

## Strangers in the Heart

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How do you let people into your life? How do you let people know who you really are? It is altogether too easy *not* to do it. Marcus Borg says we become used to having a layer of protection around our hearts; something to protect their delicate contents, like a rind protects the sweet insides of a melon. Like a shell protects a growing chick. We let people know just so much about us, and no more. Come this close and no closer. It feels like the smart and safe thing to do.

When Barbara speaks in wedding ceremonies, sometimes she will offer up this observation of the miracle of intimate relationships. That we spend much of our lives thinking that we had better not let people see our flaws. We think that if people see our flaws, they will not love us. It's like finding that one angle of your face in the bathroom mirror that flatters you most and hoping that's what you look like. It's like sucking in your belly at the beach to look good in your swimsuit. (I'm glad I'm not the only person who's ever done this.) Not only is this more or less physically impossible to keep up, you are not going to enjoy yourself very much at the beach. The irony is, of course, that only when you do let someone see your flaws that they can actually love you. That is, they can love the real you, not the savvy, masked version of you that you want them to see. In living with another person, day

in and day out, you have to accept that they will see you at your best... and at your worst. You have to trust that this will be okay.

A marriage or a committed partnership is one instance that practically forces us out of our ridiculous hope of looking good all the time. A very close friendships is another. But they are rare. And we can live a lot of our lives trying to show only that one angle of our face in the mirror, or sucking in our bellies at the beach. It's not fun. The rind around our hearts can keep us safe, and keep people at a good distance.

Being a kid in school grows a rind around our hearts. It's scary to reveal yourself because kids can be so critical. We are often advised by kindly adults to “just be yourself.” As if that were easy! Barbara says, I was not one of the popular kids in my school. I actually don't know a lot of people who will admit to being popular in school, but the ones who do have told me that they were, in a way, just as scared as the rest of us. If anything, they had even more of a mask to wear, even more to lose if they showed how uncool they really were.

Being in the working world can grow a rind around our hearts. Now you add your livelihood, your ability to *survive* in the material sense, and you will do everything you can to protect your heart. You will learn quite well how to hide major parts of yourself. Barbara remembers when her husband Robert was working at a plant in Virginia that made semi-conductors. The decision came down from headquarters to make massive cuts in staff; hundreds of jobs were shed in one day. Robert drove in to work about 15 minutes late, and saw car after car leaving the parking lot. His department

manager was not trained in “feelings”. He had no idea what to do with his workers who had been left by their friends whose jobs had just been eliminated. People who had worked side by side for years had no chance to say goodbye. “Everybody doing okay?” he said briskly. “I’m not okay,” said Robert. “I feel just awful.” Robert spent the next few days doing what you might call “stealth caring”. He went up to people who had just lost friends to cuts and said, “How *are* you?” in a way that showed he really wanted to know. This is rare.

And so depending on how thick the rind around our hearts gets, we can have it in place all the time, so that we never get to the tender heart inside. We can forget that there is anything other than rind, even to our family and friends. We become strangers in the heart.

So we come to church. A church should, by rights, just naturally be one of those places we can be ourselves, right? After all, so many of us are tickled to feel this sense of being at home when we come to a Unitarian Universalist church. Ah this is where I belong, we think. And we are right. And really getting to know people, and letting them know the real us is not as easy as we might think.

There was a woman in a church [Barbara] served, a very popular person in the church, who died. She was quite friendly and kind, had the gift of gab, and was very funny. People really cared a lot about her. And since her children lived some distance from the church, when Barbara was preparing her memorial service, she turned to her friends in the church to share stories to tell in the eulogy. “Where did she grow up?” she asked. “What was she

like as a young woman? What were her hopes and dreams?” It was shocking to hear people say, one after the other, “Gee, I don't know. She never told us much about herself.”

It's remarkably easy not to let people know us. Even in church. Perhaps especially in church. Consider worship. We come together every week, and we put on our best clothes. We work hard to look good and smell good. And since we Unitarian Universalists place tremendous stock in human goodness and human strength and achievement, we want to carry that in with us to church, too.

