

Giving Up the Ghost

Posted on August 23, 2016

Reading from Christine Robinson's essay, "Imagineers of Soul"

The audio version of this sermon can be found [here](#).

A few years ago, my colleague Robin Bartlett, who grew up Unitarian Universalist, preached a sermon she called, "Children will Listen." It was a reference to the song from the musical *Into the Woods*, as well as a reference to the subtle and not-so-subtle messages she received in the church and faith of her childhood.

As she tells it, she "grew up UU in the very late '70s, '80s and early '90s in a church where, as the old joke about us goes, the only time you heard the word "Jesus" was when the minister tripped on his way into the pulpit. I knew very well," she says, "what words we weren't allowed to say from a very early age (God, Jesus, heaven, hell, sin, salvation, Ronald Reagan). We were," she says, "an Orthodox church."

From these experiences, she describes how she learned to become an evangelical atheist UU child – "earnestly believing that [you only believed in God or Jesus if you were stupid,] and if enough people knew that there wasn't a God, the world would be a better place."

Looking back as an adult, she realizes that this reactive-atheism was a result of the grown-ups in the church's religious upbringing – their injuries and struggles, but as a kid, she just received it as her inheritance. It was her religion.

In her podcast, *On Being*, Krista Tippet begins every interview with the same question – she says: tell me about the spiritual or religious background of your childhood. Without fail all of these illicit rich, visceral, juicy stories, stories that contain the seeds of the people that everyone from Yo-Yo Ma to Joanna Macy to Jonathan Haidt to Thich Nhat Hahn would eventually become.

Each time I hear this part of her interviews, I think of Robin's sermon, and I think about my kids, and about all of our kids – the kids who are growing up here, in our congregation and in the Unitarian Universalist faith, and I wonder – how will they answer this question some day – whether they are asked by some interviewer, or by their minister to light the chalice?

What will they say are the gifts of wonder and meaning, ritual and song – or lack thereof, that they received? What messages of worth, or belonging, transformation or hope?

And often when I hear these interviews, I think of my own answer to these questions, and the answers so many of us might have – whether we were raised in a UU church or in another tradition, or in no faith at all. I wonder at the ways that we as children were listening, and how we as adults, still

remember. It is never a simple thing to piece together our stories, to fashion together something we might call wholeness, integrity, authenticity.

The church of Robin's childhood, like many Unitarian Universalist congregations in the 70s, 80s, and much of the 90s, was a church shaped by its members' personal experience of a certain kind of Christianity – and a certain kind of religious injury too many of our members had personally felt, and in the ways they experienced this sort of Christianity playing out in the wider US culture – in work places and family lives, in politics, in schools, and in the so-called culture wars. During this time, we became the anti-church church, and as some have said, rather than following our call to be counter-cultural, we decided our cause was to be counter-religious.

All of this created an interesting paradox – because when we form religious communities in reaction to other religious communities – the anti-church church- rather than – say, forming them in response to a positive, integrated vision of our own – these religious communities, and the people in them, including their children, are in many ways still formed and shaped by that old world and the past religious experience we are trying to flee, just in the negative, shadowed versions of these religious traditions, their empty outlines – their ghosts.

In the late 90s a popular UUA curriculum emerged called “The Haunting House” that was meant to address the ways that our religious pasts continue to influence us – and not just influence us, but haunt us. The word Haunting conveys something scary, even terrifying, chilling, or bone-shaking – and most importantly, being haunted has the effect of keeping us hidden, tentative, rigid, on-guard and rule-bound. This is what Christine Robinson is describing when she talks about shame.

This past Tuesday we hosted in our sanctuary the Director of Religious Education from one of our UU congregations in Salt Lake City – Liz Martin. She gave a great presentation and then answered every question we could throw at her about the Church of Latter Day Saints, the church where she was brought up, and where she and her husband were married – and also the church she left 20 years ago for Unitarian Universalism.

