

About Churches by Bob Sorrells

First of all, a church is an institution of a particular sort, and like any other institution it can get bogged down in its own baggage so that its primary purpose comes to be, **To Stay in Existence**. That's when people tend to lose faith in it and in lots of the good stuff it can still do. Confusing the institution itself and the reasons for its existence in the first place is not hard to understand, but is sometimes hard to explain: the lines blur. There's a difference between the Church as an Institution and the Church as one path which can help lead to the nourishment of the Spirit.

I tend to be an institutionalist myself (up to a point) but our UU churches are filled with people who became disaffected with where they were—privately or institutionally. Often it's as simple as, "I couldn't keep on saying I believed all that stuff you're supposed to believe if you're going to be able to say—honestly—that you're a Methodist (or whatever) so I got out."

For others, the matter is more complicated. We've also got a lot of people who were bru-tally wounded by their religions—including lots of Catholics and folks reared in fundamentalist churches that battered them with how evil they were, how worthless, how lowly, how pocked by sin and degradation and-on-and-on-and-on. These are the people who are angry angry angry at their churches and, often, at religion generally. I liken them, sometimes, to people who feel betrayed by politicians and who feel that "they're all thieves and liars and cheats . . ." etc.

Fact is, they aren't all thieves, liars, and cheats, etc. Fact is, churches have saved people from despairs of the worst and most unimaginable sorts. In both political and religious (or churchly) cases I've come to see people expecting too much, or expecting what wasn't ever possible in the first place. One problem in the political realm, it seems to me, is that "The Public" often doesn't want to hear the truth: (We'll have to raise taxes to lower the national debt, for instance; or, reaching 'way back, Chaing Kai Chek is going to lose to the Communists because he doesn't have any credibility with the people of China; or, The Viet Nam war was the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time being fought by the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Name your own refusals to hear unpleasant truths).

So institutions are like that, too. They're run by people. The United States is a nation governed by law not by men, we have been told. Yet it was Charles Evans Hughes—a one-time member of the Supreme Court—who pointedly observed that the Constitution "is what the judges say it is." People and institutions. Fundamentalists want absolute answers to the questions of life. That's why so many of them turn up in military or para-military organizations where authority can be pretty absolute. They don't understand parable, they don't understand metaphor, they can't begin to deal with ambiguity or ambivalence at all, and they don't believe in paradox. Was Bill Clinton a scuzzball? Prolly so. Was he also a good president? Prolly so.

But I said that a church is a particular kind of institution. What it's good for depends on what you think it can or should do or be. What *is* a religious institution for? Like so many other institutions there are lots of reasons for it to be and lots of things it exists to do. Many UU churches are very social-action oriented. This comes from a belief (word intentionally used) that if we believe in the dignity of all human beings, then we must act on that belief. That attitude is hardly new, going back to all the debates about Grace, Faith, and Good Works. But of course they

all had to do with Salvation, something most UUs dismiss pretty much out of hand. At least, *Salvation* seems always to be tied to a life everlasting and coming to rest in the bosom of God.

A vast preponderance of UUs don't believe in heavens and hells and other afterlives; therefore the life of love or faith or good works must be done here where our known lives are, be-cause when we die we're as dead as any zebra eaten and digested by the nearest pack of hyenas.

But the question of spirituality comes up, churches being, presumably, repositories of spiritual growth. It's here we get into the fun part, sort of. In another piece, I've written that a course in Creative Writing may be the very worst place for a person to learn something about how to write, because educational institutions are often so stuffy and bound by rules, regulations, procedures, and so on. Still, I dared venture, they can be pretty good places if that's the way you are.

By the same token, a church can be the worst place in the world to come to grips with what we call spirituality, something UUs for way too many years pooh-poohed. But it's why I got and have stayed connected.

