

Religious Communities Are All Mixed Up! And Why We Need Their Good Examples Now More Than Ever¹

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Good morning! Thank you for inviting me to join you today. I am always delighted to have a chance to speak to Unitarian Universalist congregations—or any religious congregation that would have me—even if it’s on short notice and about a topic that would appear to make me an odd choice. (In case you don’t know, the theme for April in this congregation is “What is the value of religious community?”) Yes, I grew up Roman Catholic, attended Catholic schools and universities for a time, and briefly considered a religious vocation. So far so good. But that all ended almost 50 years ago in a first-year college course taught by a priest who told his young charges that they were baby Catholics, and that the Church needed adult Catholics, and that he was more than happy to help. He also said that many of us would not make the transition.

He got that right. Imagine my parents’ surprise when I returned home for Thanksgiving spouting challenges to and critiques of the Catholic Church that I learned in that class. My father was incredulous. He actually asked me if I was willing to risk burning in hell for eternity for these new views of mine. (I’m quite certain he wanted to burn down the university.) But I never looked back and have never again belonged to a formal religious community, nor do I have any plans at the moment to join one.

But it’s the strangest thing. As I look at my day job as an educator over almost four decades, it seems that I am constantly seeking some form of religious community, though often with other names, and no fiery hells. I find easy common cause with many sacred practice traditions and am frequently reading works by authors with strong faith traditions. My friends and colleagues frequently observe with some delight and teasing that I’m still a Catholic deep down. It has taken a long time for me to acknowledge and appreciate what fine and holistic educational and life experiences I received in the Catholic tradition. Which is to say, it still feels like home, even if I live these days mostly out back in the shed.

So, the invitation to speak with you today is a chance for me to sort some of this out and, hopefully, in the process, articulate what I think it is that religious communities offer us that is so important now more than ever, and why I have never really rejected them,

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though my dad would probably disagree. Here's the short version: Religious communities are creative atmospheres that feature multiplicity, diversity, slow time, deep time, deep thinking, conversations with neighbors, including with those in the other-than and more-than human worlds; singing, caring, and sharing; work and play all mixed up together, and in ways that mimic wild nature and the earthly atmosphere that envelops us and creates our earthly home.

The phrase "religious community" lends itself obviously to more than a few interpretations and I'll be using it below quite expansively to cover a lot of ground (and even ground that might not strike you as very religious). But even the etymology of 'religion' is thought to have many sources and meanings, not all of them compatible. As this is a short sermon and not a philosophy seminar, let me offer what I think of as some common observable facts about religious communities. And I'll say it just once here, but it's implied in all that follows: 'At their best,' and 'in my experience,' religious communities have these five features in common:

- 1) They honor the integrity of individual members while prioritizing community identity and commitments to a larger world of meaning, whether transcendental or spiritual or nature based. I's and Me's, and even They's, become We. Humility and hospitality are encouraged, and together the We's help heal and care for each and all.
- 2) Religious communities stand apart from contemporary societies and in some cases are in direct opposition to contemporary social values. They work to transform the larger society's worst tendencies toward injustice, selfishness, and willful ignorance.
- 3) Religious communities even offer alternative temporal and spatial options with their own calendars and holidays, and the creation of sensory enhancements (music, incense, dancing, art) to create sacred spaces, all with the goals to help community members experience a different reality, a different way of being, if only for an hour a week. And to offer respite from the demands of an otherwise daily life relentlessly cranked up with the noises of productivity, competition, and deadlines. ('Deadline:' what a word that is! There's no ambiguity about the consequences, and we even use it with young children.)
- 4) Religious communities welcome and even prioritize conversations about the big three questions: Where did we come from? How are we to live? And what is to become of us? No religious community is without multiple opinions and answers to these questions despite their creeds and commandments. Nearly all of them

have worked out ways to keep the questions alive for every generation. Not without controversy and schisms, of course. It's an awkward and delicate dance that seeks to preserve traditions while also allowing them to grow into new forms and applications.

- 5) Religious communities represent one of the few places left where people can still come together as families and neighbors, even as enemies, for some small portion of the week, to sing, think, eat, rest, and carry on. These sorts of activities used to be done at home and in neighborhoods, but less so these days. The mobile phone is a big reason why, but the distancing and isolation many of us notice and feel in ourselves and in those we love started long before mobile phones.

As I started to assemble this list, and thanks to a book I am currently reading, I noticed that the kind of mixing one finds in religious communities is not unlike the mixing of the gasses in our atmosphere, or the mixing we see in healthy forests and grassland ecosystems: myriad species above and below ground, and minerals, and water, together cycling, competing, and cooperating; all energized by sunlight and the photosynthetic superpower of plants.

