

**Salem Village 1692**  
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How does a major congregational fight begin? Not just a negative comment, some process poorly done, a miscommunication, an email mistakenly sent to too many, no, a full scale battle complete with name-calling, letter writing, secret caucusing, and public exposure? I'm still not sure, because the tipping point is often unseen. But in 1996, as an intern at First Parish (UU) in Concord, I watched the Religious Education Committee and Director, Board of Trustees, Minister, and others scramble to first ignore, then defuse an angry parent and family.

The issue was sexually explicit slides included in AYS. The response and its aftermath took a year and ramped up to include scurrilous letters to public officials in Concord, letters to congregants full of false accusations (sent by the family), and concluded with a Bryant Gumble segment on national television. First Parish in Concord is a smooth operation, and this was a fiasco.

Yes, the congregation made some mistakes but the disaffected family went for the juggler vein. As the intern I ducked and watched accusations fly and a drama unfold. My guess was that deeper, unexpressed pastoral concerns were the root of the problem, but once the bullets fly, there is no space or safety for pastoral care or questioning.

Everyone who comes to a congregation yearns for safety, inspiration, and because we are a religious institution, assumes that everyone who comes brings their best. As an idealistic seminarian I assumed the same thing. What I learned is a sobering congregational truth (true for all denominations). Members and staff have a lot of power and are largely unsupervised. Folks are quick to take offense and slow to cool off. Conflict becomes dangerous when it is personalized. Everyone, including well-intentioned people make mistakes. And the human capacity to project wrongdoing, or evil, as our Puritan fore-bearers would say (for yes, the Unitarians are direct descendants from the Puritans), is always present, a potential in the wings.

So it was in Salem Village in 1692. By the time the year was out 142 people were accused of being witches. Nineteen people, both men and women were hung, and one man, Giles Cory of Salem Village was pressed to death by stones progressively applied to his body to induce a confession. A few others died while in jail.

In 1692, Salem Village, today known as Danvers, was a small, rural village adjacent to Salem Town (today known as Salem). Salem Town was the thriving mercantile port. Salem Village was created in 1626 by the Town to create food and tax revenue (a bit of the poor cousin). Although existing as a village, Salem Village had little power. Its taxes went to the Town and its residents had no church of their own. What they did have, was a big chip on their shoulder and growing resentments about modernization, capitalism, the increased emphasis on individualism from the residents in town, as well as growing anxiety because their acreage was shrinking with the birth of

each new generation (land was continually divided between sons), as were their pocketbooks, and prospective eligible bachelors for their daughters. When the Village brought these concerns to the Town selectmen and elders, they were regularly ignored.

The Puritans settled the Mass Bay colony as a community that subverted individual matters to the collective good. As Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum explain in *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* “From infancy, a Puritan was raised to distrust his private will, to perceive it as the “old Adam” which, above all, constituted original sin. It was this innate self-interest – more than sexual lust . . . that had to be tamed.”<sup>1</sup> Puritans were notably concerned about good, moral, character and private matters were often held out for painful public scrutiny.

Every Puritan community then needed a church. As Boyer and Nissenbaum explain

For seventeenth century Puritans, the church was neither a building nor a social institution, but a select fellowship of persons “gathered” out of the total population, those “visible saints” who had felt the infusion of divine grace . . . Only a minority of people within a given community, even a Puritan community, were entitled to join the church. Those who were not so qualified – collectively termed the “congregation” – were obliged to support the ministry with their material goods and to attend meetings.<sup>2</sup>

The visible saints were “predestined” for heaven. Yet even those not included strove to enter these hallowed ranks, and whether they ever got there or not they were required to give the church money and to attend meetings. Along the way everyone watched his or her neighbor in order to determine appropriate character.

It was an affront to many Village residents that they did not have a church, and had to drive to the Town in order to go to church. In 1672 (twenty years before the Salem Witch Trials) the Village was allowed to hire a minister, but they were not allowed to form a church and they still paid taxes to the Town. In the next fifteen years they went through a succession of three ministers, James Bayley, George Burroughs, and Deodat Lawson, (even today not a good sign of congregational health, and it certainly wasn't then). Each of the ministers struggled to be paid by disaffected members and all of them struggled to establish the validity of their call.

By 1689 Salem Village had a strong reputation as place full of “uncomfortable divisions and contentions” with “brother against brother and neighbors against neighbors, all quarreling and smiting one another.”<sup>3</sup> Residents sent regular petitions (which are still on record) to the Town and the General Court in Boston arguing about a variety of matters. If the congregation at Salem Village existed today the UUA would refuse to settle a minister there until they went through significant conflict resolution work. Salem was ripe for a fight.

