

BUF Brings Out Our Best

(Bring a Friend Sunday)

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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BUF / Brings

Last Sunday we called attention to the work of BUF's Pastoral Care Team, acknowledging that, unofficially, this is work that we all share: to companion the members and friends of this congregation through difficult times. When we are in trouble and afraid... when we are ill... or when a loved one has died and we are alone... when we have a difficult decision to make, and would like a reality check... members of this congregation call one another to be our best selves; we remind one another of the sustaining principles and the sources of inspiration that we celebrate in our Unitarian Universalist tradition; and in times of serious doubt, we reassure one another that every one of us — and every challenging person we may be dealing with — is worthy of love and respect. That's BUF.

More concretely: a Unitarian assembly came together for the first time in Bellingham in 1890. Traveling preachers came and went, meeting in half a dozen different places downtown through 1925, when we took a 25-year hiatus ... until, in 1950, when Unitarianism re-emerged as the congregation we call with affection, “bəf.” Actually it was Bellingham Unitarian *Church* Fellowship until 1959 when it dropped the “Church” part. I don't know why. Maybe they felt self-conscious about calling themselves “bəkf.”

We got our first minister, Robert Fulghum, for a few years in the early 1960s. He later served a couple of congregations in the Seattle area and wrote a church newsletter article called, “Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” which became a book of charming, poignant and inspiring short essays — his first of several collections that have now sold 30 million copies in 27 different languages.

Fulghum's stories and observation are about kindness, responsibility, playfulness, and basic hygiene — things we start learning young but probably need to re-learn throughout our lives. For many of us, when we think about the best of BUF, we think of these basics — which we reinforce in our children's and adults' religious education programs — that can guide us through a pretty good life.

Over the next 65 years BUF was served by about 10 different ministers ... hard to count because there were periods when “minister” was kind of loosely defined. So the continuity, the essence of this congregation is not to be discovered in the adventures and travails of ministers, but in the choices and commitments of this congregation as a whole...our collective joys and sorrows...our accomplishments and failures...and above all how we have treated one another and welcomed others among us, or not.

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Today BUF carries on a legacy borne through decades of extraordinary music, progressive religious education, and at least two distinct forms of social transformation: out there, and in

here/here. Actually a lot of the out-there stuff has happened in here — such as the Maple Alley Inn, a program through which we served meals to the homeless for decades out of our basement. Another project began as a food pantry here in this building, eventually outgrew us, and has become the Bellingham Food Bank.

Equally significant, tho, in our mission of social transformation, is what we do in-here to be a place of rest and recovery. Each of us gets weary from the trials and heartbreaks of ordinary life. So we need a place to recharge, reflect, and celebrate too. Building BUF into a healthy congregation is a key component of our social justice work: making this a home that is welcoming to people with unconventional religious perspectives, across boundaries of race and class, gender identity and sexual orientation, without regard to physical and mental ability or citizenship status. We still have a lot to learn about hospitality, but to whatever degree we succeed at this we are transforming not just ourselves, but the wider communities of which we are a part.

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So that's BUF, or a little piece of BUF. Our next word is "brings." I don't have to elaborate on this too much. I just need to make the point that the mission of this congregation is not to enforce *beliefs*. What matters is what BUF *brings*. It's a verb, and a highly dynamic one. "Brings" refers to the past: "bringing-from." It refers to the future: "bringing-to." And it acts in the here and now. Responsive to the past, undaunted by the future, mindful of the present. This is how *BUF brings*.

[Intermission: Eracism Minute]

OUT! / Our

Not just past and future, today is "Present Perfect" Day, a national LGBTQ celebration of the miracle(!) that more and more denominations are becoming welcoming to seekers who can come to church without worrying about being OUT about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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Our UU national annual conference of congregations — also known as General Assembly — passed a resolution in 1970 calling on the UUA to work to end discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals — 47 years ago. Over the years our language has changed along with the breadth of our understanding. Over the decades, our General Assemblies have passed resolutions regarding discrimination, AIDS, the military, sex-ed in public schools, marriage equality, the employment non-discrimination act, and more.

We can be proud of the transformational work initiated by incredibly brave UUs. But it's important to remember that, along the way, we went through the same arguments as all the other denominations. Including the argument that went like this: "Fine, fine, but do we have to talk about it? Why do we need to put up signs and make such a fuss?"

... Which led to the realization, often after many years, that *indeed we do* have to talk about it, and we do have to make a fuss because for hundreds of years, one had to assume that it was not safe to be OUT in *any* church. Long ago, and still today, unless explicitly stated otherwise, churches can be expected to be hostile to any kind of sexual or gender nonconformity. Shame,

condemnation, and violence were and still are to be expected. So to be welcoming, to promote justice an inclusion, subtlety is not an option.

For today's "Present Perfect" celebration, national LGBTQ organizations have posted online a long list of congregations, including BUF, to which someone might confidently bring an LGBTQ friend. And the reason we decided, at BUF, to grab hold of the idea, and make today a more general bring-a-friend Sunday will be revealed when we get to...

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BUF Brings Out Our. Who do we include when we say "our?" Who do we hold in our hearts when we say "*our* hearts?"

It's not possible to squeeze hundreds of years of the history of over 1,000 congregations into the hour (the H-O-U-R hour) that we have here now together. But when we say "BUF brings out OUR..." we do include all of that breadth and depth and spirit.

To bask in "Our" best is to take in a broad spectrum of brave, brilliant, creative, and scholarly Unitarian Universalists, humble teachers and parents and accountants and soldiers and scientists who have been our hands, our hearts, and the soul of our movement.