And then... sometimes we feel like crying during worship. Something in our lives is difficult, we feel a little bit tender about it, and the service gets to us. The sermon pokes at it, or the prayer. If nothing else, the music will do it for a lot of us. There's something about those hymns – those dastardly hymns that soften that rind around a person's heart. And some people get embarrassed. Most likely, there will be some kind person next to you, known to you before that moment or not, who hands you a tissue. Hopefully, someone will ask you if you're okay. But some of you have apologized to us for crying during worship. Or you have fled. In the middle of worship, there seems to be very important appointment you've just remembered, and you are gone. As we said in worship last week, we ministers do see everything. And we've noticed that it can be difficult for people to show such vulnerable emotions in church.

In the Celtic tradition, there are what are called “thin” places – places where, in their tradition, the spirit or spirits break through the mundane

world. We feel the presence of the sacred, or the holy. For the Celts, the island off Iona is a classic “thin place”. (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*) And when you have the urge to cry in church, you might just think of church as a “thin” place. Something has broken through that tough, protective, but not always helpful rind we grow around our hearts. In fact, you could look at this as a place where you can come to soften this tough rind. Our community becomes holy ground in the sense that we are a place where our hearts can be opened.

But it cannot happen just here and there, haphazardly, with no effort. Nothing can force an appearance of the spirit; nothing can force you to trust other people, to open your heart in front of them. But we can create situations where thin places might develop. And Open Circles, or small group ministry, is one way we hope to do this. Open Circles are small groups that we are forming for people to explore deep spiritual questions in a safe environment. Creating such an environment will take some commitment from people. We will be asking things from you that are not easy. For one thing, we are asking people to talk about things like trust, hope, God, love, prayer, etc., in a personal way, to talk about how they hit us, and not in general, theoretical terms.

We are also asking people to commit a significant amount of time in open circles. Meeting twice a month sounds like an enormous commitment to a lot of people. But getting to know and trust people requires this kind of time, no way around it.

We are asking that each open circle remains open. Often a group in the

church will be open for a period of time, and then close. Or it will be by invitation only. There is nothing inherently wrong with groups like these. Friendships form, groups bond, and we don't want the group to lose its small, intimate flavor. But this sort of approach can reproduce what we experienced in school – that some people are on the “inside” and others are not. If we ourselves have made our way into a circle of friends here, it's easy to forget what it's like not to have one. And then we don't learn how to enlarge our hearts, to make room for people who aren't already our friends. And we ourselves never have to be in the position of starting out as the stranger. Open circles will ask that people trust one another enough not to close the group, and to include people who don't already know one another. If an open circle becomes too large to accommodate more people, they will be asked to form two groups.

And finally, we are asking open circles to meet for just the course of one church year. They must then agree to celebrate their time as a group and disband at the end of the year. We will form new groups in the fall. All of these things are designed to help us learn to trust one another, to learn that such connections aren't that rare. They can happen again and again. We hope that this will allow our church to be a “thin place” where the sacred shows up, where our hearts are as large, hospitable and soft as they are meant to be.

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WORDS TO SIGN UP BY... *(Josh – you're going to have to instruct the ushers before hand to come up the center aisle and collect forms when the interlude stops. Since Scott will be “noodling” this, you will also have to signal him when you'd like him to stop.)*

Now that you've heard some things about open circles, we are now inviting you to consider joining one, yourself. In your order of service, you will see a blue insert. This is a registration form. We're asking you to consider whether you'd like to try this, and when. Your responses will help us narrow down the meeting times for our three groups. You will have more opportunities to sign up, of course. After church next week, and before church the following week, there will be a sample open circle for you to try it out before signing on. The big sign-up day is October 18, when we will have a luncheon after church for groups to meet for the first time.

In the next few minutes, Scott will play a little pondering music. Then we will have the ushers come down with baskets to collect your forms. You can say “not interested”, or fill it out, keep it to think over. But pass your form to the inside of the pew for our ushers to collect.