

Turning Ghosts into Ancestors – April 16, 2017



by Nina Stein

It was Easter Sunday and the pastor was preaching his heart out on a sermon about God's presence. God is everywhere. God is at work. God is in your car, God is in your bedroom, God is at your school, God is in this church. A small, concerned voice came from the third row, "God, if you are in my pocket, please don't eat my candy bar."

My, my, children can certainly take things literally and some adults too. If you're familiar with James Fowler's stages of faith, you know that this child is at the second stage of faith development or the mythic-literal stage. As we grow up a little and become a little less literal, we move in development to the third stage. Here we tend to rely on authority and conformist acceptance of belief with little examination of these beliefs through reason. Fowler believes that most people remain at this stage of faith development.

I suspect that this is where a lot of UU's run into a problem with conventional church goers and stage three churches. We questioned, but questioning is not allowed. The authority is external – in the Bible, the pastor, the Bishop, or some other book or person outside oneself. And you as an individual are expected to conform to the traditional ways and beliefs.

When subjected to reason, many of the stories of Christianity don't add up for lots of us. When people leave a stage three church, they often leave religion entirely, or they may seek out a later stage church. In the fourth stage, the locus of authority is within the self and critical thinking is applied to their religious beliefs.

Four out of five UU's come from churches other than Unitarian Universalists. As one of those four, I born into the First Methodist Church of El Dorado, Arkansas where I was Christened as an infant. It was a beautiful church with stained glass windows, wooden pews, and a pipe organ. My memories are good ones. It was a loving and kind church with little talk of sin and damnation. I continued to attend Methodist churches and youth groups until my mid-teens, when a boy led me astray. I joined the Missionary Baptist Church where there was plenty of talk about sin. I was saved and had a full immersion baptism. Ah-h-h all was not lost, I snuck out on Sunday nights after the choir sang and went to the local air force base to DANCE. Dancing was a sin.

The Missionary Baptist church lasted until my second year in college, when alas, another boy was involved. In my college town, I invited a date to attend with me one Sunday night. For some reason – divine intervention? – the minister decided to have two deacons sit by the back door to the sanctuary in case any black people might try to attend the service and the deacons could block their entrance. Let me tell you how unrealistic this was. This church was in a white neighborhood in a segregated town in the mid 1960's. It just wasn't going to happen. Then we

proceeded to sing, Jesus, loves the little children – all of them, just make sure they don't come in our church. I wanted to crawl under a chair. That young man confronted me about it on the way back to the dorm and of course I had no defense. That was the beginning of my serious questioning of Christianity.

Okay, now, I want you to get a good grip on your chair. Unitarian Universalism, like me and many of you, has a Christian history and is strongly influenced by that history. In our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations By-laws, not only do we covenant to affirm and promote seven principles, we also share a living tradition which draws from many sources including the teaching of Christianity and Judaism which calls us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Yes, I grew up Christian. It is my heritage and my culture. It is in my cells and my bones. But I have gone beyond it. It could no longer contain my faith. My faith and my beliefs got too big. But my faith can contain it. There are parts of it I don't like. I don't like the violence of the crucifixion. I don't like the way the Religious Right claimed the moral authority over the politics of our nation. And I don't like the way I felt intimidated by the seemingly righteousness of Amarillo Christians for so many years. But what I know about the latter are two things: First, for every one of those outspoken righteous Christians, there are many more humble Christians whose faith is less judgmental, but who often stay quiet for some of the same reasons we flee. And second, my feeling intimidated is about me not them.

Over the years, as I have learned more about my religion, I have become more confident in it. Early on I got on the UUA website and studied. I have read books and articles and attended numerous trainings including Dwight Brown Leadership Experience. Adding to my confidence was having the Rev. David Green representing us as our minister in the larger Amarillo community. Ours is a rich religion with an interesting history and a saving message.

In the United States, Unitarianism is descended from the Puritans. In the 1630's, there was a large migration of Puritans from England. They established independent churches free from the authority of bishops or any other outside authority, based on theological principle. They covenanted with one another on how they wanted to live in Christian love according to Jesus' teachings. Based on the early Christian writings of the Cambridge Platform, from the 1600's we are a free church, a covenantal church, not a creedal one.

In the next generations, there began to be functional and theological differences. The New England Congregationalist Churches began to divide largely on the difference of the theology of conversion vs. reason. They broke into the orthodox camps and liberal camps. As this discussion went on, most of the large churches of the Northeast were liberal in thinking and rejected traditionally held Calvinist doctrines such as original sin and the trinity. The rift between the liberals and the Calvinists deepened. Up until the early 1800's, churches had been helping each other out, including exchanging pulpits when needed. Now the Calvinists refused to do so. The liberals had to admit the split.

In 1819, William Ellery Channing, one of our ancestors, preached an ordination sermon called "Unitarian Christianity." This led to the founding of the American Unitarian Association, in 1825, to promote and plant Unitarian churches. The controversy raged on for two decades arguing over the nature of God, human nature, and the nature of salvation.

