

GATHERED NEAR:
Religion in the Round

A 2018 sermon commemorating the 370th anniversary of The Cambridge Platform

As humans, we all share a fundamental desire to gather around a primal fire, tell stories, and sing songs together. Our universal religious impulse rises in response to our deepest human needs – to belong to a wider community, to know that we are not alone, to contribute to the continuous succession of generations, and to grasp all the ways the world has wanted and welcomed us. We give voice to this impulse in our sermons and scriptures, prayers and meditations, in our hymns and chants. Their sounds echo across our Unitarian Universalist congregations every Sunday and rise to create the music for that scores our lived faith.

One invocation we are rather fond of singing is this chant you intoned earlier this morning:

*Gathered here in the mystery of the hour.
Gathered here in one strong body.
Gathered here in the struggle and the power.
Spirit, draw near...*

It's especially stirring sung in rounds: "Spirit, draw near... Spirit, draw near..." Everyone in the sanctuary seems quite clear about why we are gathered in this space today. We have come to express reverence for the mystery and wonder of creation, to form a strong body of mutual support, to find sure comfort, to engage in meaningful struggle, to empower each other, and to invite Spirit to be a presence ever more keenly felt in our lives. In short – all of us have come here to get religion.

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Yet that puts us in the minority these days. More and more American are religiously unaffiliated or else characterize themselves as “spiritual, but not religious”, preferring to remain outside any given religious framework or particular faith community. Unfortunately, an altogether individualistic spirituality leaves them at real risk for isolation and the personal consequences of that can be dire. Liberal religious communities, in particular, need to let everyone know that the invitation to circle round the fire, tell stories, and sing our songs is a standing one. That’s what our flaming chalice is always meant to signal.

Like our Puritan forbears, we here today appreciate how very important fellow sojourners are in guiding our spiritual journeys. Without them, we might be lost. Our co-religionists give us bountiful opportunity for what the 1648 framers of *The Cambridge Platform* called “edification”, providing us a lifelong congregational curriculum of “mutual learning and teaching concerning the many and complex ways of love. The people must gather regularly and often for ongoing mutual learning to take place,” the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley has written. “Otherwise, the ‘spirit of love’ is just a bodiless abstraction.”

So much of our existence these days is disturbingly disembodied. We’ve taken to talking of “virtual reality”, lived in Technicolor on the World Wide Web or another alternate platform that takes us away from our own place and time. As marvelous as it is for us to hold a supercomputer in the palm of our hand – amazing, really – there’s now greater clarity about what it has cost us in terms

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of closeness and community. What we call social media exhibits decidedly anti-social tendencies; in fact, it seems to have left our social fabric threadbare and American political discourse increasingly polarized. More articles and studies in the press today point to the negative psychological consequences of excessive screen time, noting the profound alienation that often results from it.

Last fall, *Harvard Business Review* ran a cover story on “the loneliness epidemic” in the United States. Citing it as a public health crisis, author and former US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, noted that “loneliness affected people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds across the country”. So it’s not only our children who crave contact and continuity, this assurance that “love will be strong/growing and growing/all the days long”. Nor is it only elders. Although adolescents and young adults report having large “social network”, they have little sense of actual social supports. Dr. Murthy called loneliness “the most common pathology” today, “often in the background of clinical illness, contributing to disease and making it harder for patients to cope and heal”. These days, regrettably, people tend to feel more wired than connected.

For millennia, wisdom traditions from around the world have advised people to reliably gather at routine intervals to remind themselves of who they are and how they might exist in right relation with one another and the very ground of being – in the synagogue, mosque, church, temple, tent, grove, and meetinghouse. Ancient traditions have transmitted those best spiritual practices that have withstood the tests of time, practices that give us a philosophical

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perspective on the challenges of our contemporary circumstance, provide religious insights into the nature of resilience and transcendence, insist on the rights of conscience, and connect us with the Eternal and Abiding. These long-established traditions have the added benefit of providing us some buffer against future shock, as well.

