

Be Ours a ReligionJuly 27th, 2008

In the five weeks since I last shared this sanctuary with you, I have traveled nearly 4,000 miles in my little car, from Austin to Florida, to New Orleans, back home to Austin, up to north Texas, back home again, then up to Oklahoma, and, two days ago, home once more. In every one of these journeys I took, I met and met *with* other Unitarian Universalists—in Florida, at Ministry Days, which precedes General Assembly, I met with fellow Unitarian Universalist ministers from all over the continent; in New Orleans, I met members and friends of the First UU *Church* of New Orleans, which housed me while I returned to work at the home of a woman struggling to rebuild from Hurricane Katrina; in north Texas, I met, worked, and learned with 32 Unitarian Universalist high school youth and eight adult advisors, from Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana; in Austin, I worked with members of the UU addictions ministry

task force, as well as members of the Board of the Unitarian Universalist camp and conference center, known as U Bar U; in Oklahoma, at the Southwest Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, known as SWUUSI, I met ministers, Directors of Religious Education, and lay members of all ages from across the district.

On a practical and contractual level, it has been a time of work, vacation, and, in the next few days, study leave. On a religious level, it has been a time to deepen, expand, and affirm my Unitarian Universalist faith. I assure you, I won't put you through a kind of Dear Diary travelogue. But I do hope to share with you how these weeks have served as a time of reflection, and of preparation for today's sermon, in which I wish to talk to you about the need to see Unitarian Universalism as more than a gathering place for spiritual, but not religious, people; about the need to see the Unitarian

Universalist faith as more than a church of the miscellaneous. Ours is a religion—an undeniably, if uniquely, organized religion. To forget that we are bound together by shared religious values and history is to risk falling into social, political, and religious insignificance. To celebrate our diversity *while overlooking* our commonality is to neglect the value-based *roots* of this particular tree of life while relishing its fruits, so risking a toppling over of that which sustains and transforms us.

Glad to have me back? While it may sound a little like I'm a returning parent skeptical that you actually kept the house clean or that you refrained from having any wild teenage parties while I was away, it wasn't my being gone that *prompted* me to speak on this topic, but much more so my entire first year of ministry, serving this congregation, and asking myself whether I have adequately expressed to you my

ongoing, unfolding understanding of Unitarian Universalism as a religion, and whether I have clearly asked that we *all* strive to express our shared faith as religious people and as a religious community living in relationship with the rest of the world.

It's not an easy task. Nor should it be, because ours is not an easy religion. If it *feels* easy, if we're continually feeling like, "Hey! I like this religion! No creeds, no dogma! I get to believe whatever I want!" then I'm not so sure we're doing it right. In fact, if that's the case, I'm pretty sure we're not. For, while it's true we have no creed, Unitarian Universalism is not, to paraphrase Revs. Barbara and Jaco ten Hove, about believing whatever you *want*, but about believing what you have to—what your conscience *demand*s that you believe. It is to be in creative tension between what you *have* known and what, in James Luther Adams' words, "the inescapable,

commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence” continually presents to you *to be* known. So it is that, of Adams’ “five smooth stones of liberalism,” which we heard Maxine share earlier, the *first* smooth stone is “the principle that ‘revelation’ is continuous.” Revelation is continuous. The Rev. David Bumbaugh, a former professor of mine, frames this same notion as “the universe in which we live and move ... [being] the expression of an inexorable *process*.” Therefore the search for truth and meaning mentioned in our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle is not merely a free process, though free it must be, but a necessary and necessarily *responsible* one. For to close our eyes and ears to unfolding truths which will lead us closer to just and loving community is to refuse to see that we are a part of this continuously evolving interdependent world. It is to feign religion while actually practicing, in Adams’ words, “an

ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world.”

But can we truly live above the conflicts? Or does our effort to do so merely help perpetuate such conflicts? Rev. Bumbaugh claims, in his Unitarian Universalist statement of belief, that “our location within the community of living things places upon us inescapable responsibilities.” He continues, “Life is more than our understanding of it, but the level of our comprehension demands that we act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and that we seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole....” This statement captures why I will continually address issues of justice for as long as I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. Addressing justice is not about replacing a “real” sermon with the morning paper’s headlines, or having pet passions that takes us away from our spiritual practices.

