

Unitarian Universalism: The Promise and the Challenge

by Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell

A sermon given February 15, 2004
First Unitarian Church
Victoria, BC

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come to this time and this place
to rediscover the wondrous gift
of free religious community—
To renew our faith in the holiness of life—
And to rekindle the flame of memory and hope.
Come, let us worship together.

There was a time when people went to church because—well, it was the thing to do. They got Sunday school pins for perfect attendance. In those days people went to the church of their parents and their grandparents. They sang hymns that had been around for generations—lusty hymns full of blood and crosses and sacrifice. Not only did they go to church on Sunday morning, but they went on Sunday night and then to prayer meeting on Wednesday night. I did all these things, and I expect that more than a few of you did, too. That was back in the 1950s. But then the world started to change. Then came Elvis and feminism and Civil Rights. And then Vietnam and the assassination of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. We lost our innocence. We lost the faith of our fathers.

How did the world change over the last 40 years or so? And what do those changes mean to those of us who are leaders in our religious institutions? How well do we as Unitarian

Universalists meet contemporary needs? How effective is our prophetic voice in the vast ethical wilderness of this culture? These are some questions we need to ask ourselves.

In the 1950s the empty prosperity was killing the men in the gray flannel suits, and the women were being strangled by their apron strings. Neither was free: he was a servant of the establishment, and she served him. The spiritual vacuum of the society was obscured by the elation of peace after WW II and the rise of consumerism.

The myth of the happy nuclear family and the god-fearing nation blew wide open in the 1960s, as the youth of this country made the rest of us face the tragedy of Vietnam; as Blacks moved to claim full citizenship; as women proclaimed they must be treated as equals and not just an adjunct to a man and his work; as the pill freed the body electric for passionate expression.

It was a noble effort, the 1960s, and we have never been the same since, but disillusionment set in as we realized that the world was not going to be changed by declaration. Vietnam continued well into the 1970s, and America still plays the bully nation to the rest of the world. There have been gains for African Americans, but equality is still elusive. With women free to take on careers of their own, men and women alike have been confronted with the question, “What about the children?”

The 1970s focused on the individual. We talked about “peak moments.” Gestalt therapy guru Fritz Perls told us that we were responsible to ourselves, full stop. We held encounter groups in our churches. We talked about open marriage, and some tried it out. Pretty soon, this focus on the self became untenable, as it always does. Boring, really. And destructive.

The 1980s found us in the Age of Greed. The best and the brightest were not becoming servants of the good, but servants of the dollar. “How can I get mine?” was the relevant question. Greed is still very much the order of the day—you’ve all read of the corporate scandals over the past few years. Rules are apparently there to be broken. But at the same time, there is a resurgence of interest in spirituality. Experiencing a deep spiritual emptiness, many people have become searchers—they are looking for something—something that would answer a longing that money and power and material goods can never answer. The largest demographic group is, of course, the Baby Boomers, and they are now moving to the age where they have an existential understanding that they will one day die. This is another impetus for their asking the question, “So what’s it all about?”

To answer their longing for meaning, these seekers by and large do not return to the faiths of their childhoods. Some will go to the fundamentalist churches, which offer a clear message and an ethical direction, an alternative to a society that they see as godless and dissolute—and I would have to say they have a point there. Catholics and Jews are also showing renewed interest. But for others, the ready-made answers just don’t satisfy.

Denominational loyalties go out the window. If they were raised in a conventional Christian church that claims that Jesus is *the* way and not just *a* way, they question that belief. They have seen films, they have traveled, and they respect cultural differences. They are more tolerant, more inclusive than previous generous generations. Some experiment—they may discover Zen Buddhism, or 12-step groups, or various New Age religions. They want to make decisions for themselves and to adopt beliefs that have integrity for them. Above all, they want to satisfy the spiritual hunger that our consumer culture fails so miserably to satisfy and which conventional religion has failed to address. These people, my friends, constitute a vast mission field for Unitarian Universalists. They are the ones who say, after they have found us, I wish I had known you were here—I've been searching for you for years.

We are the religious movement that the culture is now catching up to. How many times have I read an article in the paper about a major denomination struggling over an issue that we decided 10 or 15 or 20 years ago? Women in the ministry? Ordination of gays? Marriage of gays and lesbians? A commitment, if imperfect, to genuine diversity in our churches? I just read an article a few days ago that proclaimed that churches are now conducting personalized memorial services that celebrate the life of the deceased, rather than the one-size-fits-all funeral service. How long have we been doing that? Over and over again, we are on the cutting edge of social change. So why is it that we are not at the heart of the conversation, nationally? Why is it that our membership in UU churches lost 687 adults and 1,285 children and youth this past year, instead of gaining thousands of new members? And does it really matter?

