

The Sacred Playground  
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I love to ask couples and friends how they met. Every story is completely unique about how and where they met, who introduced them. I think of these stories as their “call to be in relationship” stories. I also love to ask people who go to church, what made them walk through the door of the congregation for the first time? Every story is completely unique. I think of these stories as their “call to spirit, love and justice” stories.

In seminary, my fellow students and I often ask each other, “What is the story of your call to ministry?” Again, every seminarian and minister has their own unique call to ministry story. My mine began with wanting to take a Hand Drumming class. I was on a search to find a musical instrument I could play and I African Hand Drumming might be it. It just so happened that First Parish in Lexington was offering a Hand Drumming class. Perfect! So, I signed up. Much to my dismay, I soon realized that I have very little musical rhythm. I was never a very good Hand Drummer and didn’t continue after the class ended. However, I did enjoy the class because the people were very welcoming and very kind about my off-rhythm drumming.

Each week as we gathered and played our drums, I noticed there was something special about taking the class in a Unitarian Universalist church, rather than being in an adult education center. There was also something different about the people in the class. I recall saying to myself, “These people are so nice. I think I’ll see what they do here on

Sunday mornings.” So, to a worship service I went. And, I liked it! So I kept going. I kept going to church services long after the Hand Drumming class ended. I recognized there was something different about this faith community. I sensed and was drawn to that Unitarian Universalist aura before I even knew what it was. And, I wanted more of it.

So, that’s how I walked through the door of my first Unitarian Universalist congregation. I like to say that Spirit knew I wouldn’t have come in through the front door, because I wasn’t church shopping and I didn’t think of myself as a church person. I laugh when I think about how Spirit had to be creative and lure me into church through the side door by showing me shiny African Hand Drums and tempting me with dreams of being able to finally play a musical instrument. Whatever it takes for Spirit to get you in the door, right?

But how someone walks through the door for the first time is really only the beginning of the story isn’t it? Just like the story of how a couple or friends meet is just the beginning of their relationship. Perhaps a more interesting question is, why do people keep committing themselves to their relationships over and over again?

For people who have walked through the doors of this church, I’m really curious to know what brought you here for the first time? And, if this isn’t your first visit, what keeps you coming back to the Winchester Unitarian Society again and again?” During my time as your Intern Minister, I’m excited to hear your “call to spirit, love and justice” stories.

I can tell you one of the reasons why I keep coming back through the doors of Unitarian Universalist faith communities. It's because, for me, church is a sacred playground. It's a place where people of different talents, perspectives, and passions come together to co-create something bigger than anyone of us can create on our own. Church is a playground and it's full of fabulous playmates!

But, actually, this description of a playground can be true for places other than church. I've worked on other teams that felt like a playground. One of them was working on a marketing team at Hewlett-Packard. In corporate language, it was called a "high functioning team" – but, it was a playground. We were a brand new marketing team of 5 people who were charged with generating customer interest in our software products and passing leads onto the salesforce. To do this, we designed a 10-city seminar tour, each city with a keynote speaker, multiple breakout sessions, and a technology lab to show customers how the software worked. It was incredibly ambitious for a newly formed team of 5 people. But, we had passion, creativity, an extraordinary diversity of talents, plus we liked each other. We were committed to succeed as a team. And, we did. We rocked that seminar tour! It was a grand success – and it was a whole lot of work – and it was a whole lot of fun! It was a marketing playground!

But, was it a Sacred Playground? For that particular team, it did feel sacred. Certainly the way we worked together and our commitment to mutual success was different and special. We were on all cylinders, being collaborative, having fun, and doing exceptional, creative work together. But, in my 13 years at Hewlett-Packard, that was the only

team I ever felt that way about. I worked with other teams with great people, but none of them had that Secret Sauce that made them feel sacred.

Church, on the other hand, now that's a place where Sacred Sauce flows like a river and a never ending stream! In my 13 years of being a Unitarian Universalist, being a congregant, going to General Assembly, attending regional meetings and workshops, and being here at Winchester Unitarian Society... ALL of it feels like playing on a Sacred Playground.

