

Follow that Sweater!

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During my sophomore year of college I faced a, shall I say, unique moral quandary. I was studying at the undergraduate library one night; a building that had earned its nickname “the UGLI.” I was seated at a square table with four chairs around it reading something about cultures in faraway lands for one of my Anthropology classes. I was by myself, until another student sat down on the opposite side of the table. She took off her sweater and hung it over her chair. I glanced up to look at her, but she was busy reading.

About twenty minutes she got up and walked to where the bathrooms were. A few moments after that, a man strode up to where she had been sitting, grabbed her sweater off the back of the chair and briskly walked away. I was taken aback at this. Had that fellow just stolen her sweater? What would he want with a woman’s sweater? It was very confusing. What just happened? I got up and walked around the table. I craned my head to see if I could spot either the woman or the thief that had made off with her sweater. I didn’t see either of them, so I

sat back down and waited for her to return. I would describe the fellow who took her sweater when she came back.

I went back to my book. In the meantime, the woman returned along with the fellow who had stolen her sweater! Two other students, who I had not met or seen, pulled up chairs to the table. All of a sudden they were very interested in me. For you see, unbeknownst to me, I had been the unwitting subject of an experiment they were all doing for a psychology class. It was a set up the whole time! They wanted to see how I would react if I had witnessed a theft. The man and woman acted out the crime while the other two students of the study group observed and documented my reaction from afar. And now they wanted to know why.

I am not sure I would christen this moment in my life the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to me, but it was probably in my top ten. I fancy myself something of a chivalrous fellow; if there was a thief who had stolen something from a woman I would like to think that if I had the opportunity to help I would have. But here that opportunity had come—I had not done what I had hoped I would have done. My beliefs about myself, and my actions in that moment, were not lined up. Again, it probably wasn't the biggest moral failing of my life to not follow the fake thief who took the woman's sweater, but then again most of my moral failings are not documented and subsequently written up in some student's psyche paper either! Part of my

embarrassment was that someone saw this discrepancy between what I believed to be correct moral actions, and my actual actions in the moment. Indeed, that was precisely what they were trying to measure in their experiment.

Authenticity is the when our beliefs and our actions are in line with each other. Whatever else one may say about Unitarian Universalist theology throughout our history, one point of emphasis has been clear: whatever it is that you believe, it should be reflected in the life you lead. Unitarian Universalists are less interested in the content of those beliefs, or at least the details, so long as you are called to live a good life as a result of those beliefs. To be our authentic selves, we need to always strive to have those two things, beliefs and actions, congruent with each other. One slogan from our Unitarian heritage put it very starkly, “Deeds, not creeds.”

For awhile, my elevator speech, the short speech I gave people whenever they asked what Unitarian Universalism was or what it believed was “Personal authenticity in religious living.” Authenticity is central to our faith, but it is not as easy as it sounds to keep one’s actions and beliefs aligned. It *shouldn’t* be if we our beliefs are of the highest moral order. We should *not* have a series of beliefs that lets us off the hook too easily. It’s easy to proclaim a belief that everyone has inherent worth and dignity or that all of us are connected. These are big ideas which are worthy of our ultimate commitment. We should devote our

lives to big ideas like that. But the bigger the idea, the harder it is to live by. Do I really treat everyone as if they are the Buddha? It's not easy. And yet it is exactly what our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to do.

That is really hard to do all by ourselves. Alone, it is tough to get the support we need to know what it is we believe much less the courage to live by those convictions. The filmmaker and director Kevin Smith, of Clerks fame, tells the story of how he got into making movies. There he was in his mid-twenties still living with his parents, hadn't gone to college, and was working at the local convenience store in the same New Jersey town he grew up in. One evening, he and a friend went to New York to see a film at an independent movie theater. Right then Smith knew he wanted to make movies, but it seemed like his life was a million miles away from being able to do so.

He confessed this desire to his sister. She told him, "Then be a filmmaker." "Yeah, that's what I want to be, a filmmaker." "No," she said, "Don't *want* to be a filmmaker—you *are* a filmmaker, you just haven't made a film yet." That small shift in thinking, from going from a guy who wanted to be a filmmaker to being a filmmaker who somehow just hadn't done it yet, was huge for Smith. It was a belief about himself that shifted his actions from that moment on. He writes in his autobiography, "There's a trick to being whatever you want to be in life. It starts with the simple belief that you are what or who you say you are. It starts, like all faiths, with a belief—a belief predicated more

on whimsy than reality. And you've gotta believe for everybody else too—until you can show them proof. It you're lucky, someone starts believing with you—first theoretically, then in practice.” He even goes on to say that this collective belief in what is possible spreads to form a church, a chapel, even a cathedral. But it takes more than just a single individual. It takes other people believing in that person, first his sister, then his friends, and then finally Miramax pictures, who bought his movie about a guy working at a convenience store. Kevin Smith had a belief in himself as a filmmaker and then his actions followed that belief. He was living an authentic life. But he could not do it alone.

