

The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Unitarian Universalism

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Even as late as yesterday morning, this sermon did not have a title. You may have noticed the omission in your Order of Service. I knew this was to be a sermon for Association Sunday. I knew I wanted to talk about what is worthwhile about our faith tradition, particularly in today's world, as well as the numbers of people I imagine are out there just waiting to hear that such a "church" exists. I knew this Sunday, as prescribed by our Association's leaders, is about evangelism, advertising, growing our faith, and I wondered what makes us reluctant, sometimes, to mention our religious affiliation in public. Are we embarrassed because it is hard to define? Are we afraid of the confrontations we might elicit when more traditional believers start asking where we stand on various hot-button issues? Where is our self-esteem? Our pride? What I want to talk about this morning became, for me, a matter of principle – our first principle to be exact. And so the title of this sermon is "The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Unitarian Universalism."

I first heard about Association Sunday at a Clara Barton District meeting of UU ministers last spring, when Ken Sawyer, then President of the national UU Ministers Association, was our guest speaker. He told us about how the UUA leadership had come to the executive board of the Ministers Association with the invitation to help sponsor and promote among the ministers the upcoming Association Sunday on October 14th. The executive board's response to the UUA was, and rightly so, "Wait a minute. You went ahead and made this decision, are publicizing the date, have printed the brochures and the posters, yet never asked the ministers' association leadership for their opinions, or even worse the ministers themselves. Are you really expecting our "independent" congregations and their independent ministers to accept your decision and put it on their calendars without question?" The UUMA refused to endorse the Now is the Time campaign of the UUA.

Well, I did, eventually, put Association Sunday on the calendar, but not without serious thought. My understanding has always been that this is a bottom-up association, not a top-down corporation run by President (and CEO?) Bill Sinkford. Each congregation is entirely autonomous, as Amherst knows well, and the primary purpose of the Association (as I read it in the by-law excerpt at the top of your order of service) is to serve the needs of its member congregations. I guess I sometimes balk at being told what those needs are (and at the same time what the answer to those needs are) before I'm even asked.

And I, like other ministers, wonder too about the quality of the ads that are created by outside marketing firms utilized by the UUA. We were not fond of the description "The Uncommon Denomination" which was developed for a Kansas City advertising blitz in 2003. The word denomination infers that we are a religious group with particularly held beliefs and practices – which in some ways we are, but in many ways we are not. But even that wording resulted in a 27% increase in membership over a three year period

compared to only 11% in the surrounding, untargeted area of the same UUA District. Many of the ministers I talk to would prefer that our advertisements be written by actual Unitarian Universalists, maybe even ministers themselves.

But I decided that I did want to address what is behind Association Sunday, even if I don't necessarily agree with the process used to get to this moment. Just over half of the UU congregations in this country, 560 of them to be exact, are joining us this morning in celebrating our religious movement and raising money to publicize ourselves to the millions of people who have no idea who or what we are.

Why should we celebrate Unitarian Universalism, and why should we make the effort (and donate our money) to spread our good news? Here are the words of the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, someone who has written extensively, and passionately, about the unique covenantal nature of our free church. "Let's quit focusing on our ancestor's mistakes, and emphasize what they left us of priceless worth. Like the rejection of creeds. Like the worth of every individual. Like the saving power of love. Like the very notion of covenant. Like the possibility of new life. Like the necessity of forgiveness. Like the courage to speak truth to power. Do we need to evolve beyond any of these?"

She also wrote this: "A free congregation is a body of people who have covenanted regularly to pay attention together to that worthy of their love and devotion. Doing so is a joy that strengthens, feeds, and salts character. The people don't have to agree in all things, so long as they faithfully reason together in the spirit of love. Reasoning in the spirit of love will persuade many of them quite often to make the character of their faith community a powerful influence for good on one another, on their children, and on their community. That is why a liberal, rational and free church is the best hope of the world. Salvation by character. Yes, that is our hope, I hope."

We don't always do everything right in our Association, just as in our individual congregations, but there are so many reasons we can and should hold our heads high. Go tell it on the mountain. Shout Unitarian Universalism from the highest hill, as I urged us in my canvass sermon last winter.

For this advertising campaign, we're shouting from the pages of Time Magazine, among other venues. The first ad came out just last week, and it's an eye catcher. "Is God keeping you from going to Church? Maybe you're uncomfortable with the idea of God – or at least someone else's idea of God. Yet maybe you yearn for a loving, spiritual community where you can be inspired and encouraged as you search for your own truth and meaning. This is a church, you ask? Welcome to Unitarian Universalism."

