

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**Welcoming the Soul
While Building Community
in a Wounded World**

By

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“Welcoming the Soul While Building Community in a Wounded World”

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

There are at least two ways of looking at religion and spirituality these days. First, there’s the external view: what does a given religious or spiritual act or belief look like from the outside, superficially?

Take Homer Simpson’s approach to religion, for example. In one episode, Bart Simpson is attempting to convert to Roman Catholicism. Bart’s goofy father, Homer, is sent to stop him. Here’s what happens:

HOMER (after finishing confession): Woo-hoo, I’m clean! In your face, Lord!
SEAN, the local Catholic priest: Ah, not yet, Mr. Simpson. I can only absolve you if you’re a Catholic.
HOMER: Uh-huh. . . And. . . how do I join? Do I wail on some Unitarians?
SEAN: Well, it’s a little harder than that. It starts with looking deep inside yourself. (*Homer: Ohhh*)
But it ends with bread and wine.
HOMER: Woo-hoo!

Now this is the first of at least two ways of looking at religion and spirituality. This way has us looking at religion and spirituality externally. In other words, this way looks at things on the outside, superficially, on the surface of things.

Another example of viewing religion externally might be the approach that many people take, understandably, to the celebrated grilled cheese sandwich — you may have heard about this — that reportedly bears an image of the “Virgin Mary” on it. I’ve seen pictures of it. It’s really quite charming. Have you heard about this?

It was discovered about 12 years ago.

But that’s not the end of it. About two years ago it sold on E-Bay — the E-Bay auction website. And are you ready for this? It sold for \$28,000! (Yes, \$28,000 for a ten-year-old grilled cheese sandwich. What a deal!) A casino bought it. And it was reportedly going on a world tour.

Now that’s all on the outside, superficially, externally. And to me — and probably to a lot of you — it’s pretty ludicrous, let’s face it.

But, and here’s the point, for some people — as screwy as it may seem, as screwy as it truly is — nevertheless that ten-year-old sandwich is a vehicle for something else, for something deeper. It’s terribly misplaced, perhaps, granted, but I want to suggest that it’s a vehicle for something else, for something deeper nevertheless.

This brings us to the second way of looking at religion and spirituality, wherein we look at things internally – for what I might call their “soul” value – that is, for the value that something may hold for our internal, spiritual growth.

Consider, for example, the following Hasidic story called “Heart-Searching.” Our tale goes like this:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman, [a] rabbi of Northern Russia (who died in 1813), was put in jail in Petersburg, because the adversaries of Hasidism had denounced his principles and his way of living to the government. He was awaiting trial when the Chief of Police entered his cell. The majestic and quiet face of the rabbi, who was so deep in meditation that he did not at first notice his visitor, suggested to the Chief what manner of person he had before him. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions which had supposedly occurred to him in reading the Scriptures. Finally [the Chief] asked, “[Rabbi,] how are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: ‘Where art thou?’”

“Do you believe,” answered the rabbi, “that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation and every [person] is included in them?”

“I believe this,” said the [Chief].

“Well then,” said the rabbi, “in every era, God calls to every person: and says, ‘Where art thou? Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world? Indeed, God says something like this [the rabbi continued]: ‘You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?’”

When the Chief of Police heard his correct age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the rabbi’s shoulder, and cried: “Bravo!” But his heart trembled.¹

Now, looking at this story for a moment, God, according to the traditional conception of God, should have easily been able to tell where Adam was hiding in the garden, God being all-knowing, omniscient. So, why – why in the world – did God ask of Adam, “Where art thou?” Surely he already knew!

In posing this question, the Chief of Police, like the Pharisees in Jesus’s time, is obviously trying to trap his imprisoned rabbi into stating some sort of blasphemous contradiction. But the rabbi’s reply doesn’t stay on the external, superficial surface of the story. Rather, it goes way deeper.

¹ Buber, Martin, *The Way According to the Teachings of Hasidism*, as found in Kaufmann, Walter (ed.) *Religion From Tolstoy to Camus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961, 1964) p. 426, adapted slightly.

The rabbi's reply generalizes Adam's situation to include all of us, in effect, by asking, "Where are we in life?" And this cleverly puts the story on a whole different plane altogether. Indeed, the Chief is forty-six years old, and here he is trying to trap an already imprisoned rabbi in his words. No wonder his heart trembles at being asked how far along in life he is!

