

The Church of the Present

by

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Her Disappearing Daughter

This German folktale was the Story for All Ages at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford, Illinois, on February 5, 2006, and an integral part of the following sermon.

There once was a woman whose partner died, and left her with their daughter to raise alone. She feared for her family, of course – she wanted nothing more than to provide for her daughter’s future, so she was constantly working, planning for the day when her family would have everything she wanted it to have. As early summer came, she took her daughter and a number of baskets to a strawberry patch in the woods to gather berries to eat and sell as she did every year. That summer, the clearing was filled with berries – big, red, ripe, juicy strawberries with a smell so wonderful that they could barely stand it.

They picked all the berries they could, setting them gently into their baskets, and then putting the full baskets at the edge of the clearing. When they turned back, they saw more ripe berries everywhere. It didn’t look as though they had picked a single one. They walked toward the center of the patch, looking around in confusion, and found a hole in the ground filled with gold and jewels. A voice, strong like the wind and soft like leaves rustling, said, “For many years now, you have gathered the berries you needed without harming this place. Take what you can of this treasure in three handfuls, but no more, lest you lose some other precious thing.”

The mother held her skirt into a basket, and grabbed three handfuls of gold and jewels. Just as she dumped the last handful into her skirt, she saw a ruby larger than the largest strawberry she’d ever seen: deepest red, and shining with light in way that makes it look like it is full of delicious strawberry juice. She knew that if she took that one stone, she would have all the money she needed and would someday have the life she dreamed of for her daughter and herself. She couldn’t imagine what else she had that would be worth enough for anyone to take it from her in exchange.

She took the ruby.

At that moment, there was a flash of light and a thunderclap. The hole in the ground vanished, and three faeries appeared as her daughter disappeared. With one voice, the faeries said, “Because you have stolen the heart of our treasure, we will keep your daughter, the heart of your family, with us. Return here at midsummer, and perhaps your daughter may return to you.” Then the faeries disappeared, too, and the strawberry patch was the same as it had always been.

The mother, of course, was distraught – crying and wailing and wondering what she would do. She returned home, sorrowful, understanding that without her daughter, she has no family and all her efforts had been wasted. At midsummer, just a few weeks later, she returned to the patch with all the treasure she had taken and poured it out into the middle of the patch. She waited and waited, but nothing happened. As she stood to go home, she heard a voice behind her say, “Mama?”

She turned to see her daughter surrounded by treasure, but she ignored all the glitter and sparkle, instead running to her daughter, scooping her up into a hug. When they were finally able to let each other go, they saw that the treasure was gone, but that there was a basketful of strawberries with a bow on it at the edge of the clearing.

They left with the basket, and came to find that the basket was always full of big, ripe, red, juicy strawberries, even in the middle of winter, and that the smell always filled their home. And, sometimes, just when they needed it most, a beautiful ruby would appear among the berries.

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Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford, Illinois, on February 5, 2006.

Can you imagine a ruby, so large and luminous that it looks to be filled with clear, crimson, strawberry-flavored light? Can you imagine the mother's dilemma, knowing that taking it is wrong, but that having it would be one more assurance that the future could be alright? Can you imagine losing what is most precious to you because you were so fixed on the future that you forgot that you had a present, a *now* to value?

This mother and her disappearing daughter are not so different from many of us. It is easy to say, "When I have that new job, everything will be fine." "When I pay off my debt, then life will be simple." "When I make that change, get to that other place..."

I think we humans are like that in our congregations as well: "When we reach our membership goals, then we'll be OK." "When we raise enough in the pledge drive..." "When we bring in enough diversity..." "When we have made it through our search and have found a new minister..." "When we get to this next stage in our long-term plan, then everything will be fine."

I wonder though, what is it – who is it – that disappears while we are reaching for the ruby? What do we lose – who do we lose – while we wait for the future to arrive?

We cannot live in the future. Tomorrow's dinner won't satisfy tonight's hunger. Providing for your family's future doesn't matter if your family disappears today. Just when this woman has enough treasure in her skirt to provide for her family for the rest of their lives, she forgets the daughter for whom she struggles in favor of an ever grander dream.

It's a good dream – there is no doubt about that. For those of us who have experienced poverty, a dream of overwhelming abundance is understandable. You can hardly blame someone for trying to make it happen; but what is lost can be even more valuable than what might be gained. Here, a mother loses her family, her daughter, the most precious thing in her life.

Like the woman in the story, we too must look to our future – we are always preparing for the people who will someday come to our sanctuaries and for a world that needs us. I encourage us all to do that work with an eye to strengthening our congregations in this moment. I encourage us all to think about the process of growth and change as work that can embrace possibility and build community.

In *Belonging*, a study of membership, the UUA Commission on Appraisal writes:

"Magic cannot create the warm fuzzy ideal that most people associate with community. Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment. Only by making a commitment to a community can we hope to build a community.

In this time of change and opportunity, I encourage us all to build communities that have no disappearing daughters.

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Recently, I was speaking with my mother, an Episcopalian, and she told me that she had attended a youth event in her denomination as a support person. Bishop Scantlebury of the Chicago Diocese was there, and spoke to the youth gathered from all over the region. He said,

“Never let anyone tell you that you are the church of the future. You are not. You are the church of the present. You are the church, here and now.”

You are the church of the present. You are the church, here and now. What an important idea! What an important thing for everyone to hear, and especially for our young Unitarian Universalists to understand.

I remember when I was young, and heard people saying things like, “You are the future.” I remember thinking to myself, “What? I’m not here right now? Didn’t I just do the dishes? Didn’t you notice me in Sunday School? I don’t matter yet?”

