



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

September 30, 2007

ENTER, REJOICE & COME IN

“Enter, Rejoice and Come In!” That was the first hymn I ever heard in a Unitarian service. That was a very short, very long seven years and three weeks ago in Fredericton, New Brunswick. We were in the living room of a large 60’s era house; it was set up with chairs, a pulpit, a chalice table, the fellowship banner hanging on the wall, a stained glass maple leaf and chalice design over the mantle piece; I found out later that was a denominational award that had something to do with financial goals. There was a fireplace with flowers in it, a huge grand piano up a step and off to the right in what used to be a dining room. There was a minister in their pulpit at that time, Rev. Nancy Anderson. People had been pretty friendly to me when I arrived, and I felt surprisingly comfortable and unself-conscious – I’ve always wondered why that word isn’t “self-unconscious”, though. Or perhaps there’s no real word at all for what I’m trying to say, which is that, as someone naturally shy who had avoided stepping into any religious community for 22 years, I found myself just being there, without any second-guessing or analysis of what-the-Hell-was-I-doing. If you’re new here today, to Unitarians Hell isn’t a swear word because we don’t believe in it. You can’t swear on someone else’s theology – but that’s another sermon.

As I was saying, “Enter, Rejoice and Come In” was the first hymn that day. The probably 35 people there sang it with great gusto. I found it a bit silly, really. A tune fit for a kindergarten class; repetitive words; didn’t make sense; how can you “come in” after you’ve already entered? But, the little ditty stuck in my mind, obviously, so it did the trick, I guess.

That’s part of the story of my first experience of Unitarianism: our community, our style, our simplicity, our worship, our welcome. What was your first experience like? I want us to think back together about that. If today is your first time, that’s great. You’ll find it particularly easy to remember! Some of us have to remember way back to childhood; you might use a first memory from then, or from some later time when you re-discovered a Unitarian congregation. Some of you won’t be sure which time was the first time, but you’ll figure something out. Let’s take a moment to look back. Shut your eyes if it helps. Think back, back to the time *before* you decided to come to church, to send an e-mail, to drive by a building, to read a website or make a phone call.

What was happening in your life whenever or wherever it was? What was it you were looking for? What made you decide finally to come, or to come back, or even to keep coming? What obstacles were in your way? Were you embarrassed about

coming to church? Did you have to explain yourself to anyone? Did someone try to stop you, or criticize you? Did you have trouble finding the place? Was there room in the parking lot? Was the first person you met friendly? Or busy? Or unaware of you? Or even rude? What did you see about the building? What was the room like for you? Do you remember something that happened that time? Did you meet anyone you knew already? Did you talk to anyone or avoid everyone? Was the coffee any good? Did you come back again soon, or wait a long time before trying again? Why did you wait? Why did you try again? Take a few moments to reflect on this experience.

OK, let's come back to the here and now. What we were just doing was remembering how we 'entered.' In entering, we get our bodies here; we finally listen to the part of us that told us we needed more. Or we finally *discover* that what we thought couldn't be possible – a community of faith that doesn't insist on what we must believe – actually *does* exist. We get past our doubt and anxiety so we can get here. We watch. We listen. We start to think and to feel. For far too many of us, the opportunity to *enter* is difficult. Our church, like quite a few others these days, has determined to make it a lot easier for others to enter – to know about us, to arrive here, to walk in the door.

But, the entry is not over just by coming through the door. That's so in particular for some of us who have important doubts to sort through. Some of the words we use here mean something slightly or hugely different elsewhere. Words like "church" which is truly Christian; it's as odd in the eyes of some of us to call ourselves a church as it would be if we were North Shore Unitarian Temple, or Mosque, or Sangha. But we use the word church because of the religious reasons that bring us here and the spiritual aims we strive for. Other words like 'faith', 'religion' and 'worship' aren't natural for some of us. In the process of entering, we sort through these things. And because we're Unitarian and embrace questions, value doubts and rely on reason, we don't have to sort *all* these things out at the beginning. At some point we get far enough along and then we can rejoice!

Wow! Look what we found! There *is* a place where we fit! There *is* a community of faith that isn't blind. There *are* people who reject the same contradictions and inconsistencies in belief that blocked us elsewhere. There *is* a space where a Jewish man and a Moslem woman can love each other, marry in peace and respect, and worship together. There's a Sunday school where their children won't be forced to choose or be put down for their mixed heritage. There's art on the walls of the sanctuary! There's jazz in worship! Poetry is read as scripture! Science defeats dogma! And the *sermons...*, well, they're just about perfect! And laughter is practically a sacrament!

As we enter, or once we feel we've actually arrived here, there is a sense of relief. We can belong somewhere; we can feel the sense of togetherness that comes with freedom of thought, acceptance of beliefs and freedom to choose. As we rejoice, we continue to enter. We attend regularly, sometimes more often than Sundays. We take on a task. We give our time and talent. We serve and give and donate. We share our lives; we lean upon and make ourselves available for leaning. We come to be

loved, not because we think or do the 'right' things, but because we are let loose to become who we deeply are. Truly, this is something to be glad about.

Enter! Rejoice!

So what's this thing about 'coming in'? As I've thought over the years about this hymn, little more than a jingle really, I've concluded that there's more to being here than to enter, to discover belonging, to participate in the community and to rejoice. There is something beyond that, something else, something more implied by that little phrase, "come in."

