

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective World-Changers

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I love being a Unitarian Universalist, but I have to say that one of the things I miss about the church of my childhood is REVIVAL. Once a year, the congregation would spend a week praying, singing rousing songs, going to additional services - and eating even more fried chicken, three bean salad and iced tea than usual - and getting back to basics. Revivals usually involved guest ministers, not because we liked them better than our own pastors, but because the purpose of revival was to jar us out of routine and get us back to the point of it all.

What would it mean to have revival here? Obviously, we wouldn't be asking "Are you saved?" I suspect that "getting back to the point of it all" in any religious setting, including this one, involves rejuvenating that part in each of that dares break free of habit and realize the capacity for change for the better.

That doesn't mean harking back to what brought us in the doors here the first time. We all have stories about why we came here the first time, stories that often have relatively little to do with Unitarian Universalism itself. But what brought you back the second time and the third time? Maybe today IS your second time or your third time to come here. Maybe you grew up in this church and as an adult you made the decision to come back. Maybe you have to think back a few years to remember your second time, your third time here. What brought YOU back the second time and the third time?

When I think about my own answer to this question, I realize I can't fall back on "well, they let me think for myself." I could think for myself at a private ritual or a soup kitchen or with a book in a hammock in my back yard. It also wasn't that the people were friendly. Like most Unitarian Universalists, I am an introvert. Unfriendly people could probably KEEP me from coming back the second time, the third time, but friendly people alone would not be sufficient to convince me to get up and get dressed on a day I didn't have to, and drive for thirty minutes to be with a bunch of people I didn't know.

No, "friendly people," is just like "absence of creedal statement" - it's important to me, but it is NOT the REASON I came back. I came back because of the POSITIVE values of Unitarian Universalism. I came back the second time and the third time because the seven principles made a deep part of me say, "Yeah!" More importantly, I came back because I saw ways in which the church actually lived those principles. I saw it in what was on the bulletin boards and in the brochures and flyers - church and non-church alike - and in the calendar of events, and the community groups that met at the church, and the bumper stickers in the parking lot. I could see that Unitarian Universalism could help change me and change the world, and I wanted to be a part of that work.

In other words, there was a time when I would say to myself, "I need to go to church this morning because it changes me for the better and it inspires me to join with others to carry out the promise of Unitarian Universalism as each of us perceives it." These days, I am as likely to say to myself, "I need to go to church this morning because I have a meeting after service or because I need to talk with X and Y about the program we're working on or because it's my turn to usher." Whew. Am I ever in need of revival!!

Those of you who know me are aware that I have a sort of weird hobby - I read books about congregational change and development. Roy Oswald, Alice Mann, Gil Rendle - these names are as common on my bedside table as Starhawk or Barbara Kingsolver. There is no shortage of such books because across the spectrum of churches and synagogues, the number of congregations that are spiritually declining, financially struggling, in destructive conflict - or all three - is staggering.

The issue of how habits tend to get in the way of basics is not a particularly uncommon topic for these authors. Recently, I was reading a Thomas Bandy book that took the bold step of referring to these "habits" as addictions. Drawing on the results of studies of many thriving churches and many declining churches, Bandy suggests that it is very easy for churches to fall into familiar self-destructive habits, very easy to deny these addictions, and very hard to make the systemic change that is required if those churches are once again to be vital and relevant.

Yadda yadda yadda. Yeah yeah yeah. Then I came across one of his findings that really caught my attention: "Every dying church in North America is a friendly church." He didn't say "every dying church in North America THINKS it is a friendly church." He said, "Every dying church in North America IS a friendly church." How could that be? Was he saying that being warm and welcoming and valuing fellowship doesn't keep a congregation strong? Well, as you may have guessed, that is exactly what he was saying. And the blows to what seems intuitively correct kept right on coming: "Debt freedom always leads to church decline." "More volunteers to fill all the vacancies won't help rescue the church." "Church insiders are the least able to discern future mission."

Understand that this guy had been a professional church consultant for years before writing this book. He had been a strong advocate of strategic planning. Yet when he looked at the real experience of real churches in the real world, he came to realize that strategic planning is irrelevant if a congregation fails to address its addictions, because in five years, things will be exactly the same as they were before the "renewal."

Bandy insists that "addiction" is the right word. He says, "Just as an alcoholic, smoker, or drug abuser chronically denies the destructive impact of certain habitual behavior patterns, so also congregations simply cannot see that the demise of their congregational health is directly connected to their dogged and misplaced loyalty to the "sacred cows" of former ideals, forms, or procedures." And just as an addict may dimly perceive the truth, but rationalize that a "gradual" change in behavior will eventually lead to health, the addicted congregation will fiddle with mission statements or board restructuring or program changes, all the while continuing the addictive behavior.

