

It was in 2007 that Ginny Meghan called me to ask me to be on the board at the First Unitarian Church in Hamilton. My first thought was, “I can’t be on board, I’m not grown-up enough, yet.” As I talked with her about the time commitments and what was expected, I realized that if I were to take on the role of a board member, I needed to be committed to bringing all of my skills and talents to the church. I couldn’t bring my own agenda, I needed to think of the needs of the church, and put them before my own. In short, I needed to bring my best self to church.

Now maybe this isn’t a radical concept for you. Maybe you always bring your best self to church but it has not always been my way. I first became involved in a Unitarian church when Sela was about 2. I figured I needed to do something to bring her up in a community of like minded people. I had actually visited a Unitarian church in Albuquerque years earlier when I was searching for religious community. I became annoyed after the 4Th or 5Th time I attended and no one spoke to me so I stopped attending that church, but after that, I was pretty sure I was a Unitarian. I figured I would get around to being Unitarian “later.”

Ironically, this same Albuquerque church has since grown to 850 members and is the vibrant community Mel and I enjoyed when we were on sabbatical there a couple of years ago. Anyway, I visited the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Albuquerque when Sela was 2 and started attending regularly when I separated from Sela’s dad. I found that I loved singing hymns without worrying I would

find myself singing something I didn't agree with, I liked the social justice work at the church. I agreed with the principles and I loved the intellectualism and the idea that each person found his/her own spiritual path. I dove into volunteering when someone convinced me that being the coffee coordinator was a great way to meet people. That was one of the hardest volunteer jobs ever. It fostered my inner martyr and made me feel a bit self righteous--after all, everyone SHOULD be helping to make coffee, shouldn't they?

When the coffee coordinator role ended, I worked with my friend Zoe to start a young adult group at the church. Ok I might as well admit it, I had come to the church because I thought it might be a good place to meet a liberal and fabulous man. When I got there, Zoe and I were the only ones there under 40. We saw young people come each week but they only came once and didn't come back. So I figured if I wanted to meet a great Unitarian husband, I was going to have to start a young adult group. We had a young adult greeter each week and we all sat together at the back of the church. We went to lunch after church and had a monthly event. People came, the group grew. In August 2000, Mel joined the young adult group. After 2 years there were 40+ people on the mailing list and 25 new young adult members. It was great. But I was tired.

After the first year of doing the young adult group, I thought about what the church needed next and I decided we (the young adults) should start a monthly Soulful Sundown service modeled after what my friend Justin was doing in

Oklahoma City. He was doing a weekly service but I thought we could do a monthly service. I should probably mention that Justin was a full time employee. And I was a tired volunteer. Did I mention I was tired?

We had a good run with Soulful Sundown, mostly. It was in the second year that I became frustrated that no one was doing enough but me--which wasn't true but it was a self fulfilling prophecy and as I acted frustrated, others stopped contributing as much. I was tired and I didn't know how to take care of my own needs. I didn't know how to behave well. I was working so hard, but I wasn't bringing my best self to my community. I always had a bit of a chip on my shoulder. I wanted to be given grace for the pain I had around church and my upbringing and I wanted the church to "fix" my brokenness without ever causing me any pain or discomfort. In short, I had some baggage. I remember feeling frustrated with church leaders and the ministers that they weren't getting it all right and I really wanted us to be perfect as a church. My idealism made me cranky, self-righteous and judgmental. My martyrdom made me ungracious, bitchy and unpleasant. In short, I was doing a lot of work, but I wasn't bringing my best self to church and I wasn't enjoying it very much either.

It was around then that Mel got the job offer at McMaster and we decided to move to Hamilton. We had an unexpected custody battle on the way and then arrived, excited to be in Hamilton, Happy to be Unitarians but tired and pretty burned out . We met with Allison Barrett and told her our story including the

questions we had about wanting to be contributors in our church community but knowing that we were so tired. She talked with us and suggested we take some time off and allow the community in Hamilton to feed us and take care of us for a time. We decided to try NOT volunteering for a year to see if we would be better able to contribute from a good place. It worked! I started to think of the idea of volunteering only in ways that I could honestly do with joy in my heart. I remember being at a potluck lunch with a bunch of people about 3 months after that conversation with Allison. Angie Marsman asked me if I would help put chairs away after the lunch. I quickly said, "Of course." And then I felt the dread and resentment in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't even put chairs away without feeling the burnout. I said, "Angie, I thought I could do it, but I can't. Can you find someone else to put the chairs away?" No problem, she said, I am sure she thought I was a freak. But it felt so good to say no. I was learning to take care of myself.

