

I Will Be Thirsty for the Rest of My Life
March 2nd, 2008

If you like the taste of Pine-sol, then you will like the taste of a Greek wine known as retsina. Retsina gets its name from the days of ancient Greece when the amphorae in which the wine was kept were sealed, for preservation's sake, with Pine resin. Although the need for such piney sealing ended somewhere around 300 AD, the piney *taste* was so, let's say, acquired by that time, that even today, you can take a drink of retsina, and feel like your esophagus is as fresh and clean as a well-mopped kitchen floor.

Admittedly, it's been quite a few years since I've tasted retsina myself. But in the winter and spring of 1987, while living in Greece for a semester of college, I worked hard to acquire my own taste for retsina, and drank it as if I were a compulsive house cleaner, trying to clean away something within the house of my own body and spirit. Little did I know, or perhaps little did I *want* to know, such drinking would eventually lead me to clean up my act indeed, as I bottomed out from my brief but

adventurous life of drinking and turned toward a life of sobriety from alcohol and drugs in my early twenties. It was after a particularly indulgent night of drinking, now back from Greece and in my hometown, that I woke up one morning, and said aloud to myself, to friends and family, in tears, "I'm an alcoholic." I don't remember much more about that day, except for a moment walking downtown alone, crossing a street, and finding a poem composing itself in my head. Though it was a short poem, these days I remember only the title and the last line. The title was, simply, "Sober." The last line was, "I will be thirsty for the rest of my life."

The truth is, while these days I do drink more tea in one day than all of England, the unquenchable craving for alcohol that I feared would forever haunt me that first day of sobriety has long since been lifted. I did, three and half years after first giving up alcohol, have a one-beer slip, discovering then that a lot of pain underneath my old drinking still had to be confronted as well. And so I count my continuous sobriety from the day after *that* day: March 24, 1991. As I've said here before, I am

grateful for the freedom my sobriety from alcohol has brought me.

But *my* story is only one of millions of stories, and addiction to alcohol is only one of countless kinds of addictions. So it is this morning that I hope, in the words of James Luther Adams, “to point to what we would prefer to ignore...to point to what we would like to sweep under the rug,” in hopes of reminding us that, whether in this room, or in our families, in our wider circles of friends, or among the strangers we pass each day, the suffering that addiction brings is among us, and confronting it, with our hearts open, is one way we can affirm and promote our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Addiction—whether addiction to alcohol, drugs, food, gambling, sex, shopping, or emotionally destructive relationships—becomes, in Adams’ words again, “the plight of those who live in poverty of body or of spirit.” Such poverty is humanity’s to confront.

Now, in his sermon’s original context, it’s true that James Luther Adams is looking at poverty through a lens wider than that of the

suffering caused by addiction. He is looking at, in his words, the “fragmentation of the common life” created by systems of segregation. “We live in neighborhoods segregated from other neighborhoods in terms of education, occupation, and income, [as well as] by class and... race” he says. And, he adds, “the segregations of sexism cut across all these boundaries.” Then Adams really lays his cards on the table: “In all too great a measure,” he says, “the churches are a function, and indeed a protection, of these segregations. In this situation we of the middle class are tempted, indeed almost fated, to adopt the religion of the successful.”

Weaving the issue of addiction into Adams’ notions of “the religion of the successful” being protected within our churches from “the poverty of body or spirit,” as I similarly did last Sunday when looking at race, it’s not surprising that, when Denis Meacham, in his early sobriety, went looking for support in his Unitarian Universalist congregation, there was, in his words, “nothing there for a recovering alcoholic nor at any of the many other churches I explored over the next several years (other than

AA meetings in their basements).”

Church culture, perhaps particularly *liberal* church culture, often treats alcohol as an accepted and implicit part of that culture. Whether simply sipping wine as the blood of Christ in Christian communion or serving champagne on special occasions; whether carting coolers of beer to church campouts or providing cocktails at potlucks, many members of liberal churches do not want to be denied the pleasure of some uplifting spirits, so to speak, in their spiritual community. And, seeing as we Unitarian Universalists are not a “dry” denomination, as are some, those who choose to drink within our community, and who do so without harming themselves or others, should not be denied their right, nor judged for their choice, to indulge.

Now, that may not make things easy or simple, for those of us who wish to be a part of church social life, but who would rather *not* dip or dunk ourselves into the fount of spiced punch bowls. But in a Unitarian Universalist addictions ministry visioning meeting I attended in Boston

last January, Drew Brooks of *Austin's* own Rush Center of the Johnson Institute pointed out to several of my colleagues and myself an enlightening collection of statistics that point to why things *can't* be quite as simple as some of us may want them to be. First of all, on a spectrum of degrees of alcohol use, Drew named abstinence on one far end, followed by use, misuse, abuse, and finally, on the other end, addiction. Looking at how many people fall where on that spectrum, Drew noted that thirty percent of the American population, whether because they've never had a drink in their lives, or because they hope never to do so again, are completely abstinent from alcohol. Toward the other end, ten to fifteen percent of Americans abuse alcohol—that is, they drink with harmful consequences—and *another* ten to fifteen percent drink addictively: they continue to drink despite harmful consequences; they experience loss of control; they go through withdrawal; and they find their bodies demanding more and more alcohol in order to reach the same state.

