

**“To the Glory of LIFE”**  
**Rev. Greg Ward**  
**Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North**  
**May 2nd, 2004**

**Call to Worship (Karen Holden)**

The hardest part is people.  
So Lord, help me face them.  
Without rancor or disappointment.  
Help me see the pain behind their actions  
Rather than their malice;  
The suffering rather than the rage.

And in myself, as I struggle  
With the vise of my own desire –  
Give me strength to quiet my heart,  
To quicken my empathy, to act  
In gratitude rather than need.

Remind me that the peace I find  
In the slow track of seasons  
Or an uncurling fern frond,  
Is married to the despair I feel  
In the face of nuclear war.

Remind me that each small bird shares atoms  
With anthrax, with tetanus, with acid rain,  
That each time I close my heart  
To another, I add to the darkness;  
Help me always follow kindness.

Let this be my prayer.

**Meditation: (Adapted from Anne Lamott)**

Sam, my son, is the only kid he knows who has to go to church. He is made to go because his mother forces him. He rarely wants to go. This is not exactly true; the truth is he never wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than hanging out with a friend? It does not help him to be reminded that once he's there he enjoys himself, the people, the stories....It does not help that I always pack some snacks, some Legos, his art supplies, and bring along any friend of his whom we can lure into our churchy web. It does not help that he genuinely cares for the people there. All that matters to him is that he, alone, in the world of children-dom, is forced to spend Sunday morning in church.

You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was being made to sit through a six hour Latin mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping exuberant boy come with me. And if you were to ask, this is what I would say:

I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy five pounds.

But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people in community. People who are generous with their time and their love. People who have faith – in themselves, others and the world. People with a deep sense of spirituality. They are Buddhists, Jews, Christians – people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.

I saw something from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said, “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of great meaning. I go to church – I make Sam go – because I want us to be part of that great meaning.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people of my church tied a knot in it for me and helped me to hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of the word – that place where you show up and they have to take you in. My church took me in. They even said, “You come back now.”

My biological family lives all round me and I adore them. But they are all as skittishly self-obsessed as I am which I certainly mean in the nicest possible way. Let’s just say that I do not leave family gatherings with the feeling that I have just received some kind of spiritual chemotherapy. But I do when I leave my church.

**Sermon:**

When they said, “You come back now!” I took them literally. It took me a number of years out on my own. But I came back. I was looking for some spiritual chemotherapy. And I went to the last place I had received an infusion. That was church.

But, I was in a new town. It was a new time. And I was looking for some of the same mojo I had left behind years before. I didn’t know if it was going to work. In some ways, I didn’t think it would. In some ways I didn’t even want it to. But I knew I had to give it a chance.

When I went back to church, I went back to the First Unitarian Church of Oakland. It was the best place I could think of. Mostly because the minister there was my youth advisor fifteen years earlier. If anyone could help me find what I left behind, I figured it would be him.

But it wasn’t. My awakening came from a completely different, completely unexpected source. It came in the form of a specific little boy. A boy who was made to go to church.

Christopher Berry was famous. Legendary. The mere mention of his name brought whispered conversation among people. Hushed tones among staff and faculty. No less than the very walls of the building stiffened in response to his presence. There wasn't a soul who had attended that church more than a couple of weeks who didn't know his name at least as well as the minister's. Christopher Berry was probably the most well known name in the church. Pretty good, considering he was only six.

The rest of the church would have probably preferred that Christopher's notoriety subsided a bit. That his reputation not overshadow the things the church wanted to be known for. The rest of the church would have probably preferred that they be known as the church where people go who have something to learn. Where people go who have something to teach. Where people go who want community. They didn't have in mind that they would become 'Christopher Berry's church.'

And yet, that's what the first Unitarian Congregation of Oakland became known as. I was there at a pivotal point. While the church's reputation was developing. And I know that it was this particular church, at this particular time, deciding how it was going to be known, that provided exactly what I had gone in search of.

Christopher Berry was a special boy. With his energy and exuberance he had single handedly brought a strong religious education program to its knees. In UU terminology, Christopher was a very 'spirited' boy with a sense of absolute freedom which didn't like to be encumbered by rules. In baseball terminology, which is sometimes a little euphemistic, he would have led the Unitarian Universalist Church league in every offensive category. Especially slugging percentage.

When Christopher came towards them, other children, other adults – even the ministers – would get out of the way. He was a whirlwind, often leading to children changing classrooms. Parents resigning from the RE program and families changing churches. So when I went back to church, wanting to help, I found there was an immediate opening for a teacher in his class.

Christopher appeared to be one of those frustrated children who didn't want to go to church. So I was surprised when he told me that he enjoyed going. That he looked forward to it. From outward appearance, one might have figured that he liked the hair pulling, juice spilling, screaming in class parts. Or the challenge of systematically loosening every screw that kept that church standing. But I had a theory that there was a deeper reason. Because I had a theory that every church in existence has at least one child like Christopher. And I had that theory because I was the one my church had when I was six.

