

“Who Are You People?”

A few years ago when I visited a cousin of mine after many years of separation, I was intrigued by the size of a model airplane hanging in a prominent place in his home. I learned that for years he had been into flying this kind of plane. He and his sons had flown remote control model airplanes competitively on the national level. His enthusiasm was contagious.

Just recently I called him to ask how he was. Health issues had kept he and his wife from traveling to attend our son’s wedding a year ago. His first words were: “Well my knees aren’t so good but I still get to my hobby four or five times a week.”

He was far more interested in talking about his hobby than he was in telling me about his arthritic knees. I learned that he belonged to an R/C club, standing for “remote control” with 300 members, the Sea Hawks, named after a local bird also known as Ospreys.

Some of the members fly model planes constructed the old fashioned more labor intensive way, from a kit. Others fly ARFs “Almost Ready to Fly,” planes that are usually made in China or Vietnam, and take minimal time and energy to assemble.

My cousin enjoys the building. He’s been into it since he was 7 years old; now he’s in his 70’s. He had to take 12 to 13 years off for college and medical school. But as soon as he went into private practice and had a day off he returned to his old hobby. That was forty years ago and he’s still going strong.

One of the beauties of this hobby he told me is that he can build at night or in bad weather and fly in good weather. Which means all year round. My cousin John, or Johnny as I always called him is a born and bred Floridian. His newest plane has an 81" wingspan, weighs about 12 lbs., and the engine puts out about 3 horse power.

Flying is my cousin’s primary social activity. The field is where his friends are. Some members of the club don’t fly they just come to talk and watch. They pay their \$45 annual dues and according to John are the backbone of the club. It’s all about a sense of belonging. Their newest member signed up at age 82.

My cousin’s enthusiasm for his hobby made me more and more curious about the kind of people who belong to the Sea Hawks, the kind of people whose passion is flying R/C model airplanes.

Shari Caudron, a journalist, recently became curious enough to travel around the country interviewing people who get passionately into things whether it be ice fishing in the Rockies, pigeon racing in the Bronx, storm chasing in Kansas, or collecting Barbie

dolls at home. She says you may have found yourself wondering about that lady down the street with gnomes all over her yard.

Just last week a friend told me about a neighbor who does have a huge collection of Barbie dolls. She said she fell under suspicion when the woman next door reported that a similar kind of doll was missing from her front lawn.

Shari Coudron confessed to feeling strangely jealous of people who were passionately into something. She wondered if she could tap her own wellspring of enthusiasm by studying the enthusiasm of others. In her book, ***Who Are You People?*** She reports that you can't talk about passion without also talking about identity, belonging, God, genetics, acceptance and community. Which relates to the etymology of the word enthusiasm, a synonym for passion. It means literally to be in God, en-theos. In ancient Greece the enthusiast was thought to be divinely possessed by a God or some super human power.

After attending the gatherings or conferences of people who initially inspired the title of Caudron's book, after befriending them, entering into their lives, this journalist discovered more depth, real empathy, as well as just how far people will travel to belong.

Maybe this helps to understand why 850 RV recreation vehicle homeowners held an International Rally last month at the Champlain Valley Exposition in Essex Junction. They may have been looking for a sense of identity, belonging and community among other things.

I don't doubt that many years ago New Yorkers in Central Park asked themselves "Who Are You People?" when they saw me and my sisters in religious community walking through the park early in the morning. This was before our nuns' garb was updated. We were quite a sight in our coifs, the head piece originally designed for widows in 19th century France. The co-foundress of our order was a french widow. The coif so restricted our peripheral vision that if you wanted to converse with someone face to face, someone beside you, you had to walk backwards – something the sisters became quite adept at. It did have its dangers though.

I will never forget the morning that Sister Lawrence became so absorbed in what she was saying that she ran into a street lamp and almost got a concussion. We walked at a real clip because we had to circle the park and get back into our teaching attire in order to meet the students before they arrived for class.

I wonder what I might have said if ever someone actually did stop us on the corner of 84th Street and 5th Ave. where our school was located. What if they asked: "Who are

you people?" I suspect that my response would have touched on the very subjects that Shari Coudron discovered through her interviews: community; God; belonging and ultimately identity, coming to know myself.

