

Toward a Common Understanding
December 7, 2008

As some or many of you may know, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin—the largest of the four Unitarian Universalist congregations *in* Austin, and the congregation out from which *we* originally grew—is right now in a state of pain and upheaval. Roughly two weeks ago, the Board of the church asked for their minister’s resignation. With the minister not at this time having submitted such a resignation, the Board has requested to bring the issue to a congregational vote next weekend, or in the very near future. I choose to begin this morning’s sermon with this difficult situation for several reasons.

First, we Wildflowers are, in many ways, directly connected to First Unitarian. As I mentioned earlier, Wildflower Church actually grew out of First Unitarian, and we

owe many thanks to both the members and the minister of that church for their generous support both in the creation and the nourishment of our congregation. First Unitarian knew they would lose some of their members with the creation of Wildflower, and indeed, a good number of our long-time Wildflower members were longtime First Unitarian members, well before moving their *religious* home to where their *personal* homes already were, here in South Austin.

Others have come to Wildflower from First Unitarian not so much because of its location, but because you have found here something that, at this time, better suits your needs than what you were experiencing at First Unitarian. This is not to say Wildflower *is* better. Plenty of people have found that Wildflower is not what *they* need, and have moved on to First Unitarian, the other UU congregations, or a religious home of an entirely different faith. The more important point is, we

have many people here who will be or who already are affected one way or another by what is happening at First Unitarian. For those who are affected, emotions may be strong, and we need to work through those emotions mindfully, compassionately, patiently, and cooperatively.

But along with working through our own wide spectrum of feelings here among ourselves, we will also need to be prepared for those people and the feelings that they bring, who might come here because of what's happening at First Unitarian. We also need to be prepared for some Wildflower people possibly eventually *returning* to First Unitarian, if they so choose, once the waves of upheaval have settled. The possibilities of demographic shifts are many.

With these possibilities of emotional as well as congregational shifts occurring among us, the question arises, how do we Wildflowers, as a religious community, a

community that commits, according to our mission statement, “to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love and social justice,” how do we hold this turn of events and the kindred Unitarian Universalists—all of them—up on Grover Street and here on Manchaca, with love and compassion? How do we, again in the words of our mission statement, “joyfully nurture one another on our lifelong spiritual journeys,” even when the journey becomes as tense and complicated as it very well may be for all whose hearts, minds, and lives are connected to the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin?

“A readiness,” says Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, “even to enter into discussion for the sake of reaching agreement (or of reaching at least a common understanding) depends upon our total character and not upon our intellectual capacities alone. It depends,” Adams continues,

“...upon a proper relation to the creative ground of meaning and existence.” Are we ready, in difficult times as well as fair, to be in proper relation with the creative ground of meaning and existence?

I'll ask that question in light not only of what's happening at First Unitarian, but also of an ongoing situation even closer to—that is right here *in*—our own religious home: Ever since I arrived here a little over a year ago I've heard complaints and concerns about Sunday morning services occasionally including references, particularly but not exclusively from the pulpit—sometimes kindly and oftentimes not—to particular political parties and their representatives, in an explicitly partisan context. The concern is a relevant and important one for myriad reasons. To name a few: the separation of church and state; our congregation's tax exempt status; and the fact

that we claim, in our mission statement to be “a deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community.”

While freedom of the pulpit cannot be sacrificed, we must, in this context as well, ask ourselves, Are we ready, in difficult times as well as fair, “to be in proper relation with the creative ground of meaning and existence?” Are we ready “to enter into discussion for the sake of reaching agreement (or of reaching at least a common understanding)” rather than to build walls around our convictions and thus walls between ourselves and others?

In both these cases—the call for the minister’s resignation at First Unitarian and our own occasional slipping from liberal religion into liberal political partisanship in our worship services—in both these cases, at issue is not which side is right, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, but *how do we work through our differences* so that we are

indeed transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love and social justice, rather than through acts of segregating, generalizing, or even demonizing? I raise the question not to criticize Unitarian Universalists whether at First Unitarian or Wildflower Church or anywhere else. I raise the issue in order for us to take a critical look at how we interact with one another when we are in conflict, and at how, when in conflict with others, we are *also* often in conflict within ourselves between the desire for peace and the desire for victory. Listen, for instance, to what the draft Unitarian Universalist peacemaking statement of conscience says about our very biology as human beings. It states:

Anger and violence leap full flower in each of us from an early age. Physically and mentally we have an evolved capacity for violence that can result in physical,

emotional, economic, or environmental injury. Violence occurs across all levels of human interaction....

On the other hand, the passage continues,

Humans also have an evolved capacity for cooperative behavior, resulting in our development of morals, laws and institutions to minimize the use of violence.

