

Saving Our Lives by Belonging

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein, Transition Minister

UU Jacksonville

Sunday October 20, 2019

I want to begin with a provocative proposition: this church saves lives. Belonging to this church will save your life. Not just your life, of course, but all of our lives. My life. (Name other people here . . .) Saving lives is the basic work of communal religion – more basic than all the other work that we do together, important though all of that is. If our worship is well planned and orchestrated but it isn't lifesaving, then it fails. If our acts of charity and justice are well-meaning and well-organized but not lifesaving, then they are in vain. And yet we Unitarian Universalists claim that one of the things that distinguishes us from other religions is that we are not in the salvation business. Hmmm. How could that be when deep in my heart I believe that is exactly the business we are in? Maybe there is more than one way to understand salvation? A way that has nothing to do with heaven or hell or an afterlife or a transcendent other? I have to tell you, the reason I cling to my belief in our salvific faith is that many years ago the church saved my life. But until I went to General Assembly one summer, I had never really thought about that experience as a form of salvation.

I always go to General Assembly hoping for ideas, inspirations, resources, rejuvenation. And I always find that if I'm open to what I see and hear and feel, I get what I need. Not necessarily in the ways I expect, or in forms that I recognize immediately, but still, I get what I need. That's what happened at the General Assembly in Nashville in June 1999. Two experiences crystallized my thinking about this life-saving business. Both were visceral and intuitive and unplanned.

They were both moments of clarified thinking – sort of like the little pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope falling suddenly into a recognizable pattern.

Understand that General Assembly (or GA as we fondly refer to it) happens the last week in June – a time when ministers tend to be verrrrry tired. We arrive at GA looking forward to rest, relaxation, and some badly needed down time. Silly us, to expect that in a gathering with thousands of people. Worship, workshops, business meetings, plenaries, panel talks, lectures, concerts – events scheduled from 7 am until 11 pm every day. So I'm generally tired and frazzled at GA - and therefore more than usually vulnerable to unexpected tugs at my heart. That's a good thing. One tug came at a worship service where I heard for the first time the Annie Lamott story about the little girl who is lost. I was in a room full of ministers doing a couple of days of continuing education before the full GA started. When the worship leader got to the part in the story where the little girl says, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here." – I cried. I was so touched by that lovely little story. And around me several of my colleagues were also wiping away tears.

That is what every one of us wants – to minister in a setting where people experience the church as the reliable and steady core at the center of their wild and crazy lives. "Oh," I thought in my vulnerable and exhausted state of mind, "I wonder if people feel that way back home?" I hoped so. In almost every way, UU Sterling, the church I served at the time, couldn't have been more different from the church in that story. Rather than being in a town, they were are in the middle of suburban sprawl. Nobody walks around there at all; no child could possibly know the way from home to that place. If a little girl got lost, the police officer would certainly not drive around helping her look for landmarks. And except for Sunday morning, the place wasn't even a church, it was a community center that we rented on Sunday mornings. And yet . . . each week when we unpacked our

boxes and reconstituted the church, we were in a sense building a small town where you know your way around, and where people are kind and will stop to help you if you are lost. And this church, which rose out of the mist once a week like Brigadoon, then receded again, was as much a landmark and an anchor in the lives of its members as that solid and permanent steepled building was to that little girl.

So I hope with all my heart that when you are lost, or frightened, or lonely, you will indeed feel relief when you catch sight of your church – this church. I hope that you will know that here you are safe. Here you belong. Here you can find whatever it is you need to negotiate the difficulties you are faced with. In fact I hope many of you have already felt that way about this place. And if you have, I hope you tell those stories often in the presence of people who have not yet found their way home to this sanctuary, because it is in sharing together the positive experiences of church that we grow together.

That is the fundamental assumption of an organizational theory called Appreciative Inquiry. According to theorist Sue Annis Hammond, “The major assumption of Appreciative Inquiry is that in every organization something works, and change can be managed through the identification of what works, and the analysis of how to do more of what works. The idea . . . is to approach organizations with an appreciative eye. It never occurs to us that we can ‘fix’ an organization or even our society by doing more of what works. We are obsessed with learning from our mistakes. But, why not allow our successes to multiply enough to crowd out the unsuccessful? . . . To paraphrase Jung, an important problem is rarely solved, instead it is outgrown, as a newer, stronger interest comes along to crowd out the problem. When a newer and stronger urge or life force appears on the horizon, people adjust to grow towards it, much like a plant grows towards light.”

