

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Come as You Are ... But Don't Stay That Way”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 3, 2010

Spoken Meditation

The door on 2009 has closed.
The door to 2010 now opens.

Let us be thankful for all that we enjoyed in 2009,
the support and comfort we received
any good fortune that came our way
the family and good friends we cherish and
the new people who now enrich our lives.

Let us also be grateful for the passing away
of hardships in 2009,
mourn the loved ones we lost and
the misfortunes we endured

Let us strive to hang a “done” sign on
all that was finished in 2009.

As we walk through the doorway to 2010,
what will we bring with us and
what would we prefer to drop?
What new direction would we like to take?
What new relationship would we like to develop?

As we listen within to the deepest part of our being,
what do we hear calling to us for attention?
What in our soul and spirit needs nourishment?

This very moment, can be the cusp of an inner awakening.
As we move into silence now, let your inner life speak.

Reading

Boston Globe religion reporter Michael Paulson describes a visit to the only evangelical

megachurch in the Boston area, Lexington's Grace Chapel, in a blog post that ends with this fascinating observation by the church's senior minister, Bryan Wilkerson:

I asked him about the theological rigor of the congregation, since one of the raps about this kind of church is that it can sometimes seem like a community center, with high production values and preaching that is affirming and comforting but not challenging. He said that the preaching at Grace is very Christian in content, and said the congregation seeks a "high commitment" from its members, including not only attendance at worship, but also enrollment in a course, membership in a small group, and service to the community.

Wilkerson volunteered that he is sometimes asked how contemporary evangelical churches differ from Unitarian Universalist congregations. This was not, to me, an obvious question, or even a comparison I had ever thought about, given how theologically and politically different UUs and evangelicals tend to be. But as I thought about it, I saw the similarities — a low bar to entry (you can believe anything or nothing and be welcomed through the door), a strong emphasis on community, and an absence of much liturgical ritual or iconography. Wilkerson said the difference is that, although both UUism and evangelicalism welcome anyone, the evangelical congregations seek to transform participants into Christian believers. In other words, he said, in either an evangelical or a UU congregation, "you can come as you are," but in an evangelical congregation "you don't stay that way."

<http://www.philocrites.com/archives/004012.html>

Sermon

When I encountered the blog entry I used as a reading (Chris Walton editor of the UU World writes this blog) the words of Rev. Wilkerson bothered me. Rev. Wilkerson's statements projected as normative the Christian approach to religion. Unitarian Universalists "don't stay that way" either. The way we change, however, may be quite different.

To understand and appreciate the value of the difference, let us first explore the member development process in the evangelical Christian context then examine our process.

Both our religious traditions are very open and accepting of new people wherever they are in their faith development. All are considered possessing inherent worth and dignity. None of us are lost beyond all hope of redemption as we enter to church door.

We diverge in approach however in our understanding of God and humanity. The Christian approach sounds something like this: God loves all of us even though we are hopelessly mired in sin. We cannot save ourselves without the intercession of Jesus. To fully receive God's love, we must freely choose to accept Jesus and be born again from flesh to faith. Here

is how the faith statement of Grace Chapel frames it on their web site:

We believe that human beings were created by God but we have alienated ourselves from Him and we are in need of reconciliation.

We believe that through the gift of Jesus' death on the cross our rebellion can be forgiven, and through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ we can be reconciled to God.

At Grace Chapel, come as you are, but know that only when you receive Jesus' gift and repent, can you be reconciled with and forgiven by God. Rick Warren, well known author and minister of Saddleback church expresses it this way:

Salvation is a gift from God to man. Man can never make up for his sin by self-improvement or good works – only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God's offer of forgiveness can man be saved from sin's penalty. Eternal life begins the moment one receives Jesus Christ into his life by faith.

Okay, that is where Wilkerson is coming from. And because Unitarian Universalism embraces many different ways to believe, we honor this path of faith while defining another path that suits us better.

Wilkerson expresses a widely held criticism of Unitarian Universalism. The criticism I hear again and again goes like this: Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want. All beliefs are equally respected no matter how nutty and potentially destructive or self-destructive they are. We have no unique revelation to offer our members to move them toward holiness and save their souls.

