

Universalists-in-Training

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Rev. Marta Morris Flanagan

Reading

In Brooklyn, New York is a school for learning disabled children. At a fund raising dinner for the school, the father of a student spoke. He extolled the school and its dedicated staff. But then he said, "Everything God does is done with perfection. But my son, Shaya, cannot understand things as other children. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?"

The audience was silent. The father continued. "I believe that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that God seeks is in the way people react to this child." Then he told a story about his son Shaya.

One afternoon Shaya and his father walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shaya's father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father also knew that if his son were chosen to play it would give him a sense of belonging.

Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning." Shaya smiled broadly. Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play short center field.

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again and now with two outs and the bases loaded with the potential winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible

because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly. As Shaya stepped up the plate, the pitcher moved forward a few steps to the lob the ball in softly so Shaya would at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came. Shaya swung clumsily and missed.

Then one of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch.

Again the pitcher tossed the ball softly toward Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung at the ball and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher.

The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman.

Everyone started yelling. "Shaya, run to first. Run to first." Shaya scampered down the baseline wide eyed and startled. By the time he reached the base the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second basemen who would tag out Shaya, who was still running. But the right fielder understood the pitcher's intentions. So he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head.

Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second." Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing short stop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third."

As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya run home." Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate and all eighteen boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," the father said, "those eighteen boys reached their level of God's perfection."

Sermon

Each of us is here today due to the work and commitment of thousands and thousands of nameless Unitarians and Universalists. Most of them are long forgotten or soon to be forgotten. They will not be celebrated at awards breakfasts. Their names will not be inscribed on plaques in church halls. Their presence will go unrecorded. Yet they are the ones who make all this possible.

Twelve years ago the church I was then serving restored its beautiful 1808 sanctuary. The sanctuary was filled with scaffolding, plasterers and painters. One worker caught my attention. While sanding the floor he listened to public radio at top volume. After each coat of polyurethane, he would run his hand over the floor like a man making love.

The minister's office was off the sanctuary. One afternoon he said to me, "I have figured out what you do. You read, you write and you schmooze." I couldn't argue with his definition of ministry.

Jim Harrison was a character. I invited him to attend the rededication service of the sanctuary. He kept coming back. He said, "You are my spiritual mechanic. I come each week to get a tune up. Some Sundays it works and some Sundays I sit there and don't know what you're talking about but I figure it's a tune up for someone else that morning."

In time Jim decided to sign the membership book but with a caveat. He said, "I am a member of this church. But I can't call myself a Universalist. I'm a Universalist-in-Training." Jim believed that to call oneself a Universalist is an act of hubris.

Jim Harrison was not a theologian. He was a contractor with dirt under his fingernails. He was loud talking and not impressed by class or false airs. Jim wouldn't have known what to make of a Transylvanian bishop or an Brahmin Unitarian. But Jim got it.

Our Universalist forebears believed that above all else the essence of God is love and that the spiritual game plan is to do as God would do, to love as God would love.

This idea has Unitarian parallels. Nearly five hundred years ago our Unitarian forebears in Transylvania wrote a catechism which states that *the* "purpose of religion is to refine our soul through love toward God and neighbor."

What lies at the core of our faith? As liberal religious people we put our faith in human reason. We believe in thinking. We believe not without doubt--but in spite of doubt. We question and search. We believe that diversity is a reality; homogeneity is an illusion. We work and worship together--the fidgety eight year old, the man with two masters degrees, the woman who cleans houses, the couple now married sixty years, the lesbian with her daughter. We avoid exclusive truth stands. No word of God is God's last word. We see truths continually unfolding in our midst. There are new lessons from science and the pursuit of justice. Those are the basics. But the heart of our faith is love. The Apostle Paul said in the words of our last hymn, If I speak but have not love, I am nothing, nada.

Love God. Love your neighbor. This is so simple it risks sounding trite. But Jim Harrison understood that this was a tall order.