By 1689 Salem Village has split into two groups, less well-to-do residents who identified with the rural Village and wanted their own church, and wealthier residents who felt more allied with the Town. 1689 was also the year that Salem Village formally

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (1974), 104.

<sup>2</sup> 42.

<sup>3</sup> 45.

assembled a church and played to its full weakness and called a minister as contentious as the residents, the Reverend Samuel Parris.

Reading church records, Parris was a mistake from the beginning, but I can see why the Village was attracted to him. He was moralistic, bitter, contentious, and lacked self-awareness, much like the residents. He was a frustrated second son who did not succeed in commerce, and then chose the ministry. When initially approached by the Village to serve as its minister he spent months considering the offer, then several more months carefully negotiating his contract. His final eight point negotiation contained requests such as “Second, though corn or like provisions should arise to a higher price than you have set, yet, for my own family use, I shall have what is needful at the price now stated, and so if it fall lower.”<sup>4</sup> Parris continued haggling over firewood, and somehow after all this, he never insisted on signing a contract before his call began, and like his predecessors, eventually went unpaid for long periods of time. Parris also found a way to receive the deed to the parish house, a situation that a Village meeting had specifically forbidden several years earlier.

Today when we fight in church we wonder, “How could we do that here where we are trying to be good people? How could we say such unkind things? How could we use a congregational meetings to fight so ineffectively and destructively about such an irrelevant issue?” The answer is simple. We have the congregation that we the people create. We have the same congregational polity of our Puritan ancestors. We elect our Board members, call our minister, attend congregational meetings, vote on issues, and support this place with our pledges. The exact same process was in place in Salem Village. Then, as now, everyone has choices about behavior.

When we engage in destructive conversations and fights, when we refuse direct communication, build grudges, refuse to forgive and understand, undermine one another and derail congregational business, we go down a bad path. The members of Salem Village were even more invested than we are today in positive moral character, and yet, maybe because of investment and the pain of falling short, their conflict became deadly. If moral voices stood up in 1690 and said, “These conversations are not in the spirit of Jesus Christ” they went unheard. Parris himself, with a chip on his shoulder, was personally accusatory, especially in sermons.

Only a quarter of the Villagers joined the church that Parris started in 1689 (in and of itself a bad sign, the UUA suggests ministers do not accept a congregational call if they do not receive 90% of the congregational vote). One year into his ministry pledges fell 20% short, a sure sign of dissatisfaction. The second year, in 1691, pledges were off by 29% and villagers were not bringing Parris the firewood he had haggled so bitterly to receive.<sup>5</sup> By the cold winter of 1691 the Parris household must have been a difficult place to reside.

In 1691 there was another development, the introduction of fortune telling into New England, especially among girls who often inquired about future spouses and social position. By February 1692 a group of girls in Salem Village, who had experimented with fortune telling, began to act oddly. Their parents attempted to ignore their strange fits and little speeches. The first two girls affected were nine-year-old Betty Parris, daughter of the minister Samuel Parris who was receiving neither his full salary nor

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<sup>4</sup> 157.

<sup>5</sup> 66.

firewood that cold winter, and her eleven-year-old cousin Abigail Williams. The Salem Witch tragedy began in the minister's household.

Within a few weeks the "fits" had spread to other girls, including three girls from the Putnam family (and one Putnam mother). The Putnams were close friends with Parris, and a wealthy family struggling to offer second and third generation sons' plots of land. In addition, a wealthy Putnam had recently died and given most of his money to his second wife, Mary Veren Putnam and their one son, Joseph, instead of the many children from his first marriage. By the end of the Witch Trials eight Putnam family members had accused forty-six people of witchcraft (1/3 of the people accused), many of whom, they did not even know.

The local doctor suggested the "Evil Hand" or witchcraft affected the girls. With this the girls began to act more dramatic, to insist they were being haunted or taunted or injured by spectral visions of individuals who were witches. In February 1692 the first three women were accused of witchcraft, Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba. There had been outbreaks of witchcraft accusations in Massachusetts Bay in the past, but they usually subsided with one or two accusations. But not this time. Next Martha Cory was sent to jail, and in March, four-year-old Dorcas Good, the daughter of Sarah was sent to jail where she was kept in irons (Dorcas survived but was never the same, *describe prison*). Right then and there I wonder, where was the congregation to say "This is not the vision of Jesus Christ who said bring the children unto me. This must stop. This has gone to far.") Where were the people? I think some of the people were afraid and others liked the fight but it was their congregational mission to stop the chaos, because congregational polity gave them so much privilege and power (as it still does for us today).