In Adams' words again, "a faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us grief.... It is one that exempts its believer from surrender to the sustaining, transforming reality that demands the community of justice and love." Therefore working toward justice is not peripheral, but central to the Unitarian Universalist religion.

And so it was that I found myself attending this past week, at SWUUSI, an informational workshop about the February 2009 International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women, in Houston, to which women and men are all invited. (For those with children, onsite childcare will be provided.) Featuring speakers coming from as far as the Philippines, Japan, India, Transylvania, and Nigeria, the convocation will be a means to, quote, "use our faith and collective power as community leaders to launch action that benefits women and families worldwide." Such a gathering

exemplifies James Luther Adams' fourth smooth stone, which affirms "the necessity of social incarnation" of virtue: "not only the power of thought, but also the power of organization and the organization of power." The convocation is February 26 through March 1, 2009. I intend to go, and I certainly encourage you to go as well. To attend will be one way that we can live into our sixth UU principle, "the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

Now, speaking of justice, while I was at SWUUSI, I also attended a workshop called "Looking for God in the Bible," which focused on passages from the Old Testament. Before I tell you what I learned from that workshop, remember the passage that Maxine read from James Luther Adams, that "To be sure, the word 'God' is so heavily laden with unacceptable connotations that it is for many people scarcely usable without confusion." Remembering that, let me just say that in that

workshop, reading about God's manipulation of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, Samuel and Saul, and beyond, I was most certainly confused, and bemused, by the God who appears throughout the earlier books of the Old Testament, with his power tripping, his trust lacking, his anger arbitrary, his punishments at times sadistic, and his demands highly, highly questionable.

But, while I reject this unpredictable and seemingly perpetually cantankerous *depiction* of God, I cannot reject James Luther Adams' definition of god as that "inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all life," nor can I reject the first source of our living tradition—the, quote, "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

How we experience that transcending mystery and wonder is where our diversity most frequently comes to surface—the pagans, the Buddhists, the humanists, the deists, the Jews and Christians among us have different ways of talking about and experiencing transformative reality. That is fine and good. As 19th century Unitarian minister Olympia Brown says, “Go on finding ever new applications of these truths, and new enjoyments in their contemplation.” But I ask that, while we celebrate such diversity, we not forget the truths Brown speaks of, the common rooted values that feed and inform those different branches of experience and expression. And I ask that we not forget that all these branches of our faith are meant to move us to “a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

For right here in this world—the world in which each and every one of us lives and which we, whether we have our own children or not, are passing on to future generations—right here in the world we share, as you know, are forces that seem determined to uphold only the lives of the wealthy and the privileged, while destroying the lives of the poor and the marginalized. By forces I don't mean particular people or political parties. I mean systems such as unbridled corporate capitalism, the military industrial complex, racism, classism, fanaticism, fascism—whatever system that perpetuates fear and injustice on this Earth.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called, as every one of our seven principles shows, to counter such injustice with justice, to practice “justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” to strive toward “peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

Why? Our history demands it. From the days of the earliest Unitarian and Universalist prophets who were courageous enough to challenge the existence of both a punishing God and an exclusively Trinitarian God, we have chosen, in Olympia Brown's words, "to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals." Or, as James Luther Adams put it, "While recognizing [the] tragic nature of the human condition," throughout centuries of war and atrocities, we have continued "to live with a dynamic hope."

I experienced dynamic hope alive within me as I worked, laughed, worshipped, played, and learned with 32 Unitarian Universalist high school youth two weeks ago during a week of summer camp. I felt it alive within me when, at Ministry Days, hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers were called by a leading Old Testament scholar to replace systems of wealth and power, as reflected in the Book of Solomon, with systems

of love, justice, and righteousness, as shown in the Book of Jeremiah. Hope is alive in New Orleans and it is alive in this congregation of Unitarian Universalists of all ages and backgrounds, striving to build a home for ourselves in which we can continue grow and deepen our shared faith.

Knowing these things to be true, let us continue our journey. May we travel thousands of miles together, thousands of days together, toward peace, toward love, toward divine living.

Amen.

Closing hymn #298 Wake Now My Senses