

In 2005 I started my job as the DRE at May Memorial. I was familiar with churches, having been ordained in 1985, but this was my first time in a UU church. The minister and I were preparing the first service of that program year and we were walking through it. We were up front and I said so what do UUs call the front of the sanctuary. He cocked his head and looked at me quizzically and said, "Umm the front of the sanctuary?" Sometimes churches call the front the chancel because church people like to have different words for everything. Its not a foyer its a narthex, its not the seating area its the nave and so on and so on. Some of us balk at that - its not our tradition and it sounds too stiff and well churchy - because after all we are a society and not a church. I can move on from narthex and nave and chancel. But there is one word I would like to hang onto sanctuary and not because it is a churchy word but because of what it means.

A sanctuary, is a sacred place, and has come to mean any place of safety. Each Sunday we meet for service in our sanctuary. Does it provide safety or is it a bubble separating us from what is real?

The phrase "living in a bubble" is interesting. When we say that someone lives in a bubble we usually mean that they are somehow protected from reality or at least removed from reality. And yet bubbles are delicate things easily broken.

My children sometime laugh at me and tell me I live in a UU bubble when they tell me some of the things that other students say or do in school and I react in dismay. And I have to agree that I do live in a UU bubble. I swear

I heard Garrison Kelillor describe Unitarian Universalist as people who did not know people who knew people who owned guns. Not true of course but it points to our tendency to be somewhat insular.

And when we live in a bubble as a way of being insulated from the world because we do not want to deal with the world then I think that that is a problem. Our reading this morning "The Church that does not matter" tells us what happens to a church when it lives inside a bubble. Being in the bubble means there is little risk and with no risk there is no change no opportunity for life, for growth for failure for love for all the juicy things that make life great and scary and great

But there is a difference between living in a bubble and providing a bubble. There is a difference between denial of reality and providing a respite. There is a difference between running from reality and providing sanctuary.

Let me give you an example - Many of you have had kids who went to Jowonio. For those of you not familiar with Jowonio it is one of the jewels of Syracuse. It is an all inclusive preschool founded in 1969 from their website "We believe strongly that all children belong in our classrooms, and that belonging is not something that must be earned through development of some prerequisite set of skills. We hope that the wide diversity of our classrooms is reflective of the diversity found in the world at large, and feel that our classrooms are greatly enriched by that diversity. In talking with children in the classroom, we share a perspective that everyone has things

that they are really good at and things that they are working to learn.” <http://www.jowonio.org/program/inclusion.aspx>

It is a philosophy that is resonant with our own.

Parents who have kids that go to Jowonio, especially the kids who do not have a typical development or learning modality, often talk about the Jowonio bubble. That school works hard to meet each child where they are at and to try and provide the services that they need. There is a level of partnership between the school and the parents that is often not found in the public school system.

If there is a Jowonio bubble does that mean that somehow Jowonio is ignorant of the real world - not at all. I did one of my MSW internships there and I can assure you that the staff is well aware of what their children and families will meet when they get to Kindergarten. But for the 2 or 3 years they have your child they are going to provide sanctuary and they are going to fill your child with all the positive messages they can. They are going to use their bubble to fill your kid up with goodness. And it is not just the kids with special needs who get filled up.

Both my youngest kids went there for preschool. One day Jesse brought in a special toy, a magic trick really. It was a furry worm on an almost invisible piece of fishing line. If you knew how to work it you could make it seem like it was flying in mid air between your hands. When your father is a magician these are the things you find fascinating when you are four. Any way he would not be separated from that toy that day and so I

dropped him off with it. When I returned to pick him up that afternoon every one of the kids in the classroom had a thick furry pipe cleaner tied to a length of yarn and they all were dragging them around on the floor. The teachers did not look at Jesse and say that is disruptive they looked at the situation and thought how can we make this fun for everyone.

There is a lesson to be learned there. We can be that sanctuary that healing place for people. We can provide a bit of a bubble. Sometimes when I meet folks who are not in this church, I sometimes get asked why would I want to work in a church so much sadness and trouble. And although that can be true there is a deeper truth - again and again I see church communities as places of growth. I see people deepen their faith; grow in their sense of themselves. I see people heal and learn how to love again. It is amazing to watch that and even more amazing to know we are a part of that.

The [Rev. Renee Ruchotzke](#) one of Central East Region staff wrote

Sometimes, living in a bubble can be a good thing. It can create a barrier between harmful things on the outside and precious things on the inside.

In some ways, our congregational covenants operate in this way. They help us understand that “in this community, this is how we will be together.” We promise to treat one another not only with respect, but also with a sense of mutuality so that every one of us can flourish. We promise to work toward becoming our best selves, to learn from our mistakes and to

help one another learn and grow. <http://vitalleaders.blogs.uua.org/leadership-skills/bubble/>

That is why we have a congregational covenant so that we can provide that "bubble" or sanctuary for folks while at the same time trying to be welcoming to new folks, different folks, and while trying to be the church that matters. Sometimes it can feel like we are patting our stomachs and rubbing our heads at the same time.

The church that doesn't matter caught on to the fact that often people find the familiar comforting. And that was the bubble they created. But comfort is not necessarily healing, or growth producing. Comfort can be an ingredient in healing but when it is the goal I think it kills a church. As a pastor I have to admit that sometimes when people complain that maybe my sermon was not so good, or the sound system was too squeaky or maybe the children could be quieter or the choir could be louder I maybe inside my own head am not so loving and patient but our reading this morning reminded me that I would much rather have a church where people complain a bit about stuff because this church matters to them than to have a church where no one complains because nothing matters

I think that we have gotten something right and I think that it is the same thing Jowonio got right. When we open our doors and are welcoming and we are intentional in that welcoming we provide healing. We do this when we greet each person and do not make assumptions about them but take the time to say hello, glad you are hear, what brought you. When we take

time to understand who each individual is and help them to find their place here we help build not a bubble but a sanctuary.

Each community has its strengths and I think one of the strengths of this place is the warmth of the welcome we have here. We do provide sanctuary. What an amazing gift to the world.

I have only been with this congregation a little over two years but I have seen such wonderful welcome here. I have had conversations with folks who have talked to me about what this place means to them. Some of you have been here awhile and those stories go way back - chalice circles you are in, or times when people helped you move or sat with you every Sunday after your break up. I have talked to people who are new to our congregation who walked through those doors wondering who would ever like me? Why am I so different why can't I connect to other people and someone smiled at them, and said glad you are here, great to see you have a cup of coffee, and they felt connected and it was the first step on their healing path.

What I have learned about us is that this is the church where it matters that we matter. We want to have impact and help others and ourselves. We want to be part of peoples healing.

This is our sanctuary - it is not our bubble preventing us from connecting to the real world, it is not a set of blinders that keep us from seeing all of reality, it is not a cave where we hibernate. Maybe it is a blanket fort. It is our sacred place, a place we come to for respite, for safety, for a chance to

catch our breath. It is a place where we take a moment to stop - to just stop and breathe and reflect and feel. It is a place where we learn about each other, and ourselves it is a place where we connect and we grow. It is a place where we heal. This is our sanctuary.

In a world without end may this be so.