Centuries ago, those Puritan authors of the *Platform* understood themselves to be the spiritual heirs of Moses and the Israelites, Jesus and the apostles; they recognized that early churches were called out of the synagogues that evolved out of a timeless desert religion. Wherever two or more are gathered, Jesus taught us, what is sacred can be readily witnessed. That holds as true for us today. Our Sunday worship is a process of co-creation that continues through an ongoing process of re-creation (recreation!), week after week, year after year. It unites distinct generations, turns with shifting seasons, and involves us throughout our lifespans, opening our minds and hearts to the promptings of Spirit.

A worshipping community counts everyone in its number, striving to recognize each birth, honor each rite of passage, sanctify each union, celebrate each child, mourn each death. It blesses us and those dear to us, time after time. In doing so, it magnifies our individual lives and binds them together into a larger whole. It announces our presence in our localities and in our own country and beyond that, reminds us of our global citizenship, the responsibilities we share as people of faith to remember the worth and dignity of human beings

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everywhere. Our lifelong religious instruction reminds us not only of our ultimate interdependence, but also of our holy obligations to one another. Using the strands of our own lives, we can begin to weave a denser, warmer social fabric.

“Ours is a covenantal church’. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community, meeting together often to find the ways of love, as best we can see to do,” the Rev. Wesley wrote. “We have found there is always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world.” Maybe particular strains of spirituality can exist independent of community, but they tend to recoil from hard realities, almost in dread, and to limit the scope of the common good. These strains may succeed in resisting any disillusionment, but they will additionally curtail those communal blessings that can create more abundant life by encouraging a willingness to risk engagement and encounter with each other. The congregational curriculum is an advanced course in humanity offered at this school of life.

Recently, a priest in my New York City neighborhood told me that one of his dearest parishioners had died of a recurring cancer. It was a horrible loss for him. Just days before she entered hospice, this woman made her way to Mass, although she could not fully participate in its rites, because she lacked the physical strength to either stand or kneel. He described that scene to me then said, “Even when she couldn’t stand up, she showed up.” It was clear he thought her choice was a saintly one. I’m inclined to agree with him. In *The Cambridge Platform*, the members of local congregations are called saints; the framers

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explain, “By saints, we understand, such as have... attained the knowledge of religion.”

What perhaps few people understand is that simply by coming to weekly services, they themselves are being of service to others. Showing up is sacramental; staying present is divine. None of you seem to be live-Tweeting this service or checking your Facebook feed as I speak - or if you are, you have the fine manners to do so surreptitiously. Your presence here, with one another in this gathering, is palpable, and I dare say, holy. “The living, gathered bodies of the members are the ‘matter’ of the free church,” the Rev. Wesley declared. As the Platform pronounced: “Amen. Amen.”

We religious professionals are cautioned against preaching to the proverbial choir of our faith communities, with the implication being that we expend unnecessary effort. I no longer repeat that adage nor give it much credence. Frankly, it brings me tremendous satisfaction to preach to the choir – not only because the choir makes an attentive audience, but because all of you here can carry a tune. You can carry it very far, in fact, out into a world that desperately needs to hear music like ours.

Whenever we gather before “the mystery”, in “one strong body”, in “the struggle and the power”, as we are during that familiar chant, we feel free to raise our voices. But we gather knowing that there will be a time when “the hour” draws near its close. We will hear the benediction pronounced, extinguish the flame on our chalice, put away our gray hymnals. Where will Spirit go then, after

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we're done with our time together? The point, of course, is for our faith commitments to accompany us as we return back from our religious community – to our jobs and towns and schools – and for our souls not to slumber between weekly worship services. Ultimately, we gather together in “one strong body” as because it is good for us.

