

THE FAITH OF CATS

BUC, December 5, 2010
Annual Meeting Sunday

In the Texas town where I grew up, a large irrigation canal served the dual purpose of providing water to the surrounding rice fields and dividing the black and white neighborhoods. Black houses (or shacks), black schools, black churches, black grocery stores, black restaurants, black businesses, and black gas stations all clustered on the canal's north side, while white houses and all the fixtures of white civilization spread out to the south. In those few areas where the races were forced to cross, the same spirit of division symbolized by the canal prevailed. Thus, public and government buildings provided black and white restrooms and drinking fountains and benches for sitting. In my family doctor's office, one waiting room was labeled "white" and the other "colored," and the hospital took care to separate patients into "white" and "colored" wings. The parks and swimming beaches always reserved a small, unattractive area "for colored only."

During the summer of 1964, a bridge was constructed across the canal to enable black students to cross into the white area and attend white schools for the first time. Much anguish and outrage had preceded the building of the bridge, but the community recognized that it had to comply with civil rights laws. I remember marveling at the first black students in my class, at their different styles of dressing and speaking and carrying themselves—*and* at the knowledge and experiences we held in common.

Integration was accomplished mostly peaceably, despite everyone's understandable fears of violence. Yet in many ways it seemed as though it had never happened. For the

black people never really penetrated the white strongholds. Though we shared a school, the old line of division still existed in the classrooms and hallways and cafeteria and football stadium, as blacks clustered always in one small area, sitting and standing together on the far end, and whites spread out across the rest of the space. All the “white” and “colored” signs were taken down, but they remained in imagination, encouraging people to segregate themselves again and again on opposite sides of common areas. The bridge had been built in the exterior world only—not in the hearts of the people affected by it.

And to this day, those who work for justice repeatedly experience the same bitter reality which I saw enacted in my hometown, namely that the letter of the law and the spirit of the law are two very different matters. People may comply with decrees, will do all the prescribed things—but no legislation can instill them with the feelings of generosity and fair-mindedness sought by anti-oppression laws. Behavior and attitudes do not always coincide.

Which is a truth that churches of all kinds have known for a long time. Again and again in the history of Western religions, attempts were made by teachers and prophets and preachers to inspire their followers to do good, but to no avail. The inspiration somehow failed to materialize into ongoing action. A desire to do good, to live right, was not enough. Traditions even resorted to commanding love for one another, only to see followers too often pursue singularly unloving paths, fighting holy wars and supporting cruel causes. In the face of this failure to inspire ethical behavior, church leaders were forced to ensure that it happened by devising a comprehensive code of conduct, a set of rules governing all facets of human interaction, a long list of “Thou shalt—thou shalt

not—*thou shalt—thou shalt not.*” And at the end of the list of rules came the punch line: “anyone failing to comply with these regulations will be visited by the wrath of almighty God, both now and in the life to come.” Punishment without end for those going their own ways.

Perhaps seeking a more subtle way to encourage ethical behavior when rules and commandments still achieved only a modest degree of success, church leaders and teachers came up with the image of sheep to describe what a mature, appropriate spiritual life might look like. While this image has its roots in the culture of the Bible and appears in countless Biblical passages referring to the Lord as my shepherd and sheep as the ones, in contrast to goats, who make it into heaven, it is hard for me to understand why anyone, anywhere, at any time, would appreciate being compared to sheep. In all my years of hanging around churches both fundamentalist and progressive, liberal and conservative, I have never heard a person yet proudly refer to himself or herself as being sheep-like. I doubt whether any of you here this morning would be willing to be identified as a sheep. We all know that sheep are not especially bright animals, they mill about and need some external authority to direct them, and they tend to go with the herd rather than striking out independently. By contrast, the sorts of people who find their ways to Unitarian Universalist churches, the sorts all of us are, typically do not require an external authority to direct us (and would defy them if they tried), and we do prefer to strike out independently and have disdain for a herd mentality, and of course we all know we are among the brightest folks on the block. So sheep imagery will never work in this church, is never likely to inspire you to do anything other than possibly make for the exits.

Bright, self-directed, and independent: we need another image to capture our individual and communal spiritual life. When I cast about for some possible replacement for sheep, I find myself intrigued by a possibility that many of you have suggested. Often in my conversations with you, when you characterize congregational life (and particularly when you describe leadership in congregational life), you speak in terms of cats. To succeed in ministry in this church, to assume a position on the Board or as a committee chair in this church, you warn me, will require a skill in herding cats. Setting a direction for the church, building consensus around a leadership initiative, discerning and articulating a common vision—all those aspects of congregational life that require some sort of unified and unifying movement: whenever this is our topic, you return to the cat image, you speak of herding cats.

If you are or have been a cat owner, you know the impossibility of setting a direction for even one cat, much less a group of them. You know that cats are famously noncompliant, unpredictable, unwilling to recognize any authority but their own, inscrutable. Who knows what goes on in the mind of a cat, or what a cat is likely to do from one minute to the next? So if our common life here at BUC is akin to the experience and behavior of cats, then we can expect a congregation of bright, self-directed, independent individuals who will do what they want when they want for their own reasons, and who are not likely to respond to pleas, threats, commands, cajoling, persuasion, or any other sort of behavioral influence. Cats like to reflect, introspect, settle into a comfortable place and stay there, and occasionally pounce on some unsuspecting creature happening by.

