

Let Our Life Speak – readings and sermon

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Reading Fashion Me A People by Maria Harris

People come into church communities in many different ways, and often in a combination of ways. Some find themselves in a neighborhood and either accept or search out (a nearby) local congregation. Others look for a faith community with a particular ethos, a particular angle of vision or attitude as a church, and test out a congregation by visiting several times before making a choice. Others are born in to a particular (faith). . . it is part of their personal identity. Still others ask friends or neighbors if they know of a church that might meet their needs. And still others choose a church home . . . compatible. . . with their personal desires, beliefs and convictions (and also) with their. . . needs as a family, giving important consideration to the congregation's care for children. (A) common element in affiliating with a community tend(s) to be remarkably constant. . . the impetus toward belonging. . . associating with those sharing a common belief, ways (in) life. . . Deep within the human heart is the longing for a holy time when "all will be one" . . .

Reading Let Your Life Speak by Parker Palmer

"There is in all visible things. . . a hidden wholeness." (These words of Thomas Merton reveal) that in the visible world. . . a great truth is concealed in plain sight: diminishment and beauty, darkness and light, death and life are not opposites. They are held together in the paradox of "hidden wholeness." In a paradox, opposites do not negate each other – they cohere in mysterious unity at the heart of reality. Deeper still they need each other for health. . . In a culture that prefers the ease of either-or thinking to the complexities of paradox, we have a hard time holding opposites together. We want light without darkness, the glories of spring and summer without the demands of autumn and winter. . . Split off from each other neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation. But if we allow the paradox of darkness and light to be, the two will conspire to bring health and wholeness to every living thing. Autumn constantly reminds me that my daily dyings are necessary precursors to new life. . . when I yield to the endless interplay of living and dying, the life I am given will be real and colorful, fruitful and whole.

Sermon – Let Our Life Speak

My journey into ministry began with saying yes to serving my home congregation as Religious Educator. Soon after I graduated from college (and having been a member for little more than a year), the Board President called to ask me if I would take on the job. At first I said no. Three phone calls later I finally agreed. My willingness far outweighed my expertise! There were 18 children and youth in the church ranging in age from 3 to 18. As if figuring out what Sunday mornings might be for them wasn't a big enough challenge, we had another. Space. The home of this 70 plus member congregation was a beautiful little stone church in the heart

of downtown. Built in the early 1900s, in it were the sanctuary (a third the size of this or less), a very small kitchen, a very small bathroom, and space for coffee hour in the back of the sanctuary between the tiny kitchen and the front door. There was nothing else. No classrooms. No meeting rooms. No parlor. Nothing. The quandry about where to offer Sunday morning Religious Education was resolved by renting space in a public elementary school several blocks down the street. There we had weekly access to a single large room. We divided it into space for childcare and two to three classes depending on the ages of the children in any given year.

Every Sunday morning we had to be sure everyone arrived in our RE space safely. At the end of our time together, we reversed the process; being sure everyone was reunited with their parents either at the school or up the street at the church.

We adapted as best we could. We never lost a child coming or going. And the journey from one building to the other sometimes served as part of the days' lesson plan.

Space and distance created a third challenge reflected in questions like these. How are we to be a community? How does a congregation do that when there are five city blocks separating the children from everyone else? How do we stay connected? How do we learn what is going on in the "other place"? How do those with and those without children get to know each other when social time before and after the service is also drop off and pick up time? How do we encourage everyone to see teaching as an opportunity with few opportunities to experience what teaching is all about because the kids and the teachers are down the street somewhere, where most of the congregation had never been?

You get the picture. Yes?

Given the circumstances in my home congregation back then, it was all too easy to teach lessons we didn't want nor intend to be part of the curriculum. You can probably guess what they are. Church is for adults. Children are supposed to be out of sight (and out of mind for everyone except parents, those who taught and me!). Little or no connection across generations on Sunday morning is OK. Children do not need, cannot understand, make too much noise to be present in worship regularly. As for guests, when they cross the threshold on Sunday mornings, there are at least two first impressions to choose from. This is an age segregated congregation where adults and children have little connection with one another OR there are no children in this community. In either case two words followed: how come? Wouldn't you wonder why only adults are present in worship with no sign of children anywhere?

Over the years of my ministry, serving congregations whose homes are of all sorts, in all shapes, sizes and locations, I've learned that challenges to creating community come in many guises.

Maria Harris, a religious educator and the author of the reading Lyra shared, is one of my greatest teachers. Her book [Fashion Me A People](#), from which those words came, changed the shape of my ministry profoundly. One way she "got to me" was with this insight. An extensive curriculum is already present in a congregation's life. It is both basic and profound. It

is the entire course of the congregation's life found in the fundamental forms of that life. It includes aspects that are explicit as well as aspects that are taught by absences, in silences.

Take a look around this sanctuary. Here in this space what is it that teaches us about who this congregation is? What does it teach?

The organ in the loft. The pianos here to my left. Music matters.

The food pantry items in the back there. The boxes for donations of food for Sojourner House. We care about those in our community who are hungry and without food or access to food.

The symbols here behind and in front of me – the cross, the star of david, the chalice. UUism is connected to Judaism and Christianity.

The plaques on the walls. The names in the windows. We have a long history of which we are proud.

The pews with doors and numbers. Membership was once understood differently than it is today.

And what of the lessons taught by absence? by silence?

These Maria Harris called part of the null curriculum - aka all the stuff that's left out. Procedures left unused. People whose voices and lives are invisible. This curriculum exists because *it does not exist*. And what it teaches is *not* neutral.

Here in this sanctuary, what absences do you notice? What silences?

Consider our symbols. What of those of other religious traditions?

Consider our children. How do they participate in the life of the congregation? How do we include them in?

Consider our words, our songs, and the things about which we speak and sing here. Whose words, whose voices, whose lives are not reflected?

Years after I left, my home congregation changed. They bought a house next door to the church, renovating it for classroom and gathering space for people of all ages. A walkway connects Unitarian House to the church building. And to that building they added a parish hall where coffee hour, social events, and community meetings can accommodate folks of all ages and abilities. These days when the congregation gathers, its wholeness is no longer as hidden by distance or lack of space or inaccessibility.

In the readings this morning, Quaker teacher and writer Parker Palmer called to mind these words of Thomas Merton: ““There is in all visible things. . . a hidden wholeness”. Religious Educator Maria Harris spoke of a longing deep within the human heart for a holy time when “all will be one.” May the lessons we teach, the things we learn, and the life we share

together move us always toward more fully living out our hidden wholeness, toward fulfilling, even if only in small part, that longing for a holy time, a time when all are one.