

Pastoral Prayer

A Person Is a Puzzle by *Mark Mosher DeWolfe*

A person is a puzzle. Sometimes from the inside, it feels like some pieces are missing.

Perhaps one we love is no longer with us. Perhaps one talent we desire eludes us. Perhaps a moment that required grace found us clumsy. Sometimes, from the inside, it feels like some pieces are missing.

A person is a puzzle. We are puzzles not only to ourselves but to each other.

A puzzle is a mystery we seek to solve -- and the mystery is that we are whole even with our missing pieces. Our missing pieces are empty spaces we might long to fill, empty spaces that make us who we are. The mystery is that we are only what we are -- and that what we are is enough.

In the stillness of this morning, into the accepting peace of the wide open sky, let us offer our failings, our inadequacies, into the silence. And let us know that we are accepted, by God and by this company, exactly as we are. Accepted -- missing pieces, and all.

(Adapted for Arizona, no gray sky!) Amen

Sermon for November 6, 2005,

What does it mean to belong? By The Reverend Lone Jensen

There are few emotions that are as powerful within the human heart as the need to belong. We can of course belong in innumerable different ways. We can belong to a country, a nation and a people, with a shared history, customs and mythologies. We can belong to a family, to a political party, be it red, blue or green. Special foods set us apart, as in garlic lovers and haters and holiday customs can take on a mix of nostalgia and near religious fervor. Surely, for the child in me, there is no other way to celebrate Yule, but by walking around a living fir tree with lit candles. Is there any other way?

The warm glow of belonging, the embracing feeling of coming home, the knowledge of being accepted and loved entirely as I am, warts and all, came late in my life. The cold ache of being on the outside, the misty seduction of longing and loneliness is as familiar to me as an old outgrown shoe. I recognize the aching places. And after living in three different countries and seven different states just where I do belong now can be a bit confusing. So I have a confession for you. It has taken me over thirty years to finally apply for American Citizenship and admit to that Danish little girl

in me that here is where I belong now. Not in a Denmark that no longer exist as I remember it. How about you? Where do you belong? How many countries or states have you lived in? Do you believe you can go home again?

In our day and age it seems all too easy to lose a sense of belonging, to unravel the ties that bind, and to find one self utterly different and alone. (UUMA resource material)

This is where religion comes in and this congregation. It is that kind of belonging I am going to explore today.

You can of course be religious or spiritual and certainly a good person on your own. But few of us are cut out to be solitary hermits. Even our most own famous Unitarian hermit Henry David Thoreau, while living in his solitary refuge at Walden, still attended church and still walked out to have dinner with his friends. Human connections matter. We are social animals. Even the ancient medieval anchorites, nuns who lived literally behind brick walls, in walled up solitude, were visited by pilgrims seeking advice and asking for wisdom. The stereotype of the solitary Guru sitting high on a mountaintop, so popular in New Yorker cartoons, is even 10,000 feet above civilization still part of a human religious tradition. I would go as far as to say that this beloved community and belonging to a congregation may in fact be good for us.

John Buerhens writes in a recent issue of *Quest*: *My moment of inspiration came at a glitzy mall near my home in suburban Boston, just before Christmas. In the midst of a crowd of shoppers heavily laden with purchases, I saw a teenager bopping along, listening to his CD player, wearing a T-shirt inscribed, "ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT NARCISSISM!"*

Well I suppose that is true! It is easy I must admit to get lost in and isolated inside your own musings and worries, seeing the world and others through our own particular colored glasses. Narcissus was a Greek youth who fell in love with himself and since he could never really touch that youth in the mirror, never reach the fatal beauty he saw reflected in the lake's placid surface, he was desperately unhappy, caught in the trap of thinking only of himself.

This Sunday morning we welcome new members into our congregation. All of us visitors and long time members come here for many different reasons. But we all admit by our own presence here that we need each other and in that one simple, admittedly naïve sentence lie our salvation, in a Unitarian Universalist sense of course. We are not saved from an imaginary hell for we are the proud descendant of the Universalists "no hellers", followers of a God who is all embracing love. Hell, to us, is a sick invention.

God knows there are plenty of hellish horrors in this world to go around and surely no need for that in an afterlife. That would be overkill! No, what I mean is that we are saved from our own narrow individualism, from our intense preoccupations with ourselves.

To explain part of what I mean let me share this story by *Kaaren Solveig Anderson*. *My friend Marcy and her boyfriend recently ate dinner at a Chinese restaurant. As they enjoyed a plate of lo mein, a hand reached down and ushered away their platter of noodles and a thin, poorly dressed woman left the restaurant with their plate of food.*

In astonishment, they watched her walk down the street, holding the plate as she stuffed noodles into her mouth. The owner realized what had happened and chased after the noodle thief. A struggle ensued. Noodles flew then flopped onto the sidewalk.

The owner walked back to the restaurant. My friends were given a new heaping plate of lo mein and a stream of apology. Unable to eat anymore, they asked to have the noodles wrapped up. A block later, they came upon the lo mein thief. Marcy listened to her boyfriend's plea to just walk away. But she didn't. Instead, she walked over to the thief and said, "We haven't formally met, but about ten minutes ago, you were interested in our noodles. They

gave us some new ones, are you still hungry?" The woman nodded and extended her bony arms. She took the Styrofoam container in her hands, bowed ever so slightly, and murmured, "Thank you, you're very kind."

