

The Human Circle: Of Saints and Fools

By Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

October

Halloween night. That time of year when the veil between the living and the dead is said to be at its narrowest. I spent the early part of this misty Halloween evening at a friend's house enjoying the parade of Trick-or-Treaters who showed up at the door. From pirates and Vikings to mermaids and ghouls, the tricksters arrived in their masks. I must admit that my favorite costume was a boy trick-or-treating as "roadkill". He was dressed up as a dead opossum complete with tire-marks. He wore a sign around his neck, "Trust me kids. Look left and right before crossing the street." Good advice for us all, I'd say.

As the stream of Trick-or-Treaters began to subside, I sat down with a few adult folks for dinner. Pizza and salad. Interestingly, the conversation meandered from mottos, to mono, to Mother Theresa, which brought us to the topic of saints. Our group consisted of former catholics, present catholics and a few protestant refugees. Defining a saint did not come readily. We explored the recent beatification of Mother Theresa on October 19th within the Catholic tradition, and what would need to occur in order for her to become a saint. After much discussion, and the dictionary being brought out, we came to this conclusion; that a scientifically unexplained miracle will need to occur here on earth, be verified, and be attributed to Mother Theresa's intervention. This step is integral to process of becoming a saint.

The American Heritage Dictionary offers these definitions of saints:

1) A person officially recognized, especially by canonization, as being entitled to public veneration and capable of interceding for people on earth or a person who has died and gone to heaven 2. An extremely virtuous person

What does all this mean for us Unitarian Universalists? First, I believe it is important for us to keep abreast of events in other religious traditions, and attempt to understand their meaning. Secondly, I believe we Unitarian Universalists can claim our own saints within the second definition. A virtuous person. A person who has moral guidance and goodness. The word virtue also means effective and powerful.

Just two weeks ago, I, along with Bill Breeden, joined some of the elders of our congregation for lunch at Meadowood; many of these folks have been saints within Unitarian Universalism. From those who helped found other UU congregations, to those whose roles in the life of this congregation have been profound and numerous. I sat by one of those folks, Dorothy Vitaliano, who remarked, “If Unitarian Universalists had saints, then Annetta and Ralph Fuchs would get my vote.”

I’ve mentioned the Fuchs in my sermons before. Our library upstairs is named after Annetta who died in 1987 and Ralph who passed away in 1985. I believe it is paramount that we occasionally take the time to look back and honor those whose efforts essentially result in our being here today. As Bill Lynch stated, “Ralph and Annetta played leading roles in organizing a growing group of liberal religious thinkers into establishing the initial Unitarian Fellowship.” Both were class act people. In the 1940s they fought against racial discrimination here in Bloomington and on the IU campus. And during the nation-wide anti-communist hysteria, Ralph helped form the Indiana Civil Liberties Union.

Today, as many utilize their democratic right to vote, let me say this about Annetta. Annetta Fuchs had rich experience, personally and professionally, within the League of Women Voters. The slip of paper on your chairs this morning, which encourages everyone to be well-informed voters is placed in her honor.

Annetta, I believe, would tell you to research the issues and vote your conscience. Not what I say, or anyone else says, but be informed and VOTE your conscience.

I had the opportunity to meet Annetta before she died in 1987. She sat in a red dress in her wheel chair. And although she was in failing health, her eyes still sparkled when the word “liberal” was spoken.

Then minister, Reverend Laurel Hallman, said these words after Annetta died, “Anneta Fuchs, who was here from the very beginning of this church. Who saw it grow, who urged it forward, who loved this group, this community with all of her heart. Who imbued this church with strength and tolerance and consideration, and gentle caring that will live on long after she is gone. For the life of Annetta Fuchs, we give thanks.” And here on All Souls Day, and the day after All Saints Day, we give thanks too.

And I want to say this, I am well aware that there are many Unitarian Universalist saints walking this earth today. I know it when I pick up the paper and read your letters to the editors, your articles, and articles about your willingness to take a stand for what you believe in. (Earth flag) The love we profess as Unitarian Universalists is not some sentimental rendering. It cannot be silent. It is a compassionate force for truth speaking and justice making. And with every act we make in that name, whether small or large, in this bruised and hurting world...we too, each one of us, is a saint.