The continuing education program for ministers that I attended at Nashville General Assembly 20 years ago was devoted to the study of Appreciative Inquiry. After some time spent laying out the theory, we were asked to do role playing that actually demonstrated the technique of casting an appreciative eye on an organization. I volunteered for a role play – and then something completely unexpected and profound happened. My partner asked me, in the role play, to think back to a time when the church had met my needs, and to tell her about that time. Without realizing where this would take me, I told this story.

In 1981, I had finally come back to church after a 10-year absence. I was pregnant with our first child, and Barry and I both felt the need to be connected to a community of faith – for all of the same reasons that many of you came to church initially ‘for your children.’ We hadn’t gotten involved at all – just came most Sundays and didn’t really know anybody. Just before the baby was due, I signed up to join a Women’s Group. And then the unthinkable happened – the baby was stillborn. Devastated doesn’t even begin to describe how we felt on that bleak December day when we arrived to attend the memorial service for our son Brian. A service held in a sanctuary all decked out for Christmas. The minister was wonderful – present and supportive and eloquent in reminding our gathered friends and family that we had, in one moment, been bereaved and become parents. I will always be grateful for those words.

Also present that day were some people that I didn’t know. The members of the Women’s Group that I had not yet attended. They came, they brought food, and they introduced themselves to me, assured me that I was already a member of the group. And that group became my lifeline in the following months – strangers who welcomed me, cried with me, encouraged me, and pushed me when I was close to giving up.

And that is the story that poured, unbidden, from my lips in that workshop at General Assembly. I was stunned by the power and intensity of the memory. My partner Katie was stunned by the depth and pain of it. The group was equally stunned by the unexpected nature of the sharing. But Katie recovered and continued in her role. She thanked me for sharing the story, then asked the next assigned question. “What did you conclude about the nature of the church from that experience?” And I answered, “The church saved my life. The purpose of the church is to save lives.”

The theory of Appreciative Inquiry suggests that people be encouraged to talk about what works in an organization. Again quoting Sue Hammond, “The tangible result of Appreciative Inquiry is a series of positive statements phrased as if they were already happening. Because they are amplifications of what has already happened, they are easily visualized. Organizational members grow toward the statement by doing more of what they have already done. Doing more of what works crowds out the insoluble problems.” And so we come to the Provocative Propositions – statements that “describe an ideal state of circumstances that will foster the climate that creates the possibilities to do more of what works. The purpose of Provocative Propositions is to keep our best at the conscious level.”

Now we are back to the place where we started. With a provocative proposition that I proposed based on my own experience of the church at its best: this church saves lives. Like any good provocative proposition, this one is based on actual experience - my experience, to be sure, but I suspect that some of you have had a similar experience. In fact some of you shared those experiences with me and with each other in the Transition Conversations last month. Any good provocative proposition is a statement of what happens when we are at our best, not necessarily how we are every minute of every day. But every minute of every

day is not a life-saving minute. All I know is that at those times when one of us needs a lifeline, others are ready to offer it. We may be clumsy; we may miss the mark the first time we throw it. But we will keep trying, and we will gather more people around to help us rather than trying to do it alone. And in the end, we will fulfill our primary function. We will save each other's lives!

The church saved my life. That's how I learned the real reason why the church exists. That's why I'm a minister. Sometimes that gets lost in all the other things that the church does in the meantime – in between life-saving exercises. But all of what we do is in service of readying ourselves for the transformative work of lifesaving. From Hospitality to Finance to the Board. We do other work, sure. We put together budgets and buy supplies and write reports. And then we hear a cry for help, and we respond. We remember that the purpose of this church is to save lives. The lives of those who belong to this community of faith, and the lives of those in the larger community who need our particular kind of salvation.

Yes, we are in the salvation business. Not that salvation; not the kind that depends on arbitrary and capricious judgement; not the kind with halos and harps vs. pitchforks and flames. We are not in the after-life business. We are in the salvation in the here and now business. And belonging to a Unitarian Universalist congregation that is in that business will save you. It will

In the words of Deanna Vandiver, “Our presence matters. How we relate to each other creates the conditions of hell or heaven here on earth. May we remember and affirm that we are all in this together, friends: we are all in this together.” May you all know the comfort and challenge of belonging to a community of faith that is bound and determined to save your life. Amen.