At the source of this criticism is the problem of authority. What authority guides our faith journey? The authority that guides the evangelical Christian church is scripture, as interpreted by tradition, clergy and preached from the pulpit. As we are sinful creatures, our inner impulses are suspect and tainted. We cannot fully trust our own minds and hearts. We need the corrective of scripture and the church to purify our thoughts and actions. Inner change is driven by relationship with outer revelation.

Unitarian Universalists have a very different relationship with authority. We do not put revelation at the center of our collective approach to faith. We see sacred text as inspired, meaningful words but do not receive them as the defining source of authority in our lives to which we must be obedient. Internal Biblical contradictions, errors in interpretation and translation, loss of cultural context to guide interpretation, and plurality of messages that can

be misinterpreted and used out of context, interfere with scripture being used to dictate our values and actions.

Unitarian founder William Ellery Channing said, "Every Mind was made for growth, for knowledge, and its nature is sinned against when it is doomed to ignorance." Being intelligent, thoughtful people seeking an approach to religion that includes the use of the mind, we know the limits of language to capture and express ultimate truth. Just as no perfect law can be written to govern every outcome, or final scientific truth discovered, that answers all our questions about the universe, except maybe the number 42 from Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams, we believe no scripture can be absolutely trusted as a perfected external authority.

This is a core insight of the Protestant rebellion against Catholicism. Individual conscience must be the ultimate authority in matters of interpretation of scripture and practice of ritual rather than the Church or the priest. The abuse of authority by priests and the Church through selling indulgences seeded the movement away from external authority that comes into full bloom in Unitarian Universalism. We reserve all authority to the individual conscience to settle matters of faith.

Now Wilkerson will argue that means Unitarian Universalists will not feel compelled to change anything if we don't want to. UU's will stay mired in their bad habits and locked in by fear. I beg to differ. Wilkerson underestimates the power of the individual conscience to transform a life. In fact external authority can confuse and interfere with this spontaneous unfolding, as the inner light attempts to guide us.

Marilyn Ferguson, author of *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, catches the Unitarian Universalist spirit of approaching change with these words:

A belated discovery, one that causes considerable anguish, is that no one can persuade another to change. Each of us guards a gate of change that can only be unlocked from the inside. We cannot open the gate of another, either by argument or by emotional appeal. (And I'd add, appeal to authority.)

Unitarian Universalists' resistance to external authority can be a challenge for ministers. You grant me the privilege of addressing you on Sunday mornings. I must walk a careful line between the variety of beliefs held here without projecting my beliefs and expecting compliance. I am free to articulate my beliefs but I must be very careful about speaking for the congregation and what Unitarian Universalists believe. It takes years for ministers to figure this out in all its various dimensions. Those that don't figure this out, don't have happy ministries in our movement.

Even though no external authority drives them, Unitarian Universalists do grow, develop and change, following their inner guidance, developing and listening to their conscience, to that small, still voice within. To understand how this happens, just look at our Chalice Lighting statement, a poetic restatement of our congregation's mission. Our approach follows Abraham Maslow who said, "Human beings are so constructed that they press toward fuller and fuller being and this means pressing toward what most people would consider good values, toward serenity, kindness, courage, honesty, love, unselfishness, and goodness."

My sermons, guest speakers, dialogue and conversation, reading and reflection, artistic and musical performances, poetry as is found in our literary magazine, *The Oriel*, all come together here to excite the human spirit and inspire its growth and development. Here people are encouraged to dive below the surface of their daily lives to examine our heritage, acculturation, habits, attitudes and motivations. This turning inward allows us to learn why we think and do, what we think and do. Growing up, we may have picked up negative and destructive patterns we're not even aware drive our attitudes and beliefs.

To illustrate this, take the example of unselfishness. I don't want to make any assumptions about anyone else, so I'll just speak for myself. At times, I encounter selfish and greedy attitudes in my thinking. Fear of not having enough, the urge to hoard even when I have enough, and the craving for more than I need do show up in me. I need to be very attentive to these tendencies and counter them both with experiences and with messages of the value of generosity to help loosen my grip on my wallet. Dialogue and conversation, reading and reflection, and contemplating artistic expression help raise my awareness both of my habits and of the direction I wish to go.

