

Confessions of a Hymnal Clutcher

Rev. Julie Forest

Delivered to UUCOD March 12, 2017

Last month I got to spend time after the services with a bunch of great folks who were interested in learning more about what it means to become a member of this church and what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Each of them shared some of their searching journey and what brought them to our Desert Church. Being around these folks and hearing their stories reminded me of my own journey towards Unitarian Universalism.

Once upon a time, long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away (approximately 34 years ago in San Francisco) I was a hymnal clutcher. When I finally came back to organized religion and began attending regular Sunday worship services, I would sit grimly through the service, afraid on some level of what would happen to me. When it came time to sing the hymns, I would grip the hymnal opened to the correct page and I would read along. I tried not to look at anybody else, and I hoped that no one would look at me.

Somehow after years and years of not attending any church, I found myself attending The First Unitarian Church of San Francisco. It was sort of churchy, but not absolutely horrible. On the surface it didn't seem like there were too many people like me attending: I didn't have a profession--I wasn't in a relationship. I didn't even know the hymns or any of the ritual words.

In fact, when the hymns were sung I found it to be almost unbearable. Not because the congregation couldn't sing, but because I couldn't sing, not in public, not hymns. It seemed just too I don't know, too sincere, too vulnerable, too hopeful. I stood up when everybody else did, but I did not hold my hymnal, I clutched it. My face was not opened in joyful song; rather I held it in a state between a scowl and a grimace that may or may not have passed for sincere concentration.

As I said, I hoped that no one would look at me.

I was afraid to believe, and mislabeled my doubt and fear. I called it courage. I had a scar; mine was a religious scar, and it made me profoundly uncomfortable in churchy settings. When I first came back to church, part of me

needed church and part of me thought that church was phony and inauthentic. Yet, it has been church and my faith that has and will continue to transform me.

Transformation and being open to seeing things a new way and feeling things differently are cornerstones of my faith and of our tradition. I have been transformed from someone who was profoundly uncomfortable about all faith stances to one who can say: “Here I stand. This is what I believe. Here I stand. This is my faith confession, and this is what I hope for and will work for in our faith community.”

In a legalistic sense to *confess* means to come clean, admit to doing something, providing the details, and taking responsibility. Spiritually, to confess is to unburden oneself. In the religious sense, confession also means to affirm, assert, declare, acknowledge.

Today I want to make a confession of faith and to share what I want, what I need, what I get, and what I hope to inspire and nourish in our faith community.

I have come to know that love is a core component of my faith.

Love. “Love is the spirit of this church.” We proclaim it every Sunday in unison in our Affirmation. Love is at the heart of our walking together. We believe that love is a more powerful and authentic way to draw and keep us together than any creed. Theologically we do not believe in a God or Eternal Truth that is punishing in nature. We do not believe that we are damned right out of the gate of Eden. Historically, we have believed in a loving God, a loving presence in the universe, a loving vibration that is much stronger and will always neutralize evil, non-loving vibrations. This is what I still believe.

I believe and have experienced the transformational truth of our faith. We call our tradition *The Living Tradition*; Our Hymnal is called *Singing the Living Tradition*. We do not stop and are not stuck in one place; rather, we come to this faith with a willingness to be transformed. This has always been a part of Unitarian Universalism. We know that just as our planet is transformed by our care, so, too, our faith tradition and our own practice of this faith are transformed by our care and the care we receive from others. My scars, my brokenness, my story, my dreams have flourished in large part by my relationship to the transforming power of mystery and to our Unitarian Universalist faith community.

Freedom. Another core component of my faith is freedom. Ours is a free faith. To people, like my son, who were born into this faith, I say, “That it is all nice and well but more is required of this faith than an exposure as a child.” Each one of us is here because we have chosen to be here.

Actually to use a concept from Al Gore, our faith is an “inconvenient faith”, and we enter into it freely. We are not coerced and do not coerce. Our faith is free, but it is not a free ride. It takes work and courage and a surrender of the greedy ego to really be in a faith community.