An amusing but somewhat unsettling image of congregational life, is it not? Certainly serving as minister or as a volunteer leader of a congregation of cat-types (as opposed to sheep types) can sound like a hopeless job—which may be why members of a congregation once presented me with a gift designed especially for ministers of cat-like congregations. The gift was a lovely box with a photo of a group of assorted cats under a glass lid. Attached to the box was a hammer with a note, “In case of emergency, use to break glass.” And tucked underneath the glass was a bag of catnip, the one thing no cat can resist, the one device guaranteed to win cat compliance every time.

Now if it sounds as though I am lamenting the depiction of a church full of cat types, I hasten to add that such is not the case at all. For I have owned cats most of my life, have cats now that I love, and whenever someone asks whether I consider myself to be a “dog person” or a “cat person,” I reply that, though I have owned dogs as well as cats, at heart I know myself to be a cat person. For cats, despite all their qualities that can make them maddening animals, also have much to recommend them—especially as an image of the spiritual life. The challenge for ministerial and volunteer leadership in a congregation full of cats is to find the right kind of spiritual catnip that can win cat compliance, coax them in the direction you want them to go without their usual resistance.

In the course of working with individuals who seek help for problems and wish to change their lives, psychotherapists have observed that human beings tend to resist making changes, especially if the changes appear to be for the better. Furthermore, this resistance to positive change *increases* in proportion to the amount of urging and encouragement being given. For instance, if you are depressed and I attempt to cheer you

up, I will succeed in strengthening your depression; if you are eating too much and I urge you to diet to preserve your health, you will likely eat even more; if you experience difficulty in asserting yourself and getting what you want, encouragement from me to “speak right up—you can say anything” will quickly shut you up for good. It seems to be human nature to dig in our heels and resist attempts to motivate us to action.

Thus, psychotherapists who seek to help their clients make changes must first concentrate on neutralizing or overcoming that resistance—or, better yet, utilize it as part of the process of change. What happens in this approach to resistance at first looks peculiar, but it achieves good results. The depressed individual may be asked, “well, why shouldn’t you be depressed?”; the overeaters are instructed to *increase* their consumption of food; the passive person might be bluntly told to “keep your mouth shut. Who cares what you think?” This backward approach has a kind of judo effect, paralyzing a client’s habitual resistance to getting better. The only response possible becomes the desired one of improvement. Encouraged to stay depressed or withdrawn or overweight, the client resists—by changing.

When the leaders of traditional churches first grappled with the problem of motivating positive behavior, they adopted the obvious, logical approach: in order to get someone to do something, you tell them to do it. So they instructed their followers to do good works, to love one another, to be charitable in interpersonal dealings, to give generously of time, money, and talents, to be kind and slow to anger, to forgive one another’s shortcomings, and on and on and on. And of course their followers, being typical cats rather than sheep, did the natural thing: they resisted such attempts to control and motivate them. Met by this resistance, the church leaders cried “sin!” and tried harder, to which the people

responded with greater resistance. Hence the ethical bind experienced by many traditional churches to this day: the more people are urged to be like Jesus, to love and do good works, the more they don't.

Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors somehow grasped early on the foolishness to trying to persuade people with a cat spirituality to act like obedient sheep. They avoided the motivational trap by not urging any particular kind of behavior. Again and again they reminded us that we are inherently good and inclined to seek goodness. No need to prove ourselves (for cats never worry about seeking approval anyway), to save our souls, to show ourselves worthy, to score points with God: our place in any sort of heaven is already assured. Relieved of the need to resist by being bad, Unitarians and Universalists have had no choice but to respond with good works.

And respond they did. Our tradition of service in the world is a proud one, with UU names heading the list of reformers in virtually every imaginable justice cause. Is it really possible to motivate cats? Will we do good if we have no one to tell us how to act? Repeatedly, throughout our history the answer is an affirmative one.

We have now entered the holiday season, where along with the annoying commercial messages to shop, buy, and spend for all we are worth come the more poignant messages about peace on earth—poignant because this year, like so many years at this time, peace seems ever more elusive. Having recently finished up yet another polarizing election, even coming to this annual meeting day in our church with concerns about staffing decisions and questions about trust of church leadership, it is difficult to believe that peace might ever come, not only in the world nor in the nation, but in our communities, our churches, our homes, our very souls.

In a conflicted situation, it is always tempting to try harder to exert control, to bear down and grab those cats who keep twisting away, wishing they would just act more like sheep. As your minister, I want to resort to the words ministers always use at these times: love your neighbors, volunteer your time, support your leaders, give your money, write your representatives, take public stands, show the world what spiritually progressive people can really do.

But I know better. I will resist any such methods, realizing the inevitability of your resistance, the foolishness to trying to gain compliance from a church full of cats. Instead, I will open up my bag of catnip, as our Unitarian Universalist ancestors have repeatedly when seeking to inspire one another, and tell you once again that all are already accepted, sons and daughters of the universe, unique, precious, and powerful, capable of much good in the days given us on this earth.