And I know I had reasons why I liked church – even though I exhibited the same kind of frustration. The people from my old church, who watched me grow up, would have described my reasons for going to church as similar to Christopher's. But despite no shortage of evidence, my real needs were far different than what I was perceived as

wanting. My real goals were to be a part of a place that cared. A place that took me in and made room for me and offered some structure. Because those were the things that were often missing in other parts of my life. I acted out, often, because I didn't think I would find those otherwise. And despite my behavior, my church found a way to respond. Often expending tremendous energy and resources. And, when I became old enough to realize what they had done for me, I was grateful.

That's why I came back. Yes, partly, I was looking for spiritual chemotherapy. But partly I came out of gratitude. With a debt to pay. And I wanted to know what kind of debt I had to pay. Was it to particular people who were there for me at the right place in the right way? Or, was my debt larger? Did I owe the larger ideal of church – simply because caring for people like me was something that churches do?

For me, a good deal hung in the balance besides having a place to go. I had thought about seminary. That I might like to serve an institution like the one that helped raise me. But to do that I would need to believe that it was more than some random act of kindness. That there was a way to actually cultivate kindness and organize a response to frustration. Frustration which, by the way, I was getting a pretty good dose of in my first month of teaching Christopher Berry.

“It serves you right,” my friend Dana said to me. Dana was a friend from church who knew about my early childhood and how I credited my early church with changing my life. She also knew what a terror I was to my early teachers. She'd listen to me recount my weekly trials with Christopher. “It serves you right,” she'd say.

Dana had also just returned to church after years of being away. She was beginning to rethink the idea of God. She said that just knowing that I was getting my comeuppance for torturing my teachers those many years ago helped her to believe that there was, indeed, a just God at work in the heavens. Or, that at the very least, some law of karma was still in place.

Christopher's mother Jackie was in her mid-forties. But she looked much older. She appeared as though she had once had a very kind face – the kind with a sparkle in the eye that might evolve into a soft, rosy glow with laugh lines as she aged. It would seem that circumstance gave her a very different face instead. One where kindness hid behind a mask of fatigue. One with more hardened determination than soft composure. Where joy once resided, worry now seemed to have taken root. Her appearance suggested that she might be a graduate of the school of hard knocks and might even be one of the tenured faculty.

I'd seen her each week after class when she came to pick up Christopher. She was usually one of the last parents in and we'd spoken briefly on occasion. Mostly pleasantries. Conversations about the best way to get splattered grape juice off walls or why hamsters get sick when you put graham crackers in their cage. So when I called her that week it started out pleasant enough. Until I told her about some of the concerns that other teachers and parents were raising about Christopher.

“I’m tired of hearing that it’s all his fault,” she started out. I got the impression that I wasn’t the first teacher to bring up this conversation. “Christopher’s a boy with a lot of energy,” she continued. “But that’s not his fault. Lots of boys have that kind of energy.”

“No one wants to blame Christopher,” I tried to explain. In fact, I tried to say how easy it was to love him. And how it was not hard to sense the frustration that was behind his struggles to pay attention and get along with others in class. I tried to tell her how I had noticed that there was a natural, almost automatic response to want to care for him and give him time and attention. The problem was that we had so many others in class we couldn’t always give all our attention to one boy. And I was hoping we could, together, come up with a plan that might work better.

The explanation, unfortunately, went very poorly. Jackie seemed only able to hear that I was saying that she had a problem child. And she responded like a protective mother lion defending her cub. And defending herself. I listened as she offered a sketch of her life behind clenched teeth. I learned Christopher’s father wasn’t around and never had been; though she didn’t present any details. She had no other family in the area and worked too much to have any friends. She was all that Christopher had and it took every ounce of energy and every minute of time she had to meet his needs and she certainly didn’t have time to help out in the class. She mentioned that he was doing just fine at home and at his school – thank you very much – and she couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t be doing well at church unless it was the other students, the lesson plans, or the teachers.

The hardest part is people.  
So Lord, help me face them.  
Without rancor or disappointment.  
Help me see the pain behind their actions  
Rather than their malice;  
The suffering rather than the rage.

This was the point at which I realized that my soulful infusion, my spiritual chemotherapy, was transmogrifying into something more like a spiritual root canal.

Everybody who goes to church is hoping to find something, I thought to myself. In Jackie’s case it was a place where she could find peace and rest. Looking at her, most people could see that she was just flat out tired. Barely making it. Thoughts of wondering if all that she was doing would ever be enough. Loving her son with all her heart and wanting to give him more. But having no more to give. And feeling guilty about needing a place where she could find her own infusion. She came to church to find a place where she could let go and know that it would be okay. That someone else might care as much as she did. Might help share the load.

But when people are threatened – when they are afraid they will not get what they need – they don’t often respond in the most patient, understanding manner. Christopher responded by acting out and crying out for attention. Jackie responded by criticizing the

church, the teachers and me to find answers to the problem. And I, I responded in the worst way imaginable. Especially for a Unitarian Universalist.