I'm afraid we may see the seeds of some of these addictions here - Addiction to vision by committee, addiction to multiple layers of supervision, addiction to acceptable mediocrity, addiction to debt freedom. Basically, the addictions come from taking what should have been just a tool, a means to an end, and turning it into a goal in itself. Structure and program are supposed to support and further mission, not substitute for mission.

It's really easy for something really good to tip over into addiction. Let me give you an example that is likely to get me into a lot of trouble. We often recite together a piece by James Vila Blake that begins, "Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law." One way of interpreting that is "We recognize that the power of love will change the world, and we commit to serving the world by carrying it that message." Another way of looking at it is "We agree that there is no point in focusing on the meaning of evil, and that instead, we should engage ourselves in doing something about it." Either of these is a shared vision, the mission of a thriving church, a reason for being. However, another way of interpreting it is "everything is peaceful inside this space and we members will help other members out." That is not a reason for being, but merely an addiction, just insiders' navel-gazing.

Addictions cause declining churches. In a nutshell, according to Bandy, a declining church focuses on perpetuating itself, while a thriving church focuses on discerning and carrying out mission. Bandy describes the declining church as "all about 'belonging.'" It welcomes people who can serve the existing system. It sees itself as guarding a heritage. It assumes that belonging to an institution will provide people with meaning, so it gives people the information they need to adapt themselves to life within the system. The more hours people spend in meetings, the more they "belong." "Mission results from whatever surplus energy and resources remain after maintaining the organization." The thriving church, on the other hand, doesn't focus on bringing new members into the insiders' club; it is about changing lives and reinventing itself, equipping people to use their own talents to carry out mission.

In a mission-driven church, we would likely see fewer standing committees and more spontaneous task-forces. We would applaud originality and initiative at least as readily as endurance. We would worry less that an active individual or group would give our church a "bad image," and would know that without such a variety of creative ministries, the church is invisible. We would spend less time trying to teach new people how to be members, and more time helping those people express what they feel they are called to be as Unitarian Universalists. We would stop worrying that someone might "rock the boat," and we would focus on the reality, in the words of Lorre Wyatt, "we are the boat, we are the sea."

This congregation is undertaking a discernment process whose goal is to determine what we are called to be. Many of us are already groaning, "Oh, no, not again!" And if we cannot jar ourselves loose from our addictions, it IS a futile process. If we insist on focusing on what is comfortable or thinking in terms of tinkering with program, then as surely as there will be coffee after this service, the process will fail. We have to set aside our preconceptions. We have to open ourselves to the process of discerning what we are called to do as Unitarian Universalists and what we are called to do as a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

This congregation has covenanted to uphold seven principles that together constitute a life-saving, world-changing message. It can save the lives of gay teenagers, of slaves in Sudan and in Dallas, of gorillas and whales, of all who are the victims of fear, intolerance, and self-hatred. To save those lives, to carry out the larger mission of Unitarian Universalism, we don't have to bring them into this church, but we do have to carry our message to them. "Sin" is a word we don't hear much in here, but I tell you that we have the tools to make a difference; if we fail to use those tools outside our walls, that's a sin.

Think of this as the locker room. In here, we give each other moral support, we discuss our game plans, we heal our wounds. If we fail to carry the message of Unitarian Universalism to the larger world, it is like going to the locker room, suiting up, chatting a bit, then showering and going home. And we wonder when people don't want to join the team?

Acting on the seven UU principles can make one a highly effective world changer. It makes one a UU. Signing the book at this church does not constitute being a Unitarian Universalist. Simply serving in the committee structure of this church does not constitute being a Unitarian Universalist. With that in mind, ponder the old question: If you were accused of being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

I am happy to say that there is substantial evidence that many of us ARE living our Unitarian Universalist principles. Here are just a handful of examples: It happens when Drew Patterson works as an escort at the abortion clinic, when others stand in silent witness against abortion, when Peg Kesler has a work day at the farm, when Keith Wilhelmi goes to Washington on behalf of Results, when the Taylors open their home to strangers who want to discuss Fahrenheit 9/11, when Roger Ohlman asks us to think about our relationship to food and the land we live on, when Bev Moore joins Religious Leaders for Fairness, when Sam Kaviar says "no" to war, and when any one of us wears a UU t-shirt or pin or otherwise provokes the question, "just what is a Unitarian Universalist anyway?"

We are different from that church of my childhood in that we don't as a group believe that salvation comes to each of us from some outside source. Instead, we believe that WE are the source of our own and the world's salvation. Still, we could use a revival to remind ourselves to ask the question, "who is the savior?" and to remember that the answer is ME. And YOU. And a bunch of people out there. There are a lot of members of our team who have not joined us - just because they haven't heard about the seven habits of highly effective world changers. They are in your workplace. They are in your neighborhood. They are in your political, social, and action organizations. They need YOU to tell them how to find the rest of us - not so they can huddle in the locker room with us, but so we can all join together, go outside these walls, and be about the business of changing the world.