

## Liberal Religion – Unplugged

September 24, 2006

We Unitarian Universalists are a liberal religion unplugged—completely without power. Far from stripping our prophetic voice down to its acoustic essence, which would allow us to hear the core of our message uncluttered by the theological smorgasbord that we embrace in our attempt to be all things to all people—we have simply pulled the plug and nobody hears us outside of these walls. We don't understand our own faith any more. We certainly can't expect others to understand us. We wait for those who are seeking to find us, but they have to look hard and be discerning sleuths to learn anything about us. Once a new person is here (and I am speaking more about our movement as a whole than about this congregation, because I truly believe we are above average)—once they are here, it's a wonder why any other than the most stubborn come back a second time. We have become in the past fifty to seventy years, a wandering, eclectic, self-important, and lost faith. The Uncommon Denomination will become even more uncommon unless we find our way. We need to find the essence of our religious voice—the acoustic clarity that underlies and provides richness and quality to our message.

You may wonder what happened that has me preaching so critically of Unitarian Universalism. I am usually an unashamed *evangelist* for our faith. However, twentieth-century Unitarian minister James Luther Adams said “an unexamined faith is not worth having.” I have maintained a positive outlook over the years, and am still positive that Unitarian Universalism is a critically important movement. But I cannot ignore the increasing number of well-respected ministers, theologians, and others wiser than me who are sounding the warning bells of religion crisis. A thorough examination of our faith is in order.

Church consultant Michael Durall has called Unitarian Universalism the “almost church,” and has given us a radical prescription for what we should expect to be in the future if we are to survive the next quarter century. My own southwest district colleague, the Rev. Davidson Loehr of Austin, Texas, has already declared us dead, saying that we lost our way decades ago in focusing more on social issues than the spiritual. He says that our movement is little more today than a thin veneer for a liberal political agendas. I don't quite agree, but do believe we need to better understand why we are a faith focused on the social gospel. The answer, as I will explain later, is in our Christian roots. In 2005, the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association released their most recent report, “Engaging Our Theological Diversity.” Their recommendations focused on a greater understanding of theology, with which I agree. But I'm not sure their prescription for casting an even broader theological net (my interpretation of their recommendations) is the right approach. More recently, professor Michael Hogue of Meadville Lombard Theological School, has called for a new liberal religious reformation. He notes that crisis is the natural order of liberal religion, but believes that modern liberal religion in general, and UUism in particular, like the Roman Catholic Church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century have lost their way. He also calls for a new level of theological literacy that focuses on understanding our history and foundations rather than our pluralism.

I will remain a strong voice for Unitarian Universalism, but even my views are changing about our current relevancy. How can we again be the influential faith at the forefront of progressive

social change that both Unitarians and Universalists were 200 years ago? Our religious ancestors had the pulse of this nation and were intimately involved in its founding. In the past century, we have rejected the foundations of our faith, opting for the easier path of an eclectic and disjointed pluralism.

Several years ago, I was helping with a church booth on the University of Illinois campus during orientation day. We were passing out literature and talking about the church along with hundreds of other campus groups and community organizations. One passerby asked me the simple question, "Do you believe in the trinity?" I easily said no, and waited for the next question, which didn't come. Apparently, she had learned what she needed to. I don't know what answer she wanted and saw no reason to qualify my response. She took our literature and went on to the next booth. After she moved on, another member of the congregation said to me, "You know, whether a UU believes in the trinity or not is a personal choice and we shouldn't tell someone that we don't believe in it." The minister of the church, who was also there that day, defended my answer. She said, "the fact is that Unitarianism emerged from anti-trinitarianism and you're not going to hear the trinity preached from our pulpit. It would be misleading to suggest to them that we believe in the trinity."

Last year, a new member of this congregation said to me, "I don't believe in Universal salvation. How does this affect my membership in this church?" I told him the status of his membership was completely up to him, but that he was likely in an extreme minority, which in and of itself was not a negative. We are all religious minorities here. But I said that Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion. Universal salvation is the liberal doctrine of atonement on which our heritage was founded. It is that upon which our modern principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person is founded. I won't be preaching the trinity, predestination, or an elected atonement either.