What if someone had stopped you this morning as you approached our church and asked: "Who are those people in there, the kind of people that you worship with, the people that call themselves Unitarian Universalists?" One response might have been, "come and see," taking your cue from T.S. Eliot. There's that famous line from ***The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock***: "Oh do not ask, 'what is it?' Let us go and make our visit."

Not infrequently the charge is made: "people who go to church or synagogue are hypocrits. They profess one thing on the Sabbath and then misbehave the rest of the week." To which I can only respond, we're all in process, works in progress. Some of us find community, companions on the journey, helpful, even a source of enlightenment.

When we judge any group of people from the outside our vision is skewed. When we go and make our visit, we gain new perspective, our vision widens, our knowledge deepens, our heart is stretched. I like the metaphor that Buddhists offer, that we are all looking at the sky through our own straw. That's how limited our vision is if we are not open to others' wisdom and perspectives.

Our secular culture runs the risk of being either ignorant or dismissive of the wisdom contained in religious traditions. It was good to see that Harvard is considering a religion requirement in their curriculum. The university was originally founded 370 years ago for the purpose of training Puritan ministers. Requiring all undergrads to study religion is in keeping with their tradition. They are considering a course in reason and faith that would include topics like religion and democracy, Charles Darwin or a current course that sounds interesting, "Why Americans Love God and Europeans Don't."

Who wouldn't benefit from a course in reason and faith? Some of you may have seen Bill Moyers latest PBS series on Faith and Reason. Moyers interviewed seven well known authors like Salman Rushdie, Mary Gordon, Richard Rodriguez and Pema Chodron, speaking about faith, reason and religious conflicts around the world. What I found particularly valuable about the series is that it included believers and non-believers. They were writers with enough imagination and artistic breadth that they did not label or stigmatize the other. They were not threatened by difference.

I resonated with the author Mary Gordon who said that she wouldn't want to be in a world in which everyone believed the same thing. As a person of faith she thought that there were many more reasons for not believing, yet she chose to believe. She went on to say that if it weren't for agnostics and atheists there would never have been the

enlightenment and that faith without doubt is either nostalgia or addiction.

Pema Chodron reminds us that we're all capable of being fundamentalist, of what Buddhism calls having a fixed mind. Fundamentalism is at odds with freedom of the mind. The attraction that it holds is the certainty and security it offers amidst the confusion and ambiguity of our times.

It's not uncommon to want to abdicate responsibility for your spiritual life to some religious authority. It's a little like preferring an "almost ready to fly" model plane rather than spending the time and energy to construct your own or choosing a ready made creed over building your own Theology.

But the questioner that we left on the walkway outside the church isn't looking for any lengthy explanations. Like Shari Coudron, he may just be curious, feeling adrift and spiritually lethargic. He may be looking for a way to tap into his own passion and like Shari he might find it helpful to study the enthusiasms of others within a faith community like ours – a community of believers and sceptics, a community of religious hybrids: Buddhist Unitarian Universalists; Jewish UUs; Catholic UUs; Pagan UUs as well as a few purebred Unitarians amidst the mixed breeds.

Ultimately we may all have found our way through these doors for the reason that Gandhi articulated, the point that he loved to make which is that "there is a kind of 'wildcard' within each of us, a well of courage and creativity we don't even know is in there until we learn how to tap into it through spiritual disciplines."

Community offers us any number of spiritual disciplines. Those who are schooled in the life of the spirit tell us that the ultimate discipline is "paying attention." In community we are called to pay attention to the needs of our brothers and sisters, to their inherent worth and dignity, to uncover the bonds that bind each to all.

In community we do not transcend the suffering of all creatures. We "explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain." As Pema Chodron writes: "In the process of discovering our true nature, the journey goes down, not up . . . It's as if the mountain pointed toward the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky," as if it pointed toward the thick of things.

In community we are better equipped to cope with the ambiguity and chaos. We have companions on the journey, companions who challenge and inspire us to tap into our own well of courage and creativity. In community we are more able to get to the bottom, to discover the healing water of compassion, the relational liveliness that energizes the universe.