

## “Hospital Religion”

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Rev. Thomas G. Anastasi

This sermon is one of my famous (or infamous) metaphor sermons. The idea is that the church is *something like a hospital*, and that Unitarian Universalism is often a religion where people come when they are wounded or hurting because of their experiences in some previous church or denomination. It is an interesting metaphor which is, I think, very applicable to us, as a religious congregation. I once saw a small store-front church which had a sign out front which read, “THE CHURCH IS NOT A HOTEL FOR SAINTS, IT’S A HOSPITAL FOR SINNERS.”

What do you think about that? Do you think the church is more like a hospital than a hotel? This question is especially applicable, I think, for Unitarian Universalist churches, since it seems to be true that we often serve the world as a place where people can come when they are wounded or hurting which has come as a result of a previous church experience.

The statistics show that something like 80% of Unitarian Universalists are “come-outers”; that is to say, they have come out of some other denomination—the vast majority of us were not reared as UU’s. This curious phenomenon is not evident in most other faith groups.

Here’s the way it seems to work. There are certain people in the world who want to be religious. They want to follow some spiritual pathway, and they attempt to investigate sincerely whatever meaning there is in their lives. They join a religious organization hoping to find some answers.

Some of these people eventually realize that their religion is not only *not* working for them, but that it is damaging their souls. They make the decision to go somewhere else in order to be spiritually healthy. Some of these people come to Unitarian Universalism, which they have heard is a good place to start over.

So I would like to look at that idea today. “Hospital Religion.” First of all, *is that true* about UUism? And if it is, *in what ways is it true?* And finally, *is that what we want to be?*

So let’s take a poll right now. How many people here were reared as Unitarian Universalists? (hardly any)

And how many people came from another church (or no church) because they were somehow dissatisfied or even other hurt by that experience?

Remember that all the ideas I will present about us being a hospital religion have metaphorical applications. This is because of the correlation between *physical* illness and *spiritual* illness.

We all know that for most of human history, human sickness was viewed in religious terms. You got sick because of *sin*—the gods were angry with you for some reason. Early primal religions, including the beginnings of Judaism, often offered animal and human sacrifices to appease the gods—in order to take away the sickness in the land.

Elements of this idea are still true. A shocking example is AIDS, which is viewed by many people around the world as a judgment from God upon certain groups of people.

The metaphors are intriguing, and, as always, they possess strengths and weaknesses. For instance, one of the problems with using the hospital as a metaphor for the church is that if the hospital deals with disease and injury, when you get well or when you just get better, they send you away, back to your regular life, back to all the elements of your existence which may or may not have contributed to your illness in the first place. We would like to think that the church, though mindful and *care-full* of spiritual illness, is also a place to be when you are well.

If the church is like a hospital, then when sick people get better, should we send them back home? Or should we offer them a new place to be, a more healthy environment, a place of salvation (which in its original meaning, suggests *healing*)?

When I was in seminary and worked as a chaplain in a real hospital, as part of my training requirements, I worked at a county facility in rural California. Probably 80% of the people I saw were there

because of some kind of abusive behavior patterns on their own parts—alcohol abuse, smoking, drugging, and, of course, the ever-present physical violence which is an integral part of so many people's lives.

I remember thinking that it was kind of silly to do all the things it takes to get these people well and then send them back out into their previous lives only to be assaulted again. But then, it was not our job to change people's lives; *we were there to help them heal* from their present wounds. But when they were reasonably recovered, we sent them back.

The word *hospital* comes from words meaning “of a guest”—it's related to *hospitality*, of course. In religious language, we sometimes use the word *salvation*, which comes from original words meaning “healing.” (The root words are where we get the word “salve” for instance.)

One of the things that a true hospital does is allow the patient to rest. True, there are all the invasive procedures, seeking a remedy or a cure. But we remember the original meaning for the word *disease* is “not at ease, not at rest.”

One of aspects of my childhood religion I hold onto is a verse which always had and still has enormous meaning for me. Jesus spoke these words:

*Come into my world, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Get away with me, and learn from me; for my world is gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*” (Matthew 11:28-30)

To this day, I want to believe there is a place of rest and freedom that can be found somewhere in the realm of Spirit.

Can we provide that promise here in this place?

If people come here to be healed, in what ways can we make them comfortable, even as they battle their dis-ease? For me, the first treatment comes from our first principle: “You have inherent worth and dignity.” That’s the diagnosis which begins the work.

In my case, the realization there was a religious group which begins with that principle was the beginning of my personal healing. In truth, I had never heard that from other groups.

But the real question is: what’s next? What can we do for our people after they have come to terms with their spiritual situation?

My suggestion is an additional metaphor: Even if our congregation might be a *hospital*, it is also a *health club*. What kind of exercise program can our health club provide to help folks to become *spiritually* strong and healthy? How can my associations in this place help folks *lose weight* (get rid of unhealthy baggage)?

And here’s the biggie: *How can my association with this organization make my heart stronger (also called compassion)? And, how can I be trained to have more endurance for the long race ahead?* This is in the same way we might go to a gym to prepare for a marathon we want to run sometime in the future—to “work out”, to prepare ourselves to confront the coming challenges. Yeah, that’s what the church can be: a place to prepare fore the oncoming trial, whatever it might be.

Do you remember the reading from Starhawk, about community?

We are all longing to go home, to some place we have never been—  
a place half-remembered and half-envisioned  
which we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

*Community.*

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us,

*eyes will light up* as we enter,

voices will celebrate with us,

whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength that joins our strength,

to do the work that needs to be done.  
Arms to hold us when we falter,  
    a circle of healing,  
    a circle of friends,  
    someplace where we can be free.”

And let us remember Hank Thoreau's words,

*I wish to live deliberately...I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not yet lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear, nor do I wish to practice resignation...I want to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. And if it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.*