Cooperative behavior is the foundation of nonviolence and peace. It is the basis of trust. Intentional nonviolence paired with cooperative behavior encourages compassionate communication and peaceful resolution of conflict.

We have the capacity, in other words, both to *fight to get* our way, and to *work to find our* way. So, if this is the biology we have to work with, what does it say about our very nature, and even about our particular theology? After experiencing Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, James Luther

Adams wrote his 1941 essay, “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature.” He wrote it not simply to criticize Nazism, but to look critically at how religious institutions, especially *liberal* religious institutions, were responding to the rise of Nazism. Discovering an inadequate response, Adams observes, “The ‘orthodox’ theory of ‘original sin,’ because of its association with the notion of Adam’s fall ‘in whom we sinned all’ as well as with an ascetic conception of sex, has been rightfully abandoned by religious liberals. It is doubtful, however,” continues Adams, “that there is any word available that has more profound metaphysical implications than the word ‘sin.’... whether liberals use the word ‘sin’ or not,” states Adams,

they cannot correct this “too jocund” a view of life until they recognize that there is in human nature a deep-seated and universal tendency for both individuals and

groups to ignore the demands of mutuality and thus to waste freedom or abuse it by devotion to the idols of the tribe, the theater, the cave, and the marketplace..... It cannot be denied that religious liberalism has neglected these aspects of human nature in its zeal to proclaim the spark of divinity in humanity.

While Adams was writing in 1941, at the peak of Fascism, and while we who share this liberal religion have continued to evolve our collective theology as shown in the efforts of those who are writing the peacemaking statement of conscience, we would sin indeed to see ourselves as carrying a divine spark superior to other religions simply because we choose to focus on our divine spark without accounting for our ability to, in Adams' words, "ignore the demands of mutuality," or, in simpler terms, without accounting for our ability to sin.

For those of you who resist that word still, remember that the Hebrew word for sin is also used in world of archery. It

means, simply, to miss the mark. It is not a matter of depravity or dirtiness or blame. It is about striving, again and again, to take better aim. Isn't that part of why we come to church each Sunday, to aim for becoming our best selves, our most complete selves amidst beloved community? Remember the words we shared earlier: "From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness. By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves. Yet we know," the reading continues, "that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all."

What are we called to do in order to gather ourselves, both individually and collectively, into wholeness again, to keep that Tree of Life whole? The reading proclaims, "Let us

labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.”

Let us labor. In other words, we’ve got work to do.

Whether in our own hearts or our own homes, in our religious homes or in this global home we all share, we are called to accept humanity’s capacity—and that means ours, too—for violence—violent thinking, violent speaking, violent teaching, violent side-taking—and to work cooperatively, peacefully, and justly, to transcend that capacity in aim of something better.

Specifically, the draft Unitarian Universalist peacemaking statement of conscience asks us to work for what it calls just peacemaking, and just peacemaking requires that we ask not what justifies war, or any other form of violence, “but what justifies the humanitarian preservation or restoration of peace.” Furthermore, as we heard Betty read from the statement earlier, “building a culture of peace at all levels of

human interaction requires a transformation of consciousness, individual lifestyles, and public policies. At the heart of this transformation,” notes the statement, “is the will to understand the truths voiced on all sides from a stance of empathy and love.”

In our small Wildflower corner of the world, particularly at this time when our neighbors at First Unitarian are going through a struggle in which there are indeed truths voiced on all sides, and particularly when we here at times walk too thin a line between liberal religion and liberal political partisanship in our worship services, in our small corner, may we remember our task is not to focus on good guys vs. bad guys, but to seek to “understand the truths voiced on all sides from a stance of empathy and love.” This is one sure way we can work cooperatively into living out our mission of transforming “ourselves and the world around us...”

Other ways? The draft statement of conscience provides calls to action for just peacemaking on international, societal, congregational, interpersonal, and inner levels. I encourage you to go to the UUA website (www.uua.org), type in peacemaking statement of conscience, and read the statement for yourselves. As a congregation, we can then vote to move the statement forward for a vote at General Assembly.

But we can't stop there. In the next year, we will need to support the efforts of the Committee on Ministry, as they begin the work of creating, with your active input, a church-wide covenant of right relations. Having such a covenant among us will help us stay in mindful relationship with one another, and when we miss the mark, it will call us back to improving our aim. The Committee on Ministry hopes to have such a covenant by the fall of 2009.

But don't wait for it to be official. Let us covenant here and now, in our own hearts, to remember we are a "deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community," that "we joyfully nurture one another on our lifelong spiritual journeys," and that we commit, indeed, to "transforming ourselves and each other through acts of compassion, love and social justice."

In the spirit of our mission, and in the spirit of peace, I say to that covenant, amen.