



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A Still Small Voice: Listening for the divine, when you're certain the no-one is speaking

Ruby Johnson © 26th February 2023

I think that a lot of people are attracted to Unitarianism because they were cast out by, or have left, other faith-based communities. The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism is that we engage in “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. Those of us who have come to this church as cast-offs from other faith traditions will attest that free inquiry is not necessarily a hallmark of organised religion.

My journey to this church was long and difficult. My family was not churchgoing, but I absorbed a common form of vague Christian theology. I had a chaotic and unstable home life which left deep impressions upon my inner world. The idea that we were all sinners, deserving of eternal fire, was something that very quickly lodged itself in my head. At night, I would pray to God to save me from the flames.

I put off questions about God and the meaning of life until I was about sixteen, with the complication that this was also around the time I was realising that I was queer. I made some friends at school who were extremely religious and started attending church with them. I'm not sure even to this day what denomination the church was, but suffice to say that it was theologically conservative. But I tried to believe. I began to pray every night, and I got something in return. Nothing as dramatic as a voice from on high, but something that brought me some kind of peace.

Eventually, my discomfort with the social values of the church at large, and my friends in particular, became too much for me and I stopped attending. It was a painful and isolating experience which created inside me a deep mistrust of anything related to religion.

I wallowed in that resentment for over a decade, only to find myself here. Why am I here, in this church? Why are any of us, those who have been rejected, excluded, and marginalised: what do we find in this community?

I believe that if you were to ask this question of those attending today's service, you would find that what people look for most in a church community is connection and guidance. In most faith communities (at least most Christian ones), this connection and guidance is facilitated by communion with a defined higher power. You are supposed to come to God in prayer, and allow Him (and it is always “him”) to speak to you. I have often heard that we must come to God as if we were children, with trusting, open hearts, and allow Him to guide us in the role of a loving “heavenly father”.

This kind of communion is described as a “personal relationship” with God. I have never been clear on exactly what this relationship is meant to entail. How does He communicate? I always assumed as a child that this guidance came in the form of a voice inside our heads, as if a person were speaking right next to you. If so, how can we tell the difference between spiritual communion, and a schizophrenic episode? I suspect that if we put aside the flowery imagery of a holy voice coming from on high, then what most people experience in conversation with God is more of an internal dialogue. The “still small voice” heard during prayer seems (to me at least) to be a quiet internal reminder of what exactly our values are, and how to live in accordance with these values.

Now obviously, this is not the only form of connection and guidance that people get out of a traditional faith community. There are also the connections formed between the parishioners themselves, and between those parishioners and their minister. However, I think it is a fair observation that this personal relationship with God is of central importance to these other social connections. I’ve even heard it said, for example, that a true Christian marriage is between three people: a husband, a wife, and God. A deep spiritual communion with a higher power is seen as a sort of glue, binding together a community.

But this comes with a price: live how we want you to live, believe what we believe. If you cannot do this, you had better figure out how to lie, both to your community, and to yourself. For many people, this compromise grants a great deal of spiritual security, serenity, and peace. However, quoting former Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage, “You can pay too high a price, even for peace.” I believe that many of you will agree with me when I say that this vision of spiritual life is stifling, claustrophobic, and ultimately, too high of a price to pay.

As Unitarians, we have chosen a hard road, because the principles which we hold mean that we are unable to accept easy answers about the nature of life. When I first began to read about different faith groups as a teenager, I couldn’t quite get my head around Unitarianism. It seemed to me somewhat farcical: coming to a church, engaging in ritual worship, but not necessarily believing in any particular doctrine of divinity. Why did these people engage with all the trappings of religion, if they did not believe that God was listening and ready to answer them?

I am sure that many of you have heard of the psychological concept of the “inner child”. The inner child is the part of our subconscious that holds the most fundamental beliefs we hold about the world, based on our earliest experiences and interactions. Our conscious, adult minds are in constant negotiation with this inner child. When we feel a sinking feeling inside pulling us toward deep anxiety and fear, we find ourselves wrestling with this part of our psyche. When I began therapy a number of years ago, I understood that this concept was useful for dealing with particular psychological issues, but I could not see how it applied to me.

I was asked to explore the fears and insecurities that came up during the course of a day, and to track these thoughts back to the lessons I learned about life as a child: that it was frightening, unfair, unsafe, etc. However, rather than my therapist attempting to talk me out of these

positions, she would ask me what I would say now, as an adult, if I were to be put in charge of a child who was distressed. What I quickly realised was that no matter how cynical my own conclusions about the world may be, I would sincerely seek to calm and comfort this child.

Now, replace this imaginary distressed child with the very real distress that each of us feels, somewhere deep down inside. Would you speak to your own inner child with the same warmth? Managing our inner child is nothing more or less than engaging in this internal exercise every time we feel upset. Most people learn to do this automatically, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on how this kind of calming behaviour was modelled by the adults around them. For those of us who begin to learn this as adults ourselves, it is a very frustrating process. Why can everyone else cope, when I cannot?

To me, inner child work fundamentally resembles prayer. The wounded child comes to the calming adult presence, and seeks comfort. What is remarkable is that each of us is able to do this inside of our own heads. While I do not seek to entirely explain away the mystical connection that one might feel while praying, I do think that a huge part of prayer is doing exactly what I was asked to do in those therapy sessions. In essence, part of ourselves prays to another part of ourselves, and miraculously, we receive an answer. It is the ultimate personal relationship with the divine - a communion with the humanity which we each hold in our hearts.

Fundamentally, what this realisation affirms for me is that my efforts toward engaging with the spiritual are not just a relic of a less enlightened time. Church is not just for fools. The acts that we engage in as a community have a humanistic value which goes far beyond dogmatic theology. We can have a connection with something genuinely important, something soothing, something that nourishes the soul. I believe that we can engage with something genuinely divine.

That said, I know that what I am labelling as divine doesn't have the same security to it as God and all His angels. What right do I have to tell myself that everything is going to be ok? How can I claim to know that? I agree that, fallible as we are, reassuring ourselves is not quite the same as being reassured by an infallible God. That, I am afraid, is the cost of the hard road we have chosen. Unitarians do not claim that we can know the answers with certainty, but we seek solace while we ask the questions.

So why do we come to church? I would say that it is because we understand that no voice is coming from on high to give us the answers. The experiences we have with the divine fundamentally draw from the experiences we have with other human beings. We seek examples of kindness, compassion, and empathy so that we can emulate these same values while in dialogue with our own deepest selves. We each take on this sacred role as our own minister, the dual roles of the child and the parent, counselling ourselves with the best examples learned from each other. We talk to ourselves, gently, in a still small voice.

Meditation / Discussion Questions:-

Why do you come to church, as opposed to doing something else?

What do you gain by coming to a service?