

Reading: Less Beautiful Without You

By Tess Baumberger, inspired by these words by David Fanning
"This place would be less beautiful without you."

This place would be less beautiful without you,
 Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jew,
 Hindu, Humanist, and Earth-centered, too.

This place would be less beautiful without you,
 Your heart honed by hardship, grief, illness,
 Seeking solace and comfort here among us.

This place would be less beautiful without you,
 Filled with joy and gratitude,
 Seeking celebration of life's bounty.

This place would be less beautiful without you,
 Curious, inquisitive, asking questions,
 seeking transformations emerging from within.

This place would be less beautiful without you,
 Striving to resist a world that tells us
 We are so much less than we can truly be.

This place would be less beautiful without each of us,
 Borne in this morning to seek heaven's fire
 In each other's souls, our own flames rising to meet.

**"The Lovers, the Dreamers, and Me:
 What the Muppets Might Teach Us About How to do Church"**

Sermon Reprint by Reverend Tess Baumberger
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They warned us about this in seminary – that when you start preaching on a regular basis, anything and everything can become sermon fodder. It is an occupational hazard.

You can be kicking back and watching a sitcom on television when suddenly you sit up and say "I could use that in a sermon!" Or you could be watching a film in a movie theatre or at home on television when it hits you that the story embodies a religious concept so well you must use it in a sermon.

This happens to me quite often, because I love watching movies. Now, when it comes to sermon fodder, some movies stand head and shoulders (or should I say flippers and beaks) over other movies with religious themes.

Today I'm going to talk about a film that, in ways both wise and silly, addresses some deep issues about how we can live together on this earth, and also in our theologically diverse Unitarian Universalist congregations. I am speaking, of course, of that epic great, "Muppets from Space."

This fine film's religious themes are obvious from its first scene. We see an ark, Noah's ark, in a desolate landscape. Clouds glower menacingly in the horizon and lightning strikes. We see animals entering the ark two by two.

And then, in the foreground, we see the distinctive profile of our hero. He even has a heroic name - Gonzo the Great. Yes, Gonzo with his funny beaky thing, who loves chickens and who shoots himself from cannons for fun. That Gonzo.

Gonzo rushes up to the ark and speaks to Noah, who he addresses as "Mr. The Ark." He says he thought he'd missed the boat. Noah asks him, "What are you?" It so happens that a related question, "Who are you?" is a central religious question. Gonzo replies, "Well, put me down as a 'whatever'."

Noah asks, "What is your species?" and Gonzo says, "There's only one of me." Noah replies, in a deep voice rolling like the thunder itself, "Then you are doomed." He slams the door shut, and Gonzo looks up at the heavens and cries from the depths of his furry little soul "No, no, I don't want to be alone! No!"

It is, of course, only a nightmare, but it sets the stage for a story of self-discovery - Gonzo's quest to solve the problem of his own identity. Now that sounds like a spiritual journey to me. The story has elements that may be familiar to many of us when we think about our own paths, the paths that led us here today.

Many people who enter houses of worship these days have never been part of a congregation before. Their lack of religious background, coupled with the isolation so rampant in our society, might leave them feeling like spiritual oddities, like there is no place where they would fit in, spiritually speaking.

Like Gonzo approaching the ark, they see what looks like a haven of safety in a threatening world, and are drawn to it. Like Gonzo, some might find church doors slammed in their faces. This may be because their theology is too different for that place, or because their social values are too liberal, or because they are gay or lesbian, transgendered or bisexual. And as doors close to them, like Gonzo, the spirits of these searchers might cry to the heavens, "No! No! I don't want to be alone."

Others who come to us seeking religious community have had experience with churches in the past. However, their beliefs may have changed so much over time that they no longer fit in. Or, as often happens in the queer community, when they come out, their faiths of origin push them out. These

people can feel cut off from their religious roots, which is a source of grief. Many no longer know who they are as religious people, but need a safe haven.

People who visit houses of worship are, at some level, trying to solve the problem of their religious identity. Like Gonzo, they want to know where they belong. People who come to us having been rejected by other churches desire a safe place in which to explore the question of their religious or spiritual identity. If we are able to provide that for them, they can make our lives more beautiful. Sometimes we succeed in doing this.

Sometimes we fail. It is not just other churches that slam doors in people's faces. For example, a mother and her adult, disabled child came for a while to the church I have been serving in Franklin, NH. There was no place for the daughter's wheelchair amongst our pews. She stuck out in the middle aisle. After a while, they stopped coming. I learned from this experience that we need to be ready to accept people with special needs.