She told us about the experience of going into the temple to be sealed with her husband in marriage, after looking forward to it for her whole life. Instead of spiritual elation like you are “supposed to feel,” Liz shared that felt disappointed, and disoriented.

In these moments, there are two possible responses – either we decide there's something wrong with us, or there's something wrong with the religion we are trying to practice.

When people tell me these sorts of stories – when many of you have shared with me about your own stories like this, usually, you tell me how you picked the latter – how wrong and obviously dumb the ideas of that religion were. (How people who believe in God or Jesus are stupid). But when we keep talking, and keep

remembering the experience as it actually played out – usually we get to the part where before there was the latter, there was the former – first, you decided something had to be wrong with *you*.

That's what Liz felt when she didn't "get" the temple. Rather than doubting the church, she doubted herself. Her beliefs weren't strong enough, her spirit not pure enough, her dedication not deep enough. She studied more, served more, tried harder. A few years later she decided it wasn't meant to be and left the LDS church.

Many of us who grew up in and then left other religious traditions can relate with this experience. Maybe it wasn't even about beliefs, *per se* – maybe it was literally about who we are – about our sexual orientation, or our gender; or maybe it was an experience of abuse from someone we trusted in a religious community.

Walking away from these religious communities and traditions can take years, yet happen as if in an instant. When we leave, many of us also leave our primary friendship circle, our families of origin, and something that has been at the center of our identity – our sense of who we are, our people, and our sense of belonging. No wonder it can feel later like we are being haunted. It is a huge and complicated loss.

Today Unitarian Universalism remains a place where many people who have left another religious tradition can find sanctuary, and a liberating, spiritual freedom.

Just as a small sample, let's just do a quick survey of our gathering this morning – if you're willing – If your upbringing had you connected with one or more religious traditions other than Unitarian Universalism, will you raise your hand?

And then, if you were like Sally – starting at any point in your childhood or youth – raised in this or another Unitarian Universalist – or Unitarian, or Universalist congregation....raise your hand?

And then finally, if you were raised outside of a formal religious tradition – no church or synagogue or mosque?

This last group is growing, especially with those who are under age 30 or 35 or so, and not just in our congregation, or in Unitarian Universalism, but nationally. Many more than in prior generations have not been raised or affiliated with any religious tradition or faith community. Many of these had parents who left a religious tradition and never returned, and so didn't raise their kids connected to a church. If you're in this group, you may wonder if "pledging" is the same thing you do with a sorority or fraternity, or you may either call your minister for every single thing (God bless you), or never at all, and your reaction to the word prayer, for example, isn't reactive negativity, but more nervous curiosity, wondering if it's something you could learn, and would you seem silly if you asked how to do it, or why, or when?

And most of all you wonder if there are words you could learn, rituals you could practice, songs you could sing – anything that could express that feeling you have, sometimes, when you look up at the stars on a clear night, and feel connected to all of them somehow, and yet so aware of how small this moment is, what a blip in time your life represents, and still somehow knowing your life matters, you wonder if there could be words for the

feeling that you have that even your breath matters, that somehow it is connected to it all, and your great sense that if you tug on any piece of any of this vast universe, it will reveal itself as connected to every other thing – you wonder if – you hope this place, this faith, this religious community will help you stay connected to this great feeling.

By the way, all three categories struggle and wonder about all of these things, too.

All three categories struggle to piece together a sense of wholeness and integrity when it comes to their religious and spiritual upbringing, as well as their present, and their future. All three categories struggle to claim with clarity and purpose who their people are, what words and rites will fit – and to reference Rumi, which of the “thousand ways there are to kneel and kiss the ground” will connect with a deeply felt sense of truth and beauty, All of us struggle to believe that whatever the way could be good enough, that we are good enough, worthy and already loved, just as we are – All of us struggle to do this not with shadow but with light – not in reaction to ghosts but in reverence to all *tangibly alive*.

A few years ago I asked Christine about her ideas and the question of shame, and if she had done any work to address people’s shame about their religious pasts in her congregation.

She sighed, and said that she tried, but her folks told her repeatedly, they had no such thing. “We’re not ashamed.” They said, “We’re fine.”

