

Walking Together

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One of the most profound experiences I have ever had of culture shock happened to me while I was living in Japan. Many of you know that I lived in Tokyo studying Buddhism for the year in between getting my undergraduate degree and starting seminary. I stayed with a group called Rissho Kosei-kai, and they had a dorm that many of their students stayed in. It was cheap and near the subway, so in a lot of ways it was an ideal location. Except that I spent most of my time in Japan hating the dorm.

I had lived in the dorm in college for only one year. After that I moved into an apartment with friends. Even during the summers I would stay on campus with my friends rather than moving back home all of the time. Eventually I grew used to living on my own. I was free to live however I liked and to do whatever I wanted. Sure I had to cook my own food and do my own laundry, and find a job to pay the bills and for the things I wanted, but with it came sweet freedom. I lived like

that for three years before moving to Japan and into the dorm once again.

While this was a Buddhist organization, don't think of it as a monastery setting. It was urban, and very much like any dorm you may have experienced in our country. What I hated most of all were the rules! The worst was the 10 PM curfew. People hear that I lived in Tokyo and often they assume that it was one big party. Tokyo has a rockin' night life—but I saw very little of it in my time there. The dorm was obsessed with keeping track of where you were at any given time. Everyone had name plates that hung on hooks in the lobby of the dorm. When you went out you turned your name plate around so that your name now appeared in red. It meant you were no longer in the building. Even when you were in the dorm there were magnets with signs on your door. You would move the magnet to indicate to people where you were—in the dining room, or taking a bath for example. I could never read what the words on the sign said, so I never used it. At one point this obsession with my whereabouts at every moment of the day got to me. So on a dry erase portion of the sign on my door I wrote, "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength" the three slogans of the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's novel "1984." I thought invoking "Big Brother" would be rather provocative, but no one got it. It was my own private form of rebellion.

Perhaps the oddest rule of the dorm in Tokyo was when someone had a birthday. One evening I had a knock at my door and it was one of the leaders of the dorm who invited me to a birthday party they were having for another student. They also needed me to chip in 1000 yen, about \$10, to cover the cost of the food and drink. At the time, money was a bit tight, so I told him that I wouldn't be able to go to the party. He looked a bit befuddled when I told him this, and he walked away with an odd look on his face. About an hour later he came back with another student who spoke better English than he did. They explained that the 1000 yen fee was something you had to pay even if you didn't go to the party. What?! Pay for a party that I am not even attending? "Outrageous!" I thought to myself. "How dare they!" But what could I do. I lived in the dorm; and it was their rule. So I gave them a thousand yen note. If Emerson were there he would have called it a rueful thousand yen note. As I recall, I went to this party. If I paid for it, by God I am going!

As I said, I hated the dorm for most of my time in Japan. Toward the end, it grew on me. I started to like the regiment it brought. You ate at a particular time. You bathed at a particular time. Life had a sort of rhythm to it that it never had before or really since. All I had for entertainment was my books—I couldn't watch TV and Wifi wasn't invented yet. Life was more structured, and it brought with it a certain

peacefulness. The rhythm of the day prevented laziness and sloth, while at the same time putting you in contact with your fellow students around our communal activities. Eventually what felt inhibiting became comforting.

It was the first time I noticed something that I have been trying to learn ever since. That what appears at first blush to be a negative experience can actually turn out to teach us something very important. It is a lesson I have to continually remind myself of, as I am sure many of you do as well. But I got more out of living in a dorm than I would have expected. I formed deeper friendships with the students I was living with. We all did the same things at the same times—of course we got to know each other. Sure there were a few Saturday nights when I wished I could have gone clubbing in Shinjuku, but this was good too.

Perhaps most importantly I learned something about being in community. In America, certainly when I lived in the freshman dorm at Michigan, the basic assumption was that we were a collection of individuals. We all lived together, and yes we were friends, but we did our own thing. But in Japan the assumption was that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Yes you had free will, technically, but within more circumscribed limits than we in America were accustomed to. There was still a sense that one made personal sacrifices for the

good of the whole. Sometimes they were sacrifices of money or time or of freedom. But in return you got to be a part of something larger than yourself.

The day before I left Japan the students at the dorm threw a big party for me. For once I was the center of attention and got lavished with food and gifts. It was very sweet, and some of the things they gave me I still have and they adorn special places in my home. But I remember thinking at the party—“I wonder how much they made everyone chip in for this?!”

That larger, transcendent, perhaps Gestalt sense of community is what the historian Conrad Wright talks about in his writings on the liberal church. The early Unitarians, he tells us, when they were forming their congregations had in mind the words of the prophet Amos in the Old Testament who asked, “Can two walk together except that they be agreed?” In other words, do we all have to believe the same things in order to be a community? Certainly Christianity had up until that time answered with a resounding “Yes we do have to believe the same things in order to walk together.” But the Unitarians had a different answer. They knew that there is something deeper about being community than simply everyone agreeing on dogma. Intellectual assent on such matters can be pretty superficial as a means

of holding a group of people together. Sure they may all agree on one idea, say for example that Jesus Christ is the son of God, but there could be a million other things that they disagree on. Why pick just the one thing?

