

Meeting our Ministries  
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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."

Last spring, my husband Gary and I set out for a lecture at Memorial Church on the Harvard Campus. As we approached 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 leaving us like the magnolia pedals that fly from the trees in the wind, 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?*

Please say the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> principle printed in your order of service with me:

- ☒ [1st Principle](#): The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- ☒ [2nd Principle](#): Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

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?

Please say the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> principle with me:

☑ [3rd Principle](#): Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

☑ [4th Principle](#): A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

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. 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.

Unitarian Universalist people of faith, it seems to me, are used to not knowing or making truth claims but ask the questions anyway and live 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.

Please say the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> with me:

☑ [5th Principle](#): The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

☑ [6th Principle](#): The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

When we live as committed community, as beloved 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, authenticity is the outcome: like honey is the outcome for the hive, like blossoms are the outcome of

spring, like light is the outcome of the dawn, like a chill is the outcome of snow.

I have heard, as I am sure you have, people exclaim, The ocean is my religion, or nature is my religion, or surfing or bird watching is my religion. And though I understand the sentiment, I must push back. Religion comes from the word, *religio*, which means to bind. 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. Here we build committees, we act in the community, we take care of each other's children and each other as we age. We mourn and celebrate together and in doing so, we are not only comforted but we are also challenged. 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.

And still, religion, this bound we share, calls us back again and again and we go on doing the work of faithful community. The truth is this seeking and this returning. The truth is the very engagement of each of us in this Meeting House 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.

Rev. Jones ended her lecture by telling us about the architecture of Union Theological Seminary where she is 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.

Please say the 7<sup>th</sup> principle with me:

[7th Principle](#): Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

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*