

Living Churches
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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The book of Ezekiel is undoubtedly one of the strangest passages in Hebrew Scripture – an odd but compelling amalgam of Stephen King terror and Billy Graham inspiration. We find the prophet Ezekiel, who’s already had his share of wild and crazy feats to perform, earnestly preaching a sermon to a valley of dry bones. At Yahweh’s insistence, he’s trying to breathe life and spirit into them, and lay flesh and sinew against their brittleness.

How Ezekiel ended up in this horror movie trailer is a matter of much theological debate (and we’ll skip that and get to the point). Based on the evidence, Ezekiel has come upon some sort of battlefield aftermath. The Jews are in exile. They’ve been slaughtered by the thousands (probably by Babylonians), and left to rot in the sun.

When you consider the Jewish admonition to bury the dead within 48 hours, you can imagine the agony of this scene for Ezekiel. All that is left is their dry bones. It’s a striking metaphor for the Jews, exiled from the refreshing waters of their faith.

God asks Ezekiel: “Mortal, can these bones live?” The question is somewhat ridiculous, even for Yahweh; so much so that Ezekiel is savvy enough to realize that it’s more of a rhetorical question. Perhaps that explains the prophet’s chutzpah in lobbing the ball back into Yahweh’s court like a sassy teenager: “Oh God, *you* know.”

In the face of the question: “Can these bones live?” believers in theistically-based religions have no choice but to humbly place the query back in God’s hands. If there is anything that can resurrect the bones, God will do it. Case closed. The suspense of faith resides the moment between the question and God’s reply.

For those of us in our more liberal, freeform, and humanistic religion, the question, “Can these bones live?” resonates just as powerfully, but in a somewhat different context.

Globally, we’re operating under a continued malaise caused by terrorism, war, environmental threat, pandemics and economic instability. We’re beleaguered and exhausted by political chaos and mounting authoritarianism. It’s like a bad case of indigestion that won’t subside.

Locally, we’re gathered here this morning in this Sanctuary. This is not a valley of dry bones, to be sure. Yet, as we know, this has been a year of some change and reflection. Some of us may feel parched, some of us may feel a sense

of exile from the Temple, and some of us may even have wondered if the bones of this congregation could live.

I'll paraphrase Ezekiel: "Good people, *you* know." Can these bones live? Yes!

Spirit, love, and faith move in this congregation and among us in all of our joy and sorrow. Hope and healing nourish us as we journey from anger to forgiveness; from fear to acceptance, crisis to opportunity, confusion to clarity.

We are a *living* church. The pioneers who have come before us have loved this place into being since 1958. Since its founding, they've faced dry bones from time to time, and they've breathed life into them, breathed faith into them, breathed money into them, breathed mission and vision and a sense of calling into them so that they would live.

Look around and you'll see a living, breathing example of this commitment in our beautiful building expansion. You made it happen. Can these bones live? Good people, you know!

Church is church is church, or so it seems. One can wander a long time and still find oneself scaling the same mountains and navigating the same valleys...kerfuffles about the Minister's role and disagreement about the Religious Exploration curriculum, concern about the state of the piano, about the upkeep of the facilities, about recruitment of volunteers and leaders, the wages for the staff, and the clever juggling of available space to meet the church's needs. Sound familiar?

Through the years, members and friends have kept the home fires burning and now it is our turn to lay sinew and muscle, flesh and skin against those bones so that we can continue to thrive as a living church. Our turn to dole out our pennies to what truly matters and what will endure.

It is our turn now to explore our mission and vision, our core purpose and callings, as individuals and as a community of seekers and stewards for Beacon and for Unitarian Universalism itself.

Notice that I said "thrive" as a living church, not merely "exist." Sometimes we've got a pulse, but not very healthy. We're barely breathing, rather than full of vim and vigor. Perhaps we're chugging along, settling for the same old same old. In order to truly "thrive" we'll need to live as a congregation of callings, of individuals who come alive, not merely an assembly of warm bodies.

