

2005 Sermon of the Living Tradition

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Dedication:

Listed among the roll of ministers remembered this evening in the year of their death is the name of my first Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. David Osborn, whose wife and partner for his many years of ministry, Janet, also died this year. Some thirty-three years ago, it was at their dinner table in Oradell, NJ, that I first shared my secret longing to become a minister. I dedicate this sermon in love and everlasting gratitude to David and Janet's memory.

The Sermon:

When I found myself enrolled in theological school in Chicago a year after that fateful, confessional dinner at the Osborns' home, our great UU professor James Luther Adams reminded us in his church history class that the word "tradition" in church history can be translated with two very different meanings in Latin. The first root word of tradition is "traditum," a heavy-sounding word, which means "the unchanging inherited weight and authority of history."

But a second, much lighter translation of tradition is the Latin word, "traditio," meaning "a sense of the living customs of a community; the ongoing creative dance of ever-evolving meaning and practice."

As illustration of the difference between Traditum and Traditio, JLA offered us the larger-than-life example of Tevya, the devout dairyman of Anatevka, in Fiddler on the Roof. When first we meet Tevya, he explains to us that Tradition - the heavy obligation of Traditum - determines virtually every aspect of his family's life and his life as a man, as a husband, and absolutely as a Papa.

But as the story unfolds, we watch how this good man's tradition-bound heart is repeatedly and ultimately challenged and overruled by his love for his three daughters, and we listen in on his anxious conversations with God as his independent-minded daughters, one by one, teach him the primacy of love over custom, teach him to choose L'Chaim, Life, the dance of traditio, as the highest ultimate reckoning with his heritage. As he explains to God his daughter Tzeitel's decision to marry for love rather than by arrangement: "They gave each other a pledge-unthinkable. But look at my daughter's face-how she loves him...and look at my daughters eyes, so hopeful."

Tradition!

Here in this annual Service of the Living Tradition, wherein our collective community of Memory and of Hope is evoked and named in the line of our ministry saluting both the generation who precede us in service and now recognizing those ready to take up the mantle of ministry, in this revered ritual we reference both meanings of Tradition: both the pride and weighty rich inheritance of five centuries tracing back to the 16th century in Transylvania and beyond; and at the same time, we take up our own generation's obligation to define and refine constantly for ourselves the norms and practice of our living Covenant in the Free Church.

For, like Tevya, as we hold dear the precious legacy handed down to us, so we recognize that we exist as churches, as Free faith communities, and as those ordained to work in the name of this legacy, we recognize that we exist to serve and to make better the tenor of our times, to give meaning to our days. These particular times, I mean; and these particular days. The times we are given to live and to shape. The days that have our names on them.

As a living community we take up the dance of Traditio - at its best, a communal choreography capable of almost balletic grace and harmony; even if, at other times, it more resembles a crazy tarantella, with all of us bumping into each other and stomping on each others' toes, all in the clumsy, sometimes comical improvisation of community that is the living church.

What lends the Free Church both constant power and constant challenge, of course, is it's unique placement as that City on the Hill that is always both part of society and prophet to that society. It has been the nature of our Church and its ministry from time immemorial always to wrestle with a kind of schizoid tendency to shift back and forth between full-blown retreat from the world on the one hand, offering itself as sanctuary and refuge from the world -and full-blown engagement and confrontation with the world on the other hand. The Church as Comforter of our afflictions, haven in our struggles, on the one hand. the Church as Afflicter of our comfort and poker of our conscience; the Church as Righteous Prophet demanding our efforts to mend what is broken in the world; to heal what is wounded in our communities; to hold gently the sorrows and to address lovingly the pain of those perennially left out on the margins of society; the hopeless and the helpless; the war-torn and the hungry and the infected of the world.

Perhaps no one figure in our history more personally incarnates the push and pull of our Unitarian Universalist dance between retreat and engagement with the world than our beloved idealist, Henry David Thoreau, who in his intentional withdrawal from society into the woods of Walden Pond for two years appeals to one very deep historic strain of UU sensibility; while his great essay on "Civil Disobedience" and his willingness to be jailed as an anti-war and Abolitionist tax protester makes him a hero in another chamber of the Unitarian Universalist heart.

On this occasion this evening when we ponder the sum and substance of our Living Tradition, it is to Thoreau's life and writings that we might profitably turn for one source of inspiration and illumination. In his relatively short life - Thoreau died at age 45 remember - he penned a personal journal of some two million words explaining both the idealistic principles that he went onto the woods to discover and to ponder, but also, lest we forget, the demands of a highly developed moral conscience that eventually called him out of the woods to actively engage in abolitionist confrontation with his society.