It strikes me that this is one of the ways our own children disappear while we reach for a ruby. We need our youth to be an integral part of our congregations. We need our children to understand that they, too, are the church. They, too, are the community. We need to tell them that they matter now. That their energy and wisdom and experience is needed in the present.

I want our eldest Unitarian Universalists to hear this as well. You are the church of the present. You matter now. You, too, need to know that your energy and wisdom and experience is needed in the present.

In times of transition, strengthening the whole of the community – from youngest to eldest – cannot help but make the coming path clearer and easier to travel. I believe, in order to strengthen the whole of the community, that our children, our youth, and all our adults must attend the same church, must be a part of one congregation.

If the experience of the children and youth is deeply segregated from the experience of the adults, if the presence and voices of our young people are lost to everyone else, then we have no church. If we do not teach all our members, of all ages, why the child and youth experience matters, then we tell the children and the youth that they are irrelevant.

If we do not teach all our members, of all ages, why our traditional Sunday worship has value by including them in our services, then we tell our children and youth that worship is irrelevant.

In order to be the church of the present, the congregation that is growing strong and healthy now, we must find ways to bring all people in the congregation into relationship with each other.

Logan Harris, a youth leader in our movement, writes:

“The youth that I talked to all felt passionately that there were just some things a youth group has to do to be strong. One of these is to be active in the congregation.”

She goes on to speak of creating intergenerational worship that includes the younger members of the church, particularly the youth in the planning and leading of the services. She suggests placing a bulletin board of youth events in the main hall of the church, so everyone can see what is happening, or encouraging youth to join committees, fundraisers, and social action events.

What is a youth group without these active connections to a congregation? How will our young people understand the value of our worship, our institutions, without experiencing them?

Our Commission on Appraisal recognized this problem in *Belonging*:

“All too often our congregations are not successful at engaging our [children, youth, and young adults] in the life of the larger congregational community. We fail ourselves as well as our younger UUs when we overlook their contributions and their unique needs.”

I find it interesting that a sentence earlier in the same paragraph said: “Youth and young adults present unique and important opportunities for they are the future of our movement.” In truth, we do not know the future of our movement, and who it may include. The children, youth, and young adults are the church, now. We are, all together, our movement. Now.

When we bring children and youth into the work of the church in social justice, leading and planning worship, and other forms of service – including committee work – we honor our community. When we encourage all our adults to take an interest in the education and spiritual growth of our children, we honor them and their place in our congregations. When we bring our elders in as mentors and learners, when we build a community of all of us, we are the church of the present.

When we segregate the contributions and value of people by when we think they will be able to be of use, we have failed to value their worth and dignity. We have failed to see them as whole people. We have failed to live out our covenant.

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I believe that, in order to be and to strengthen the church of the present, we need to value, educate, and integrate all the members of our congregations across the whole spectrum of ages, the whole of life.

The director of Lifespan Religious Development for the UUA, Judith Frediani, writes:

“What would a congregation engaged in lifespan religious growth and learning look like? It would be the ultimate committee of the whole: a community in which everyone is seen as teacher and learner; in which every age and stage of life is equally valued and equally supported by whatever tangible and intangible resources it has to offer; a community in which no decision is made about the life of the community—whether in the areas of worship, physical plant, fundraising, budgeting, social action, the arts, education, or any other—without consideration of its impact on and opportunities for every member of the community.”

What a wonderful dream – that Unitarian Universalist congregations could be places of radical acceptance and deep valuing of everyone within the congregational community...and I would dream also that living that life, that faithful, religious life, would move beyond the bounds of congregational community and into our everyday worlds, at work, play, politics, school, the grocery store.

This dream, though, is not some ruby-hued temptation for the future, some impossible gift from the faeries that we must wait to have dropped upon us. This dream is one that we can work to create now. This vision of our congregations is one path to strengthening the church of the present so that we can meet the future united in our covenant and community.

In her essay, “Religion as Relationship,” the Rev. Patricia Hoerdoerfer writes: “Unitarian Universalists *covenant* together. It is our voluntary agreement with each other; it is our freedom to promise mutuality. It

is our pledge to respect “individual religious rights” and it is a commitment to action. Our covenant is a pledge to bond together to pursue common goals.

Fundamentally, our religious growth and learning need to be concerned with relationships: our relationship to each other, to our living faith tradition, to the world we live in, to all of being. We need to offer experiences of belonging and a sense of purpose to those who believe and participate in our communities and educational programs that build these vital relationships.”

In the end, that’s really what all of this is about. Relationship. Deciding which relationships you value and how you will express that. Our relationships with that-which-is-larger than ourselves – whether that be humanity, nature, love, the Holy, Deity – are only one part of a deep religious life. Our relationships with each other and the world around us are other important parts of a deep religious life. All are necessary in order to live out our covenant.

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You, in this room, this sanctuary, right now, are the church of the present. Those people who cannot be with us today because of illness, infirmity, or circumstance are the church of the present. Those who are elsewhere within this building, in classes or conversations, are the church of the present.

As you consider where you may be going in your congregations, what paths lie ahead of you, what the future may bring, remember that everything about the future can change faster than you can blink. What you can do is strengthen your communities in the here and now – consider what is coming and plan for it as best you can, but live in the present moment. Value everyone who is here, because each person matters right now. You need not have any disappearing daughters.

When we bring our children, our youth, our young adults, our mid-life adults, and our elders all into one community, one body of faith, we embody the hopes and dreams of many, many people who have gone on before us. We become a religious community bound not by fear or doctrine, but by love. We become a place that can support each person in their quest for meaning and truth.

We no longer wait for our young people to become the church of the future.

We all become the church of the present.

May it be so.