The threat I was feeling was partly to my ego. Feeling like I was giving myself and then being criticized for not doing enough. But it was more. I really wanted to contribute to something which I felt grateful for and loyal to. I wanted to feel like I could help teach at least one important lesson or offer one important thing in my service. And I felt threatened that I wouldn't be able to be part of that.

So, determined not to fail, convinced that something was wrong and committed to fixing it, I sat down with Dana and told her my plan. "I'm going to write a policy," I said. Dana just rolled her eyes.

I was young. And naïve. I hadn't yet realized that the great enemies of all Unitarian Universalists since the beginning of time were all policy writers. And yet, I was determined to seal my fate as a leper in the community. I discovered in very short time that my policy had all the inspirational lift of a lead balloon. But it did manage to accomplish two things: It raised the level of conflict between Jackie and me to something akin to the Trojan War. And it got the church talking.

People were suddenly much more aware, not only of the conflict between Jackie and me, but the problem underneath it. Many teachers began to see how they really wanted to feel not only appreciated and supported, but effective. Many parents wanted to feel okay about letting go and feel like they were working as a team with their children and their teachers. Everyone wanted to feel like we, as a community, had something important to pass on to the children – and everyone who came in our doors.

It was, by this time, December. I had been back to church, teaching in the classroom for over three months. And although we were talking about this issue everywhere, I couldn't see that anything was going to come of it. Although I could see that you could organize debate and discussion, I wasn't at all convinced that you could organize kindness.

The policy had no effect. But there was a good bit more help offered from a few people. And, at least, there was some awareness that this wasn't an issue between two people. Or even for one program of the church. This was something that permeated throughout coffee hour, became part of every committee meeting and affected and involved almost every member.

Still, I wondered if I was able to make a difference. Teach anything worthwhile. And if all this time, tension and turmoil were worth it. I confess that I had doubts. Even though Christopher showed up every week and seemed to be the life of the party and our annual Christmas celebration.

But the cold war that had developed between Jackie and me continued to grow. We had made some efforts to arrange a facilitated conversation with one of the ministers to discuss the personal feelings which had arisen. But even though I had begun to grow in

my empathy and understanding of her, and even though I began to respect her for sticking with the church and continuing to bring Christopher each week, I still found it very awkward to be around her.

And then came the New Year's Eve party where, in a crowded room, we suddenly found ourselves standing next to one another at the champagne table. We picked up glasses, turned and were facing one another in a moment of uncomfortable silence. But suddenly, she lifted her glass and smiled – a genuine smile – and said, “Happy New Year.” We toasted. Then she told me that she'd heard Christopher say that he really likes me as his teacher. It felt like a weight had been lifted from my heart. And it made a huge difference in the way I felt about what I was doing. I told her so. And thanked her. And we parted ways.

The next morning, early, the phone began to ring. I turned it down to sleep more. But when one call after another seemed to be coming in, I finally answered. It was Dana. “Have you heard?” she asked. “There are at least ten people here at the church. I think you should come.”

That night, after she had gone home and gone to bed, Jackie Berry died in her sleep. Christopher went to wake her in the morning and couldn't. It was no surprise to me that he was startled. It was no surprise that he was scared. It was a surprise, however, to find out that the first place he decided to call, the only place he called, was the church.

Within minutes, the ministers were there. People were called and came and brought food. Ten people came to see if they could help. Another ten called to offer places where Christopher could stay until it was determined what would happen.

He ended up staying with the ministers. But he might as well have been staying in the church itself because just about every member took the time to go over and let him know that they were there for him. People who had, only months before jumped out of the way when they saw him coming, were now stepping in to make sure they got to see him.

Over the next couple of weeks, care was offered, services provided, and arrangements made. After only a few days, it was discovered that Christopher's biological father lived only 80 miles away. He had been paying child support regularly, every month. Social services reported that he had requested visitation repeatedly but the request had always been contested by Jackie. Christopher's father had married and had two other children. He agreed, and was delighted, to take Christopher in the interim and possibly indefinitely. It was the church that insisted, almost unanimously, that he bring Christopher those 80 miles to church for at least a little while. Which he did.

Christopher Berry was famous. And the first Unitarian Church of Oakland is famous for being known as his church. And they are proud to be so. For he held up a truth, greater than any minister or church leader, the real reason why we bring our children to church. Not because we outweigh them. But because they help us to see that the people we want

to be, and the people we want our children to be – which is to say, people with purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people in community.

Community is never something that is brought about by random acts of kindness. But by people who are willing to organize kindness beyond a level of skittish self-obsession. Community is built by a collective of people who come with something to learn and something to give back. People who want to know there are places where they can let go and places where, when they are at the end of their rope, will tie a knot in the end and help them to hold on. People who value a place where when there is nowhere else to turn, take them in. And even say, “You come back now.”

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