

OUT OF THE NEST

Nancy Northup
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All Souls Church

In preparing for this sermon, I've been thinking a great deal about inhabiting uncomfortable spaces. Uncomfortable spaces like the one right here in this pulpit. Intellectually, I appreciate the privilege and opportunity of being able to talk to you this morning. Emotionally, I want to run for safety. I want to be in my regular Sunday routine sitting where you are, in the pews, letting our ministers carry us through.

As a child, I was "painfully shy." When my grandmother would come to visit, I wouldn't talk to her for days. My family moved eight times when I was growing up. My sister would venture out to meet the kids in our new neighborhood; I would tag silently behind. When I joined All Souls after college, if I dared to attend the coffee hour at all, I spent the time studying the notices on the bulletin boards.

Coffee hour aside, All Souls for me in those years was a soothing and tranquil place. Then, as now, the choir was outstanding, the sermons stimulating, the liturgy beautiful. I came, I listened, I pretended to pray during the prayer, and I left a little blissed out and a little self-satisfied. My pew was like a nest, surrounding and comforting me on Sunday mornings.

In her book When Things Fall Apart, the American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron writes about our misplaced but very human quest for comfort and stability. She explains how we instinctively react to discomfort or pain in any form as unwelcome and bad news. So we run like crazy and use all kinds of ways to push it away – materialism, addictions, or just plain shutting down. But avoiding discomfort, she says, is exactly the wrong path for the spiritual warrior. Chodron

explains that: *“To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest.”*

Think about when you have been fully alive. Was it preceded by a leap out of your nest, either because you were thrown by life or took the jump?

In 1988, I moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana for a one-year judicial clerkship. I did what my family always did as we moved around the country: I found the local Unitarian Universalist church. As I drove into the parking lot of the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, the bumper stickers were unmistakably familiar as those of our clan. *“The Religious Right Is Neither.” “God Is Coming and She Is Pissed.”* And that UU favorite: *“My Karma Just Ran Over Your Dogma.”* I entered the sanctuary to find 40 parishioners in folding chairs. This was not All Souls. I tried to sit unobtrusively in the back. But early into the service they asked visitors to stand and introduce themselves. Everyone turned around and looked at me. At the end of service, we were instructed to “take the hand of the person on your right and the hand of the person on your left.” In this way, the entire congregation was physically connected as the minister gave the benediction. I was 29 years old at the time, but I don’t think that I had ever touched a stranger except to shake hands. And I was being asked to take hold of whoever happened to be beside me. I felt that I would perish in a state of excruciating self-consciousness. “Where was the anonymity of my pew at All Souls?” I fled the sanctuary intending not to return.

But I did go back. Sunday after Sunday, despite the exposure and unease I felt. The fragility of the struggling congregation was palpable. Would the 40 people gathered get the hymn off the ground with no All Souls Choir in the loft to carry them along? Would a parishioner break composure during “joys and concerns” when sharing about a broken heart, a lost job, or a mother’s cancer diagnosis? I felt not only my co-parishioners’ vulnerabilities but my own, because I was giving my heart to this imperfect community.

As the year went on, I felt something else as well: That I was needed and I needed them. That my voice was needed to get those hymns going. That my encouraging nods were needed to help the minister feel supported as he preached. That my hands were needed to make the unbroken circle at the benediction. By the

end of the year, I looked forward to joining hands to close service. I needed the love. I had moved from mortification to appreciation of what it meant to push past unease, reach out to those near me, and feel “we’re connected in this life journey together.”

I returned to All Souls changed. I came back having experienced that being in a religious community is not a spectator sport.

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Even after getting onto the playing field at All Souls, my internal pull toward safety zones was strong. It always is. While I took the leap to teach the Coming of Age class for our Ninth graders, I approached it at first like the NYU Law School seminar that I taught. I threw out some ideas, debated them with the teens, and kept everything on an intellectual level. I played it safe, the kids played it safe, and nothing got messy. I lead with my head, and not my heart.

My second year I was given a teaching partner, Paul Bennett, who was about 15 years my junior. He had completely different ideas about how we’d approach the class. We’d draw pictures of heaven. We’d play games. We’d do circle worship: meditating, reflecting, and sharing our thoughts and feelings, without comment. We’d trust the kids to lead worship. I gave up control – to Paul, to the kids, to what evolved from our worship together. It was hard to let go, not knowing what would be coming our way.

I remember vividly a hard spot when we were returning from the Coming-of-Age trip to Boston. It was my fourth trip as youth leader, and I thought that I knew what to expect. But this had been a difficult trip. Some kids had been exclusive and hurtful, and I felt more like disciplinarian than spiritual advisor. Frankly, we were all sick of each other and wanted to get home. But life had other plans.

A snowstorm delayed our train back and as it was crawling through Connecticut. Paul took the slow pace as an opportunity; he gathered the group together and asked, “What was a favorite highlight of the weekend?” “Oh no,” I thought, “They’ll be mean to him . . . to us! . . .they’ll diss the trip, they’ll roll their eyes . . . can’t we just all retreat to our seats on Amtrak and run the clock down on

this disastrous weekend with some dignity?” I was in safety mode, taking the approach with the teens that one takes with witnesses on cross-examination: never ask a question to which you don’t know the answer. To do otherwise is to leave yourself open. But there was Paul, unguarded, without guide, putting his heart out there, asking “tell me what you loved, tell me a highlight.” He took the leap and asked them to leap with him, inviting them to be affirming, to be joyous. And then they spread their wings. The connections started. One said “I loved ringing the bells at Arlington Church.” Another, “I loved cooking together at Pickett-Elliot House on Saturday night”. And another, “I loved reenacting Emerson’s sermon in the Harvard Chapel.” Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, asking the kids to be show their hearts, connected us with one another and transformed the experience.

So here we are on Lay Sunday. The nest isn’t as beautiful as the other 51 Sundays of the year. We’re doing our best up here, but it’s not what we do Monday through Friday . . . and believe me, we’re feeling that. Maybe you’ve been a little uneasy at points. “What are we doing with this ‘congregational handshake’”? “Why do I have to stumble over the bond of union in Spanish?” “Is Nancy going to have anything interesting to say?” But unease is a good thing. Of course, what makes us uncomfortable differs for each of us. I’m going to venture that Peter Green, who now leads *Coming of Age*, finds nothing excruciatingly uncomfortable about asking kids open ended questions. For him, something else triggers discomfort.

I can’t presume what makes you uneasy, where the territory is that’s beyond your comfort zone. But you know, because you feel it when you’re there. And I do know that we need to each move into discomfort if we are going to connect with ourselves, because we learn who we are when our safely nets are gone. And we need to move into discomfort to connect with each other, and with the Divine.

We walk through these doors to be in religious community. To reach across difference to worship together. As Galen has said, we can be spiritual at home, but we come together to be religious, to experience a shared faith. We’ve got to get out of our individual nests to be a flock.

“To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest.” Let’s get uncomfortable. Let’s take some risks. Let’s get uneasy. Let’s see what happens.