Hope. Hope is another core element of my faith. I believe that the resources for a meaningful and fulfilling life are present and available to all people. Alone my hopes don’t amount to much, but when I blend my hopes with yours, when our community takes our hopes and proclaims them to the wider world, proclaiming and advocating for a more just, equitable and compassionate world, we expand the possibilities of what it means to live more fully into the gift of life.

Invitation. In my experience of the divine truth and the divine reality, divine communication always occurs in the form of an invitation. No religion with a God who issues literal commands rings authentically true for me. Rather, the Spirit of Life and Love that I have met operates in the realm of invitation. We, and our church, are at our best when we operate in the same manner.

When I began attending First Church in San Francisco no one insisted I do any one thing, profess any one thing, or be any one thing in particular. I wasn’t brow beaten or threatened with damnation. Missing church was not a sin imposed on me by a church hierarchy. Their door was open to me in my full humanity, my struggles with the Bible and the patriarchy, and my joy and the wisdom that I found in dream work. Yet, over time I began to see in the words of my mentor the Rev. Dr. Peter Luton, that “The liberal religious life is not a spectator sport.” Our faith requires that we participate.

My faith and my direct experience of the transforming power of mystery and wonder have led me to the belief that the nature of reality is relational. The more in tune we are with the interconnected web of life, the more involved we will be in our faith communities. We know that no one will come down and live our lives for us. No one will vicariously atone for our sins. There is no substitutionary salvation for us. No one but our own imperfect selves will do the work of the church. It is up to us.

Humility. Last but not least. The final cornerstone of my faith is humility. Humility, from the Latin word *humus* which means land or soil. Humility reminds me that as a Human, the earth is my home. I will return as earth to the earth. My faith does not make proprietary claims about this world or the next. We don't claim to own life, death, heaven or hell -- or truth, for that matter.

I started out this sermon with the code words “long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away, once upon a time” because my journey from hymnal clutcher to religious leader has been a mythic one worthy of mythic language. But here's the greatest thing of all about the faith tradition that you and I share. I am not alone. Each of us is called as part of our faith journey to engage ever more deeply with love, and to wrestle with transformational truth in freedom. The invitation to hope and work for a world transformed by our care is always there.

For a while after I left organized religion, I thought that religion was only for weak people, only a crutch. My attitude was far from humble. Now, my approach is much different. Now I feel that the stronger I am, the stronger my faith is. The stronger I am, the more of me there is to surrender, the more of me there is to give and to share. Although I am still not 100% comfortable needing anything, I need my faith and my faith tradition. Recognizing that I need my faith has been a powerful awareness for me and it has required humility and a willingness to be vulnerable. But it can be done. I have moved from a scowl to a more joyous embrace of not just singing but all of congregational life. And I have found comfort, paradoxically, in my uncertainty.

For all you hymnal clutchers out there, I bless you. I praise you. I honor your uncertainty and acknowledge the huge canyons and cliffs of doubt that must be traversed to come into the warmth of our communal fire. You are not alone. In fact, you are in fine company with theologian, UU Minister and friend to this church, Tom Owen-Towle and me. I want you to know that an integral part of my faith is doubt and that I am strengthened and stretched by my faith community. Rev. Owen-Towle reminds us that “It is foolhardy either to doubt or to believe all by oneself.” We need each other.

So let's cherish our doubts and let us cherish our faith community. Let us hold our faith, each other and our church as if it were a magic vase, inspiring us to keep looking with new eyes and freshen up what needs to be renewed. As a community, we are not perfect. But we know that there is always the invitation to begin again in love. Our doubts when held lightly and shared communally, not only lead to larger truth but they make us wise, keep us humble and

allow us to live together in love. May we embody the spirit of invitation. May we embody the spirit of hope. May we be open to transformation in our faith, our hearts, each other and our world without end.

Blessed Be. Amen.