It was about 5 years later that Ginny called me to be on board. I said yes and realized I wanted to do the work of the board with joy in my heart while bringing my whole self to the role--all my tools as a coach and the skills I had learned around decision making while participating in continental young adult activities through the UUA. The young adults at the continental level make all their business decisions as an organization using Formal Consensus, which I found to be powerful social justice work because the young adults learn the skills of consensus and take them back to their communities. I needed to bring my best

self to the board role in Hamilton--mostly because I didn't want anyone at the church to know I had a worst self.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I did what any self respecting Unitarian would do--I went to Google and typed in "How many words are in a sermon." I didn't get an answer, but my eye was drawn to "The Sermon on the Mount." I followed the link to Wikipedia and learned that the Sermon on the Mount is considered to be Jesus' commentary and direction on morality and how to live.

Some consider it to be his take on the 10 commandments. The best-known written portions of the sermon comprise the [Beatitudes](#), found at the beginning of the section. The sermon also contains the [Lord's Prayer](#) and the injunctions to "[resist not evil](#)" (5:39) and "[turn the other cheek](#)", as well as a version of the [Golden Rule](#). Other lines often quoted are the references to "[salt of the earth](#)", "light of the world" and "judge not, lest ye be judged. The "Beatitudes (from Latin *beatus*, meaning "blessed" or "happy")^[1] are blessings from Jesus recorded in the [Sermon on the Mount](#) in [Matthew](#) and the [Sermon on the Plain](#) in [Luke](#).

These eight Beatitudes of Matthew follow a simple pattern: Jesus names a group of people normally thought to be unblessed or unbleisable and pronounces them blessed (well-off and fortunate) because of the presence and availability of abundant life in God's kingdom to everyone, regardless of status,

circumstances, or condition. This was revolutionary at the time.

The beatitudes present in Matthew are:

- The *poor in spirit*; theirs is the [kingdom of heaven](#).
- Mourners; they will *be comforted*.
- Those that *hunger and thirst after righteousness*; they will *be filled*.
- Those persecuted for seeking righteousness. The text says that theirs is *the kingdom of heaven*.

- The [meek](#). The text says that they will *"inherit the earth"*.
- The merciful. The text says that they will *"obtain mercy"*.
- The [pure of heart](#). The text says that they will *"see God"*.
- The peacemakers. The text says that they will be called *"the sons of God"*.[\[6\]](#) Other translations use the phrase "Children of God".[\[](#)

Incidentally in my research I discovered

This verse was famously misprinted in the second edition of the [Geneva Bible](#) as *blessed are the placemakers*.

- The typographic error in the Geneva Bible became parodied in [Monty Python's Life of Brian](#) where the crowd listening to the sermon mishears it as *blessed are the cheesemakers*. ("Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.")

I was surprised as I read through the Sermon on the Mount how many of the teachings in this relatively short sermon have infused the ethical morality of our whole culture. These have become a part of our core societal values to the point that we no longer attribute them to the Bible. We say “do unto others” or “turn the other cheek” without thinking of it in a religious or biblical context at all. It is a part of our shared belief of what is right and what is wrong. Many of the Beatitudes have made it into pop culture. You might have heard:

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The [Sting](#) song "All This Time" ([The Soul Cages](#)) contains the line, "Blessed are the poor; for they shall inherit the earth. Better to be poor than be a fat man in the eye of a needle."

The Beat Generation took its name, in part, from the concept of Beatitude [\[14\]](#)[\[15\]](#)

As one of the most famous of Beatitudes, *the meek shall inherit the earth* has appeared many times in works of art and popular culture:

- The title of a song in the [Little Shop of Horrors](#) musical
- The title of a song on the [Frank Zappa](#) album [You Are What You Is](#) ("The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing")
- The songs "Visions of the Night" and "Walking in your Footsteps" by [The Police](#) each contain the line, "They say the meek shall inherit the earth"
- The theme of the [Rush](#) album [2112](#)

As Unitarians, we don't always think of ourselves as being biblically influenced but these messages of right and wrong are so much a part of our everyday lives that we run the risk of assuming they are the RIGHT WAY rather than a part of a spiritual path. I become curious about my own moral code and what it means to me as I become aware of how much influence the bible has on my concept of right and wrong.