These stories reveal the identity crisis that Unitarian Universalism faces today. We don't know who we are. We are so worried about including everyone and offending no one, that we appeal mostly to those who would prefer either to be theologically eclectic or theologically illiterate. Most Unitarian Universalists either want to hyphenate their UUism or are content with not knowing very much about it, or both. If this weren't the case, then we wouldn't be in crisis. We would know our identity, and would still be a mainstream faith with the recognition, influence, and respect enjoyed by so many other faith communities. I am growing weary of being the Uncommon Denomination. I am tired of hearing that we are a cult or that we worship Satan, to which I respond we can't worship something we don't believe in. I am tired of being called "nothing," or hearing that people believe our ministers can get their ordinations online for a fee. If you know anyone who believes that, tell them that I'd be happy to explain the entire 4-7 year process, the five figure investment that it will require, not to mention the phenomenon of becoming a completely transformed person whose subsequent life and actions belong as much to those they serve as to themselves.

So, by now, you must be thoroughly confused, completely discombobulated, or down right frustrated by my heresy. If you aren't, then you haven't been listening very well. I just accused us all of being self-absorbed, irrelevant, unfocused, ignorant, and *too* liberal. Are you discombobulated now? Good.

A member of the congregation recently asked me to preach a sermon in response to the following questions: “What is universally common among UUs? What draws people of various faiths together into a Unitarian Universalist Church? What is the common denominator of our faith?” Well, that’s three questions from which I could deliver six or seven sermons, but I understand what they meant and have a couple of answers this morning.

First, as I said last week, Unitarian Universalists are, if nothing else, intellectually engaged. We are a thinking and questioning church. This was true for the first Unitarians and Universalists, who risked and sometimes lost their lives and livelihoods because of their heresy. Those who need clear answers will not find them here. What you will find here are the tools with which to help each other through life’s struggles, and with which to be a positive influence in the community and world. Sometimes, we are too much in our heads and use these tools selfishly for our own mental gymnastics. We are at risk of falling into our own absolutist thought (the dangers of which I also discussed last week). Because our faith is built on reason, discernment, and even the scientific method, we tend to assume that it is THE right way to think. The passion of activism is not unlike the passion of fundamentalism. That is why I believe that advocacy is a primary focus in carrying out the social gospel. Activism is sometimes necessary to prevent an immediate injustice, but it has a short-term focus that will not stand on its own merits without an underlying long-term commitment to transformation.

Second, as I have already mentioned we are a liberal religion. What does it mean to be religiously liberal? In this part of the country, it means you are in the extreme minority. More to the point, being religiously liberal means that we are focused on progress. Our religious ancestors went further than Martin Luther and John Calvin in reforming the medieval Christian church. We allow ourselves the freedom to make decisions and to take action, rather than instituting prohibitions that restrict us. But with this freedom comes great responsibility. We are on a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning.

Some people confuse liberalism with pluralism. We *have* become a theologically diverse faith, but UUism is religiously plural only inasmuch as we accept all religions as potential sources of wisdom (recognizing that all have their troubles too). We are not religiously plural in the sense that we accept all points across the continuum of orthodoxy or even that we identify with all other religions. We don’t. Nor need we embrace or endorse religious practice that is corrupt or irresponsible, founded in the supernatural or fantastic rather than reason or discernment, or which is intolerant of all others. These are all factors that distinguished Unitarians and Universalists from other religious expression.

If you asked a Unitarian or Universalist 100 years ago to explain their religion, they might say, “We are a Christian faith focused on Jesus’ teachings and witness for the weak, oppressed, and downtrodden. We believe that all souls are worthy of salvation from suffering.” If you ask a Unitarian Universalist 100 years from now to explain their religion, even though they might have a different name by then, they will probably say, “We are a Christian faith focused on Jesus’ teachings and witness for the weak, oppressed, and downtrodden. We believe that all souls are worthy of salvation from suffering.”