But what really helps me wake up and see another way is the example of others. Again and again I am powerfully affected and moved by the example of other Unitarian Universalists in this congregation and in other UU congregations. I'm inspired by our ministers and am pleased to bring their inspiration to you. I love attending our yearly General Assembly to see, talk with and be motivated by the outstanding leaders of our movement, people of great vision, moral leadership and dedication.

As members of this religious body, in contact with others striving to live and serve a greater purpose that transcends our individual egos, we touch and are touched by each other. The illumination I witness in you serves to brighten my inner light and helps bring into focus my path forward. Witnessing, as I am privileged to do, the beautiful acts of generosity that go on in this congregation, I am both humbled and inspired as together we sustain a vital and nurturing religious community.

This growth and development doesn't follow some ideal, preconceived plan from A to B to C with a certificate of completion to frame and place on the wall. Whether we like it or not, each of us has a unique path of growth and development. There isn't a one size fits all approach. Each of us has different baggage we've brought with us. Some of us have brought a tracker trailer load of stuff with us. A few of us are fortunate to just have an overnight bag. Some of us have an enormous amount of pain and suffering to deal with, others have lived charmed lives full of good fortune. For some of us any kind of growth and development is exceedingly difficult. For others it is spontaneous, light and easy.

Unitarian Universalism has a radical respect for each unique process and doesn't try to superimpose one way to do it. Please understand how hard and difficult this is. Each of us has a faith and an understanding arising from that faith that makes complete sense to us. Resisting trying to impose this faith on someone else requires a lot of self-discipline. When someone is lost and confused, I know the temptation to encourage them to believe the way I believe. It is a lot harder to encourage that someone to look within and discover the truth that is already there, waiting to be discovered.

I'm reminded of a wise Sufi story that speaks the Unitarian Universalist vision of growth and development. A mureed or student was invited by his murshid or master to a party. The room was full of strange and unusual people. One fellow juggled six balls in the air while balancing a straw on his nose. Another fellow was carrying on a conversation with another fellow while they both were doing handstands. One fellow sat quietly facing the wall while another talked so fast it was difficult to understand what he was saying. Yet another pulled beautiful flowers, small rodents and silver coins out of her sleeve. The murshid asked the mureed, which one is the perfected, enlightened saint? The mureed marveled at the wide array of people and shrugged his shoulders in confusion. The murshid smiled and said, "They are all saints, each coming to perfection through unique paths."

What can be so difficult for us is recognizing the beauty and perfection in ourselves and in each other. We are already experts at identifying the flaws in each other. No more energy needs to be expended there. Do any of us need any more criticism? Do any of us need to hear one more judgment that we at times fall short of our highest aspirations? I think not.

"Every human being on this earth is born with a tragedy, and it isn't original sin." Expressed Helen Hayes in Roy Newquist's, Showcase. "They're born with the tragedy that they have to grow up ... a lot of people don't have the courage to do it." Jean Gebser wrote in his diary, "Becoming an ego is painful. Hardly anyone finds his ego prior to the middle of his life. Then most people remain stuck in it and become hardened in it. The still more painful process of ego-transcendence with all its crises and relapses is accomplished by only a few. But it is just this ego-transcendence that is the decisive task of human life."

As Unitarian Universalists we are called to ego-transcendence, each in our own way. The payoff of the effort and difficulty we encounter through growth and development is meaning, satisfaction, joy, peace and a beautiful and holy kind of all encompassing love. Amplifying an expression by Norman Cousins, "The growth and development of the human mind and spirit is still high adventure, in many ways the highest adventure on earth."

Actually, the Buddhists really understand the truth about change. We can't avoid it. No matter how hard we try to resist and hold on, change will happen. What is in doubt is whether we will grow and develop along with that change. Motivational speaker, Karen Kaiser Clark says it well in her book of the same title, "Life is change. Growth is optional. Choose wisely."

Come as you are. Don't delude yourself into thinking you can stay that way. Change happens.

Let us use that change wisely to stimulate growth and development that leads us to live from the truth of who we really are, common expressions of the Spirit of Life, seeking a wholeness that extends beyond us.

Benediction

I close with the wise words of Rilke to a young poet:

I do only want to advise you to keep growing quietly and seriously throughout your development; you cannot disturb it more rudely than by looking outward and expecting from outside replies to questions that only your inmost feeling in your quietest hours can perhaps answer.

Let us be attentive to the truth we find within and bring it to life.

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