So, what makes all these UU experiences sacred? Covenant is a big part of it. At the foundation of our faith, we are a covenantal community. We are intentional about make covenants where we promise how to be in relationship with each other. In my first month with you, I've attended many committee meetings and at each one, you began by reviewing and renewing your covenant of how you promise to be together. Each covenant is unique, and yet they all speak of the common values of: affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each person, honoring our commitments, and speaking the truth with love.

Covenants build a foundation by intentionally choosing how we want to be in relationship with each other. You could say, that covenants are the Rules of the Sacred Playground! They are how we promise to play together.

Covenants help to create a space where we feel safe to be authentically ourselves and be valued for All of who we are. Covenants give us enough of a safety net so we are free to experiment, be creative,

discover, explore, and take risks. Children play boldly and freely most of the time, it's what they naturally do. As adults, we can become so skilled at doing what we're good at, that we tend to limit our playful natures of taking risks that challenge us to grow personally and spiritually. Sometimes, when we're unsure if we can, or even if we want to do something – and we end up saying “Yes!” anyway, that's when we discover new parts of ourselves:

In my first year of being a member of my home congregation, I was asked to deliver a lay-led worship service that summer. I was caught off guard and said “I've never even seen a summer worship service. Maybe next summer.” That was fine. I wasn't pressured. But, I kept thinking about it. I couldn't let it go. I realized I had a message I wanted to share. So, I took a leap of trust and said “Yes” to delivering a sermon that summer. It was during that worship service that I felt the first little sparks of my call to ministry. My soul grew a little bigger that day.

One of my favorite ways to play on the church playground is being on committees. Yup, I'm one of those people who loves committees. Each one lets me have a different experience on the Playground. I was playing in the sandbox with one committee, swinging on the swings with another, and going down really fast slides on others. I had freedom to play anywhere I wanted to on the church playground. By playing, I was able to develop new skills, learn new things, and I got to play with fabulous playmates. Every new experience was a spark of growth in spiritual leadership that has led me to be who I am today – ready to play in the playground of being a Minister.

What is also true on playgrounds is, they are not always full of happy fun and games. There are times when we may push and shove and hurt each other. Being in covenantal community is not about being perfect. It's about showing up as our imperfect, messy, sometimes cranky, human selves, and then, recommitting ourselves to how we aspire to be in relationship. It's about being accountable for words and actions with our playmates, and it's about calling each other back into covenant when we've been hurt by another.

There are times on the Playground when there is divisiveness and conflict, and it's frustrating. We may even want to pick up our toys and leave the Playground. It is during these challenging times, when we need to lean most heavily into our promises of how to be in relationship with each other, even when it's messy and hard. It's actually during these challenging times, not the happy times, when we may grow and learn the most. Challenging times call forth more strength, wisdom, resilience, leadership, and compassion – individually and collectively – than we may have known we were capable of. These too are ways of playing on the Playground.

So, there are many ways to play on the church playground. For some service is what helps their heart and spirit grow, for others it's singing in the choir, or maybe it's offering hospitality, or teaching our young children about UU values. There are a multitude of ways to play on the Sacred Playground of Church. Or, maybe what feeds your spirit isn't even at church.

Each of us has our own ways of discovering new parts of ourselves, whether it's at church or in another place that's sacred for you. There

are many paths and many ways to grow personally and spiritually. When you feel that sense of the sacred, you know it. You may not think of it as a playground like I do. But, whatever that image is for you, it's your holy and sacred place where you grow, and maybe heal your heart and spirit.

My imagery of a Church as a Playground is actually a healing image for me. I born with a physical disability, Spina Bifida, which is essentially a partial paralysis from the waist down. As a child, I didn't like playgrounds very much. There were places where I couldn't go on the playground because I couldn't run, jump, climb, skip, or hop like all the other kids. And, since I couldn't play like all the other kids, I didn't feel like I belonged or fit in. So, all my life I've been on a quest to find playgrounds. Places where I was free to play in every part of the playground, with playmates, and have fun!

Over the years, I have found playgrounds where I had fun, sometimes lots of Fun! But, it's within Unitarian Universalism and congregational life where I found a Sacred Playground. Church is a place where we get to play with people who have big hearts and willing hands. I'm so glad I get to play with you for the next two years. I can't wait to see what risks we'll take and what parts of ourselves we will discover in the playground of the Winchester Unitarian Society! Let's play! Amen.