

Religion as Authenticity  
Linda Simmons  
Oct 23, 22

Do you know that great Groucho Marx quip about membership? He wrote, "I sent the club a wire stating, PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION. I DON'T WANT TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WILL ACCEPT ME AS A MEMBER."

I think many hesitant church goers may feel the same way!

A few years ago, in the spring before covid, when so much still felt possible,

Gary and I set out for a lecture at Memorial Church on the Harvard Campus. In that part of Cambridge there are many magnolia trees and when the winds pick up, it rains these fat, pink blossoms all over. This always makes me believe that anything is possible. Even in the face of it all.

As we approached Memorial Hall, this spectacular building, granite steps and enormous pillars gave way to huge wooden doors. We took the wide, cool, steps slowly, reluctantly leaving the light of spring behind us.

Pulling the heavy oak doors open, we noticed a plaque of stone hanging above us that read: "In grateful memory of the Harvard men who died in the World War, we have built this Church."

Tempered by this dedication, spring's touch and leaving us, magnolia blossoms stuck to our shoes, we softened our step and hushed our chattering and entered the yet empty sanctuary. Engraved on the walls were the names of Harvard men whose lives were lost in World War I & II, the Korean War and Vietnam War. Lists and lists.

I rested on each name, or perhaps it is better said that each name rested on me, and I imagined the young faces of these men. Lost to war. Lost to violence.

Memorial Church is a place in which the question, *What is the meaning of life*, stares out at you from each name spoken silently, rolled softly on the tongue. *What is the meaning of life* they ask, these long gone young men of our wars. *What is the meaning of life?*

The lecture held in this old and elegant church built in 1858 was part of the Paul Tillich lecture series and

Reverend Doctor Serene Jones, first woman to hold the position of president of the 174 year old seminary in NYC, Union Theological, was presenting. At one point in her lecture, Rev. Jones told us about a survey done in NYC that posed the question, "If you could ask one question of religion, what would it be?"

The response was overwhelmingly, "I want to know what it means to live an authentic life." I want to know what it means to live an authentic life.

I was enraptured to learn that there still lives in our culture a sense that religion holds a key to some knowledge, some way of being, that is relevant today! What does it mean to live an authentic life the people surveyed in NYC asked of religion. Can religion help us answer the question about how to live an authentic life? If so, how can it? Is there a mighty voice that will speak for all religion? If there is someone who proclaims this, I somehow doubt we will give their message much credence! Why did people ask this of religion. What kind of answer would be acceptable?

Parker Palmer, the great author, educator, and activist, in his book, The Courage to Teach, makes an interesting observation about the search for truth or meaning or authenticity which are all parts of the same quest it seems to me. He says that the objective inquiry into truth has been debunked, that science no longer claims it can study anything without the observer influencing and changing the observed. Palmer goes on to say that we are shaped by the searches we are on when we risk searching together, we are shaped by the searches we are on when we risk searching together. When done together, the truth becomes a way of being in the world, an authentic way of being in the world, rather than an answer to a question.

Truth becomes a communal verb, a faithful negotiation.

Unitarian Universalists, who qualify as people of faith, it seems to me, are used to not knowing or making truth claims. We are used to asking questions and living authentically into the beauty and pain of asking, knowing only that we cannot know and walking together as we hold the beauty and pain of this mystery. What does an authentic life look like that lives in relation to something which can ultimately not be known?

It is attentive. It asks lots of questions and knows how to be still without the answers. It is a life that understands that all of the seeking and asking matters only within a community of seekers and askers. It is a life that understands that though we cannot know, we can love and be loved, we can work for justice and be just, we can give and receive, we can hold each other under the weight of this not knowing and witness each other into our wholeness. We can be still and wait for the voice of love to arise from within our communal heart.

When we live as committed community into the questions of meaning, knowing that the answers cannot be known, knowing that the goal is not the answers but the lives we live in relation to the questions, we become brave and capable and maybe even authentic when authenticity is not a kind of vengeful truth telling but a thoughtful engagement with ourselves and the world in which we seek first not to be right, not to condemn, not to criticize or polarize but to see ourselves clearly and in that seeing, know that we can only see clearly in community.

Religion is the place we come together and search and in the searching, forge a path of truth where truth is not about anything objective but about the process of being together in faithful community itself. The work of religion, of being bound together in covenantal community is not easy! Sometimes, we argue, we disagree, we walk away angry, we pout, we feel unheard, we feel ignored. Sometimes we blame and shame and work behind the scenes to get what we want. But none of this can go on for long. Someone will call us out. Someone will tell us that it is too much, that we have to reconsider, pause, listen, be open. Truth becomes a communal verb, a faithful negotiation.

This all sounds like group therapy but it is not! We gather here to learn how to hear the voice of love and discern its message. You can leave group therapy without much notice, maybe a call or two, but here, if you walk away, you will be called back again and again because we are bound, because we share a common purpose, because we know that there is something possible in this communion that is not possible without out.

The truth is not *about* this seeking and this returning, it is this seeking and returning. The truth is the very engagement of each of us in this Meeting House congregation and this truth, this is the path to authenticity.

The people of NYC were right. Living a committed religious life does hold the key to authenticity.

And I tell you this as one who is leaving this iteration of my religious life, that of a minister. I am aching about this as I love you all so. And ministry, it asks you to give all that you are, it teaches, shapes new understandings, allows new ways of being to emerge. It becomes a way of being in the world more profound than any other I have ever known.

I look back at the 53 year old who came here as your minister, and I see her as so young from this vantage point almost 10 years later. And all that I have become here with you, becoming beside you, through you, in relation to you, has shaped a cauldron in which we have all grown.

This holy cauldron, you must tend to it with more care than fear now. It is so worthy of us all and it is fragile, like all things built with ingredients that can retire! Be careful my dears. Love this cauldron. Feed this cauldron with your love. Notice when you want to do righteous truth telling not built on the communal verb of truth, not built on faithful negotiation.

Here is a communal truth, a faithful truth: There is love here and the possibility of healing. And another: we have created hope together that is not built on denial but by leaning in deeper, by eschewing fear, by loving more, by tending to an environment of love with our very lives. What else, tell me something else you care about that we have built here?

Rev. Jones ended her lecture by telling us about the architecture of Union Theological Seminary where she was the first female president. It is very grand apparently, replete with brick and limestone English Gothic architecture.

And then when you enter the courtyard, she told us, everything changes: there is a beautiful, lush garden enclosed by stone walls but with a ceiling of only the sky. The flowers and trees and earth are held in by what was, by an architecture that honors the past, but what will be is open, undetermined, full of wind and blue expanse.

Sing out the pain and beauty of life, ask others to join your chorus, take each other's hands and lift your voices to the deep blue sky. Know that the ancient walls around us are strong enough to hold us. They will help us to not forget from where we come and give us the strength to go where we still must go.

These elegant walls that hold us, inscribed with our names, all of our names, one after another, under a plaque that reads:

These people live, each day, committed to this life, to this beloved community, to bringing beauty, hope and compassion into our world. These people choose to bless the world. *AMEN*