culture: setting one's sights high, striving without compromising, believing that anything is possible if one tries hard enough, seeing ourselves as creatures of infinite capacity and potential, convinced that a meaningful life is the life that ranges far and wide, refuses to accept limits, never gives up.

Based on my thirty years' experience with Unitarian Universalists in different parts of the country, I would say many of us are similar to the Super Bowl athletes in some arena of our lives. Profiles of the sorts of people who wind up in UU congregations typically depict us as high achievers, successful in reaching many career and personal goals, well-educated and well-traveled—and far from the types lampooned in Raible's song. We tend to be accomplished people who both formulate agendas *and* implement them, again and again. Clearly we know how to realize our goals; clearly we have an excellent capacity for follow-through. So what happens to that dedication when we head off for church? Why is our commitment to real action, not just idle discussion, checked at the door?

As a "J" type in the Myers Briggs inventory, one who likes to make lists and cross items off those lists, it is perhaps not surprising that I have long been fascinated with forms of spirituality that come as lists, steps to follow that ensure steady growth in wisdom and compassion. The Ten

Commandments of Judaism; the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism; the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; the 12 Steps; our own seven UU Principles: these are just the most evident of the programs developed by various traditions to guide us down the often complex and convoluted path of spiritual and personal growth. Sometimes the programs outline stages, processes, steps that are to be taken, in sequence, to get from whatever spiritual state one is in at present to a higher, or healthier, or wiser spiritual state. Other programs are not sequential, but instead offer parameters and signposts that prevent the seeker from getting lost or losing focus. Such guidelines recognize the inherent tendency of us all to slack off and stray, to formulate agendas and engage in discussions without ever actually doing anything. Left to our own devices, it seems, we humans are often clueless when it comes time for us to undertake real spiritual advancement. We are not born knowing how to meditate or pray; we get confused when evil comes our way wearing a pleasing disguise; we grow tired of trying to discern the will of God or a pattern of meaning in the universe; we despair when our lives are broken by suffering. And ever since humanity evolved into existence, there have been some among us who are eager to help us move through our spiritual fog into a better place.

Most of the better known of the spiritual programs have a common starting point intended to impress upon us the hard recognition that we are not the center of the universe. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” admonishes the first of the Ten Commandments: Yahweh, not any human creature, is supreme. The first Beatitude speaks approvingly of those who are “poor in spirit.” The Noble Eightfold Path sets right understanding as its point of departure, an understanding that includes, as a key element, the recognition of the illusion of ego or self. The Twelve Steps mince no words as the first step shatters our tendency to see ourselves as being in charge of our destiny: “We admitted we were powerless . . . that our lives had become unmanageable.” And even our own Seven Principles, which initially seem to lift up the individual self in our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of a person, temper that with a single well-chosen word, *every*. “We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person”—which means that I have to share that wonderful place of worth and dignity with everyone of you, with the people I like and the people I loathe, with atheists as well as evangelical Christians, with Democrats as well as Republicans and Sarah Palin. I do not get to keep worth and dignity all to myself.

If so many programs for spiritual growth begin by setting limits on the individual self, then somehow recognizing that we are not the center of the

universe must be the common starting point for spiritual advancement. Until I recognize and own my limits, it seems, I will not be able to grow. But with that recognition, I can become aware of all the possibilities outside myself—which seems to typically be the second movement in most of these programs: with limits on the self having been established, the next step shifts attention to what lies beyond the self and why it may benefit us to notice.

Dr. Allan Chinen has assembled a collection of stories and myths with the title *Once Upon a Midlife*, claiming that certain insights relevant to our middle years can be found in stories and folks tales—but we will need to recognize that these stories may sound quite different from the more familiar ones because they are aimed at middle-aged adults, not children and young adults. So heroes in these stories, for instance, do not look so brave, nor do they accomplish so many amazing feats; instead, they are more likely to receive their comeuppance, to be chastened and caught up short, to have their illusions exposed and pretensions unmasked, all those difficult but necessary lessons we have to learn as part of our journey towards maturity. One such story from China, called “Destiny,” unfolds the lives of two brothers, one of whom works hard but never earns much or gets anywhere in life, while the other brother goofs off, never works a day in his life, but has

success in games of chance so that he amasses a fortune in land and gold. Eventually the story reveals that the differences are due simply to fate, and nothing can change matters. Chinen suggests, in his commentary on the story, that at some point each of us struggles to learn the degree to which our lives are not in our control, and how much of what happens to us is not the result of anything we did or said. An unsettling lesson, one that flies in the face of all we have been taught since childhood about being and doing anything we want if we simply work hard. It is a Super Bowl perspective that this Chinese tale overturns, presenting instead a lesson in the difficult virtue of humility. After hearing the important, self-esteem building ideas which tell us we can do anything, we are full of potential, success comes to those with commitment who work hard, there comes a point where we begin to see how such ideas are not universally true. At that point, we move beyond the Super Bowl vision of life, as we see the limits of any one person's version of truth, as we learn how to ask for help, as we struggle to be open to another's ideas, as we recognize the possibility for guidance that comes outside our limited human capacities. Without humility, life becomes a lonely experience of working too much, of feeling overwhelmed and overburdened. Without humility, we cannot discover how much more can happen when we depend on others to support our journey. This does not

mean never taking pride in an accomplishment nor does it involve discounting our gifts. It does mean, however, never losing sight of the limits each one of us has, our personal limits, those things we will never do well and we will never understand, our community limits, those things we cannot manage without one another. The journey becomes a constant balancing act: doing what we can, asking for help, finding our way, listening for guidance, affirming what we know, acknowledging the mystery which surrounds us and which will never be explained.

Our nation at present is embroiled in an excruciating process of learning all sorts of limitations, whether those be limits on our financial powers, our military powers, the power of our health care system to keep up with the demands we make on it while providing equitable care for all. We seem to want to keep refusing those limits, to remain in the Super Bowl posture of continuing to insist, because after all we are the greatest country on earth, that anything and everything is possible for us. But until we learn a national humility that gracefully accepts limits, humbly asks for help, and makes the hard decisions that inevitably follow when limitations are recognized, we will continue to be a proud nation that is falling, falling, ever father.

Similarly, I believe our city is being forced to discover difficult limits of size and resources, trying to learn when to say “no” and when to say “yes” to

all that we want to be and do, when “not” is an appropriate act of humility, when “yes” is an appropriate statement of hope. This is an extraordinarily difficult path to negotiate. It will take all of us who claim this community as our own time, patience, and will include many missteps. But I believe this very church can play a key role in the process, that we are uniquely equipped to teach humility and how one can make the wonderful discovery of how much help is available to us, from one another and from resources in the inexhaustible web of life.

As for learning personal humility—well, that is a lesson that at least for me will require a lifetime. I celebrated a birthday this past week. A longtime friend called me to offer birthday wishes. In the course of our conversation—and I listen carefully when she talks about life, as she is 95 and has considerable experience—she suggested that the key to successful aging is learning to be dependent. Not the birthday message I wanted to hear: I enjoy my independence, and I intend to keep enjoying for a very long time. So, I will likely always be struggling to discern the difference between a limit that must be accepted and an obstacle that should be overcome. But with each experience of humbling, along with the inevitable pain, comes the chance to learn anew what it means to lean into the arms of a beloved community that stands ready to catch us when we try too long and

too hard to make our lives into a constant Super Bowl challenge. May we never fail to take justified pride in all that we do; and may we likewise never fail to admit all we cannot do; may we be wise enough to know the difference; and may we be humble enough to gracefully consent when others come to our rescue, and when the Sacred Mystery offers us yet again another chance.