What makes us walk away from discomfort? Or stay? You could say a lot about my friend's story -- a lot about generosity, kindness, attention, and thievery. I'm more interested in what motivates us to confront that which makes us uncomfortable and makes us look at the guts and grit of decisions, the choices to not address things that are uncomfortable, uneasy, unbalanced, unnatural and unbelievable.

My friend Marcy chose not to walk away. She held firm in the muck. Sometimes, that's all we need or can do to get to the other side -- the side where generosity, comfort, and kindness reside, the side where foundations are firm and stable.

Anderson's story touches my heart. Would I walk away? Or would I listen to my other better self and stay in the muck? Even though doing so may make me feel awful or uncomfortable? Staying in the muck is a great metaphor for what it means to really belong to and stick with a congregation. As in a marriage we chose to stay and work through it over and over again.

As Unitarian Universalists we live in a paradox of our own making: we are born questioners and yet we must trust. We must trust the mystery of our own existence and take on faith that it has meaning and purpose beyond our narrow selves and a limited pursuit of happiness that over time loses its flavor. Alice Walker wrote that *service to others is the rent we pay for living on earth*. Certainly that is part of our role: to transform the world. In fact some of us suffer from the malady that Mark Twain described: *Sometimes our conscience takes up more room than all the rest of our insides*.

In the magazine *Congregations* I found these words: *Religion has traditionally been a powerful force for preserving a sense of community, counteracting the tensions that can easily pull people apart. The word itself is most likely derived from the Latin root religare, to "re-tie" or "re-connect." Most of us have had an experience of "collective effervescence," a powerful feeling of shared energy and identity among a group of people. When I read these words the image that came to my mind was bubbles as in Champagne. Together, my friends we are effervescent! So much spiritual energy is bouncing all over the place. Can you feel it?*

On good days we sure can. On good days we celebrate together. But what happen on not so good days? Does this

congregation help you to become a better person and does it make a difference in your life? Are you willing to wrestle with these questions as Jacob did with the angel until you too are blessed with a deep sense of belonging? What do you believe?

What happens when we get hurt or angry? Dare we really trust each other enough to share our deepest held beliefs? Can we stay in the muck even when it seems uncomfortable and work it out? To get to that place where generosity, comfort and kindness reside?

Lately I have been in a bit of a muck of my own making. Two months ago I decided to not put my sermon titles in the newsletter. Some of you, no many of you, did not agree. My intentions were good but all of us know what the road to the place we do not believe in is paved with. Good intentions! Let me assure you I did not do this to make things easier for myself. I did it out of a conviction that this congregation could be a place of ever more transforming power. That takes commitment and more than occasional attendance. Unitarian Universalism cannot be reduced to a discussion club, a place where our own views are only affirmed and never challenged. I see Valley Unitarian Universalist Church hovering on the verge of greatness, getting closer and then stopping short. I include myself in this challenge for I too have my

own very special sacred toes and do not like to have them stepped on. But worship is at its core about transformation. We who create the service are merely doorkeepers. You choose to enter or not.

Well as those of you who read the Newsletter knows I had to eat crow for Thanksgiving, and the titles are back. Give and take is part of any relationship. And we are in a relationship, as congregation to minister. We do in this very moment belong to one another.

But I still believe what I wrote in August: We invite you to come each and every Sunday you possibly can because this is your congregation and your presence here matters! We want you to come and be a vital part of making this sanctuary “a place of celebration and peace as we encounter the mystery of life.” Minister led, lay led and guest preachers, we will worship, which means “lift up that which is of worth”, together. Your presence is not only requested it is essential!

There are no perfect people and no perfect minister. But we dare to believe that human goodness is not only possible but natural. Every one is welcome here. This is how we live our faith and our first principle: yes, even those folks we cannot stand have that inherent worth and dignity! No, it is not easy! We have to get into the muck at times to learn how to really belong.

Martin Copenhaer writes: *I remember my shock at hearing a psychologist say that a church is valuable because it is a place where we can learn to stand one another. As members of a church, we did not choose one another, so we have an opportunity to learn what it is to receive the stranger...*

He is right. We chose this congregation and we chose this faith but not necessarily each other. But now we got each other.

As when we fall in love at first we see only the good in the beloved. And then we see the flaws. We get angry or hurt and it is at that point we really choose to belong or not. *We may wish that we could make of the church some otherworldly gathering of high-minded folk in which smaller concerns and seemingly petty conflicts do not intrude. (Copenhaer)*

But I could not belong to such an otherworldly congregation. It would not be real. Home they say is where they have to take you in.

In closing I invite you to ponder these words by John Buehrens: There is, finally, a deeper and more important dimension to the elusive mystery of congregations. These are sacred places where people meet God within them, where they tap into a higher power and a larger reality. In the pews at worship time, in the coffee hour and the classroom, there is a sacred

presence “in, with, and under” everyday life, a grace that changes everything. And although congregations are not the only places where this grace works, these special sacred places provide an opening in the world—a place to breathe, to see things differently, to change, to find meaning amidst the whirl of life.

So be it!