Of the first women accused, Sarah Osborne, a Village insider, had attempted to deprive her first two sons of their inheritance after her first husband died and she remarried. Sarah Good was born with money but through a series of misfortunes became a beggar, and a rather sullen one at that. Her daughter was also a beggar. Tituba was a slave in Parris' household. Strangely enough, Tituba confessed to everything and was spared. Martha Cory was an older woman who had remarried after giving birth to an illegitimate bi-racial son (I'm sure that shook up the Puritan status quo). She was later hanged and her husband was the one crushed to death by stones. She was also a covenanting member of the Salem Village church, which was horribly distressing to residents. The elect were supposed to be pure.

By March the situation was monstrous and it just kept going, with Salem Villagers accusing people up the social ladder, many who were not known to them. There are instances of people being brought to court under accusations of witchcraft, and they were not even recognized by their accusers. Salem Village even went so far as to bring back a former minister, George Burroughs, from Maine who had been gone for over a decade. He was tried and hung for witchcraft even though he gave a perfect recitation of the Lord's Prayer, which a witch or wizard was not supposed to be able to accomplish (I always remember this scenario when considering contentious minister/congregant relationships - I could always be brought back, tried, and hung). By the time everything ended in 1693 a judge and even the governor's wife had been accused of witchcraft. Parris and his parishioners had colluded to create hell here on earth.

Boyer and Nissenbaum note that the initial victims were women on the margins of society, or women who had defied the social order (denied children property rights, given birth to an illegitimate child, lived as a beggar). They also note the number of older women who were accused. Their theory is that given the high number of Putnam family accusations, and the Putnam's fury at being denied money by an older second wife, that the Putnams transferred their anger to older women such as Martha Cory and Rebecca Nurse. When this sermon was advertised I received an e-mail from a former member, John Johnson, who contacted me to let me know that one of his ancestors, Susannah Martin was accused and hung. He told me that she was a widow with a tart tongue who regularly denounced the entire proceedings. Another member here, Lyn Martin, has an ancestor who was a judge during the trials. In fact he was the only judge to later publicly apologize for his involvement.

The trials began to wind down in the summer of 1692. In October 1692, after other local ministers assembled and suggested the entire process lacked evidence and did not rely on enough reason, executions ended. By the winter of 1693 all others accused were finally released. Parris refused to leave the parish until 1696 under pressure from his colleagues. Some ministers don't know when to leave, even when they have led a congregation into deep trouble. That happens even today.

Boyer and Nissenbaum note that a similar incident of youths having anxious fits developed in Northampton, Massachusetts forty years later, in 1734. With little effort the minister, Jonathan Edwards, channeled this energy into a "Little Awakening" of positive religious enthusiasm. Boyer and Nissenbaum note that the Salem Village parents were still responsible for the girls making the accusations, and the first girls were so young and impressionable, nine and eleven. What if the parents, Parris, Putnam, and others, instead of buying into witchcraft, or perhaps even encouraging witchcraft accusations, had interpreted their children's episodes as positive manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Surely this was possible for the minister to do? The attraction for destructive, personalized, and aggressive conflict shared by Parris and Salem Village led to tragedy. They had other choices and they did not take them and innocent people died. The Salem Town Selectmen and Elders have responsibility too. Salem Village regularly asked for help and fair treatment, and they were ignored, so problems festered. Continuous conflict needs addressed, at least named, before it explodes. I know we are afraid of conflict, but it is important to go to that place and say, "We have a problem."

It's amazing that Salem Village ever recovered, but they did, with the help of a very young minister, Joseph Green, who had a lot of good sense about ministry, justice, and the meaning of life. In addition the residents made a decision to live more harmoniously. They must have, or else they could have chased out Green just like they had chased out the other ministers.

Green was adept at avoiding destructive conflict. He was personable, enjoyed life and his family. He depersonalized conflict, kept his personal life personal and avoided extreme ideology. He was a genius community builder. After a few years he placed the Putnam and Nurse family back on the same bench at church. Formal rivals (with a state murder between them) now sitting side by side at church. Later he found a way to gently tweak the congregations conscious just enough so that they posthumously reinstated Martha Cory, who had been excommunicated prior to her execution. Green followed a model of slow, gentle, honest reconciliation.

The scariest thing about Salem Village in 1692 is that there were no witches or wizards, only human beings like you and me who made bad choices. It is the banality of evil. The residents of Salem Village in 1692 were average people, living with economic and social stress, like us, who chose to live vindictive, fearful, hateful lives. Every day we get to choose. Learn well from our Puritan fore bearers. Choose love and choose life.