Jim understood that to be an Universalist was to see good in all people, to find them loveable in the sight of God. Jim said, "I'm not there yet. I'm in training." Jim would tell you about the guy on the road who cut him off that morning or the man who cheated him out of something. Jim squirmed about gay men kissing on the street or the women on the grocery line who spoke Spanish. He wasn't proud of his feelings. But when the local Hispanic church needed a place to worship, he made it possible for them to worship regularly in the sanctuary on Sunday afternoons. And when he installed a hot tub in the home of two gay men, he jumped into the tub to prove to his workers that you can't get AIDS in a hot tub.

Jim could be generous. One Mother's Day, he waited till mid afternoon then bought hundred of flowers at half price. He delivered one bunch of flowers to my husband and said, "Give these to Marta and tell them they are from you."

When my marriage ended he moved me out of my beloved condo. He arrived with four men and a truck and said, "Boys, our job is to get everything out of here before the woman cries." They were out of there in an hour. Whatever good acts he performed he'd counter by saying, "Don't mistake me for a nice guy."

Jim could be a pain. He talked too much and was long winded. On more than one occasion I said, "I love you Jim but I've got to go."

He fancied himself a self-reliant man. He called himself “Jimmy fix.” He knew houses inside out and could repair anything. He took the church on as his project, caring for its old boiler, changing locks, fixing windows, doors, and plumbing.

Jim knew how *to do* but not always how *to be*. He drank. Too much. He drank when he woke up in the morning. He filled his coffee mug with vodka. He kept bottles in his truck. When he was drinking he talked even more. And more loosely. He horrified the older ladies in the church with his forthright language. Afterwards at my urging he would personally apologize.

Jim knew few boundaries. He called too often, showed up unannounced, and was generally in your face. He was the kind of person it was easy not to like. And yet I loved Jim Harrison.

In our churches in small towns and big cities we are living a grand experiment. We are trying to live out the vision of our forebears, trying to love even the unlikely and the difficult among us. Truth is, it is easy to love others when they’ve done good. But the time to love another is when they are at their lowest and least attractive. That is the Universalist challenge. We fall short of this goal, but we keep trying. Who do you need to love right now in order to live our faith?

We are Universalists-in-Training. And it is the Jim Harrisons in our midst who keep us on our toes.

Love. The love I am talking about is rarely soft and sweet. This love is demanding as well as gentle, tough as well as tender, blazing with the fire of judgment as well as brimming over with the oil of healing and forgiveness.

Love what is difficult. Love the one who is irritating. Love the one who has disappointed you. Love the one who has brought you down. Love Timothy McVeigh. Love the gun holder and the one with the pro-life bumper sticker. This love is not simply personal. It involves the commonweal. It is active. Love made manifest inevitably leads to justice. When we love enough, a new way on earth will unfold. So vote as an act of love. Protest as an act of love. Challenge cynicism as an act of love. Fix the system as an act of love. In the end our goodness will not be measured by what we resisted or whom we excluded but by what we embraced and who we included.

More than once I brought Jim to detox. He packed up his bag, locked up his truck and got into my little white Honda. When he was released he'd start going to meetings. I still have one of Jim's thirty-day chips. But that was about as far as he could go.

Jim was a member of the Board of Trustees. In one of the finest moments I have ever witnessed in congregational life, the Board adopted a motion saying that Jim could no longer speak in public worship to make announcements or light a candle of concern if he was drunk. But it wasn't enough. Later, the Board voted not to nominate Jim to a second term on the Board. They expressed their love, their concern, and they said he was welcome back into church leadership once he stopped drinking.

"How are you Jim?" I would ask. "Fair to suicidal," was his usual answer. He told me about Bob his brother who had killed himself in his twenties. He saw what Bob's death did to his family. He said, "I can't ever do what Bob did."

When Jim's father committed suicide by rolling his own wheelchair off a dock in Florida, Jim called. I arrived and emptied out all the bottles I could find in the house. Jim said, you don't trust me. "No I don't." Jim smiled and cried.

At times Jim was a master of denial. Other times he knew himself too well.

James Melvin Harrison died of liver failure on November 21. He was 51.

He is one of the thousands of nameless ones who are forgotten or soon to be forgotten. His name will not be inscribed on a plaque or hung in a church hall. His presence will go unrecorded. Yet such are the ones who offer us another chance to train as Universalists, to love one another.