But to truly bring out our best, we have to reach way way beyond Unitarian Universalists. One of the great things about being a UU preacher is that we're not limited to an isolated well from which to draw inspiration. *Our* best is the best of *all humanity* for *all time*.

Well, we didn't bring *all* of that out here today. But wait till you see what we've got going on next week! Just another tiny particle of the consciousness and the dreams and the beauty and the potential within this interdependent web of all creation. That's all we have to work with, for now.

Unless... BUF could help, somehow, to bring out the best of *each of us* — *our best* — so that we could let it ripple forth, in the name of love.

[Interlude: #1014 *Standing on the Side of Love*]

BEST

Here's the best part.

Martin Marty is a Lutheran minister who was also a professor at The University of Chicago Divinity School for 35 years ... where he became known nationally as a historian, primarily of American religion — and eventually accumulated 80 honorary doctoral degrees. My Unitarian Universalist seminary, Meadville Lombard, was an affiliate of the U of Chicago Div. School. So when Meadville celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding, Dr. Marty was invited to speak to us about his impressions of Unitarian Universalism.

Because of his extensive study in comparative religions, he was asked to speak about how he saw us within the landscape of American denominations, and what we might have to offer to the future.

So he came up with scheme of breaking the hundreds of denominations that he'd studied into four groups. He called them [along a spectrum] "No-And" ... "No-But" ... "Yes-But" ... "Yes-And." These labels referred to how each tradition sets boundaries around theology and ethics. Then he named denominations within each category and examples of why he put them there.

Marty has written extensively about fundamentalisms. These he placed in the "No-And" category to designate that they tended to respond to modernity with a great big, "NO, both our theology and our moral teachings are settled, the unfolding of history cannot touch them. *AND* did we say that emphatically enough?" Very strict boundaries about what to believe and how to behave.

The "No-But" denominations tend to have strong boundaries around their traditional theology and moral teachings ... BUT ... let's at least acknowledge that the world is complex, and changing, so we do need to struggle with how to keep our traditions ... while adapting to change.

Then let's skip *way over to your left*. Out here are the "Yes-And" people. Maybe hard to categorize as denominations because there is so little to define them.

Do we allow x, y, and z? *Oh yeah, YES! YES of course AND, while you're at it take it a few steps further ... make up some letters of your own! We're free, free, free, not held back by traditions or rituals or bylaws or expectations of any kind.*

We are talking — in this scheme — about an enormous spectrum. And since no group of humans is entirely homogenous — especially over time — there is going to be quite a bit of play within each group in response to different issues.

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Then Marty described some of the best and the worst tendencies he has observed within Unitarian Universalism. Sometimes we fall too far into "Yes-And." With a rush to that shiny trinket over here and that faddish guru over there ... and no real grounding in anything.

How does "Yes-And" play out in congregational life? Lookout! With some insisting vehemently: we include everyone ... God loves everyone just as they are ... so every individual is *free* (I in particular am free) to think and say whatever I want, whenever I want, in any manner I want.

Stir that in a pot with little tolerance for behavioral boundaries and no tolerance for anything that could be construed as censorship ... and we're not going to find much spiritual deepening or beloved community.

Slipping to the other side of the spectrum (not all the way over to "No-And" where the concept of nuance doesn't even exist) just into the realm of "No-but," where we would do well to acknowledge another shadow side of Unitarian Universalism. Because just as strong as our starry-eyed flaky side ... is our staunch rational-historical-critical tendency to stay one-step removed from *the actual experience* of religion (like I'm doing right now) ... our tendency to approach with caution, or not approach at all, anything or anyone that might have religious cooties.

That is the “No-But” aspect of Unitarian Universalism. NO to the woo-woo nonsense, BUT ... I suppose you could read from the Tao de Ching once in a while.

In the middle ground though we find the richness of “Yes-But.” We say “yes” when we can. Yes, we will be genuinely open to the perspectives of each new generation. *But* our answer to every ethical question is not going to be “sure, what the heck?” That will not be our answer when violations of human dignity appear in new forms.

To say “Yes-But,” institutionally, means to develop thoughtful processes for making decisions, and to follow them — *yes*, with some flexibility, *but* not with wild disregard for organizational sustainability.

We are at our best when we say “Yes-But.” It’s like showing some spine. Like a healthy spine with some flexibility, not like a slinky toy.

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Once we get past our most basic physical needs in life — and of course none of us can take our physical needs for granted, not food shelter and clothing, not medical care, clean air and water, and healthy food ... so ok we never get past our most basic physical needs ... but ... along the way, author Clay Shirky suggests there are four things humans seek:

Autonomy and connection: in these two we have that polarity again [referred to in today’s Children’s Focus about the relationship between *me* and *us*] ... the yin and yang, freedom and responsibility, roots and the wings.

Autonomy and connection ... competence, and generosity. Surely these have something to do with our feeling our best, and being our best.

I hope you will experience BUF as a place in which you can grow in each of these dimensions. A lot of us have fled organized religion because of hypocrisy, irrelevance, or gobbledegook. We may not have experienced a good balance of autonomy and connection.

Or we’ve become wary of expectations at church. Especially expectations around generosity. If you are wondering whether or not BUF can help you to bring out your best, please know that we consider growing in generosity to be one aspect of being our best. We promote generosity in all of its forms: kindness, forgiveness, volunteerism, the generosity of being here for one another, and financial generosity.

Can BUF help you to bring out your best? If so, it won’t be because we have the best principles, or the best preachers. Rather, I believe, the question, “Can BUF help you to bring out your best?” will be answered in terms of generosity. What are you seeing modeled to you here? What are you modeling to others?

The members of BUF pursue lives of generosity with seriousness, and levity. We hope you, too, will consider, for yourself, what this pursuit has to offer. And consider what you have to offer as well.