

Not my father's religion

If my working-class father started attending a UU church, I'm not sure who he'd talk to.

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My hometown is in downstate Illinois, in farm country. We had one high school, so whether your dad was a millionaire or ran off when you were three never to be seen again, that's where you went. My father did something in between: He worked in a factory, the same factory for my entire childhood. You could do that in those days, if you showed up on time every day and did what they told you.

It was a good job. The factory made cattle feed, and cattle always need to eat, so the work was steady. If you were careful with your money, it paid well enough to support a family.

It was also a bad job. Dad came home stinking of fish oil. Over time the noise ruined his hearing. And the schedule fluctuated. He worked the day shift one week and the night shift the next—back and forth every other week until he retired. All the workers in that factory did that.

If the night shift was working overtime, I didn't see him all week. But otherwise I got off school about an hour before he had to leave for work. I'd race home on my bike, and we'd play baseball. He taught me to hit by throwing tennis balls in the front yard.

Dad had a method for teaching me not to be afraid of the ball. "Let it hit you," he said. Because that's how Dad thinks: If the worst has happened already and you survived, what's to be afraid of?

I'm a Unitarian Universalist, but my Dad isn't. My parents seem quite happy in the same conservative branch of Lutheranism in which they raised my sister and me. It teaches the literal truth of the Bible, and its God is real, personal, and powerful. The God I met at home was more liberal than the God of my Lutheran grade school, but not by much. He was, at the very least, secure enough to be amused rather than threatened by my human attempts to be clever. At home, my heretical theological speculations were always matters for discussion rather than reprimand. But nonetheless, God had spoken, and His word was law. If reason and conscience told me something different from what was written in the Bible, then I'd better think things through again.

That theology, as I said, works for my parents, which is one reason I've never tried to convert them. But there's another reason: If they did start going to a UU church, I'm not sure whom they'd talk to.

Unitarian Universalism has a class problem. We rarely discuss it, and when we do, we often focus on the very poor: the homeless, panhandlers, people on welfare. But we also have a problem with the working class, particularly the ones suffering from what Marx called alienation. If you're a skilled craftsperson and like to work with your hands, you might be a UU. But if you make a living by renting your muscles and selling your time—permanently, not just until your novel gets published—you probably aren't.

My UU church is in a Boston suburb, and like all the UU churches I've attended, it has a lot of professionals with advanced degrees—people like me. But most UU congregations don't have a lot of people like Dad. I think that's a problem.

This problem rarely even makes it onto an agenda. At my church Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday is an annual reminder to meditate on our race problem and the paucity of African Americans in UU congregations. Labor Day? We're closed. It's the last weekend of our summer break, time for one last trip to the vacation home on the Cape.

But that's in the class-segregated suburbs of Boston. What about my hometown in farm country? Growing up, I didn't know we had a UU church, but we do. I've preached there twice now, and I try to stop in whenever I'm in town on a Sunday. It's full of wonderful people, but as best as I can determine they are also more like me than like Dad. I've met the newspaper editor, the superintendent of schools, and a professor from the local university there, but nobody from the factory where Dad worked or any other local factory. No truck drivers. No waitresses. Nobody who works checkout or has calloused hands.

I hope one or two working-class people are there somewhere, but I haven't met them yet. Neither has Dad. He came to hear me preach the first time, but he hasn't been back.

Unitarian Universalism has a class problem.

Like our race problem, the class problem seems paradoxical to many UUs: We try to stand *for* all people, but when we look around, we're usually standing *with* people like ourselves. We promote equality, but perversely, the less privileged would rather join conservative churches, churches that seem to us to serve the interests of the rich and to tell everyone else that it's their own damn fault their lives are such a struggle.

One reason this paradox is hard to talk about, I think, is that a lot of us believe an explanation that we don't want to say out loud: Working-class people are stupid. The powers-that-be have duped them into pining for Heaven instead of changing Earth.

It's a tempting explanation because it absolves us. When the working class doesn't listen to us, we don't have to ask if we're being stupid—if we're really talking only about our lives, not theirs.

