

Perhaps twenty years ago, the UU congregation to which I belonged came to a small fork in the road. I don't even remember the issue at hand. I couldn't tell you; but whatever it was, I believed that the congregation needed to do "A" but the congregation instead decided to do "B." Imagine that! Of course, we all know that "A" is always the better road to take. Ok...whatever...

Well, when the stewardship campaign rolled around a few months later, I voiced my displeasure with the congregation and road "B" via my wallet. I reduced my pledge. That'll show 'em.

At the time, I was in working in sales for an engineering company...and I'd taken some MBA classes. I understood that customer satisfaction is paramount. The customer is always right. We build what we sell in an effort to delight the customer. We deliver excellence. If we don't do that, customers will react negatively. They may go elsewhere for their products and services. They'll take their business to those who are more attuned to customer needs.

Well, in this particular instance, I wasn't a satisfied customer. Looking back, thank goodness I didn't leave the congregation and take my business elsewhere. Many dissatisfied churchgoing customers do that, after many, many years of walking together, one false step...one false step in a direction they perceive to be the wrong direction...and they're out the door. It was as if their church membership was living paycheck to paycheck and there was never any grace or goodwill set aside in a reserve account. I'll be taking my membership and my pledge elsewhere thank you very much!

Many years later, I find myself in seminary. They ask, "what does it mean to belong to a congregation? What does it mean to be a member of a congregation?" Well, I realized that I hadn't really thought about it too much. I had never dawned on me that membership meant anything. I thought that membership was just something one did. Just what does it mean, at its root, to belong to a congregation? What does it mean to be a member of a congregation?

In a text I read, "Membership in the congregation becomes synonymous with a covenant of commitment to its mission and ministry... (Robert Latham, *Committee on Ministry Model*, 12)."

What??? Can that be right? In light of my sales background and MBA classes, if I make a pledge as a condition of my membership in a congregation, aren't I now a paying "customer" in some way?

By making a pledge and signing the membership book I thought to myself, "Dave, you are now entitled to all the benefits, privileges, advantages and services set forth in the church policy manual including, but not limited to, a community that will always agree with your beliefs, viewpoints and preferences, whatever they may be, even when those beliefs, viewpoints and preferences change drastically over time; you are hereby entitled to heartwarming music that will set your soul aflight; vegetarian, vegan, gluten, and nut free dishes, cooked to perfection that will be served to you at an ever-frequent array of potlucks and church functions, kick-ass sermons and services each and every week, where the only hymns that will be sung will be the hymns having words with which you agree, communications that will communicate to you only the communications to which you are particularly interested in being communicated and they will be communicated to you in a manner, time and place that is convenient to you...And as an added benefit Dave, you will also be entitled to a sustainable building, beautiful gardens, clean bathrooms, childcare and all the fair-trade and heavily caffeinated coffee you could ever possibly desire.

Ok, of course, maybe I'm laying it on a bit thick. Maybe I'm exaggerating...just a teensy bit!

But seriously, when I read, "Membership in the congregation becomes synonymous with a covenant of commitment to its mission and ministry... (Robert Latham, *Committee on Ministry Model*, 12)," I want to shout "Hey, what about me? Aren't I the paying customer here? What about what I want?"

Rev. Michael Piazza says, "Being a member means taking off the bib and putting on the apron (Michael Piazza)." Wow! "Being a member means taking of the bib and putting on the apron." The act of joining a congregation in membership shifts one's role from one being served to being of service. The act of joining a congregation in membership shifts one's role from a consuming customer to a giving partner with us in mission fulfillment.

This was a big shift for me. Maybe I'd simply been conditioned by our culture into always seeing things from the vantage point of a consumer...and then getting what I wanted! (Houston, we have a problem.)

Friedrich Nietzsche believed that our primordial orientation, our primordial thirst was the will to power. Other philosophers and theologians might label other primordial instincts; the will for God, the will for wisdom, the will for happiness, the will for meaning, etc. ...the list could go on. Now I'm sure this is not new philosophical territory, I'm sure some known or long-forgotten philosopher has proposed this before, but I believe that our primordial instinct is the will to belong; the will to belong to a community, the will to be accepted just as you are into something larger than yourself no matter what, the will to belong and to feel, for oneself, accepted and worthy of belonging. And consequently, perhaps our greatest loss would be the loss associated with being shunned, excommunicated, cast out, left behind, left out, abandoned.

We're obviously not all wired the same way; some of us are introverts, others extroverts; some of us are shy, others gregarious; but regardless of how we're wired, we are inherently social beings on a fundamental level.

Poet and professor Christian Wiman expresses a religious communal sensibility when he writes, from a Christian perspective, "Christ comes alive in the communion between people...without shared social devotion one's solitary experiences of God wither into a form of withholding, spiritual stinginess, the light of Christ growing ever fainter in the glooms of the self (Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, p 20).

We are inherently social beings, and our flourishing also extends through a communal religious sentiment.

Also, there might be people here at UUMAN...here today, who, despite not getting what they want all the time, despite us being imperfect, despite us being flawed (because we all are)...despite all this, they still wish to belong. They continue to pledge...And they even continue to increase their pledge.

Why would they do this? What might motivate some people here at UUMAN, here today, continue to have the will to belong, continue to increase their pledge and increase their overall commitment to UUMAN despite our imperfections? Why? I believe it is because they continue to believe in us. Because they continue to believe in you. They continue to believe in UUMAN. They continue to believe in our mission. They continue to believe in Unitarian Universalism. They continue to

believe that we can be better than what we currently are. They continue to believe that we can be something new.

"Membership," writes Renee-Noelle Felice, "is not something conferred upon one person by an already extant group of 'others,' but a covenant among individuals to become something new (*Belonging*, Commission on Appraisal, 65)"

I take that covenant very seriously. As a member, as a member of the extant group, I too make a commitment to our newest members on Membership Sunday. I too make a commitment to allow and encourage our newest members to change us – to help us become something new. The question is, "Can we walk that talk? Are we differentiated enough, are we secure enough with who we are, are we courageous enough to allow our newest members change us?"

Yes, those beloved members, those re-members, I'll clarify that in a moment, who continue to remain here despite the disappointments, continue to also believe that we, an ever new and ever changing UUMAN, are the best hope to offer hope to a troubled and deeply divided world.

To those who don't always get what they want here, yet continue to have the will to belong; who continue to have the will to wear the apron instead of the bib, to be of service rather than being served, despite our flaws. To those, I say, "thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Thank you for loving us no matter what!

Thank you for continuing to be the lifeblood of this congregation

Thank you for believing in us...believing in our mission

Thank you for understanding that belonging is bigger and always more fulfilling and transformative than consuming could ever be.