

**Washing Feet: A Practice in Intellectual Humility**  
**August 9, 2009**

It is good to be with one another again. Good to finally, really, be back. I know I returned to the pulpit at the end of last month, after being away for several weeks, and everyone welcomed me home warmly, and then, oops, I was gone again last week, fulfilling a commitment to preach down in New Braunfels at the Comal County Unitarian Universalist Society. But now, again, I'm back, and feel like I've fully landed here in Austin after time away on study leave, vacation, working as a chaplain at a summer camp, and attendance at General Assembly.

Now, by the way, so as not to assume everyone knows what General Assembly is, or is about, let me say a few things. For those of you who've never been, General Assembly is the annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists from around the

country and from around the world, its primary purpose of which is to do the business of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, via plenary sessions. At the plenary sessions, delegates from congregations vote on issues ranging from our bylaws, to social justice, to who shall be our next president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. If you haven't heard yet, by the way, at this last General Assembly in June, in Salt Lake City, the Rev. Peter Morales from Golden, Colorado, was elected to serve as the eighth such president, and has already begun his four-year term at our UUA headquarters in Boston. He is our first Hispanic president.

Now, to make General Assembly a bit more alluring and multifaceted both to delegates and to *non*-delegates who wish to attend, in addition to the plenary sessions, there are dozens of workshops, worship services, social events, social *justice* events, youth caucus events and, of course, the various

attractions of the host city to take part in. (If you haven't been to General Assembly, or if you have, consider going to Minneapolis next year, Charlotte in 2011, or Phoenix in 2012.) This General Assembly was my sixth general assembly. How many of you have attended at least one General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association? (Show of Hands).

Now, for those of you who have attended (and for those of you who haven't, imagine you have...), did you by any chance find the four and a half days or so of going to plenary sessions, workshops, worship services, panel discussions, and lectures just a little bit exhausting, if also exhilarating? Did you find, at times, after walking the labyrinthine hallways of whichever convention center General Assembly happened to be in when you went, that your poor haggard feet just needed to be propped up and given a rest? Or better yet, a rub? Or even better yet, wouldn't it have been heavenly if someone would

have offered to actually wash your feet? Maybe you've been so lucky.

I myself don't recall a single toe of mine getting washed while at General Assembly, unless you count my own scrubbing during a morning shower. But having attended *this* year's General Assembly, having listened to poets, preachers, academics, and activists sharing their wisdom, life experiences, religious and spiritual passions, I humbly come to remember I should be asking not "who has neglected to wash *my* feet?" but "whose feet might I wash?"

Some of you may recall that at the last supper, Jesus of Nazareth kneeled down to wash the feet of his disciples. It was a subversive act, a radical act. Just as Jesus had earlier turned over the money changing tables in the temple, he now was overturning the status quo of hierarchical power. He was,

in his leadership role, taking a stance not of superiority above his followers, but of humility among them.

So I was struck when, at Ministry Days, which occurs for just a day and a half immediately before General Assembly, so I was struck when I heard our guest speaker, the poet, teacher and activist Sonia Sanchez, speaking to the hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers gathered there, about her experiences working with poor, neglected, and marginalized children. She ended her lecture proclaiming that it is our call to “wash the feet of our country.”

Imagine such an image. Imagine such a phenomenon. Throughout the rest of the week, as I scribbled notes at each event I attended, I felt the passion and the plea of Sanchez pulling at me and gathering strength, as each note I took from each other speaker seemed to weave itself into the thread of

Sanchez's message: We are called to "wash the feet of our country."

Now, guessing that Sanchez is speaking, at least in part, metaphorically, what exactly does she mean in her "wash the feet of this country" call? Just whose feet is she really speaking of? While in her initial proclamation, it seems she's referring to this country as the *children*, the marginalized, of this country, at another point, she speaks of this same country whose feet we are asked to wash as the very thing that is *ruining* our children, stating in fact that "it eats up our children...and burps." Why should we humble ourselves to such a monster as *that*? Allowing the poet some poetic license, I imagine, in Sanchez's conflicting images of this country—one which needs our love, and one which devours us—she is portraying two sides of this land and the systems we live within, and that if we were to transport ourselves to the time

and place of that original foot washer, Jesus of Nazareth, we could see in our country the two-sidedness consisting of those in power, and those without it—let’s say, the Romans on one hand, and the marginalized on the other.

Since we are not in the land or place of Jesus of Nazareth, however, we might ask ourselves, “Who are *our* country’s Romans, and who are *our* marginalized?” Ideas? (Let people share some ideas.)