According to Emanuele Coccia (Kocha), in his 2017 book *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, all life arises from mixture and atmospheres of mixture, and plants are the most important and influential mixers of all time. They eat sunlight and burp oxygen. They've been at it for almost half a billion years; and according to a new study there are 435,000 varieties in their extended family, and that's just land plants. They destabilized the atmosphere—it's called the Oxygen Catastrophe, but in doing so created habitats for many, many other lifeforms, while keeping the atmosphere conducive to life. They live in two places at once: both above and below the ground. They make symbiotic friendships, and they create food, beauty, shelter, music, medicine, and fuel for so many others. They even mix the temporal scales as annuals, biennials, and perennials. They don't shout about it or lord it over the rest of us, but they'll outcompete us every time if we insist on a contest with them; they simply know more and have way more experience living in communities.

This mixing of plants, soils, minerals, microbes, gasses, sunlight, and water is life's testament to improvisation, resilience, and creativity. It's wild and unruly all the way down and over long stretches of time. It's the wildness that preserves the world, as Henry David Thoreau proclaimed in 1851. It's the tangled bank along a stream described on the last page of Charles Darwin's 1859 classic *Origin of Species*, "wherein from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved." And in the work of another Charlie—Charlie Parker— whose solo in a late-night jam session when he was just 22 years old helped give birth to be-bop, a new musical form. It's an "endless net of threads studded with crystal beads," proclaims a

hymn in the ancient *Rig Veda*. The “rhythm of being,” in contemporary theologian Raimon Panikkar’s danceable phrase.

If only this mixing were more available elsewhere in our everyday lives. There, it seems, life is more ordered and fractured and sped up. Divisions are everywhere. And not just recently, but for thousands of years. The origins and practice of agriculture seem to have had an outsized influence on how we’ve come to organize the rest of society. Ten to twelve thousand years ago in many places around the planet our ancestors began selecting just a few plants and animals for their diets and ignoring and subduing the rest—conveniently called weeds and pests. They and their offspring over centuries and millennia began to divide the world up into ever smaller pieces, professions, and ‘fields.’ Fields of corn, wheat, and rice, and eventually fields of study where new discoveries are described as breaking new ground; and as battlefields and athletic fields. In all of them competition is favored over cooperation resulting in a few winners and mostly losers.

To get a glimpse just walk through almost any town or city on the planet or on a college campus. There’s a building for everything: one for food, one for art, one for theater, one for books, one for worship (or one for each version of worship), one for classrooms, one for healing, one for governing, and on and on. We are also expected to hand our children over to professional teachers before they turn 5 to sit in classrooms where they get segregated by age and eventually by rigorous grading which is weeding of another sort. They spend more and more time preparing for a career and making a living instead of learning how to live a life. (And if you’ve ever wondered about the etymology of ‘career’ you won’t be surprised to learn that it comes from a Greek word that means to run at full speed in a circle. No kidding.) It is no wonder that we feel exhausted, lonely, and anxious.

So, how can we invite greater mixing and merging in a broader range of communities, religious or otherwise? I hesitate to offer any advice to a religious community that in its very name celebrates mixture. Unitarian Universalist, a merging of two traditions, head, and heart. And your openness to many gods or none at all. My brother-in-law tells the story of talking to his mother while he was in college about his interest in visiting a nearby UU church. She said “Why would you want to do that? They don’t believe in anything.” She was right in a way. You don’t believe in any one thing. You believe many things. You invite guest speakers with views of their own, you eschew creeds, and welcome independence of thought and interdependence of shared reflection. Thank you for your good examples.

But as we leave this sanctuary and re-enter the communities and institutions we live in for the rest of the week, I hope we might begin to take stock of how much or how little life-sustaining mixing and mixtures occur in them. To imagine how these communities and institutions might become more like living atmospheres, with greater diversity,

celebration, and improvisation at their cores. And how in our personal lives and daily habits we might give greater attention to slowing down, to welcoming interruptions, lightening up, gathering more in groups, walking, learning the names of our neighbors, humans, plants, and animals alike. We might also try celebrating and emulating the multi-taskers and generalists we know with deep regional wisdom, rather than galavanting specialists with lots of letters after their names. Or consider the possibility that the greatest influence and impact we can have in our lives might occur within the area that we can cover on a slow, afternoon walk. Or simply try to witness and experience with our whole selves the joys or frustrations or loneliness of other beings in our neighborhoods and communities.

Here's how a Middlebury College student summed it up in a final reflection paper last semester:

There seems to be no realistic, long-term solution to the problems we face, other than solidarity, communal and collective living; systems-thinking and thinking focused on longevity, rootedness to place and to people, repair and nurturance, slowness, and deep consideration.

That sounds like the work of religious communities to me, wherever we can find them; or create them.

For further reading:

The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture. Emanuele Coccia. Polity Press, 2019.

The Perennial Turn: Contemporary Essays from the Field. Bill Vitek, editor. New Perennials Publishing, 2020. (This book and all publications from New Perennials are available free here:

https://middlebury.figshare.com/collections/New_Perennials_Publishing/6307632

The Nation of Plants: A Radical Manifesto for Humans. Stefan Mancuso. Profile Books, 2021.

Deschooling Society. Ivan Illich. Multiple editions and available in pdf form for free on many websites. (First published in 1971.)

A selection of Bill Vitek's writings can be found here:

<https://www.newperennials.org/musings>