Dr. Murthy called on Americans to “rebuild strong authentic social connections... that ensure greater health and well-being for all of us.” Digital addiction and personal atomization have negative consequences for our mental as well as physical health. Not only do those blue-lit screens cause sleep disturbance, they can contribute to depressed mood and elevates anxiety as well. At my congregation in Brooklyn, we have begun to encourage our congregants to take “e-sabbaths” and “media fasts”. Now people arriving on Sunday are given the option of checking their smartphones for the duration of the service or the entirety of the afternoon. It's becoming an increasingly popular practice, I'm pleased to report, as people discover the delights of quite literally coming to their senses.

Just such embodied religion can illuminate our thoughts, warm our hearts, and kindle in us profound commitments. Our religion lets us need others and it lets them need us, too, no apologies or explanations required. It invites the seeker as well as the believer, the theist as well as the animist, the agnostic as well the mystic -- and then makes room for all those gathered. As we give utterance our highest aspirations, we learn a great deal about what it means to

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become truly faithful and fully belong. We find that the act of extending a larger welcome helps us dwell deeper in heart of our own religion. Certainly, I hope you'll be back here one week from today, and beyond that, I hope you'll consider bringing a friend or two with you. Try being an even bigger booster of this place, either online or in real life. Linger a while at the social hour, if you can. Engage in conversations that feel meaningful. Get curious about your neighbor. Say "hello" to a stranger. Loneliness may be contagious, but so too is connection.

Loneliness is not solely a public health problem in the U.S., by the way. In January 2018, the U.K. named a 'Minister for Loneliness' post in its government, a very frank acknowledgement, one journalist observed, that "loneliness... is bad for both your figurative heart and your literal one". One proposed policy measure is that communities sponsor "Great Get-Together" events over the weekend. Thankfully, that habit is already ingrained for most of us here. Having taught graduate-level classes in psychology and theology, pastoral counseling and congregational polity over the past several years, I can testify that "regular attendance at [religious] services" is both healthy and wholesome for the attendees. "Happy are the people," the *Book of Psalms* tells us, "whose hearts are set on the pilgrim way... No good thing will G-d withhold from those who walk with integrity."

This liberal religious community encourages me to show some tender regard for those who are passing through this muddy valley alongside me and to perhaps to be more patient with myself and whatever pilgrim progress I have

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attained – or not, as the case may be. It has helped me to feel more at home wherever I might find myself at a given moment in my life, keeping company with the young and the old. I'm spared the crushing image consciousness and endless impression management of Instagram and the attendant danger of entering a common "compare and despair" mode. Before we even enter into this sanctuary, we can take a moment – maybe the briefest of pauses – to gather ourselves and heed that still, small voice within. What we promise one another Sunday after Sunday is no one need walk alone. What we discourage here is ever attempting that.

So far from being mere social convention, your attendance this morning is actually hugely counter-cultural and yes – spiritual as much as it is religious. We not all angels, surely, but we all called – perhaps curiously, borrowing the Puritan term – to be "saints", as best as we are able. The loneliest among us may not cry out for help; some may opt to suffer in silence. If you yourself are struggling with loneliness, please try to share that with someone here today. Together we can help hold despair at bay. We can tell our stories; we can loan one another strength; we can bind our broken hearts and beyond that, break banana bread afterwards at the social hour. Remember the cadence of our sung rounds: "Gathered here... Gathered here... Gathered here..." When we humans gather around the fire, we are seeking what naturally sustains us, light and warmth alike.

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Light and warmth dance in our flame. Here it is not so easy to be cool and calculating, remote or detached, the way we might conceivably be in online discussions or LinkedIn. “Happy are those,” the Psalmist reminds us, who walk together in faithful, heartfelt ways and find rest in the company of one another. Happy are our own recollected hearts! In our congregations, people occasionally stumble over one another, yes, but they also understand the fumbling holds a blessing of its own. Each time we form a circle and tend the flames we have lit, we give voice to our collective faith in Presence and in one another. Suddenly, we were called home to this world of wonders, wonders already known and wonders still being revealed to us, a few flickering at the edge of our vision, likely drawing near. All together now, our kindled souls sing.