

The Haunting Church

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Every autumn there seems to be a lot of talk about “ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night,” even though may just be dressed up for trick or treat. I think that most of the haunting we experience comes from the inside rather than outside of ourselves. And many of those hauntings can take place without our even knowing what is happening.

I loved to swim when I was little, even before I learned to swim. My mother used to tell me about when I was two years old and our family would go to a swimming pool and I’d jump off the diving board and tread water until my father came out. He’d lift me up on the side of the pool and I’d run around to the diving board and jump in again, and again, and again. I never got tired of this game and would keep it up until it wore my father out.

I don’t remember any of that but I do remember our family going camping at Cranberry Lake. We’d go to the sandy beach and play in the water. There were fresh water clams out where the water was deeper and my father liked to dive and bring them back to our campsite. I remember holding his shoulders, riding on his back as he dived deep to the bottom of the lake. It was strange and exciting to hold on for this underwater adventure. Was I scared? No way! I just held my breath, opened my eyes and held on for adventure.

My love of the water was well known, so when we visited my mother’s parents the summer I was three, my grandmother gave me a swim toy, an inflatable ring with a raised front section that was like the wheelhouse of a tug boat. I remember that it had a little red bubble on the top that could squirt a jet of water just like a real tug boat.

We returned to Cranberry Lake later that summer and I wasted no time in getting my tugboat toy into the water. But one day while I was in the water my mother, who was sitting on the beach, looked up and saw my legs kicking in the air. The toy had flipped over and my head was trapped underwater. I was pinned

upside down and couldn't escape. She looked to the lifeguard, who had her head buried in a book, and then waded into the lake and pulled me ashore. I very nearly drowned.

I don't remember a bit of that experience. The shock of it completely blocked it from my mind. I only learned about it years later when my mother told me the story.

I didn't know what had happened, but it had an effect on me, on my emotions and behavior. I didn't like the water and hated to swim. I avoided going into the water whenever possible. I would wade but not swim. During several summers my parents insisted I take swimming lessons. I went but didn't enjoy them. I felt uncomfortable, anxious and depressed but didn't know why. I didn't learn to swim.

I finally made progress several years later when I went to the Boy Scout Camp Sabattis in the Adirondack Mountains. I needed to pass a swimming test to be able to participate in boating activities. I was so fearful of the water that I kept failing the floating test. I couldn't relax in the water. I'd sink like a stone. A kindly counselor took me aside, spoke soothingly and helped me to learn to float. Besides canoeing on the lake that summer, I learned so well that I earned my "Mile Swim" merit badge. But the accomplishment was short-lived. Left to my own devices, I'd always choose any activity other than swimming.

Fast-forward to my mid-50's. I was working as a minister and needed to find a way to make regular, low-impact exercise a part of my routine. I joined a gym that had a swimming pool and started swimming laps. Something strange and unexpected happened. From what seemed to be out of nowhere, dark images of fear, distress, and panic would emerge as I swam from end to end. I'd have to stop and catch my breath. Sometimes it felt like I was drowning, and those feelings would cause me to flail instead of swim, lose my flotation and begin to go under, reinforcing the sense of drowning.

But there was no real reason for the fear in the present. These haunting feelings arose from the place, buried deep in my subconscious, where the repressed memories of drowning were hidden. Hidden no more, they came to life as fresh and powerful as the day I first felt them.

I chose to deal with those emotions and keep swimming. I learned to breathe gently, calming the anxious feelings when they arose. I got to know the texture, depth, and qualities of those emerging fears, slowly bringing my adult strength and acceptance to the emotions I'd long repressed. As they became more familiar, they became more integrated parts of my own self. I felt richer and more whole, stronger and more peaceful, for allowing them into my conscious awareness.

Those feelings are a conscious part of me now. When they arise while I'm swimming, I say to them, "Hello, feelings. I can see that you still remember that sad day from long ago and your fear is still fresh. I'm a better swimmer and stronger person now. You don't have to worry. I'll take care of you."

And now I love to swim. I swim as a whole being – body, breath, mind, emotions, anxieties and strengths – all present together, stroke after stroke, lap after lap, one with the waters of life.

Although I didn't know it, didn't even remember it, I had been haunted by that tugboat toy all those years, haunted by the repressed memory of a near-death experience, out of control and drowning. That haunting was present in many ways – in my decisions, my emotions, my self image and lack of confidence – until the unconscious became conscious, restoring the energy and qualities of selfhood that had been split off and stored deep and out of sight so many years before.

We can find ourselves haunted, limited, held back by things that happened in our past. For me it was my tugboat. We can be haunted by terror, as I was from my near-death experience. But many of us are haunted by our earlier experiences of church – fear or shame, guilt or depression.

You see, many churches in our culture are built on a belief that people can only be motivated by negative emotions like shame, guilt, and fear. They believe that the only way to get people to behave properly is by threatening them with severe and harsh punishment.

One version of this belief is written deeply into the American psyche from our New England religious heritage, a leading proponent of which was the Rev.