When I first read this Hasidic tale, I confess that it truly stopped me cold — in a good way. It caused me to stop and think, and to reflect on my life: What am I doing with my life? Where am I going? Where do I want to go? Who do I want to be?

And likewise with you: Where are *you* going? Where do you *want* to go? Who do you want to *be* — internally — in terms of living out your values? In terms of what is important to you — or arguably should be important to you — in your life?

III

In one of his recent books, Thomas Friedman, author and a regular columnist for *The New York Times*, relates the following African proverb:

Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed.

Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death.

It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you better start running.²

Many human beings, I would suggest, especially us Americans, are much the same way. When the sun comes up, sometimes even *before* the sun comes up, we start running. And in many cases we don't *stop* running until long after dark.

Sometimes we run literally — on treadmills, in parks, in streets, after tennis balls, after softballs, and my personal favorite: some of us run after soccer balls.

At other times we're running after the clock — the deadlines, the meetings, the appointments, the calendar.

Sometimes we run like lions, pursuing things we do not have — financial security, self-esteem, personal and professional achievement.

² Friedman, Thomas, as cited by Guengerich, Galen, *Dreamers of the Day*, three sermons published by All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City, Winter of 2006.

At other times, we are running away from things, like the gazelle running from the lion. And so we run from failure. We run from disappointment. We run from our dysfunctional families and the behaviors they instilled.

Whether pursuing or being pursued, in either case, many of us (and I include myself here of course), many of us are often, if not always, on the move, running.³

Friends, the church, *this* church, at best, is a place where we can stop running -- at least once a week. It is a place where we can stop to honestly reflect upon our lives, looking not just at the outside, superficial surface of things, but at the deeper meaning of things. It is a place where we can ask the important questions. It is a place where we can ponder our place in the larger scheme of things. In short, at our best, the church is a place that “welcomes the soul,” by which I mean: it is a place that welcomes, not some disembodied spirit of some sort, but, rather, it is a place that welcomes simply the deepest and dearest of all our concerns.

And, thus, it is a place that helps us to cultivate the precious, life-giving values and meanings out of which we live our lives.

IV

So, our first task, here, I would suggest, is that the church be a place that truly “welcomes the soul.”

Our second task, I would suggest, is to ever be about the task of weaving ourselves a perpetually open and diverse community – a community of love, justice and compassion. For the “soul” knows, deep down, that being in community with others, in relationships of substance and meaning, is important. Indeed, the soul knows that being connected to others – and being connected to something larger than ourselves – is absolutely necessary if we are to thrive.

Now, being in community is not always easy. It requires time and attention. It requires sacrifices and compromises. We bump into one another. Not everyone agrees with us. We need to patiently sort things out sometimes.

Yet, at our best, this is a place to weave an intentional community of deep, soul-welcoming hospitality and engagement. At our best, we truly welcome diversity and honest differences of opinion. At our best, we deal openly and fairly with conflict when it arises, as it inevitably will. And we seek to nurture the best within us all.

As our old church covenants of the 1600s used to express it: Even though we may not always “think alike,” we can still “love alike,” and we can still covenant, as they used to say, to “walk together.”

V

³ My thanks go to my colleague Galen Guengerich here (op. cit., p. 9) for inspiring the above commentary on Friedman’s haunting African tale.

So, at our best, the church seeks to be a place that warmly welcomes the soul. It also seeks to be a place where we can get connected to one another, and get connected to a community that shares our values — a community where freedom, reason, spirituality and social justice can all come together in one place.

Now, being connected in a soul-welcoming community is especially important, I would suggest, in our badly bruised and wounded world, where, together, we can (and where together need to) make a difference.

So, the final image with which I would like to leave you this morning is this one from Parker Palmer's book, *A Hidden Wholeness*. "There was a time," Palmer writes,

when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

"Today," Palmer continues,

we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war.

It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives: they make headlines because they take so many innocents down with them.

Palmer continues:

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some are lost at this moment and are trying to find the way home. Some are lost without knowing it. And some are using the blizzard as cover while cynically exploiting its chaos for private gain.⁴

Friends, in a fractured, bruised, and wounded world it becomes especially important for us to stay connected both to our souls and to one another in loving and ever-compassionate community. So, together, right here, let us create and sustain such a community! Let it be a joyful and a vibrant community of blessed memory and abiding hope. And in the tough times, let this be a community that we can hang onto like the farmer's rope through the occasional personal and societal blizzards of our lives. Let us do this for and with one another.

⁴Palmer, Parker J., *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass), pp.1-2