If we conducted a health audit on a sampling of UU congregations, the healthiest ones spiritually and financially, the ones with clearly articulated core values and a grounded sense of mission, would share a number of notable characteristics.

My esteemed colleague, Alice Blair Wesley, has written a thought-provoking reflection on the topic, examining what one would expect a spiritually

healthy congregation to look and feel like. After more than 30 years in active ministry, Wesley observes that:

“Members of a spiritually healthy congregation love their worship services. The people like to sing and obviously enjoy lots of other music. They are glad to have the children with them. People laugh at silly things during announcements; there are times of palpably deep silence and, always, some tears.

They treasure solid sermons and tell their minister when he/she or they has taught them something, helped them with a particular issue, spoken the good old truths just right, missed the mark, or otherwise hit one out of the park. Before and after services, you see many of the people greeting each other with affection.”

“The people in a spiritually healthy congregation,” Wesley continues, “ care about the cleanliness and good order of their building and grounds. They care about how the place looks because they think everything that happens there is important. So, no junk, no weeds, no peeling paint. It's the usual thing to see members setting out plants, scouring the sinks, picking up the orders of service left in the meeting room, putting up a new shelf in a classroom.” Check!

“The people in a spiritually healthy congregation almost all take their turn and do their part. They rotate every office and chair at least every three years, because they so much want always to be bringing on new interests, abilities and talent, in new and long term members. They don't want anybody "owning" leadership slots and have no "paper" committees, which seldom meet. They know what policies to follow to avoid "turf battles" and "burn-out" and to encourage freshness in all the church's programs.”

“The people in a spiritually healthy congregation,” she writes, “are alive to the special needs and the special challenges of their particular community and time. Many people now want and need depth, but their time is in short supply. So throughout the church the people work at being tender and efficient, as thorough as they need to be but not long-winded or micro-managing or talking every issue to death.

Numerous lay leaders, in office and out, make it abundantly clear in all kinds of ways that this church doesn't do gossip, triangulation, ridicule or sarcasm, because this is a community in which trust and trustworthiness are the norm.”

“The people in a spiritually healthy congregation knock themselves out to be transparent. Even closed groups routinely describe their activities from time to time. Every committee posts its minutes for any who care to read them. The board is fanatic about publishing its agenda before meetings, and afterward all carried motions, including a summary of pros and cons expressed in discussion.”

“The people in a spiritually healthy congregation take their continuous involvement in work for justice and mercy as much for granted as they do the church piano and RE curricula, but they don't take up every single liberal issue that

comes down the pike. They work in a few focused areas, in which a significant number of members know what they are doing, or are trying hard to learn in engaging ways. Barring a very sparsely populated area, a spiritually healthy congregation is growing. You couldn't keep new people out if you tried."

"And, finally, writes Wesley: "The people in a spiritually healthy congregation talk about money easily, expect financial facts to be delivered simply, and give generously without making a big deal of it. The annual canvass is completely wrapped up in one month. Every staff person is paid at least a living wage, on time every time, and is treated with respect.

I so appreciate Wesley's astute profile of a spiritually healthy congregation, although it may sound more like a bionic one to some of us! Gosh, do any churches get it all right all the time? I doubt it. Most often, we have some areas of congregational life boasting a low cholesterol count, while others plague us like creaky knees or flare up like stuffy sinuses.

Here at Beacon, I'd say we're more than passing our physical, but I believe we could still achieve and sustain even greater vitality in all areas of congregational life as we look to and fund our future. The Israelites in Ezekiel's time didn't have much to look forward to, but we surely do.

Can these bones live? Good people, *you* know. Yes!

