

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Deeds NOT Creeds”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 16, 2010

Spoken Meditation

Mary Oliver asks the question,

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do.

With your one wild and precious life?”

When the bed is made,

the body cleaned and groomed,

the breakfast served,

Once the dishes are washed,

the counter wiped and the sink cleaned,

After giving thanks

for the freedom to choose to do anything beyond survive

What are we to do with this one wild and precious life?

Out of us can flow a mighty river of both unrest and compassion,

fire and fury, tenderness and pity,

power and strength, love and devotion.

Yesterday informs us, today moves us,

tomorrow drives our imagination.

Ours is the commonwealth of humanity, now and tomorrow,

building and yet to be built.

Ours is the world, the universe and the fullness of life,

responds Universalist minister Ken Patton,

If you will make them yours

through the largeness and the strength of your love.

What dreams and visions return to us unbidden

calling again and again for a response?

What faith and desires live in our hearts

that give color and music to those dreams and visions?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do.
 With your one wild and precious life?

Sermon

Deeds not creeds – what does that really mean?

I've often heard the expression, “Deeds not Creeds” as a thumbnail sketch of what Unitarian Universalism is all about. I've heard us described as following the examples of the great religious teachers. We don't worship those teachers. We don't blindly believe whatever they say either. We tend to think what we do matters far more than what we believe.

Many translate doing into good works and social action. Our congregation takes pride in our record of social action. This congregation wants to do something to make the world a better place.

Most recently, we've been recognized as a “green sanctuary” congregation. A number of green initiatives are being implemented through our congregation and by our members. This year we expect to be carbon neutral as we contract for our power from renewable sources and pay for carbon offsets. For many years we've led support for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning communities. Before that we supported the Committee on Progressive Legislation that helped secure women's reproductive rights in New York State in the early 1970's. We were a sanctuary congregation during the 1980's sheltering Central Americans escaping to Canada. More recently, we helped a Bosnian and Iraqi family resettle here. The Rev. Nick Cardell and FUUSA members fought for fair election practices and against the five-dollar vote and the Albany political machine in the 1960's. We protested the Vietnam War and now we're developing a War Healing Ministry. These are all wonderful deeds to celebrate and be proud of.

And other religious organizations have joined us in these efforts. The Catholics were our partners in refugee resettlement. The Presbyterians too have been our partners in many of these efforts. And organizations like the Jewish Federation and Catholic Charities do far more to help people than we can imagine doing. Good as what we do, and what our global UU organizations do, there is nothing special about our social action.

I've been thinking about this because of [the keynote address](#) we heard at our Saint Lawrence District Assembly by the Rev. Robert Latham. A former Southern Baptist, turned Unitarian Universalist minister, Latham has served in our ministry for over 40 years, including nine years in the celebrated breakthrough congregation in Golden, Colorado. In his talk titled, “A

Mission Born of Mystery," he was quite critical of substituting social action for a clear sense of Unitarian Universalist identity and mission.

Latham claimed that by leaving issues of identity and mission to each individual congregation, we've abdicated answering the big questions that society asks of all religions. These questions are the basic human questions that arise as we struggle to make our lives meaningful. Questions such as:

- WHO AM I?... which is the question about the nature of my being.
- HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I KNOW?... which is the question about the source of my authority.
- WHO OR WHAT IS IN CHARGE?... which is the question about my ultimate value.
- WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?... which is the question about that which informs and sustains my sense of self-worth.
- WHAT DOES MY DEATH MEAN?... which is the question about the boundaries of time in my existence.

All major world religions have specific answers to these questions. We don't. Latham said in his address:

"What, then, distinguishes between all of these religions? Is it their purpose? No! Their distinctions are that they all answer life's compelling questions about mystery differently, thus, giving different meaning and direction to community living. And these answers are so different that they become critical to the destiny of the human enterprise. The Islamic fundamentalism that has driven the world drama over the past almost ten years underscores this truth."

Unitarian Universalism relegates answering these questions to each individual. And that is fine ... until we come together to turn our answers into actions. What unifies individuals in a congregation into a whole is its mission. Latham defines mission as creating "a shared sense of meaning, purpose and direction for community and ultimately, for the culture in which community is located."

Latham continues,

"What religion does is define for community what issues of social action and political correctness might best serve the community's reason for being. In essence, rather than being the mission of religion, social action and political correctness are the imperative arms of the religious community *servicing* its mission. That is, they are important to the social expression of the religious community's life but are not its reason for being."

Let me be clear that Latham isn't substituting the word mission for creed. Common beliefs are the organizing principles for other religions. But a shared sense of meaning, purpose and direction need not come from a common system of beliefs. Unitarian Universalists have chosen to chart a new course by putting values at our center rather than beliefs.

Defining a common set of beliefs was a big issue during the merger discussions of the Unitarians and Universalists during the 1950's. It was at that time, the first set of purposes and principles were written down to define who we are. Some have worried that our current version of the Purposes and Principles finished in 1985 is becoming our creed. Not so. They do however define some of our shared values and the sources we draw on for those values. And those shared values rather than beliefs can be our source for social action.

The problem of organizing meaning, purpose and direction for the United States of America after we gained our independence could have been solved by organizing around a set of beliefs. Our founding fathers, many refugees from European religious wars, wisely chose principles, values and law as the center of our society. Last Sunday, Reese Satin referred to the right to life and the right to liberty as his personal organizing principles and asserted they are also organizing principles for Unitarian Universalism. (He dropped the pursuit of happiness. We had a vigorous conversation about this on Thursday.)