To understand why people might choose not to be *with* us even though we're trying to be *for* them, let's go back to baseball for a minute. Consider batting helmets. The major leagues didn't make batting helmets mandatory until 1971. You know who fought that rule? Hitters. The league had to grandfather the active hitters in, so that they could keep facing Nolan Ryan's fastballs without helmets until they retired. The last batter who didn't wear a helmet was Bob Montgomery in 1979. The same thing happened in hockey, whose last helmetless player retired in 1997.

Now, from the outside it sounds crazy that the players would fight against people who were trying to protect them, but it makes an odd kind of sense. You see, the players knew the lesson my Dad taught me in the front yard: If you're afraid of the ball, you can't hit it. They just took it one step further: If you're really not afraid, why do you want a helmet?

When you're doing something hard like hitting a baseball, sometimes the mind-set you need, the one that works, is not the objective, big-picture view. It's the one that tells you to be brave, not the one that tells you to wear a helmet.

Here's another sports example: I remember hearing Muhammad Ali say, "I am the greatest. Ain't never been another fighter like me. Ain't never been no nothing like me." If you ask whether those statements

were objectively true, you miss the point. Ali was doing something hard. He needed to think that way to do what he did.

Working-class people are doing something hard. Sometimes that means they need to think differently and ask different questions from the ones that seem obvious to those of us who look at their situation from the outside.

Picture it like this: Imagine society as a giant maze, with success as a prize at the end. Some people are born right by the exit. Others start in more difficult places. They can't just wander out. They have to make all the right moves.

Now, if you imagine yourself standing in a high place overlooking the maze, compassion for the people deep inside might raise questions like these: Why does it have to be so hard to find the prize? Couldn't we knock out a few walls? Why can't the minimum wage be higher? Why can't the government hire the unemployed? Why can't college be free?

From a God's-eye view, those are great questions. But if you're inside the maze, that mind-set won't get you out. Why does this maze have to be so hard? Why does that wall have to be there? Why can't I have a clear path to the prize? It doesn't help. No matter how good those questions are objectively, if I'm so deep in the maze that I seriously doubt I'll ever get out, I don't need them in my head.

Ten or twelve years ago I was in Tennessee visiting my sister, who also got a college education and joined the professional class. That Saturday night I got her husband, Ed, talking. He was an engineer researching clean ways to burn coal. It was a demanding job, but he believed in it and thought it was important. So he worked long hours and traveled a lot. He was also finance chair of their church, in the same Lutheran synod we grew up in. They were raising money for a new building, and that also seemed important. At the same time his sons, my nephews, were both in elementary school. Ed worried that he wasn't spending enough time with them.

Job, church, family—every part of his life wanted more from him. What to do?

The next morning I went to church with them. The sermon topic was “Resisting Temptation.” In my mind I boiled the entire 20-minute sermon down to three words: Don't be bad.

I felt smug that morning because I knew that Ed would have been so much better off in my church. We talk about real life, *his* real life. He didn't need to be told not to be bad. His issue wasn't Good versus Evil; it was Good versus another Good versus a third kind of Good. And that's the issue in my life and in the lives of all my professional-class friends. The primary spiritual challenge of the professional class is discernment. There are so many good things we could do with our lives. How do we choose?

That's the kind of issue a UU sermon talks about.

But I don't think discernment was Dad's issue. Because the factory was not a competing Good. It was a necessary Evil.

When he was pitching me tennis balls in the front yard, I don't believe that any part of him actually *wanted* to go off to that dirty, hot, noisy, dangerous factory. He went because if he didn't something bad would happen. He'd be punished. And in the long run, if he lost his job, I'd be punished, too.

Dad didn't need help discerning what to do. He just needed to make himself do it.

And that's working-class life in a nutshell. You're not following your bliss. You're not pursuing your calling. You're selling your time for money. The way out of the maze, and the way to get your kids out of the maze, is to get up every day and do something you'd rather not do.