OK, that was a little bit of a trick question, because as we explore it, I don’t want to tempt us to too contently point fingers at individual others. Instead, we might go further and ask, *what*, rather than *who*, are our Romans?

Why ask *what* rather than *who*? Cautioning against dualism not only between good and evil, but between self and other, Unitarian Universalist scholar Sharon Welch forthrightly illustrated the futility of such dualism, in a

General Assembly lecture, with her own personal revelation at one point in her life that, quote, “I can no more denounce George Bush than I can denounce a cramp in my foot.” In other words, to point at individuals as if we are not a part, somehow, somewhere, of the same system, the same *body* is to refuse to see the larger, interdependent picture, and so to distance ourselves from our own accountability.

So, thus recognizing the interdependent nature of our shared existence, in order to hold ourselves accountable and to more deeply look at the *whatness*, rather than the *whoness* of our particular Romans, our own systems of inequality and imbalance, let me return us to this year’s General Assembly Ware lecturer, Melissa Harris-Lacewell, whose words we heard Jeff read earlier. Harris-Lacewell cuts to the chase and notes of Unitarian Universalists ourselves, “our commitment to reason, rationality, and evidence can become a kind of cynical

self-righteousness. We can easily make ourselves feel superior,” Harris-Lacewell says, “because we have an analytic lens that allows us to see the injustices of the world. But,” continues Harris-Lacewell, “that reason *without* faith can also paralyze. We need to know we are not always right.”

In other words, just as two wrongs don’t make a right, too self-righteous a UU doesn’t right the wrongs of injustice. We must act not only *with* hard facts, but *in* faith. For faith, as Harris-Lacewell states, “is a practice of intellectual humility: a habit that reminds us of our own limitations and encourages us to remember that we don’t know everything....”

To illustrate her point, Harris-Lacewell tells her own story of traveling to New Orleans just weeks after Hurricane Katrina. As a political scientist “citing reason and evidence,” she initially concludes that “New Orleans could not be rebuilt.” However, despite all the statistics that Harris-Lacewell put

together, “despite all evidence,” she says, “something amazing began to happen in the months following Katrina.” She notes the thousands of people returning to the city, the volunteers, the organizers, those willing and ready to roll up their sleeves and work, and she discovers, in her words, “New Orleans emerg[ing] as ground zero for social justice, like the Mississippi Freedom Summers forty years ago.”

Taking Harris-Lacewell’s story beyond the specifics of New Orleans, how might we apply such a story to our daily lives, our *religious* lives? Starting with our first religious principle, I wonder, for instance, do we know rationally, reasonably, with hard, cold evidence, that “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” is true? If we use only our analytic lens, as Harris-Lacewell first did in New Orleans, noting what we see when we encounter reality—the homeless, the poor, the religiously conservative, the immigrant, the dark-skinned, the

decadent, the young, the old, the queer, the straight, the Muslim, the Christian—looking through *that* lens alone, do we see the souls of those around us? Looking only through that lens, are we willing to wash the soles of those souls' feet?

Or might it take some faith, some good old subversive counterintuitive faith, in order for us to move beyond our habitually analytical boundaries? To counter our own potential for self-righteousness, Harris-Lacewell states that we Unitarian Universalists have “the most audacious faith claim of all.... We... stand here together,” she says, “to make the most ridiculous, unlikely, and *powerful* faith claim of all: that we can join together to make a world that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of each person and that we can make that world using the power of love.”

Making a world that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and doing so using the power of love.

Maybe *this* is what Sonia Sanchez meant when she called on us to “wash the feet of this country.” And maybe washing the feet of this country—recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person—maybe this washing of feet is what it will take to transform our country’s child-devouring power systems into foot washers themselves.

But we can’t lead such a transformation guided by reason alone. Yes, reason is good, essential even. As Harris-Lacewell says, yes, “We *are* determined to use the power of reason to identify the inequalities and injustices in our world. We *are* determined to marshal evidence as a tool in our work for fairness. But,” she reminds us, “we must be *equally* determined to stamp out cynicism with hope, to fight hate with love, and refuse to lose our faith.”

So, faithful ones, here we are, called once more to live out *our* faith—to *balance* reason with faith, head with heart, power

with humility, observation with action, outrage with accountability, and, last but never least, to *counter* hate with love.

I love my religion, and I love my religious home. I love traveling to General Assembly each year and learning from poets, preachers, academics, and activists who share and inform my religion. But unless I practice an understanding of the interdependent nature of existence and so do my part to heal the web of life, my faith is incomplete. So may it be that metaphorically, literally, religiously, humbly, I learn to be a washer of feet.

Amen.

Hymn #131 Love Will Guide Us