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Dog School

After my last dog died, I decided that I would not be able to get another dog. I work all the time, I'm never home, it wouldn't be right to bring a dog into a situation where there would not be enough attention or companionship. It had been years since I'd had a cat; I figured that would be the right choice. I made numerous trips to the SPCA just to look, and on the way to one of those trips I decided that would be the afternoon I would leave with a cat. In fact, as it turned out, I left with two cats—the young woman who was in charge of the adoption process told me that it was two-for-one month for cat adoptions. If I'm being honest, I'll admit that I suspected that the previous month might also have been two-for-one month, and even the following month might be two-for-one month, but I didn't press the point. What really sealed the deal was that the young woman suggested that I might be eligible for the senior citizen discount. Two for one month *and* a senior citizen discount—you can see why I left the SPCA that evening with two cats. They have been wonderful, entertaining, rewarding companions who certainly make my life richer, and I have been glad, ever since that rainy night I brought them home, that they live with me now and not at the SPCA. Even so, though, I never got over wanting a dog. I talked to neighbors who were walking dogs just so I could interact with the dogs; I went to the farmers market so I could play with dogs there. I looked online at rescue organizations and petfinder.com, picking dogs that I'd like to have if only I were going to get another dog,

which, of course, I wasn't. And then, because the Universe knows what it's doing, one thing led to another which led to me driving down to North Carolina last November to get a dog. She's an adult French bulldog, a breed I love and never expected to be able to have, but my expectations and my vision were limited, and after all, the Universe knows what it's doing. My dog's name is Emma, and she's a superb dog in every respect. She's calm, affectionate, quiet, and cooperative, so when a friend at work told me about the dog training classes she was going to, I was convinced that Emma should go to dog school. She could have fun, learn basic commands, learn to interact with other people and other dogs, maybe even learn to run that dog agility course. I had high hopes for dog school.

Over the past weeks, going to dog school two evenings a week, I've been surprised, made many adjustments, and thought a lot about church. I'll be honest...I didn't like dog school very much. When I'm in a situation that disrupts, disturbs, or challenges me, as dog school did, I've come to understand that I need to ask myself: what am I supposed to be learning here? Why am I bothered by this? How is the Universe calling me to grow, or go deeper, or change? As I've worked at processing my discomfort with dog school, I've come to view my experience through the lens of church-- what I've heard, read, and participated in over the years of working with and for the church.

I arrived at the first dog school meeting, which was orientation for humans only, and I felt uneasy before I ever got out of the car. The tiny parking lot for the school was filled, and I didn't know where else to park. Was the street OK? The parking lot of the adjacent building? Other people

knew where to leave their cars, but not me. I felt like an outsider immediately. Once I got into the building, it wasn't clear where I should go, and when I did find my way to the tiny office, nobody acknowledged me. It was crowded; several people and their dogs were visiting with each other while the person who evidently was supposed to take my money was on the phone. She gestured to me, indicated how much I owed, and did my paperwork while she continued her phone conversation. We know how to do this so much better in church, I thought to myself. We know how important it is to welcome strangers; we know theologically what that means. We know how to help people see where to go when they get to us, or at least we know we're *supposed* to do that. Even as I realized that, though, I speculated. As a visiting minister, I have been to churches where greeters were right inside the door, so eager to welcome that they almost pounced on people they didn't recognize, asking for information and offering name tags. When I visit anywhere for the first time, I like to enter the space and the atmosphere in my own good time, observing, absorbing, processing. I don't want to answer questions; I'm not ready to reveal too much. At dog school and at church, I like to be acknowledged, even welcomed, as a new person, but I don't want *too* much attention. Of course, while I'm naming to myself the ways I want to be welcomed, I'm realizing that dog school, like church, is not just for me. Both places are filled with other people whose needs and preferences are different from mine.