Ah, but my sermon title says from saints to fools. What about the fools in religion? The tricksters? The jesters? They too have their role in many faith traditions. (Circle) In the 2002 May-June issue of Utne Magazine there were two articles addressing the role of the fool. First, “The Way of the Wacko in Religion: Rediscovering ancient wisdom in which the truth is nothing less than crazy.” And “Wise Fools: A Gallery of Mad Prophets, Poets and Pranksters.” The article points out,

The Trickster gets around. Sometimes male and sometimes female [or a little of both], usually in animal form, this universal character has been spun by storytellers for centuries. In Native American tales, the trickster is often embodied by Raven or coyote. In Asia and South America, she's the Fox. In Africa, he's called Anansi, Legba or Spider. Shapeshifting, mischief making, and often scandalous gender-bending, the trickster likes sex and food a lot. (Utne, May-June, 2002, pg 67)

And above all, they are playful. It is within their rather playful hedonistic life-styles, that they, time and time again, stumble into wise truths and insights. I believe the trickster's would agree with what many of you know as my favorite quote, "Life is a paradox and then again its not..." Or as Physicist Neils Bohr stated, "A great truth is a truth whose opposite is also a great truth." (Sometimes the truth hurts).

Where does this leave all of us Unitarian Universalists? Oh there's plenty of mirth and wise fools around here too. As psychologist James Hillman quips, "The comic spirit masquerades in all things we say and do. We each are each a clown and we [do not even need to put on the make-up]".

While in Madison, WI, I spent one evening with a group of friends reading stories from the wise fool, Mullah Nasrhuddin, "a 13th Century elder Muslim village cleric who rides a patient long-eared donkey (sometimes sitting backwards) and responds to life often in a decidedly offbeat way," (Ibid, pg 69) Regarding the Circle of Humanity, Nahsruddin makes a great declaration, "A Wise Philosopher once told me that humankind has two good qualities. The philosopher forgot the first one, but he did tell me the second one. Unfortunately," Nahsruddin went on, "I've forgotten that one." That was his great declaration

Nahsruddin was the kind of guy who would probably, if he were to dress up as the trickster, wear a "road kill" costume.

What I like about these tricksters and wise fools, is that they are playful. (And in the circle of saints and tricksters and the comic spirit I believe there is a lot of overlap). I've seen too many pictures of Annetta Fuchs with her head tossed back and laughing to know her serious depth of commitment was balanced with a laughing heart and spirit.

It was also in Madison, WI that a young adult loaned me a picture for my office. It was a wonderful artistic painting of a laughing Jesus. Within that laugh there was wisdom, spirit and playfulness. This Jesus, like Nahsruddhin, would have, on occasion, ridden his donkey backwards too.

Our religious traditions require seriousness, but when this is not blended with wit, humor, playfulness our hearts harden and, I believe, the results are devastating. We begin drawing lines, and hurting those who would dare step over them.

Play. Do we UU's play enough. (The Answer. No. So I took a break from this sermon and went outside and romped and played with our 7mo old puppy, Gilligan. Theskippertoo McPhelps. Then returned.)

I once attended a day-long workshop with the well-respected congregational consultant, Peter Steinke (Peter had a unique personality. Kind of a blend between Ghandi and Jackie Gleason) What was interesting for me was that one particular topic came up several times in his presentation about congregational health. Play. Play involves the part of our brain, which can have positive attributes such as emotional bonding and community building. When we, individually or as a community, are experiencing stress, play can offer relief, feelings of connectedness, and most importantly, perspective. Essentially, according to Steinke's congregational system's theory, the congregation that plays together, stays together. (Now there's a theology we liberal religious thinkers can wrap our brains around.)

So what is play? A cascade of phrases can come to mind: We can play the piano, play the bass, play for keeps or play along, play ball, play hookey, play for real or play a song. I can play make-believe or play it to the hilt, play in my innocence of play out my guilt. I can play. You can play. In many ways we play. But too often we hear another say, ‘Just don’t play me for a fool!’ But I am here to say, a fool can be cool.

So what is play? The authors of *Chop Wood, Carry Water* (1984, Putnam Books, New York, NY) state it well when they say,

Play is something that unites adults and kids, different races, opposite sexes. In fact it binds humans and animals together. From the divine play of the universe—which the Hindus call *lila*, to the self-absorbing play of child and puppy (minister and puppy), play is something wonderfully free and aimless, the spark that makes life worth living. As Plato once said, “life must be lived as play, playing certain games, singing and dancing, and then one will be able to propitiate the gods.”

So what is play? It can blend humor with spirituality. When the Zen Master Sasaki-Roshi was asked why he had come to America he replied, “I have come to teach people to laugh.” In fact, he instructed his students to begin the day by standing tall and engaging in a deep belly laugh. “This practice,” stated Sasaki-Roshi, “is equal to hours of zazen [meditation]” (Ibid, pg 144). (pause)

Now there’s a meditation practice to which I can dedicate myself!

As we go into the week ahead, may we remember the saints and fools in our lives, and also remember...the congregation that plays together, stays together. May we play well. Saints and Fools alike. May we play well.

Amen.