Those who were arguing eventually became today Unitarian Universalists and our first cousins, United Church of Christ – both descendants of the Puritans.

In 1961, the Unitarians and the Universalists merged and adopted what was then six principles. Christians in both religions expressed concern that adoption of the principles would diminish Christianity in Unitarian Universalism.

Our Amarillo church was founded in 1949 (chartered in 1950) by humanists as part of the Fellowship Movement as an idea to grow Unitarianism. Officially joining in 1981, one of my early experiences was a class called the Haunting Church: Healing Your Religious Past. This was an important step in healing the wounds of my Christian past.

We have all been wounded in many ways, by our parents, our spouse or ex-spouse, friends, strangers, churches. Some of us have big gaping wounds and others have nicks and scratches. Our hurts and wounds need to be dealt with. Hans Loewald, a 20th century psychoanalyst, coined the phrase, “turning our ghosts into ancestors” to describe the healing process. When we fail to deal with who or what wounded us by denying, suppressing, or disengaging our emotions from our memories – we disembody the wounding perpetrator. That person takes on a ghostly quality. The past contaminates the present, whether we admit it or not. We. Are. Haunted.

When as children we are wounded by people we know and love and who are supposed to love us, we draw faulty conclusions. Because children’s minds aren’t fully developed and they don’t have the ability to reason fully, they often decide that there must be something wrong with themselves because to think that there is something wrong with their caretaker would be life threatening. If there is something wrong with the caretaker, the caretaker might not take care of them and without care a child might die.

So now there is a bad part of the self that develops. There is something wrong with me. Most of us have developed a bad part, parts of ourselves we don’t like, perhaps from something benign someone said that we were too young to completely understand or from something traumatic. If we don’t want to own or acknowledge this bad or un-liked part of the self, we will often project it onto Other. This often leads to “us and them” thinking. We are good; they are bad. Taking back our “badness” leads us to healing. This is the path to wholeness.

Many of us have unresolved issues with our Christian cousins. We may have been hurt by the church of our youth. We may have left because we no longer believed what was taught. If we were led to believe that inability to conform was due to a flaw in our nature, we carried with us a burden of shame. Another wounding may have left feelings of intimidation, fear, or irritation. Our woundings might not even be related to church or religion, but when we aren’t dealing with our hurt, we often project. As UU’s it is unacceptable to project onto most groups — Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Earth-centered religions, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, or any other religious, cultural, or ethnic group.

Sometimes, however, we find it acceptable to project onto our Christian cousins. When we do this, we are out of “right relationship.” Our UU association covenant guides us to “live in right relationship with others.” We are guided that when we “break the covenant”, we will seek to “repair the relationship,” “entering dialogue with one another in mutual love and respect,” and “to seek the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Perhaps the most important relationship we have is with oneself. Healing is a process. It begins by acknowledging that we are wounded and hurt and that the wound impairs us in some way. Perhaps our difficulty with Christianity impairs our ability to grow spiritually and to seek truth and meaning wherever we might find it, yes even in the Bible, in the teachings of Jesus, in the essence of Christianity, or from the Christian heritage of our religion.

When we engage the healing process, we re-embody the ghosts and they become our ancestors and truly can be in the past. Now we are free to make choices. Discernment becomes keener. We are acting rather than reacting. We can be loving and curious with our neighbors. We can appreciate the poetry of Psalms and the Song of Solomon. As a counselor, I used the story of Jesus sleeping in the bottom of the boat during a storm to talk about coping with stress with my clients. And I talked about how it is okay to have the human emotion of anger, by talking about Jesus being angry with his disciples because they fell asleep instead of staying awake with him the night before the crucifixion.

Speaking of the crucifixion, today is Easter. A Christian high holy day. A day not often celebrated in this church. Let us love and celebrate our Christian past and our Christian cousins and our members who follow a spiritually Christian path. The story of falling and rising, death, and descending into hell and arising into heaven, whether a story about Jesus or Persephone, can speak to us of our little deaths and descents into hell and resurrections. We die to our old self when we give up something old in ourselves and we are born to our new, healed selves. While some of the stories we tell may not be true, they may hold Truth in them.

When we search for Truth, going where it takes us, one of the places it might take us is to more fully developed stages of faith. In the last two stages, we move from independence to interdependence. At the fifth stage, we become more interested in serving others, more compassionate, and more empathic. The sixth and last stage, considered rare, service is to universal values such as unconditional love and justice. I believe ours is a saving religion because these are the values of our religion and when we are in service to unconditional love and justice, we save lives.

Let us work on healing our wounds so that we might be worthy of the UU religion and look for universal Truths wherever they might be found and turn our ghosts into ancestors. Today is Easter. Let us rise up together.

Let us rise up together with Christian spirituality

Let us rise up together with Buddhist thought

Let us rise up together with Humanist thought

Let us rise up together with Atheist thought

Let us rise up together with Earth centered spirituality

Let us rise up together with New Age spirituality

Let us rise up together with Jewish spirituality

Let us Unitarian Universalists rise up together

Let us all rise up together in unity and diversity.

Let us live in a house of hope, spreading our saving message.