Shame is not an easy thing to claim, and especially after it’s been a while, the brain plays tricks, employs coping techniques – so that we don’t remember that we – like Liz, first blamed ourselves. The pain and shame of those early experiences instead creates a wall between ourselves and the whole of that old religious tradition, a wall we decide marks off all that is wrong from all that is right, the old world that was bad, and wrong from the new world which good, and right, and true.

Guarding the wall becomes a practice of scorn, resentment, and shame turned outward.

As Christine says, “If there is one thing a person who has been shamed knows how to do, it is to shame others in return.”

It reminds me of that saying I quote often to you – from Richard Rohr – that pain that is not transformed is transmitted. Because these walls – this scorn, this haunting is about pain – pain that hasn’t been properly addressed, or fully healed, or integrated into new story of spirituality.

Healing this pain, or giving up the ghost of our religious past begins simply by openly and non-defensively remembering these pasts – because walls don’t work, whether we are talking about national borders, or spiritual pasts.

Though we may have hoped to leave it all behind, deep in our hearts, and in our bodies reside the remnants of our religious and spiritual pasts, the stories and rituals we shared, or longed to share, the songs we sang, the people we gathered with, and the ways they loved us, or failed to.

Healing begins when we realize how much this past still pulls on us – even if just in our avoidance – especially when we are grieving, confused, afraid, or alone, seeking an anchor in the open sea. Healing begins first by remembering it all – all we felt, even when it was painful, especially then, all those places of shame, the feelings of being unworthy or deficient.

And from there, healing continues, as Christine says, when we realize, in those places, that our way of being and believing, even if it did not fit with what others may have wanted, even if it wasn't how we were supposed to feel, believe, or be – none of this actually made us broken, or wrong, or less important, or made us less worthy of the experience of the tradition and our right to call ourselves a part.

A number of years ago, I was serving as a Chaplain at a community hospital, when I was called to help a large catholic family – and if you don't know my religious upbringing was Catholic. I walked in the room to find them all wearing rosaries around their necks – which is NOT OK. As I arrived and identified myself, they asked if I would find holy water and bless one of their stuffed animals for their family member who was ill – also NOT OK, but I did it. We circled around the matriarch's bedside, and I blessed everyone with the holy water – among them I spotted a lesbian couple fully integrated. We prayed the Lord's Prayer, often with not the right words, and it was perfect.

Suddenly, it hit me: there was nothing the Pope or any priest – or *anyone* could do – to control who calls themselves a Catholic, or what Catholics actually believe, or how they engage with the tradition.

Even in Catholicism, you can't stop people from making their own way, finding their own way to kneel and kiss the ground – to proclaim their truth and seek out their own ways of beauty.

Which also meant, that the pieces of Catholicism that were still a part of me and that fed me – rather than haunted me, could stay, could be re-claimed, could be integrated and celebrated. It didn't need to be an either/or.

Our spiritual paths need not be a process of serial monogamy – where you are seriously committed to a series of religious or spiritual traditions, but only one at a time, and wholly rejecting one as you commit to another. Instead, it could be a process of repetition and revision, and of relentless accumulation that paradoxically results in a continuous stripping away – all that you might reveal something true, raw, and real that was there all along.

Whether intentionally or not, we were listening as children, and we absorbed. And as adults, we remember. Nothing we do would allow us to give up our pasts – religious or otherwise – not entirely. But we can give up the ghost in favor of the gifts, the off-limits words in favor of renewed and deeper meaning, the shadow in favor of the light, the wall of scorn in favor of the great, whole, and holy story, still and always growing.

In our walk together, we can be not just a sanctuary from our past injuries, but a place for healing, and transformation. We can hold one another and bear witness as we re-tell and rebuild our stories, creating and claiming a positive faith, a constructive theology, and a spirituality truly open to all the sources of truth, beauty, and love. For our children, for ourselves, for our church, and for our world, let us keep listening, as we continue this walk, together.