When he moved into his rough-hewn cabin on Walden Pond on the outskirts of Concord on the Fourth of July, 1845, Thoreau wrote his immortal apologia for retreating into the sanctuary of Natural surroundings far from the madding crowd:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

[Aside - May I ask for a show of hands: how many here tonight have ever visited Walden Pond?? Look at that! UU's going to Walden are like Catholics going to Lourdes! With the possible exception of Kolesvar, it's as close as we come to having a pilgrimage.]

When Thoreau came out from Walden two years later in 1847, he wrote:

"I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spend any more time for that one."

It was not until seven years after he left the woods that Thoreau finally published *Walden* to great acclaim. But in the years in between his leaving the woods and publishing his famous account of why he went there, it was his essay on "Civil Disobedience" which gained his reputation. After the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1851, it was the work of Abolitionism, and involvement in Underground Railroad activity, and lecturing on "Slavery in Massachusetts" that occupied much of Henry's time and thought. When the rabid Abolitionist John Brown visited Concord in 1857, Thoreau was among the Transcendentalist circle that first welcomed him and helped promote Brown's "radical chic" notoriety in the face of the federal government's continued cooption by the system, both North and South, that maintained Slavery as an institution.

While he never lost his vocation as a Naturalist and botanist, neither did Thoreau ever lose his prophetic idealism for the great justice issues of his day. His spirituality, nurtured in periods of pensive solitude and in his daily ramblings in the countryside, and which he recorded in a voluminous daily journal over the years, was eventually formative of Henry's fierce moral conscience, a conscience always unafraid to speak truth to power; to take a stand for principle; to name the evils that afflicted his day. What a powerful icon he remains, what a shining example for what we in the Free Church might aspire to in our own time!

Alas, it has been suggested by some that, of late, over the last twenty or thirty years now, Liberal religion itself has been in something of a Waldenesque retreat from effective activist engagement in the crucial moral struggles of our time. As more and more of our churches moved out from the environs of our great urban centers and relocated themselves quite literally into the exurban woods and fields of suburbia, the better to serve the majority of a membership that consequently remains overwhelmingly white, middle-to-upper class, and educationally elite, it has been suggested by some that we in the liberal church tradition have been too long enamored with the ideal of Thoreauvian retreat from the mix and mess of the world, and that we have been too little mindful of Thoreau's later example of conscientiously speaking up, speaking out, acting up, and acting out in behalf of the causes of righteousness in our culture.

It is said by some critics that Liberal religion has seemed to lose much of its volume, if not its voice altogether, if not its way altogether, if not its righteous indignation in the face of social and moral causes that once would have lit up our pulpits in moral outrage. The charge has been leveled that Liberal religion has gone all but mute, in far too many places, in behalf of causes that once (at least we like to think) would have pulled our people out of the pews, put their feet in motion, and put their hands to work reclaiming the proper contours of that ancient city on the hill, the one we once imagined, that dreamt-of society where racism, economic injustice, and warmongering are named for the blights that they are upon the human soul.

Dare we hope to find again, in this newest generation of ministers, preachers who burn with unapologetic indignation in behalf of equal opportunity, equal education, equal health care, decent housing for everyone, the equal right of every person to marry whomever they love, and the right of every woman to be the sole decider of what happens to her body?

Dare we look to you newest ministers of our Living Tradition for preaching and teaching that will pour concrete foundations under the moral arguments for a just society, for a world at peace?

For these are moral human issues before ever they are social policies, no matter what party is in power, no matter who happens to be sitting in the White House, or sitting in Congress, or sitting on the Supreme Court. Our ministry has no moral right not to speak to these issues, no matter whom we might offend or make uncomfortable in our pews! Whether such preaching grows our membership or not, whether it is effective institutional strategy for our Association or not, these are the issues that will always determine the health and integrity of Liberal religion, or what's a pulpit for?

What's a pulpit for?

Tonight as we speak, for example, from our privileged place in the midst of an almost obscenely wealthy nation, it is simply shameful, a moral travesty, that upwards of thirty million children under the age of fifteen in America have no medical insurance.

We should rush home from this General Assembly and carve the words, "Leave No Child Behind" into every pulpit in the UUA, until we take that sacred phrase back from those who now use it as a sarcastic euphemism and give it back to Marion Wright Edelman who knows how to live it and mean it! If we're looking to reclaim our pulpit fire, here's one place to start!