We need community to support us. I think it is no accident that Smith refers to his group of supporters and believers that he was a filmmaker as a church. Religious community is where we should come together to help each other and support each other in life. We should also hold each other to a high moral standard—articulate those big bold ideas of the interdependent web and the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and help each other live according to those ideas. That is not to say that we should be overly judgmental of one another when we fail. Quite the opposite in fact. Being judgmental of another person rarely helps that other person. Being judgmental is almost always an ego trip for the person doing it—they feel superior to others when in fact they have even further to go down the road to spiritual maturity than those

who forgive. Yet religious community helps us all grow as spiritually mature and authentic human beings. Gurdjieff knew this all too well.

At first blush the story of our friend Gurdjieff doesn't sound very authentic. I mean, he has to pay this difficult fellow to stay there, right. The whole point of Gurdjieff keeping this fact a secret from most of his community is a form of confession that he himself is not as fully authentic as he would try to instill in his students. But before we decry him as a hypocrite, it is important to recognize that his breach of authenticity is done with a purpose. His main teaching to his students is that they should be aware of whatever it is that they are going through. That sounds easy enough, but Gurdjieff knows the tremendous power of human denial. We think we know what we believe and how we should act accordingly, but far too often we are simply fooling ourselves into feeding our base desires and egos. To really be aware of what it is you are going through, it needs to be in your face. It helps to be overt and easily experienced. Anger and frustration are two emotions that cause us the most difficulty and suffering. Cruel as it is, and I think we might properly judge him to be cruel rather than a phony, it does help his students practice his teaching. It is one thing to give sermons and lectures on loving your neighbor. It is all together a different level of teaching to have to deal with difficult people right in your own back yard. The Dalai Lama says that he is able to show compassion to the Chinese government for their mistreatment of Tibet and of him, because

they have given him the opportunity to practice patience. Similarly Gurdjieff wanted to drive home the same lesson in his community.

Community is where we learn virtues like patience. It provides for us the opportunity to actually put into practice what we espouse as our highest ideals. You can't live your life according to the Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every person if you were locked in a cell all by yourself. Without anyone to annoy you or drive you crazy, then that idea is simply a notion, an abstract philosophical assertion. It isn't religion until we actually encounter other people and have to treat them as if they had inherent worth and dignity.

That is the beauty of churches, isn't it? We espouse the great ideals of life, and then support, and at times challenge, each other to live accordingly. That is how we live the authentic life. I am proud to say that First Unitarian Church is such a community. Last year many of you participated in a series of small group discussions entitled "Mission Possible." The result of those conversations has been that the Board has articulated a brand new vision for our congregation—they have given us a renewed sense of direction and purpose. This vision is by no means a secret. Indeed, the soon-to-be-Rev. Collins and I are planning to preach extensively on this new vision throughout the course of the church year. Part of the Board's new vision is as follows: "that people of all ages at First Unitarian Church feel safe, accepted, and loved and empowered to be their authentic selves." They didn't say that I should pay some of you

to stay here. But I think the road toward feeling safe, accepted and loved goes through first empowering folks to be their authentic selves. If you are faking it with each other, then how safe or accepted will you really feel? Inauthentic people don't love very deeply either.

That is the kind of church I want to be a part of. It is sort of community that would have been a huge help to me back in college when I was studying there in the UGLI. I wish I had had then a group of people who helped me articulate and understand, in a deep way, what it was that I believed. Then I probably would have had a better chance of living it out in that crucial moment. I would have followed that sweater to at least attempt to catch up with the would-be thief. But confusion around what was going on and what I should do about it got the better of me. I questioned my impulse to help, and sat down.

When those other students walked over to me and told me what was really going on I was so embarrassed. I have never wanted a time machine so badly—so that I could go back and make the choice that fit my beliefs. They began to interview me, and asked me, why had I not chased after the fellow who took the sweater? “We were rooting for you! We were so disappointed when you eventually sat down.” So was I. I tried to answer their questions as best I could, but all I could keep thinking about was Sartre. The infamous French Philosopher of Existentialism once wrote that our lives and actions are our testimony to the world. When faced with a moral quandary we should act in such a

way that we would have anyone in the universe act if they were in our place. If any person you choose had been sitting there at that table and had seen that sweater take off, I would have wanted them to chase after it. But I didn't. Sartre's dictum is a moral litmus test that directs us to lead a life of authenticity. "Act in such a way that you would have any person in the world act if they were in the same circumstance." My friends, I deviated from that exhortation once; I highly recommend you heed its wisdom.

Oh if I had a community that had supported me in those days! A group of people, like Kevin Smith's "believers" who have faith in a vision or idea despite the lack of evidence, but are inspired to the point of moving toward that vision. I believe that the Board has given us exactly that gift. May this year be one in which that vision begins to come to life so that we, and the entire world with us, are blessed with its fruit. Amen Blessed Be.