Another family that attended for a while, stopped because they said we were "too political." It's true that our congregations can be uncomfortable, sometimes, for people who are anywhere right of left. It is important to recognize the complexity of issues, and the diversity of views that can be held by religiously liberal people. After all, there's a place among the Muppets for the ultra-American Sam the Eagle. He teaches the chickens aerobics in the mornings. He sits at the same table with all the others.

So sometimes even we fail at this radical acceptance business. Often, we succeed. I'm sure you have your own success stories. Let me tell you one of mine. A couple of years ago, a woman started attending the church in Franklin. I'll call her Sarah. She brought her husband after the first couple of services, and they became regulars. At a newcomer gathering, Sarah told us that they had first attended another Unitarian Universalist church in the area. When she told them she was Christian, they told her theirs was not the congregation for her. They shut the door in her face.

I said I was so sorry this had happened to her, and that she was welcome among us. Her husband, who identified as an atheist at the time, joined the congregation. Sarah retained her membership in a liberal Christian church, but often attended our services with her partner and came to many of our social events. The congregation and I came to know their little girl and also the three teenagers Sarah had from her first marriage.

About year after she first came to us, Sarah was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. She and her husband invited us to walk the painful road before them. It so happened that I had been planning a sermon series on the acts of mercy for that fall.

These acts include visiting the sick and comforting the sorrowing. In those sermons, I talked about how important it is to show up for people, even if it is difficult or painful to do so. I talked about how important it is just to be

there, how comforting it can be just to listen. The congregation accepted and acted on this advice as, together, we ministered to Sarah and her family.

Sarah had a rich religious past, and diverse family. During my pastoral visits, I met her fundamentalist Christian brothers. They never said as much, but it was clear they didn't think women should be ministers. And yet, when I kept showing up, supporting them, commending them for being so strong for their sister, making sure they each had a place where they could fall apart, they took me in. They even let me pray with them.

Also during my hospital visits, I met some of Sarah's friends from the years she spent as a Mormon. And then there were the members of her liberal Christian church. Members of our choir sang for her and her husband at Hospice House. We sang, "Spirit of Life, come onto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion." She and her husband both wept.

A few weeks later we sang it again, at her memorial service, over 300 voices raised in song. Her liberal Christian pastor and I led the service together, but we had it at our church because it was bigger. Even so, people were standing around the edges. Sarah had so many friends, and she was young - in her 40s.

In that service we saw the diversity of Sarah's religious life. Her fundamentalist brothers, huge bears of men, hugged me as they came in. During the sharing time they quoted scripture and talked about heaven and hell and accepting Jesus as your savior. I watched a Jewish woman in our congregation watching them as they said all this, and wondered what she was thinking.

Sarah's Mormon friends spoke as well. Others performed Native American ritual, and people from the congregation I serve read poetry. At the end, I talked about how we must all find ways to respond to two great religious questions - what is the meaning of our lives, and what is the meaning of our deaths? I talked about how Sarah had made goodness with her life, and how we could live up to her memory by making goodness in our own lives.

At the reception, the wife of one of her brothers thanked me. She said we had all made it so easy for them. I looked around at the members of the congregation as they offered coffee and comfort, being so kind and generous. They did such a wonderful job of practicing radical acceptance of the whole range of religious belief among Sarah's friends and family.

By the way, when I checked in with the Jewish woman, she said she recognized that Sarah's brothers were speaking their own beliefs at the service, and that did not affect hers. She said she could see their grief. Wow. What a grown up response.

Since Sarah's death, I've had occasion to think about that UU congregation that shut their doors so firmly on this wonderful, funny woman whose life and dying and death so enriched the life of the congregation. They drew so close to one another during that time. They saw what wonderful ministry they could perform. They saw how practicing acceptance of others could make the life of the whole congregation more beautiful.

Now I realize that this sermon has taken a decidedly serious turn. Let me return us, gently, to the story of Gonzo in the movie “Muppets from Space.” In doing so I mean no disrespect to Sarah or her family, and I don’t believe she would take any offense. In fact, she had a great and quirky sense of humor, and quoted Monty Python skits in her last days. I’ll bet she loved the Muppets.

Like many of us, like Sarah with all her varied friends, Gonzo in the movie needed gentle acceptance and support on his journey of self-discovery. We all look for guidance in our spiritual journeys. For Moses, it came through a burning bush. For Gonzo, it is through food. At the beginning of the movie, his Captain Alphabet cereal spells out a message, telling him to watch the sky.

As he sits on the roof doing so, a great and mysterious force strikes him, transporting him to a starry realm, where he meets Cosmic Knowledge Fish. The Cosmic Knowledge Fish reveal that Gonzo is a space alien, and that his “people” are trying to reach him. He’s not alone, after all. Gonzo’s attempts to contact his alien family land him in trouble with a secret government agency looking out for the threat of alien invasion. They imprison poor Gonzo.