Our bones have been taking on sinew. It's the sign of a healthy congregation that we've faced some conflict and hurts together, and engaged in difficult conversations about leadership, ministry, trust, and beloved community. We're taking part in productive, honest conversations about our strengths, and yes, our limitations. In our opening words, we said: "Living churches dream great dreams of beloved community; dying churches relive nightmares and are stale with bickering." Let's live!

Our bones have been taking on flesh. The Sunday school is alive with children, the Social Justice Allies seek to mobilize us and activate us in the public square, Sunday services have been well attended and the Chalice Circles grow. Remember: "Living churches have lots of noisy kids; living churches follow a vision; living churches support community work heavily." Let's live!

Our bones have been taking on breath. We can feel a vitality of the spirit here in our worship and in our music, in the ways we care for one another and build trust with one another, when we mourn or celebrate, when we mend what might be broken, and when we rally.

The spirit moves among the Board as it does among the carpenters, the gardeners, the dinner groups and our many committees. "Living churches have the fresh breath of love blowing through them." Let's live!

It's worth noting that among Biblical motifs, the symbolism of breath is hugely significant. Yahweh breathes spirit into living things; and breathes life into the spiritually dead. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruach*, and it pops up fully ten times in just these fourteen verses from Ezekiel.

The intended audience, the exiled Jews, are somewhat dried up; they're cut off from all joy, and their spirits are shriveled within them. There isn't much for them to anticipate or feel hopeful about. And yet Ezekiel stands up, clears his throat, and preaches a sermon to the skeletons anyway. Why? He knows what Yahweh knows: The bones can live with the *ruach* of life and faith breathed into them. Don't we know this truth, as well? This living church will live with an infusion of spiritual vitality and faith, regardless of the source.

Can these bones live? Good people, *you* know.

To maintain excellent health, we'll need to lie on the muscle of money. Please review your Pledge card, ask questions of the Stewardship committee as desired, and consider how the *ruach* of your generosity can and will enliven this beloved place. "Living churches are filled with healthy pledgers; dying churches are filled with tippers." Let's live!

Recently, I heard the story about one Mr. Smith, who was brought to Mercy Hospital (a Catholic hospital), and taken quickly in for coronary surgery. The operation went well and, as the groggy man regained consciousness, a Sister of Mercy, who was waiting by his bed, reassured him.

"Mr. Smith, you're going to be just fine," said the nun, gently patting his hand. "We do need to know, however, how you intend to pay for your stay here. Are you covered by insurance?" "No, I'm not," the man whispered hoarsely. "Then can you pay in cash?" persisted the nun. "I'm afraid I cannot, Sister."

"Well, do you have any close relatives?" the nun questioned sternly.

"Just my sister in New Mexico," he volunteered. "But she's a humble spinster nun." "Oh, I must correct you, Mr. Smith. Nuns are not spinsters - they are married to God." "Wonderful," said Mr. Smith. "In that case, please send the bill to my brother-in-law."

Sure, God will breathe life into the weary, but he/she or it isn't going to pay our bills, provide adequate staffing or materials, or fix the copier when it goes on the fritz. There is no free lunch in the free church! Yahweh may embolden a prophet to preach to a congregation of skeletons, but he isn't going to cough up the dough for engaging guest speakers or musicians, or foot the bill for memorial service receptions, for our contribution to the UUA Program Fund, or for delegates to General Assembly. That's our calling, our task and our responsibility. Let's live!

We are no valley of dry bones. And, together, our sacred and practical callings will *ever be* to lead, to envision, to fund the dream, to prophecy, to pledge

our time and talent, and to keep this “can do” congregation limber and quenched and breathing with full lung capacity.

How shall we do this? How shall we thrive as a congregation of callings, not merely an assembly of warm bodies? The famed minister Howard Thurman wisely advises us: “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what is your calling; what makes *you* come alive? And then go and do that. Because what the world needs (what Beacon needs) is people who have *come alive*.”

So, let’s come alive. Let’s live!

Beloved congregation, I ask you: “Can these bones lives?”

Good people, *you* know.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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