

Are We a Private or a Public Congregation?

Alison Wohler, October 25, 2009

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

It was a short article in a recent issue of the UU World Magazine (Fall, 2009, p. 14-15) that caught the attention of your Board of Trustees. By Michael Durall, it was titled "Reach out to become a 'public' church." Durall makes some good points in his article, taken from ideas in his book The Almost Church, but there are some things he says with which I find I cannot agree. Your Board also has a range of opinions about this article. Let me read some of what it says.

First Durall talks about attending the opening of a community health clinic that was being financed in large part by a local church – not a Unitarian Universalist church – whose stated primary purpose was to serve the public good. Another church Durall held up as being a public church raised ¾ of a million dollars to build a Boys and Girls Club. He could not think of any UU congregations that have taken on similar projects.

Durall quotes the Rev. William Murry, UU minister and former president of Meadville Lombard Theological School: *Too often we have understood our task as relegated to the private sphere, the personal lives of our members. Too often we have preached sermons on trivial and inconsequential subjects rather than address the significant issues of our times. In a word, too many of our ministers and churches have retreated into the safety and security of the private sphere and have little or no public ministry, and that is tragic.*

I think this can be true, although just what defines a trivial sermon topic might be debated. What might seem trivial to some may be just what another person needs to make it through the night. There is much brokenness beyond these walls, but also inside these walls too.

In his article Michael Durall writes: *I believe that many of Unitarian Universalism's perceived strengths are in actuality its most significant liabilities. The fourth Unitarian Universalist Principle, 'A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,' is the quintessential private spirituality and may be detrimental to future growth.* With these words I also disagree.

He continues: *When I witnessed the ribbon-cutting ceremony opening that health center, the search for truth struck me as trifling in comparison to what this congregation had accomplished....The search for truth resounded not only as trivial, but indifferent to a world in great need.*

Durall believes that if our congregations emphasize the search for truth as a fundamental goal, as in our very own UUSA Mission Statement, we are primarily looking to attract the self-help and spirituality markets to which our bookstores cater so well. He uses these words in a derogatory way. He believes that "our primary concern should lie elsewhere – away from the private sphere and toward becoming a public church, one that reaches out to create a more just and humane world." This, also, is in our Mission Statement.

So are we a public or a private congregation? Our Mission Statement has some of each.

Here is how Durall suggests we measure ourselves: *You can perform a simple test to determine the extent to which your congregation takes a public or private stance, he writes. Just look for the 'outreach' or 'social action' line item in the church's budget. This line item is separate from denominational or district dues.*

He cites these statistics: *Mainline Protestant congregations, churchgoers most like UUs in socioeconomic terms, maintain a line item for outreach of between 10 and 29 percent, with the national average being 16 percent. This money goes to people who are less fortunate, beyond the church's four walls.*

Our line item for Social Action, which amounts to the percentage of the morning's offering we give to the Social Justice Committee to distribute to organizations of their choice, is less than 1% of our annual budget.

Let me soften that blow. First of all, Michael Durall is limiting his measure of non-triviality to an amount of money. There are many socially responsible, non trivial, things we do here and through this congregation that do not involve only money. And I would also remind us that many in this congregation, as individuals and families, do give their money generously to multiple and various causes beyond these walls. We are not an ungenerous congregation. We just don't do all of our social work or make all of our contributions through this organization. But in terms of the money we give through our pledges to this Society, almost all of it goes strictly for staff, religious education, building needs and our larger UU association. Our finances are focused pretty much on ourselves, even though I would assume with some confidence that this situation is not as we would ideally have it.

Let me return for just a minute to Michael Durall's opinion about the triviality of the work we do here toward our personal spiritual journeys. I do not agree that these things are trivial. I believe that the direction we take in our lives and the choices we make, ethically, morally, and about our priorities, are grounded in the part of our lives we might call religious or spiritual. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "A person will worship something, have no doubt about that... Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming." William James, in his book on The Varieties of Religious Experience wrote that "the key feature of significant spiritual experience across traditions and epochs is a shift toward warm other-affirming affections." (Unlimited Love, by Stephen G. Post, p. 71) What we believe is what we are which becomes what we do. Learning to see "the other" as an extension of ourselves is exactly what leads us to compassionate action. These are not trivial things.