You can see these at the UUA web site, uua.org – it's not necessary to actually buy a magazine to check them out. The next ad will read "Find us and ye shall seek. If you're searching for a spiritual home where questions are as welcome as answers, find us. We are a loving, open-minded religious community that encourages you to seek your own path, wherever it leads. To nurture your spirit and find your own truth and meaning. Welcome to Unitarian Universalism."

Some of the Time Magazine ads will start on one page and end on the next, with articles and essays between the two, authored by Unitarian Universalists on important topics such as the relationship between religion and science, the role of religion in American democracy, and our UU perspective on religion, morality and sexuality. These ads and articles should catch people's attention and possibly bring an influx of visitors through our doors. We should be prepared for this, and know something about the ads which attracted them here.

Sometimes I think we forget how radically different, heretical, our message is, even among other liberal faiths. Forrest Church writes that in the traditional view "religion is a body of specific teachings and practices, won by a leap of faith and secured by strict adherence to the truth as it is revealed or taught." In contrast, religion, for us "has little to do with a body of beliefs or practices; it represents a gradual process of awakening to the depths and possibilities of life itself." (A Chosen Faith, p. 10-11)

The tag line for this campaign is no longer "The Uncommon Denomination," but "Unitarian Universalism: Nurture Your Spirit. Help Heal Our World." It is indeed the combination we aim at in everything we do here in this congregation. We nurture our spirits to give us the strength to help heal a hurting world. The Latin root of the word religion – "religare" – means to bring together for greater strength. We are better together.

There are five stages planned over five years to the Now Is The Time to Grow Our Faith campaign. The first is happening today, planned to help grow our UU numbers. Of the money raised, 50% will go toward national awareness advertising, 25% to the UUA's Diversity of Ministry project, and 25% will go directly to the Districts for grants to congregations for their growth and outreach projects. I can imagine that we may become a recipient of some of that grant funding as we expand our numbers and our vision.

Next year the focus of the Now Is The Time initiative will be on growing our diversity, followed by growing our witness, growing our leadership and growing our spirit. I believe that each of these goals is admirable and necessary for our Association to flourish. That is why I chose to have UUSA participate in Association Sunday. The UUA leadership is trying to do what it thinks is right, and if we do not establish a relationship with the group we sometimes identify simply as "Boston," how will anyone ever know what we think – or need?

I also believe that there is much to benefit us in strengthening our ties to other local congregations. There isn't time this morning, but some other day I would like to introduce us to the Clara Barton Chalice Lighter's Program, designed to be of benefit to our closest UU neighbors in our own District when they (or we) are in the most need.

There is one significant way, however, in which I am not exactly following the suggested format for this service sent to me from the UUA. The UUA would like us to have a dedicated offering for the Now is the Time campaign, and send it as a lump sum to

Boston. I have chosen instead to provide pre-addressed envelopes in the newsletter and in your Order of Service so that you may personally choose when, if, and how much you would care to donate to this effort to grow our national UU membership – and perhaps our Amherst UU membership as well. I will be sending a check, too. There is a place on the envelope to identify your congregation, even if you are not an official UUSA member. And don't forget to make your check out to the Unitarian Universalist Association. I will not tell you the amount they suggested that each of us give. You know what you are willing and able to give.

Our Offering this morning will be for the life of *this* UU Society, for without congregations like us the Association would not exist.

Decades ago A. Powell Davies wrote what could have been our opening words this morning:

There are millions of Unitarians in America today, but not in Unitarian churches. There are millions of Unitarian [Universalists] who do not know its history. They do not know its basis. They do not know its purpose. They do not know that they themselves are Unitarian [Universalists]. If...[our] religion is to shape the world to peace and freedom, these people must be joined together to advance its cause.

Religions with worn-out creeds cannot do it. Ir-religion cannot do it. Confused religions cannot do it. If the strength of a free person's faith is to be the under-girding of the world tomorrow, a world so full of dangers, yet so rich in opportunities, and if the people of America must rise to take their place within this venture, then there must be hundreds of new churches, and multitudes of pioneers. This will come about partly if Unitarian [Universalists] will preach their faith, for there are many who are ready to hear it. But it will come about most surely if Unitarian [Universalists] are willing to live their faith..."

Now is the time. Together, let's find all the ways we can to help give our tradition a larger voice and a greater influence in the world. We are worth the effort.