What Drew wanted the group to understand, in addition to *these* numbers, is that what's left of the population in the middle are those who are using alcohol—a beer here, a glass of wine there—and the people who are occasionally misusing alcohol—mostly as a stress reliever—and that that combined number adds up to a substantial forty percent of our population. These are the people living within the bell curve, and they will be the hardest to convince that our culture of alcohol use in our churches and in society at large needs looking at.

How then could this group of fourteen Unitarian Universalists sitting around a table at UUA headquarters in Boston be able to move forward in our collective hope to create a substantial and influential addictions ministry within our movement? How could this group—which included Rev. Alex Holt, who takes a strongly Buddhist approach to recovery; religious educator Nan Moore, who works specifically with youth and addiction; lay leader Julie Hernandez, who has created an addictions and recovery ministry within the Pacific Unitarian Church in L.A.; and Rev. Denis Meacham himself—how could this group convince

the movement on a national level that addiction is as much an issue of justice and compassion as are the very issues James Luther Adams brought up in his sermon when he spoke of the “poverty of the body or of the spirit”?

First of all, we had to break the ice among ourselves that alcoholism, as I said here earlier, is not the only addiction weaving itself into the fabric of our American culture. While alcoholism may be one of the most readily recognizable addictions in our culture, we mustn't use it as a distraction from our own sufferings from addiction to other substances, as well as to *processes*. The common factor in addiction is not whether we consume something, but whether we become consumed *by* it. Thus, we needed to acknowledge that when we're thinking of the suffering caused by addiction in our own congregations, we must take seriously addictions ranging from the race track to the clothing rack, from over-sexualization to self starvation; from the smoky lull of nicotine to the intangible pull of codependence.

Next, we had to get to work and look at both the strengths and weaknesses that our movement already has, as well as the potential benefits and the dangers of adding to our movement a strong addictions ministry. I won't cover here everything we listed there, but I will mention to you some of our more interesting insights. Beginning with challenges, we might find, for example, that a strong individualist strain in the Unitarian Universalist faith at times creates resistance to doing anything in a community-based way. Another example: looking back on how we've handled addictive behavior in the past, our movement, though not more than other faiths, has an unfortunate history of indeed sweeping under the rug behaviors such as church leaders drinking too much, or clergy violating sexual boundaries with congregants. In other words, we don't have a strong foundation of modeling. Also, Unitarian Universalists can tend to be somewhat conflict avoidant, particularly within our own walls. As James Luther Adams said, we lean toward wanting to be a "religion of the successful." But addiction, in its *essence*, is about the conflict between behaviors and values, community and alienation, love and self-

loathing, health and self -destruction. Addiction *ministry* would demand confronting such conflicts.

As for dangers that an addictions ministry could present, they extend from the simple fact of attrition in membership, to tense theological and semantic debates. Because most people equate addiction recovery with the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous and its various niece and nephew 12-step programs, and because that particular program does use language like “God as we understand Him,” and “turning our will and our lives over to the care of God,” recovery in the form of the 12 steps is as much a turn off for some as it is a blessing for others. Thus, the idea of an addictions ministry in our Unitarian Universalist movement might be initially heard by some as a threat of a 12-step takeover.

Such fears could be addressed simply enough, I believe, by presenting models such as Alex Holt’s Buddhist recovery model, or Nan Moore’s model she uses with youth. But more challenging to work through would be the tensions that might arise as individuals, families,

and friends begin to look more deeply at how addiction may be affecting their lives. Whether a father confronts his pot-dependent son, or a child confronts her cigarette-dependent mother, the status quo gets rocked, and ministry must be in place to respond to such upheaval.

How could that ministry be in place? First, we *already* have in place our seven principles, four of which I want to hold up in particular: our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person; our second principle, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; our fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and our seventh principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Second, we have other programs such as the Our Whole Lives sexuality education program, to use as models for how to be in conversation about issues that are initially perhaps a little scary, but which become not so much so once language, insight, and feelings of community are formed. Finally, we do have pioneering leaders like Denis Meacham and others I've mentioned this morning, who are taking this work on as part of their call to ministry. I hope, to whatever degree

possible, I can be a part of that pioneering, and I hope expanding, effort. I am already fortunate enough to have been invited to the visioning meeting in Boston, where I was blessed by the people I met there and the work we did together.

Part of the work we did included making clear to the public what we wished to accomplish. Toward the end of our longest work day, Nan Moore, Alex Holt, and myself volunteered ourselves to work out an initial mission statement of the group. After scribbling and scratching with various markers on a flip chart, we finally came up with this:

The mission of the Unitarian Universalist Association Addictions Ministry is to walk together with congregations and religious professionals to educate individuals, families, congregations, and communities about the suffering caused by addiction. Our purpose in doing this ministry is to transform cultures of misuse and abuse into cultures of healing, wholeness, and health.

It is *my* hope today, in sharing this work with you all, that someone—whether someone in this room, or someone whom one or many of you loves—begins, indeed, a journey toward healing, wholeness, and health.

No Pine-sol required. Just love, compassion, and an understanding that we are all in this together. Each and every person on this earth deserves that much, and no less.

Amen.

Passages taken from:

James Luther Adams, "Hidden Evils and Hidden Resources," *A Prophethood of All Believers*.

Denis Meacham, *The Addictions Ministry Handbook*.