

BUF as Teacher

-Roz Reynolds

In my youth, I did not join groups. No churches, no clubs, not even girl scouts. Doing group projects in school drove me nuts, and even team sports made me uncomfortable.

Part of it was my introverted personality. Part of it was a fear of not being accepted in the group – not joining in the first place felt preferable to being rejected later on. But part of it was a feeling that joining a group meant giving up part of my own identity, and compromising my integrity. I was genuinely mystified when people talked about searching for something “greater than ourselves.” I truly didn't understand. What is there, I wondered, that is greater than the individual conscience?

Perhaps not coincidentally, I also spent my youth moving around. A lot. By age thirty, I had lived in twelve different towns, in three different countries. I didn't join any groups. I made friends here and there, some of whom are still around. But mostly I moved from one place to another like an expert diver moving from air to water – leaving barely a ripple to show I had been there. I drifted along, like a tumbling tumbleweed, free and uncompromised, neither owing nor expecting much from anybody.

By age thirty or so, though, the life of a tumbleweed was no longer cutting it. It dawned on me that my life had breadth, but no depth. I had covered a lot of ground, and sunk no roots. For the first time, I wanted depth.

I stopped moving around and made a commitment to one town. But geographical depth is only part of it. I wanted a depth of human connection. I wanted meaningful human relationships, not just with a spouse, immediate family, and a handful of friends. I wanted to learn how to be a good person, how to be with people over the long haul, through good times and bad. I wanted to be part of something, something larger than myself, whatever that meant. I wanted to live so that when I died, I would leave more than just a faint ripple behind me. I wanted these things, and I had no idea how to get them.

Then one day my husband Jed and I showed up on the steps of BUF for the first time. The truth was, we barely knew what we were doing there. And we were nervous. Just walking in to the building and interacting with strangers, however friendly, was challenging for me. Holding hands as we circled round for freedom was a big stretch, and sometimes I even found excuses to duck out just before. I would come away from it all drained – yet, oddly, in other ways, fulfilled.

We entered these waters slowly, year by year. Things began to shift for me when I started teaching RE. I got to know and appreciate the other teachers. I began to feel like, well, part of a team. Not a team that competed against others, or insisted on conformity, but a team that pulled together towards a common goal. Others relied on me, and I relied on them. It felt strange. It felt good.

The next big step for me was joining the Ministerial Search Committee. I almost didn't join, because I worried about the time it was going to take out of my own personal life. And it did take a huge amount of time. And it was one of the best things I've ever done. It was intense, at times brutal, but always deeply human: a year-long exercise in trusting others. I experienced both the highs and the lows of living together in religious community, and found that the highs more than made up for the lows. I came away connected to this place as never before – a connection that I cannot imagine ever severing.

I am still an introvert. I still feel a flash of panic every time I walk in the doors on Sunday morning, and I still feel mildly embarrassed about holding hands with strangers. And that's okay. I have strengths and I have weaknesses, and I bring them all with me. That's just how it is in this messy, glorious human predicament. It is worth it to dig down through the discomfort and set those roots.

If I had to sum of what BUF is for me, it is my greatest teacher. It has taught me that service is not only an expression of love, but it is at the root of all happiness. Working together with other

humans to build a better world, in however humble a fashion, is surely our highest calling. I wish that I had understood this at a much, much younger age. So I bring my kids to BUF, hoping they will grow up with the lessons that I only stumbled on, luckily, later in life. And I support this community in whatever ways I reasonably can. Because this is what I had been missing all my life without realizing it – the community that, far from compromising my individuality, anchors me, day after day, to my better self.