As Unitarians, the concept of bringing our best selves to church challenges us in a similar way. We do not have the luxury of a prescriptive approach to determine what it means to bring our best selves to church. We can't simply follow the 10 commandments and let it go at that. We are tasked with a free and independent search for truth and meaning--one of our seven principles. And with that principle comes the struggle of discerning what it means to bring our best selves to church.

I am never quite sure if I am bringing my best self to church when I am kind and gentle, or fierce and challenging the status quo or when I am helping quietly in the kitchen or when I am enduring the conflict of tough committee work. On the face of it, bringing my best self to my life seems like a great thing to strive for, it is in the execution that I am unclear.

This idea of best self makes me long to believe absolutely in the Bible or some other book that would just tell me the rules of how to live. It would be such a relief.

There are times I do know I am bringing my best self to church. When I belly laugh with friends about something that makes us uniquely Unitarian but isn't at all mean, when I teach OWL and make the world safer for people around their sexuality and bodies, when I walk the labyrinth at Unicamp and am exquisitely aware of my surroundings--every flower, every plant, every tree, every thought.

I am pretty sure I am bringing my best self to church when I volunteer my time at the church, or make a meal for someone who needs it, or call my friends when I haven't seen them at church for a while. But what if I get it wrong or bother someone?

I get pretty confused about whether I am at my best when I stand up for myself in a way that causes conflict, and I am confused when I try to bring my best self and bump against the best selves of others seemingly dancing to another tune.

A former employer once shared that she knew she was bringing her best self to tough times when she had peace in her heart , not war. That has been a good test for me. The other test for me has been to ask myself if I am looking at the

needs of all involved or just my own.

The connection and free flow of self and community in the church is for me the most difficult of all to navigate in terms of bringing my best self forward. One of the things I have noticed is that even when everyone is bringing their best self to church, conflict can occur. Or maybe it is especially true when we are committed and invested and trying to do our best that we create dissonance with each other which is incredibly uncomfortable. Maybe it is our best selves that make it most difficult to be in community together.

Ironically while getting ready for this service I hit a bump with Rachel, our music director. I thought I could help by asking my daughter Sela if she would like to do the music as time got shorter and we didn't seem to have a musician. I was well meaning, uninformed and had no understanding of roles or process between worship committee and the music committee. Ok, I meddled! Anyway, I stepped on toes and had a conversation at a time that emotions were running high and I got frustrated. I have to say that Rachel was lovely, focused on the positive and looked for a solution. I didn't bring my best self to that interaction but Rachel did. It showed me that part of being in community is giving each other grace and forgiveness and picking up the pieces for each other. I want to mention that I do have Rachel's permission to tell this story and we did talk it through and found deeper understanding. I share this story because sometimes when everyone tries their best, you still pump up against conflict.

So even when people are all bringing what they consider to be their best selves there is not necessarily agreement about what a best self looks like. Our diversity is our strength and our curse. We aren't given a moral code to live by, it is part of our search for truth and meaning. So we need to be gentle with each other and understand this, like our spirituality is a journey, not a destination.

The other thing I have noticed is that Unitarians have a lot of moving parts. We each have our own individual baggage from our childhoods or the spiritual communities we grew up in, we all have our own spiritual and religious beliefs and needs and we all have our own journeys to discover who we are at our best-- never mind the challenges of living up to that vision. All these moving parts exist a community of other people with moving parts which make it a very complex system indeed.

As a facilitator who works with groups and teams, I notice how important a group agreement or covenant is for people in community. It is the way people can decide to be with each other in the face of all those moving parts. It is even more important in a spiritual community where we are determining our own path. A covenant allows us to play all out without doing harm to each other.

In conclusion, I ask you to put both feet on the floor. Settle yourself with a deep breath and close your eyes for a moment. 5 COUNT

Think of what baggage you bring with you from the past to your church experience. 10 COUNT

Next take a moment to consider a few of the core spiritual beliefs you have. 5 COUNT

How does this inform what you need from the church? 10 COUNT

Think about your best self. 5 COUNT

How do you know you are at your best? 5 COUNT

When are you at your worst? 5 COUNT

Finally, think about how you mesh with the community at the first Unitarian Church of Hamilton. 5 COUNT

What would you like to change about the way you show up here? 10 COUNT

Blessed be.