First of all, the second verse says, "Open your ears to the song." Certainly this means more than to listen to *this particular* song. That would be to settle for a marshmallow when you're starving. There is a greater song, a more beautiful melody, a grander harmony to which we must listen. We might think of this song in many ways.

There is song at the artistic, musical level. For me, certain music demands that I listen only to it; I stop whatever I'm doing in order to open my ears to that song. The most sublime of such songs for me is the third of Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs*, particularly as interpreted by Jessye Norman. It's called "Beim schlafengehen". Yesterday as I was writing this, I finally discovered an English translation of this Hermann Hesse poem Strauss put to such unearthly music, so I selected it, rather out of context, as the reading this morning. This is music I want played as I lay dying. When I open my ears to this song, I am transported, just as the poem says, "to night's magic sphere/ To live deeply and a thousandfold." Open your ears to such a song. Come in to a deeper experience of art.

But there is more. Music is a science: the art that goes with physics, chemistry and biology. For those who have the ability to hear, the communal experience of music actually creates a common state of mind on a neurological level; when we are accustomed or *attuned* to a kind of music, it makes our eardrums vibrate in exactly the same way, and this affects our whole nervous system. We share a similar state of arousal and of emotion. That's why a shared experience of music can be so entrancing; we are literally in synch with those around us. Open your ears to such a song. Come in to the communal experience of our bodies.

Further, we talk of the "music of the spheres", the "universal song." What could we mean by that? At least, this is a metaphor of the harmony within nature; early on the planets and stars were observed to move in a periodic and predictable way. Among humans, we call such periodic and predictable movement 'dance', which we do to music. So an ancient image for us is that all the universe is responding to a common song, a common rhythm that guides its course. As we observe the incomprehensible grandeur of the universe, and watch its lingering minuet unfold is it not right for us to 'open our ears' past the real sensations to listen farther and with more concentration to that song? Open your ears to such a silent song. Come in to the experience of awe and wonder.

All the scriptures of humankind use the imagery of music when they attempt to convey the truth of the divine. Heavenly angels sing Alleluia! The dervishes whirl to music as they seek contact with the divine. Christians, Jews, Baha'is, First Nations among others frequently chant prayers because they believe the chant carries their words more directly to God's ear. Or perhaps it's the other way around; that our ears open more directly to the transcendent when we chant. Open your ears to the celestial song. Come in to the sound of the spirit.

"Open your hearts everyone!" That's what the song tells us next. Open our hearts. Surely this is a command that we be loving. That we come here and be patient, kind and warm one to the other. That we build our community not just on common values, but also on true affection, the kind that comes from working side by side; from getting past petty frustrations or differences to see the deeper level, the beautiful humanity of each other. Open your hearts to each other. Come in to the commitment of love.

We also open our hearts to the stranger, whether it be a visitor here for the first time, a bit timid or confused, or whether it be to someone on the street that we've never seen before nor may ever see again. Even more, when it's to someone forlorn and far away whom we could never meet: homeless mothers and children in South Asia; the youth in our partner church in Hungary; the victims of genocide in Darfur. We are called to be open-hearted to the world; to make ourselves vulnerable to misery, even if we only feel it vicariously through the suffering of others. Open your hearts to the stranger. Come in to the pain of compassion.

Open your hearts to yourselves. Turn your attention, consider, contemplate, ponder and gaze upon what lies within. I believe it was Goethe who said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Whether that is true or not, it is impossible to examine one's life without looking in to one's own heart: what is hidden there; what lurks. Is it a darkness? A fear, a pain, a rejected memory? Though such pain is part of life, it may be weighing you down; you may need to decide to deal with it. Is it a secret, something simply private, or something shameful? There are secrets that are silver, but they must be cared for and not allowed to tarnish. There are secrets like poison; the antidote is honesty. Somehow, someday they must be told. Is what lies in your heart a treasure? A talent you've not yet perfected; an idea or dream that you've put off. Open your hearts to yourselves. Come in to the truth of who you are.

Heart is also a metaphor for spirit. Open your spirits everyone! Awaken yourselves. Whatever you believe, it is likely there is more to know. In whatever you don't believe, it is likely there is some truth you haven't recognized. If you're a rationalist, take up a spiritual practice. If you're an artist, challenge yourself to study something complicated. If you're a mystic, figure out how to explain your experience to someone who doubts you. Opening your spirit does not just mean to get spiritual; it means to stretch yourself, to grow in an uncharacteristic direction, to try out a part of life

that's new. There will be mysteries there to baffle you and inform you. Open your spirits to the unfamiliar. Come in to a new layer of living.

"Don't be afraid of some change," the song reassures us. Well, it better reassure us because if we really *enter*, if we actually find something to *rejoice* about, if we truly *come in*, open our *ears*, open our *hearts*, then something's bound to change inside us! Don't be afraid of that. Embrace it. We have no choice anyway. Even resisting change *changes* us; it hardens and wizens and shrinks us.

Many Unitarians are excited by the changes brought easily once we find this faith, or commit to it, and then we happily try to stay the same the rest of our lives. We know what's true and false, and by George, we're sticking to it! Transformation doesn't stop. It must continue to work its magic in us. That is what prepares us for what happens in our lives. That is what being truly alive is; that is what spiritual growth is.

This silly, simple, little transformative hymn was the first I ever heard in Unitarian worship. "Enter, Rejoice and Come In." I didn't know what it meant; I still don't know fully, but I entered, I still rejoice, and I keep coming in.

May this hymn work its way into your hearing, your heart and your life.