In Rochester, Minnesota, (my home town for nearly nineteen years) there's a huge com-plex called Assisi Heights, a convent that once housed hundreds of Franciscan nuns, but which recently had to come to grips with the economics of numbers, which eventually led the Order to sell The Heights to Mayo Clinic. Still, in the Lourdes Chapel up there—a beautiful space where many concerts are held during the year—there is a great, arching inscription that reads, I HAVE LOVED O LORD THE BEAUTY OF THY HOUSE WHERE THY GLORY DWELLETH. In that space, it's a stunning statement of faith and hope. Still, it's what's wrong, in my opinion, with so many people's attitudes about "church." The glory of the Lord (whatever that might mean to any given person) doesn't dwell in that house any more than it dwells in anyone's house—or home or heart or mind. That is, that's not the only place the "Lord's Glory" dwells.

It seems to me that one source of the bad raps UU churches get—or give themselves—is from those who don't understand or accept or realize that spirituality is a *felt* state of being, and that attempts to deal with it rationally will always fail. Reason, Logic, Common Sense, and all those good things simply can't reach the pith, the core, the essence of a spiritual sensibility.

So a church will always fail if it is seen as a fount of spirituality rather than as a route—one among many—for a person to get introduced to spirituality, to move nearer where he or she needs to be, that way. A church is really no more than a community of more or less like-minded and similar-hearted people who deal with each other by playing, working, and communing toget-her to move toward (or within) the goal of whatever their religious ambitions might be.

Well, this is all little more than so much blather to many, I imagine—which doesn't "dis-appoint" me, assuming I'm right, but saddens me after a fashion. One problem many in this country have is that when they talk about religion or church, they too often automatically think of Christianity. What a shame. There's so much else going on.

Our Unitarian Universalist societies, it seems to me, should have us be highly visible models to demonstrate that religion doesn't *have* to equal Christianity to be valuable; that what works for one religious sensibility doesn't *have* to work for all; that if a particular route of faith held by one doesn't work for another, that doesn't *have* to negate or lessen its value for the one; that a calm for our hearts, a balm for our souls, and a passion for living our beliefs can manifest themselves in many and wondrous ways; and that one must *keep on* finding or looking for ways to

approach that calm, that balm, that passion. Or, to reverse the process, we need to keep pre-paring ourselves so we are able to recognize, ready to gather up, and willing to embrace those urgencies of mind and heart to make them our own.

I wish I could say I've done all that for myself. Still, in certain ways, I have. It's just that you really do have to keep finding it, have to keep leaning against the tightening strictures of the mortal coil, I guess. It's like the good ole boy football player who told his coach during a tough game that he just couldn't knock that big fella in front of him down. "Well then, don't try to knock him down, Bubba," his coach wisely advised. "But you still gotta keep leaning on him."

Anyway, I keep finding things out from William Butler Yeats that I've said in other ways myself. For instance, my wife and I were talking about who knows what once upon a time, and within the context of our conversation I responded to something she had said with, "I don't ever have 'fun.' I don't do 'fun.'"

Then she said she knew that and it had always made her sad.

More or less surprised at that, I said, "But I'm really into Joy, so 'fun' isn't something I miss." Then I happened across some quotes from Yeats in a book called *Writers on Writing*. He said that a poet's passion "is reality" as opposed to the understanding of sentimentalists—"practical men who believe in money" and to whom happiness is to stay busy, so that "all is forgotten but the momentary aim." "And for the awakening," Yeats went on, "for the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word—ecstasy."

So I've found that I'm concerned about Joy and Ecstasy much more than happiness or fun. Maybe that's why—even coming from a not particularly religious, much less churchy, back-ground—I've gotten hooked on some semblance of religion: what it is, what it isn't; what it can be; *how* it can be; what it's about (after a fashion); the joys and ecstasies it can lead to; about how it can help me develop at least a glimmer of what an epiphanal moment can be. In a long essay on Nashville I even raise the question as to whether people still have epiphanies. When I wrote that, I was thinking of a funny remark once made by a dear friend: "I majored in philosophy," her patter went, "but that was a long time ago, and they didn't know very much about it then."

I've always loved that.