Those differences in need and preference became clear to me in the first class with our dogs. I met others who were more intent about the training than I was. They wanted to get through all three of the basic levels with their dogs so they could go on the therapy program or the agility

program. Some of the instructors seemed motivated to that same end: do better, do more, go forward, practice harder. Your dog has to do this to get to level two. Your dog will have to be able to do that in level three. The point of mastering the skill seemed to be not so much for the value of the skill itself, but to move ahead. This reminds me of church, I thought. How many meetings have I sat in and listened to animated conversation about how we're going to get more people to visit, get more people to join, get more people to volunteer, get more people to give more money. It would have been so much richer, I thought, to talk about ways to minister to the people who were already there, ways to use the money we already had most effectively. In church and in dog school, I yearned for the peace that comes with embracing the reality of enough. Right now, in this moment which is actually all we've got, we have enough. We are doing enough. We have enough people, we have enough money, we are good enough, we are smart enough. *We are* enough. My dog is good enough at this skill. I'm good enough at teaching it. We'll probably be better some day, but right now we are good enough. True of dog school, true of church.

Another way that dog school brought church to mind was in a characteristic I noticed about myself. When we practiced at home, I spent more time practicing the behaviors I knew my dog could do well. I wanted her to feel the satisfaction of earning a reward, and I wanted to enjoy the feeling myself when I saw her mastering a skill. I didn't want to watch her being unsure of what to do, and I didn't want her to be unsuccessful. At first that troubled me a little, and thinking about church helped me understand. Naturally I want her to do something really well, and I want to enjoy watching her do it. I feel the same way about church. I yearn sometimes for

the UU church to stand firm in that way of thinking: we do this particular thing well; let's make this what we do. Is it social justice, is it worship, is it community involvement and support...let's decide who and what we are, and then let's be that. Let us be faithful and consistent and wholehearted in the identity that we choose, and let's value ourselves for who we are. We could give up the focus of the consumer culture, wondering how to be more things to more people, wondering how to make more people happy so they'll keep being our customers. Instead, we could say, in essence, come in. You're welcome here. This is what you'll find when you get here, and we hope you'll come back often. If this is not what you want, we're still glad to have you, but don't expect that we'll be different. We know who we are, and this is it.

Of course, there's a shadow side to this confidence in identity and purpose, and it was made clear to me one night as I was driving to dog school. At the stop light just before the school, I thought, "I hope we don't do anything new tonight. I don't want to work on anything we haven't already learned." Then I thought, "Whoa! Nothing new?" Would I be happy to go night after night and do the same thing over and over again? In fact, I probably would. It is certainly easier that way. I don't like having other people see that my dog is not as skilled as their dogs. I don't like the instructors telling me I need to be teaching the skill a different way. I like success—success for myself, success for my dog. I like certainty. If we know, as the church, who we are and who we want to be in the world, how are we going to react, how are we going to manage, when we find ourselves called to be something different? How will we know when to adapt and shift and change, and when to stand firm in our identity?

Sometimes that will be clear; other times, we will surely have to engage in intense and potentially hurtful examination of ourselves and our principles, and we may have to give up that sense of certainty that we're doing right. We will have to take risks, and we will have to live in the reality that success is not a given. For many of us, that risk is costly.

There's good news here, though: folklore and religious lore have a fundamental story in common, although the language and images are different. It is precisely in the struggle, the turbulence, the disruption that we see the hero of the story finding what she or he needs...finding what we need and offering it to us through the story. It is precisely there that we see God, by whatever name you call it, at work. God's gonna trouble the waters, says the old song, and it's in those troubled waters that we learn who we really are, discover what we really need to know.

Church and dog school—who knew that one could have so much in common with the other? And yet, we who are people of faith understand that everything we do has something to teach us about church, and church has something to teach us about everything we do. We who are people of faith know that everything church teaches us about life, everything life teaches us about church, contributes to the overarching, most powerful spiritual lesson of all: the lesson of transformation. We are not going to be who we are now forever. In any given moment, we are enough, and yet, we are always going to be changing. Transforming ourselves, transforming the world.

And so may it be.