There has been, since the beginning of recorded theological thinking, a debate over which is more important, what we believe (our faith) or how we act (our works). You can probably tell, from the direction I've been headed in this sermon, where I come down on this debate. I think they are both important, and that, taken seriously, one should lead to the other, from whichever direction you begin. If we would immerse ourselves in the needs of the world we would eventually come to the understanding of our oneness. We all need the same things. Likewise, if we could come (by whatever means) to truly understand our oneness (the interdependent web of all existence) how could we not be moved to do whatever was in our power to help our fellow web-dwellers? It's like a question that came to my mind often when I was beginning my work to become a minister: Now that you know, what are you going to do about it?

Did you hear the words that Augusta read for our chalice lighting this morning? **You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, so that it gives light to all the house. In the same way let your light shine before others that they may see your good works.**

I see a part of what we are called here to do is to light our lamps; engage our souls in the nature and the work of the world. Once our lamps are lit, however, we become compelled to let them shine – to take our light out where it can be of use. The UUA has a slogan I've mentioned several times this year already: "Nurture your spirit; help heal the world." Light up your soul, and then let it shine.

Rebecca Parker writes that "to have soul is to be awake to life. To have soul [to turn on our inner lamps] is to live with a sensitive awareness of the real presence of other human beings and the earth. It is turning your hands to the work of justice and compassion, your mind to the call of wisdom, your heart to decisions for life. It is making your whole being an act of praise." (Blessing the World, p. 135)

Our mission, as I see it and as you have written in your official Mission Statement, is to both nurture our spirits (the private aspect of what we do) and heal the world (our public ministry). It is not only the world that is fragile – our bodies and our relationships and our lives are fragile too. We have many ministries here that deal with the personal and the private. Could we do more, however, with the healing the world part of our mission?

I've been talking about this for years now, but I would really like to see us take a leap of faith and begin making our Sunday morning offerings a deliberate act of our public ministry. The leap of faith is that we believe in ourselves and our mission enough to put our budget on the line, confident that doing the right thing, standing on the high moral ground, will not result in the collapse of our finances. There are many people who would love to be part of a more public congregation.

The history of other congregations who have done this clearly demonstrates that the income side of the budget does not suffer when the line for the Sunday offering is eliminated. Rather, the UU congregations that have moved to this more public model of ministry have increased both their membership and their annual income. Not to mention the benefit to the causes that were the recipients of all those dedicated offerings.

We, all of us, just have to commit to doing this if we want to make it happen. When we feel good about ourselves and how we are living out our mission, this will be reflected in the way the congregation grows and supports itself financially. As I've also said before, when we become the congregation we want to be, others will want to be part of us too.

There is so much more I would like to say in this sermon, but time is a limiting factor. That is one reason we've arranged to have a conversation on these subjects after the service is over today. I would love to have the opportunity to hear what you are thinking about this topic of being a private or a public congregation. I do not like that word "or."

Two weeks ago I read a little reflection that talked about how the author pretty much knew he was not one of the daring ones of this world. He was a stay at home and keep the home fires burning kind of guy. But he was coming to understand the value of the

adventurers and inventors, the ones who could not stay home. There are those of us for whom keeping the home fires of this Society burning are the most important thing. For others it feels more important to reach out beyond this Society. The private and the public – it takes all of us to make a congregation. It's "both/and," not "either/or."

To sum up my thoughts this morning: I want us to be all that we can be – privately and publically. I want us to feel held by the hands and hearts sitting all around us right now. I want us to know, deep in our beings, that what happens to one of us happens to us all. I want us to feel, too, the connections between ourselves and men and women and children on the other side of the street and on the other side of the earth, and that in our hands and hearts we can and do hold the whole world. We are of one beautiful, and at the same time suffering, world. I want us to be lovers of life. And I want our lives to bless this world. I want to be and do it all – and I will never stop working toward that goal. There is too much at stake.

Here we learn to see beauty. Here we are also called to be healers.

*The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will
a moving forward into the world
with the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,
a confession of surprise,
a grateful acknowledgment
that in the midst of a broken world
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.
There is an embrace of kindness,
that encompasses all life,
even yours.
And while there is injustice,
anesthetization, or evil
there moves
a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage,
a revolutionary love
protesting, urging, insisting
that which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty
and this rage.*

May it be so.