No community has to be more about what we agree or disagree on. The Unitarians knew, what most married people come to know, that it is more important to be in relationship than it is to be right all of the time. Relationships are based on shared values, and explicit promises to each other that yes, no matter if we disagree we are still walking together.

At the heart of every church is love. That is the theme for the month of May remember? I think Conrad Wright can give us a very erudite and historically accurate academic account of how the Unitarians formed their congregations. But I think Kaaren Anderson gets to it much better. She has a way of conveying the love that lies at the heart of every church. I like how her friend Marcy is described in the beginning of the essay as a tough no nonsense lady. She is almost intimidating just hearing about her. But the story isn't really about that. It is about Marcy as a child; a vulnerable little girl who is looking for ways to feel safe and comforted in the world.

All of us are like that you know. All of us have that child inside who is still yearning to feel safe, accepted, and loved as our church's vision puts it. That is the part of us that comes to church. That is the part of us that is hungry for what a community can give us—a sense that our life is a part of a grander drama that matters in the world. It is the part of us that is looking to be healed; to have some words of kindness spoken to us. That is why we gather as a church. It is why we walk together even if we don't agree all of the time. We sort of expect that going in when we join a Unitarian church, don't we? I hope so. Because we are more than the sum of our parts.

It's funny, the story of Marcy and her ever-shrinking blanket reminded me of a similar thing that happened when I was a child. I too had a security blanket that I clung to like Linus from the Peanuts comic strip. After a few years, it had seen better days and was essentially in tatters. There had been a border around the edge of the blanket that was made of satin or something like that. It was my favorite part. But most of it had fallen off, so that there was only one little strip of the border material left. One day we were visiting my grandparents. My grandfather saw this blanket, and asked if he could take a closer look at it. He pulled out his pocket knife and cut off the last remaining strands of this satin border! I immediately burst into tears, and ran screaming for my mother. She assumed that I had a limb missing somewhere with

the way I was carrying on. I pointed at my grandfather in an accusatory way and said, “He did it on purpose!”

It’s funny thinking back on this story now as an adult, and as a parent. I sympathize, now, far more with my grandfather than with the outraged child I had been. My grandfather had seen me carrying around this nasty looking, raggedy blanket that was falling apart at the seams. At least it appeared that way to him. To his mind he took out his pocket knife to trim it up a little bit, cut off some of the loose strands so that it didn’t unravel. It was a very innocent reason for why he cut off that piece of satin. He felt about two inches tall after he realized how much that raggedy blanket meant to me. He tied it back on as best he could, and I was satisfied for the time being.

It just goes to show you how vulnerable we can be. The smallest action can do us great emotional harm. It behooves us to be very gentle and sensitive to others because what may appear to us to be just some satin cloth that is falling apart, is someone else’s prized possession. And at the same time, when we are feeling victimized and put upon, it is good to bear in mind that another’s intentions might not be as nefarious as we assume. Oh, if only my grandfather were alive today to see how such dramas are played out with my own young children, about the same age I was when he cut the border off of my

blanket. I think we would probably get a kick out of it now, having seen things through the eyes of the other.

Community is about the whole and not just the individuals. None of us were there at the founding of First Unitarian Church in 1866 and few if any of us will be here one hundred years from now. Yet the church remains. It is larger than any of us and all of us. Yet we are its stewards in the here and now. We define it through our actions and interactions every week and every day. It is a grand gift to receive, the gift of our heritage and tradition. We do well when we remember this.

And while we are a part of the grand sweep of history, it is also equally true that the people sitting around us are little blankets of vulnerability coming into this sanctuary looking for refuge. In a comment he made in one of his stories, Garrison Keillor once observed that people don't come to church to parade their problems in front of their ministers. They come to church to parade their children in front of their ministers! How well behaved and hansom their children are. Yet, come on. Let us drop such pretenses. We, all of us, ministers included, come to church because there is something gnawing at us. It might be something that is very acute and in your face right now, or it might be an issue that you are successfully avoiding but squirms there in the back of your mind just out of conscious reach. Some

dissatisfaction with the way things are turning out. Some crisis in your marriage or your finances. Or perhaps it is finally understanding that yes you will die one day, and it isn't some abstract fact, but a lived reality. Those gnawing, those hungers, those are what bring us to church.

And rightfully so. For it is in community that those hungers can be fed. Satisfaction can be found. Some problems have no solutions, but we can learn how to live with the problems better somehow when we tackle them as a community. For what was true for the early Unitarians remains true for us; we can walk together so long as we are held by what unites us and not let our differences become divisions.

May that ever be so as we knit together the pieces of our quilt. Let us risk being vulnerable with each other for that is the path to healing. And may there always be a fellow traveler on the journey willing to walk along with us so that we might never be alone. Amen
Blessed Be.