Professionals have trouble understanding the depth of that chasm because we imagine that we also do things we don't want to do. We don't get that extra hour of sleep in the morning. We have meetings with people we don't like. We fill out forms that we know are pointless. But does that give us comradeship with people who are losing their hearing in 100-degree heat?

Here's what sums it up to me: When professionals retire, we keep dabbling. The retired newspaper editor in my hometown still writes. When the professor retires, he'll keep reading journals and going to talks. But in the thirty years since my Dad took early retirement, he has never brought home some fish oil and mixed up a batch of cattle feed in the garage. When you retire from Wal-Mart, you don't set up a bar-code scanner in the basement, just to stay busy. You do that stuff for money, and when they stop paying you, you never, ever do it again.

UU churches also help with the second major spiritual challenge of the professional class: inspiration. The whole point of discernment is to find a consistently inspiring path through life. The ideal profession is a calling, and inspiration is how you work those 12-hour days without burning out. Inspired people bounce out of bed in the morning with ideas and ambitions. They stay late because there's always one more thing they want to try. Those are the people who really make it in the professions. If you have to push yourself, and you're competing with somebody who's inspired, you're at a huge disadvantage.

That's why professionals tell their children: Find something you love, so that you'll be brilliant and creative and energetic. You'll run rings around the guys who are just doing what they have to do.

In the professional class, inspiration is the road to success. It's the way out of the maze. Or at least it's one way out, the bright way. There's also a dark way out, for those professionals who are driven by fear and greed rather than pulled by love. They sell their time and energy for a lot more money than factory workers—and a lot more than many idealistic professionals—but they can get just as alienated. They also don't seem to respond well to the UU message. Or at least I don't run into many of them in my church.

In the working class, the road to success is self-control. That's what you want to teach your children: Resist temptation. Walk the narrow path. Do the hard thing you don't want to do, so that you and the people who are counting on you won't be punished.

That almost sounds like a theology. But not a UU theology.

Let's throw one more idea into the mix: Second chances. Rich kids, professionals' kids—they get them. If your parents have money, the door never completely closes on you. Don't worry if you flunk out of two or three colleges. It'll work out. Children of the very rich and powerful don't have to get serious until they're 40. The sky is still the limit.

In the working class it's not that way. Eminem's song "Lose Yourself" asks: What if you had one shot? To a professional-class kid, imagining that you get *only* one shot is a way to add drama to your life. But in the working class, the fantasy is that you get one shot. What if you *had* one shot? You wouldn't blow it, would you?

Let's put these pieces together: Imagine yourself deep in the maze, standing between two churches. One church tells you there's Good and there's Evil. And because somebody has done something incredibly generous, you get a chance to choose Good. One chance. You get it wrong, you go to hell forever.

The other church tells you there are a lot of ways to be good. And if the good you pick doesn't turn out to be the best good, pick again. It'll work out.

Which church is talking about the world you live in? Which message do you want your kids to hear? Which one gives you the mind-set you need to get out?

We sometimes describe conservative churches as otherworldly because they talk about supernatural realms. Their harsh theology, we worry, can justify harshness in this world. But the connection between harsh theology and a harsh world goes both ways. If you live in a harsh world, a church with a harsh theology is talking about your life. The church with the easy theology is the otherworldly one.

Of course, if you're so close to the maze's exit that you can already picture yourself in the high place surveying the big view, then the whole good-and-evil, heaven-and-hell theology doesn't sound so impressive. It's crazy. It's stupid. Almost as stupid as batting against Nolan Ryan without a helmet.

So this is what the question comes down to for me: Does Unitarian Universalism say something about life or just about life in the professional class? Can we speak in words that make sense everywhere, from the high place to the darkest, trickiest passages of the maze? Can we teach *both* subtle discernment *and* making yourself do the obvious hard thing? Inspiration *and* self-control?

I hope so. Because otherwise we're a boutique religion. Otherwise we've surrendered the working class to conservative religion. My hunch, my faith—or maybe just what I need to believe to do what I do—is that we can find such a message, that there can be a truth that encompasses all situations, a wisdom big enough for all people.