Jonathan Edwards, expressed in his sermon of 1741, entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” where he said, in part,

“The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; . . . you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince: and yet ’tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment: . . . Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you don’t this very moment drop down into hell.

“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: ’Tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked . . . You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have . . . nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.”

Now that’s an image that could and did haunt generations of Americans. And this is the view against which both Unitarians and Universalists rebelled, although its shadow it casts is still present even among us. Unitarians objected to this theology’s demeaning picture of human nature; the Universalists objected to the characterizing the God of love and forgiveness as such an unrelenting bully. Unitarians thought that it insulted them; Universalists thought it insulted God.

There are many other religious hauntings as well. There’s haunting by shame and guilt, encouraging children to internalize a moral repression so strong that it undermines their ability to respect themselves. I’ve heard people recall being told that every sin they commit, every improper thought or impulse, every act of disobedience drives another cruelly excruciating nail into the suffering flesh of Jesus on the cross.

My own church wasn't all that big on the God's wrathful judgment or the horrors of hell, but they taught me something more subtle and difficult to resist: they taught me who to look down on, disapprove, or despise. My church taught that one should behave in certain proper ways and if people misbehaved they were unlovable. We learned to disapprove of the "wrong" kind of people, people who did things we'd never do, like breaking the law.

The Kelsey's were prominent and upright members of our church community. Mrs. Kelsey taught Sunday School and Mr. Kelsey was on the Church Council. One day I heard through hushed whispers that Mr. Kelsey had been arrested for drunk driving and that was a very bad thing. It must have been, because we never saw the Kelsey's again. The shame of our disapproval pushed them over the line that separates "us" from "them" and made them feel unlovable and unwelcome in our church. We saw them as different and, just as importantly, so did they. We didn't wait for God to judge; we did it ourselves.

My family is more traditionally religious than I am. One of my sisters home-schooled her children because the schools in Seattle taught the "satanic" doctrine of self-esteem. She'd explain that if you felt good about yourself, you wouldn't believe you needed a savior.

You might just end up a Unitarian Universalist.

Despite its popularity, the belief in the importance of the negative emotions of fear, shame, guilt, and terror represent a fundamental misunderstanding of religion. When people – or in the case of Unitarians and Universalists, entire denominations – reject the negativity of many traditional religious approaches, they often rebel against the entire enterprise.

They reject God as the ultimate abuser.

They reject concepts of the afterlife as poisoned by threats of punishment and eternal suffering.

They've been so hurt by misuse of authority that they often reject the validity of any authority greater than their own.

They've felt so misled and betrayed by misuses of emotions, that they mistrust any emotionality in a group setting.

This reminds me of a joke – a light bulb joke.

It goes, “How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

The answer is “Unitarian Universalists don’t screw in light bulbs; Baptists screw in light bulbs.”

The idea here is that we have rejected traditional religion so thoroughly that we won’t do anything that a traditional church would do – even if it is something as reasonable as changing a light bulb.

Just because things can be misused doesn’t mean that they are not useful or important. There’s another phrase that has resonance here, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.” Even though the history of religion is rich with the abuse of power, that doesn’t mean that authority is necessarily bad. Even though people have created a version of God that is arbitrary and abusive, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t good ways of understanding ourselves to be part of something greater, wiser and more loving than we are. Even though the emotions of the mob have been exploited, sometimes inducing people to irrational behavior, it doesn’t mean that sharing exuberant positive emotions in a group is necessarily a bad thing.

We may not believe in a traditional God, but we can experience feelings of awe – the sense of being connected with something that is mysteriously wonderful beyond our capacity to understand.

We may have rejected traditional concepts of heaven and hell, but we need not let that separate us from our capacity to experience the timelessness that is mysteriously present in each moment, a capacity that unites us in a transcendence that opens our minds and hearts to feelings of beauty and connection.

We may have rejected traditional motivations of guilt, shame, punishment and retribution, but that doesn’t mean that we also have to reject the gloriously positive motivations of compassion, love, and joy that are so much more fulfilling, empowering us to embrace change for the better, rather than avoiding change for the worse.

So I invite you, if something at church reminds you of hurts from long ago, to say, “Hello, feelings. I can see that you still remember what happened at

church so long ago and your anger is still fresh. But I'm older and a stronger person now. I go to a different kind of church. I'll take care of you."

As Rumi, the founder of the Sufi Order of Muslims wrote, "Out beyond right and wrong there is a field. I'll meet you there."

As Jesus, the inspiration for Christianity, said, "Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment."

And as the Buddha said, "Never was hate overcome by hate. Only love can overcome hate."

True religion is the practice of compassion, nurture, and love in action, which is justice. We need not be haunted by these things. When we can open our hearts to the deeply transformative power of the joy, love, and compassion that are written in our heart of hearts, though sometimes obscured by the ghosts of our past, we can rise up and rejoice, singing, "Glory, glory, hallelujah! Since I laid my burden down."

May it be so.