Based on the assumption that our late 20th and early 21st century theological diversity has left us without direction and purpose more than it has broadened our vision or scope, I predict that by about 50-70 years from now (when our very young children are middle aged and beyond—an entire generation), Unitarian Universalism will again be a primarily, but not exclusively, Christian faith, or it will be all but nonexistent with only a few aging, unbending, *museum* congregations left.

Now with that particular bit of heresy on the table—I am often fascinated when I hear later what you think I said. In this case, that would be, “Matt said we all had to become Christians.” Let me clarify now that this is not what I just said, nor what I meant. Nevertheless, I do believe, just as they were 70-100 years ago, toward the end of this century this congregation and most other UU congregations around the country will consist of members who primarily identify themselves as liberal Christians.

The premise is not that UUs will become Christian, but that American Christianity will again become more progressive. Progressive Christianity will be the primary religious expression of this entire country, although other religions will also be even more accepted and heard than they are now. I remind you that no Unitarian or Universalist congregation or association has ever declared itself other than Christian, and both were primarily Christian denominations into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. American Christianity by the late 21st century will be more a "religion of" rather than "religion about" Jesus, and will not be synonymous with "THE" path or "THE" good news, but one of many paths in a postmodern global village in which we have learned at least peaceful coexistence, if not true interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Of course, this is the Christianity that Unitarians and Universalists have always embraced. This is the theological literacy that we have lost. Thomas Jefferson said more than once that he thought Unitarianism would be the general religion of America in his lifetime because this more reasonable view of Christianity was simply common sense in his mind.

UUs recognize the wisdom inherent in all religions, but we are not those religions. We are not the Buddhist, Pagan, Christian, Humanist, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Atheist Unitarian Universalist Church. We can't just choose the best of each religion, practice them as our own, and call it Unitarian Universalism. The consequence of doing so is for our faith to become extinct. This is not the critical thinking that I encouraged last week. It is simple thought.

In a world of true religious pluralism, people will feel more secure practicing their faith. The U.S. is by sheer numbers and by cultural influence, predominantly a Christian nation for better or worse. But in the future, religious minorities will reclaim their identity, have more freedom to express and to be themselves. Unitarian Universalists, unless we return to Christianity as our core will be left without an identity in such a world. There will be elements of Buddhist thought and Pagan thought intertwined with this new UUism, but the Buddhists, the pagans, and the Christians will mostly move on without us. The humanists and atheists among us already feel this pressure and displacement as Unitarian Universalism experiences resurgence in expressions of spirituality and reverence for something greater than ourselves.

This train is already moving, and not slowly. The emerging church movement, the liberal evangelicals, the progressive Christians are redefining themselves, taking the helm from the

religious right, which is crumbling beneath the weight of its own anger and inability to change. We can either meet the same fate or again be leaders in social change and justice. We have always been a faith of good works, of witness for the weak, oppressed, and downtrodden. This is the religion *of* Jesus. This is our heritage. We can continue to focus on the negative and reject Christianity for the damage it has done in the past hundred years, or we can rejoin the tide that we started over two hundred years ago in this country. If we continue to focus on the negative, or to grasp for that which is not ours, we will be left behind again, irrelevant, unplugged, without a voice. If we look forward, having embraced our religious past and join those who are about to do the work that we have always *talked* about, then we will be part of the greatest revolution the world has ever seen.

Liberal faith, by its very nature, is revolutionary and evolutionary. I long for the moment when it will be unnecessary to struggle for women's rights, gay rights, and racial equality, but that moment has not come. I long for the moment when wars will be unnecessary, but that moment has not come. I long for the moment when poverty will be non-existent, but that moment has not come. I long for the moment when the world population universally respects the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but that moment has not come. Faith is a longing. My humble hope is that in relationship with one another and in the presence of all that is holy to us, we can work together in loving community toward changing the world, step by step.

May it be so.