The Muppet gang responds by rallying round and forming a rescue party. They find Gonzo and break him out, making their get away in the Electric Mayhem Band’s multi-colored bus.

Kermit, the wise leader, says, “See guys, when we pull together, we can do anything.” That’s when Gonzo informs them that they need to go to the beach at Point Doom because his sandwich told him to do so. See, I told you Gonzo receives spiritual guidance from food!

Everyone groans, but Kermit says to Gonzo, “It doesn’t matter what we believe. I mean, if you believe you need to go to meet your alien brothers, then I say – well, I say we’re going to the beach.” They do, of course.

And here’s where I think this movie can teach us some deep lessons about how to be together in religious community. The Muppets, out of love for one another, are willing to stretch themselves in order to accept and support Gonzo on his journey of discovery. They do this even though they don’t believe that he’s really receiving messages from “the beyond.”

Now we are not expected to support each other in beliefs quite as wacky as Gonzo’s. However, some of the beliefs of our brothers and sisters in faith may seem very “alien” to our worldview. Their religious or political beliefs, or the way they live their lives, may be completely different from our own.

Nevertheless, our third principle calls us to accept and support each other in our spiritual journeys. Nothing says this will be easy. However, I believe any religion worth its salt should take us beyond our comfort zones, and challenge us to grow. In my experience with Sarah I found that when we do this, it can be powerful and affirming for a whole congregation.

“Muppets from Space” provides an extreme example of a diverse community committing to support one of its members in his admittedly odd life

journey. In doing so, this ragtag group often demonstrates what it means to be a healthy community.

For instance, they know that they're all different from one other and yet, in some important ways, they are very similar. They have a good sense of their separate identities and of their identity as a group. They know what their individual gifts are and contribute them to the group's efforts.

Moreover, the Muppet gang has a good sense of loyalty to one another. For instance, when the gang gets together to go rescue Gonzo, Kermit says they're going even though it's dangerous "Because Gonzo is one of us and no matter what happens, and no matter what obstacles we face, we never forget one of our own."

Of course, poking fun at Muppet imperfection, someone immediately points out to Kermit that they just forgot Beaker and Dr. Bunson Honeydew back at the gas station. The heroic music that had been playing in the background winds down, but Kermit recovers quickly and says, "Well, from now on we never forget one of our own," and of course the heroic music gears up again.

To me, this shows what it means to be convenantal community. We look out for each other and promote one other's well-being, knowing we will do this imperfectly. Sometimes we mess up, we drop the ball, we leave some members behind. The best we can do when that happens is to make amends as well as we can, and to resolve to do better in the future.

In the movie, *Muppets from Space* the Muppet Gang waits with Gonzo on the beach until his alien family appears. Gonzo finally solves the problem of where he came from and who he is, but he still faces the problem of where he belongs. Does he belong with the alien family he just met, who look like him, or is his place with his ragtag Muppet "family?" You can guess how it ends. Gonzo stays with those who loved and supported him on his journey.

The people who come to us seeking answers to the question of their own religious identities may face this choice at some point. Do they find communities with others that look like them? Or do they join our congregations, with members whose beliefs and lives are as varied as the Muppets look?

My own religious journey has brought me close to my liberal Christian roots, something I would never have expected when I first entered a Unitarian Universalist church 12 years ago. On the way to where I am now, I found some healing with Goddess, read works by Buddhist teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, learned about Jewish religious traditions, and developed a yoga practice. I could not have taken all those stops along my journey in most churches. I love this about our faith – the many sources of inspiration open to us allow us to explore wide range of spiritual paths in the same religious community.

And I choose to remain here because I love the diversity our acceptance of one another can create. I love being in community with people who believe very differently from me. Maybe that's true of Gonzo, as well. To me, it's more

interesting to be among people that look different from you. It's more beautiful to those of us who have eyes that see that way.

Wherever those who seek amongst us end up, with us or in other religious communities, I salute them for their taking up the question of their spiritual identities. I hope we can provide safe haven for seekers to explore their beliefs. If they go back to their faiths of origin, I hope they find love and acceptance. If they go to faiths where everyone holds very similar beliefs, I hope they find a sense of belonging and connection.

If they choose to stay with us, I welcome them with an open and thankful heart. Like Kermit and the rest of the Muppets did for Gonzo, I accept them as they are, and will support them loyally in their spiritual journeys, however different those journeys are from my own, wherever those journeys take them.

You see, I believe that when we are accepted as we are, we grow in self-esteem. This growth can uncover gifts we never knew we had, so that we stand a little taller, and bloom a little brighter into this our lovely bouquet of colors, scents, and sizes. Or should I say our variegated crew of fur, beaks, feathers, flippers, fins, waggly ears, and bulgy eyes? We are all earthlings, after all.