The beauty of principles and values is their belief neutrality. One person's affirmation of the right to life and liberty may arise from the belief in a benevolent God who created life. Another person's reverence for life may arise from a pantheistic belief that sees all life as one with the divine. Last week Patti Jo Newell talked about her belief in Panentheism. Yet another may see life not as an expression of divinity but as the crown jewel of an improbable, randomly driven, organic process.

Identifying and committing to shared values charts a course toward world community that allows people with different beliefs to live together in peace. Unitarian Universalism can be a laboratory for ways to develop world community. The twentieth century was the beginning of that experiment. Let us hope the twenty-first will see its fruition.

What shared values do we celebrate? First and foremost the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Freedom of individual belief. Justice, equity and compassion; acceptance and growth; peace and liberty. Assuring everyone a say and a vote in community decisions. And finally valuing interdependence in all of its manifestations, from global down to all its individual creatures, including humans.

These values can find support in Christian as well as Jewish theology. They can also find support in Humanist and Pagan world views. Buddhist and Hindus can also connect their

thinking with our values.

Because our values find support in the major world religions, doesn't mean they are the universal values of all people. There are beliefs that are not compatible with Unitarian Universalist values.

- Religions that see the world as an exploitable means to an other-worldly reward do not affirm our values.
- Belief systems that promote racial supremacy or cultural supremacy are in conflict with our values.
- Economic systems that devalue and destroy our planet cannot support our values.
- Authoritarian ideologies that devalue, imprison and torture individuals violate our values.
- Belief systems that encourage violence and hate do not mesh with our values.

So you see, you can't believe anything you want and be a Unitarian Universalist.

And while I know it sticks in the craw of some of our members, our core values are neutral when it comes to the existence and worship of God. You can be an atheist, an agnostic, and a devout believer in God and accept Jesus as your teacher and guide and be a Unitarian Universalist. And the friction between these different beliefs, I believe, is actually fruitful for each of us and keeps us from idolatry. And I believe it is even possible for each of us to have a plural religious identity. I like to call myself a humanistic Sufi-Buddhist Unitarian Universalist who loves Jesus too... And most true believers would probably call me an atheist.

The pluralism problem isn't intellectual for most of us. It is emotional. Any prayer to Jesus would likely cause those from a Jewish background to reflexively cringe. The appeal to a goddess is likely to get the back of a humanist up. Even translating the language metaphorically can cause a queasy feeling in the stomach.

What I see Unitarian Universalism doing today is working to create our own symbols and language that have emotional power and intellectual coherence. And that takes time to evolve. Remember, Unitarian Universalism will be 50 years old next year. That isn't even a full generation yet. I was born and grew up a Unitarian even after merger in 1961.

I find participating in the evolution of Unitarian Universalism very exciting. We are the first generation to begin shaping the future of who we are becoming. We are the ones who can

participate in the creation of a new, values based religious tradition unlike those of the past. It will be hard, we know, and the road will be rocky and rough, but we'll get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but I know we will.

The rudder that will keep us on course as we evolve Unitarian Universalism is our mission. Thankfully, we have a good one, crafted during our sesquicentennial in 1992 and adopted in 1993. You can read it on the back of the order of service. When I first came here, I crafted it into more poetic language and inserted it into our order of service as our chalice lighting. These words are the organizing principles for how we translate our values into action.

Welcoming all free seekers of truth and meaning,
 We gather to excite the human spirit
 Inspire its growth and development
 Respond morally and ethically to a troubled world and
 Sustain a vital and nurturing religious community.

Notice how each sentence begins with a verb. These verbs organize the deeds that define who and what our congregation is. Yes we gather to sustain a vital and nurturing religious community, but the other 80% of the chalice lighting is about transforming ourselves and our world.

And transforming the world is core to our mission as Unitarian Universalists. Let me now return to Robert Latham's hard hitting conclusion to his address. He said:

We are on a downward spiral toward human genocide. This spiral is fueled by a self-centeredness and greed that elevates the whims of the individual above the needs of community. While this path of destruction involves our abuse of the planet, the planet will survive us. However, if we are to survive as humans, we must engage a view of reality that empowers us to live within the planet's rhythms.

Only a commonly empowered view of reality that demands the diminishment of such greed orientations and that insists on honoring the worth of both humans and creation can overcome this persistent force of destruction. And only a changed social heart can sustain the insistence of such a view of reality. This is precisely what society created the religious institution to do, to provide a view of reality that informs the cultural conscience and dictates a social behavior that is in the nation's most noble moral and relational interests.

May Latham's words be both the challenge and the encouragement for us to see the larger mission of why our congregation exists. We are here to shape, grow and develop our own

beliefs guided by our shared values. And then we must take those values into the larger community. The world needs our approach to religion and the values we promote.

May we find the courage to allow Unitarian Universalist values to speak through us and change this world for the better with our deeds not our creeds.

Benediction

13th Century Sufi poet Sa'd Ud Din Mahmud Shabistari, author of *The Secret Rose Garden*, writes:

“I” and “you” focus light
like decorative holes cut
in a lamp shade.
But there is only one light.

“I” and “you” throw a
thin veil between
heaven and earth.
Lift the veil and all
creeds and theologies disappear.

When “I” and “you” vanish,
how can I tell whether I am
in a mosque, a synagogue,
a church, or an observatory?

May our deeds, derived from our shared values,
shaped and directed by our congregational mission,
be our creed.