To you young colleagues who are the focus for this service, who tonight are officially invested at the beginning of your ministries, oh, how we welcome you! And how we need you to take up your work with passion and the determination to make your mark! For, Brothers and Sisters, I come to announce to you some rather alarming news tonight: In case you haven't yet noticed, Walden is burning! The woods, our beloved woods, are on fire! Our Eden, our idyllic retreat, our sylvan sanctuary from the mundane cares of the world, Eden is ablaze tonight!

Every one of you who dons the stole of ministerial office tonight is hereby called to action. All Idyllic weekend passes are hereby cancelled, and you are to report immediately to these pulpits, or to the community agencies that you serve, to your chaplaincies, to the classrooms where you teach, to the communities where your voice is respected, where your leadership is counted upon. Walden, our beloved Liberal religious haven from the world, Walden is on fire! And it is time for more Unitarian Universalists to catch fire too.

I cannot urge you enough, if you take up the ministry at this point in our history, young colleagues, be aware: do not take on this mantle merely to save your own soul. Rather, we need you to become ministers, as the poet urges, to spend your souls, spend them lavishly and wantonly in service to the world. I entreat you; do not use your trusted office to take refuge while the world around you is going to hell. Do not employ your preaching talents to give comfort to the already too comfortable.

We do not need in our pulpits at this point in our history any more retreatants. Or dilettante scholars. Or idle poets. I implore you; do not seek here amid these thousand-plus congregations for ministries of quietude, or for more churches in the woods, where you can take shelter in theological reverie while the social policies of our country are increasingly determined to protect the already privileged and to ignore the already deprived. The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, - but you, we, all of us who wear the stole - have promises to keep! The liberal ministry of our time needs ministers with fire in the belly, fire in the eye, and fire in the heart. So ignite, young colleagues, I beseech you! Catch fire! Or better for your souls and for ours that you should never put on the stole at all, please.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that he kept a dog-eared copy of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience in his car, and he memorized long passages from it to pass his time in jail. "I read Thoreau's words," he said, "to center my spirit and to re-find my purpose, and then my courage is restored and my vision is again made clear." Would that we learn to do the same with but a portion of his courage and his effectiveness!

Our prayer for you this night, you duly Fellowshiped colleagues taking up your ancient calling, a calling that will cost you everything you have, a profession that will humble you, that will break your hearts even as it gives meaning and purpose to your lives- our prayer for you as you assume your earned place in the line of Channing and Murray and Ballou and Brown, the line of Parker and Priestley, the line of Joseph Tuckerman, the line of the Iowa Sisterhood, the line of Safford and Gordon and Blackwell, of Helvie and Padgham, the line later of Lewis McGee, of Fahs and Holmes and Skinner and Davies, the line of Jim Adams, the line of David Osborn and a thousand other ministers before you, most of them un-famous and uncelebrated, all the saints. Whose good lives once gave sheen and luster to this heritage and whose spirits fill this hall tonight to applaud with us as you walk across this stage. What they dreamed be yours to do!

May your fire bring us out, dear colleagues; lead us out from the safe Waldens where liberal religion has been too long in hiding, too long asleep, too long comfortable and complacent! Lead us out! Lead us!

Remember, and never let anyone forget, that you are not ordained to become just some under-glorified business manager of a local religious franchise measuring your ministry's worth in numbers or in bottom lines. And your churches' role and function is never merely to serve as just another perennially under funded non-profit agency in town. The Church's reason for being is to make real the Beloved Community on earth, nothing less. And your office in all its varied forms, exists to embody the work of that ideal, nothing less.

Thirty years on, James Luther Adams's words still echo true, and we heard them wonderfully underlined for us by our esteemed colleague Burton Carley in his Berry Street Essay this week: the Covenant, the Covenant, the Covenant, Adams insisted, is the great glowing coal at the heart of our Free Church tradition. Preach the Covenant, then, Traditum and Traditio, binding us one with another and with our God.

Preach the Covenant then, first and last, binding us one with the world beyond our walls, in all its woundedness and imperfection.

Preach the Covenant, binding us, yes! to Channing's Faith and to Murray's Dream, to Theodore's Fire, and to Olympia's courage; binding us, binding us always, to Jim Reeb's immortal heart.

Preach to us the Covenant bravely and fearlessly, my new colleagues, and in your preaching know that you will be forever blessed in the sight of That which causes the sparrow to fly and the lilies of the field to bloom. Preach the Covenant, binding us with the Sacred Center of life: whose Love is finally our only Doctrine, whose Quest for Truth remains our precious Sacrament, and whose Service is evermore our fervent and lasting Prayer.
Still.

Amen and Amen.