

## **Small Group Ministry As Spiritual Practice**

*From the sermon "This is the Real Life," by The Reverend Nathan Ryan  
Delivered on October 13, 2013 at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana*

The assignment was to pick out one piece at the Art Institute of Chicago to share to the members of my seminary class. I walked into a room at the end of the modern art wing that featured one artist's works. His pieces were, in my mind, unremarkable. They were canvases painted white with three or four pieces of white wood or siding attached to the canvas. That was it.

My first reaction was resentment. I walked out, but then I walked back in. Instead of looking at the art, I started watching the people looking at the art. With maybe one exception, every person took at most two steps into the room, caught a glimpse of the art and turned around and walked out. I was entranced. This artist was renowned enough to have an entire room dedicated to exhibiting his work. And yet almost universally people walked out on it. They weren't repulsed by what he did, but his lack of something being there evoked an almost universal response in people. I picked this piece to show my class because of the impact it had on people. It was the first time I had experienced art not by looking at it, but by looking at how it impacted others.

That image of looking for the reality in the response is the theme of today's sermon. Here is an example. One of the goals of memorial services here is to retell the story of a person's life. This, of course, is an impossible task, for no one can ever fully know a person, and no one can ever fully retell the story of someone's life—certainly not in one hour.

Finding the full story of the memorialized person cannot be found by looking to the speakers of the eulogy. In a funny sort of way, you have to turn around to see the full retelling of the story. The life of the newly dead is being reborn and retold by those in attendance. Each person at the memorial service who thinks of that person they loved and reflects on their own interpretations of the stories and understandings of the memorialized are allowing that person to be alive in their mind. It is the combination of all present, the reflections and reliving through each person's perspective, that fully retells the story and brings the departed back to us in that hour.

But these connections between people do not just exist. They must be built over time. There is an opportunity in this church to engage in this spiritual practice of building real and meaningful connections. We provide you with an opportunity to touch lives and be transformed in a way that is almost entirely absent from our larger culture: our Small Group Ministry program which we call Branches.

Branches is an opportunity to spend 2 hours a month sitting in a room. You are guaranteed to spend 9/10th of the time not speaking. You will not be sitting in silence, but you will be prohibited from fixing or building or doing or pulling yourself up by your boot straps or checking your phone or pointing out how wrong other people are, or reflecting on how you and your political party and demographics and ideology got it all right. And this can change your life and hold you when you are aching.

This is one of the strongest spiritual practices of our church. In a Branches group you do not get to pick who you are with. You do not get to say that you want to be with like-minded people. The spiritual practice of the Branches group is to listen, to really listen without fixing or correcting or judging or evaluating. And it isn't easy, and it isn't natural, and you won't get it right all the time. That's why we

call it practice.

The deeper belief in our small group ministry comes out of the idea that within each of us we are good enough, beautiful enough, strong enough to know what is right, what is good, what is just. When I see that happening, when I see us being pulled toward growth and kindness, I can't help but describe it as God.

The gift of engaging in the spiritual practice of Branches is that you get to be there as other people discover their soul. I can't think of a better description than these words from Parker Palmer from his book, "A Hidden Wholeness":

"Despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye—but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself."

Instead of looking at the art itself, Small Group Ministry encourages you to watch how the art impacts other people. Looking for reality in the response is the spiritual practice of Branches. It is to learn how to be with other people in a deep way.

Earlier this year we had a Branches Enrichment Weekend with a small group ministry expert, Susan Hollister, from North Carolina, as our guest speaker. We spent a good amount of time talking about how to listen without trying to fix or judge the other person. The controversial example someone gave was that they felt they should respond to someone who mentions that their grandmother just died by, at the very least, saying that they were sorry.

This idea sparked quite a bit of conversation. On the one hand it takes a lot of strength to admit to a group of people what you are struggling with, and the speaker wants to know that their words are held in love. There is a reasonable argument to be made that responding with a simple "I'm sorry" will help the person know they have been heard.

But it was also pointed out that the intention for saying that you're sorry may not at all be because it is what is in the greatest interest of the speaker. It might be a desire for you to say the pre-determined expectation of what to do when someone shares the death of another. It may be that you are saying you're sorry so that you can check it off of the list of your societally mandated responses to death. Are you saying it as a way to say, "I did what I needed to do, now we can move on?" It runs the risk of scaring that wild animal of a soul back into the woods.

In the end we decided that each listener had to discern whether their desire to respond was really to help the other person's soul come out or was it to make the listener feel better about himself or herself? This is doing the hard work of learning to listen.

I think this spiritual practice may be particularly challenging for the left brained, intellectual, Unitarian side of our heritage. Seeing the reality in the response goes counter to a lot of what we teach and believe. There is a strong thread in our faith that says things must be rational, explainable, justifiable. It must be able to stand up to hearty debate and rigorous argument. One of the sins of the Unitarian mind

is the desire for an explanation for everything, for a reason, a rationality. I can explain and criticize that painting in Chicago, but it won't change how people feel when they see it.

We can criticize or pick apart anyone's beliefs or scripture. We can poke holes in their stories and find their hypocrisy. It's easy because everyone has hypocrisies. But that adds more injury and more pain to the world. No, the spiritual practice we are asking you to engage in is one of saying yes to life. We are asking you to trust that the other person knows what is best for them. We are asking you to trust that sometimes you can see things better if you stop looking at the thing and turn around to see the response.

There is a belief in this church that you are somebody, that you are worthy of the greatest love and admiration. You are built in the image of the most high and holy, and you deserve respect and dignity in this life. Right now. You are part of this great world of ours. If you want to see that, maybe you should look at the response. Amen.

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