With so much to offer, we seem to be able to pretty consistently undermine ourselves, which is a great sadness to me. As John Buehrens, our former President, said to me once, "I'm not surprised that we shoot ourselves in the foot; I'm just surprised at how quickly we can reload."

Let me offer a story. This past January I took a trip to a small community in the South—the community to be unnamed—and while I was there I visited the Sunday service at the local Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. I was amazed that this small group of ninety people had built a lovely brick sanctuary, debt-free, which they had just opened. And it actually looked like a church, which is important in the South, where everybody goes to church—a lot. But then the service. They did light a chalice and welcome visitors. So far, so good. They had announcements. They sang a hymn that was almost unsingable. And then they had a talk by an English professor entitled "Moby Dick and Peace." It was actually a lecture, followed by a Q & A. There was nothing that appealed to the heart or to the spirit that morning. There was nothing that would have brought comfort to one who was hurting. Or to one who was searching for a deeper religious faith. Before the service, one of the leaders had said to me, "We don't want to get too religious, you know." And they certainly didn't.

"We don't want to get too religious"? The Unitarian Universalist movement is a religious movement. Churches are not social clubs. They are not ethical societies where we debate issues of the day. Churches exist as places where people can grow spiritually, and then

out of that growth, bless the larger world. That is their unique reason for being. Spiritual growth. When we forget that, we lose our mooring and begin to drift. We forget why the institution exists. Cut loose from any sense of mission, we fall into petty quarrels and fritter away our resources of time and energy. Given our call to spiritual renewal and justice seeking, this forgetfulness is what I would call institutional sin.

Let's think for a moment about why visitors come to church. People don't get up on Sunday morning and decide, "I think I'll go to church today, and maybe I'll hear a good lecture." Or "I'll go on down to church and listen to a string of announcements." No, more than likely, when somebody takes the time to get up, get dressed, and drive to church, it's about something pretty significant. When I went to a UU church for the first time, I went because I was separated from my husband, and the Baptist church I had been attending considered me some kind of fallen woman and did not want me teaching the youth any more. My whole social network had fallen apart. So I was talking with my therapist about all this, and she said, "Why don't you go over to the Unitarian Universalist church—there are lots of divorced people over there." And she was right of course. And I was accepted as I was. What a wonderful thing—to be accepted as one is.

People come to church because they need something. A woman comes because she has just lost her child in a court case. An older couple has moved from another state, after retirement. A young couple comes, with their child, because they want to provide some religious education for the family. A young man comes because he can hardly stand to listen to the news any more. Two gay men show up because they hope to be accepted as they are. "What now?" all these people are asking. "Where will I find meaning?" "What can I give myself to, that has value?" "Where will I find the love and support to take me through this tough journey called life?" This is why people come to church. To find, and to serve.

So, being unclear about our mission is first and foremost what keeps us small and ineffective. But there are other ways we undermine ourselves, as well. For example, staying stuck in the negative. Deciding what we don't believe, but never moving to embrace the positive values of what we do believe. Many Unitarian Universalists are rebels without a cause. But you can't build a life on "no," and you can't invite others to join a "no"-based movement.

And then, to continue, in our desire to be respectful to individuals, we sometimes fail the community. In every church of every denomination, we are going to have some unhealthy people. People who need excessive attention. People who cause needless conflict. People who are negative about most everything. That's understandable, and that's OK—so long as the congregation doesn't let these folks dominate the life of the church. It doesn't take many—just one or two can really hold up the life of the church. And I don't blame these troublesome folks when this happens—I blame the leaders who are passive, who do not set boundaries, who are afraid to say "no." The community should not be up for grabs to destructive individuals.

Another reason we are not growing is that we tend to hide our light under a bushel. I'm not sure why we do this. In the first place, too many of our churches and fellowships go off into the woods and build, and then put up a small and very tasteful sign that is very difficult to see. We need to make ourselves accessible. We're uneasy about telling friends and acquaintances about our faith, lest we be thought of as proselytizing. It's as though we don't want people to find out about us. We say we want to grow—but our actions belie our words.

We have been called “elitist” by many. Perhaps it is true. Perhaps we are guilty of what someone has called the sin of “uniquity.” It starts with self-righteousness. Some of us flat-out don't believe in evil, not in others and certainly not in ourselves, in spite of in-your-face evidence such as the holocaust, for example. We take that soft, mushy liberal attitude that if we all had good parents and warm milk at bedtime, there would be no ill will or violence in this world. I remember when I was serving a little congregation in California when I was doing graduate work, and one Sunday we ended the service with “Amazing Grace.” When we sang the words “that saved a wretch like me,” one woman called out “I'm not a wretch. I'm not going to sing this.” Whereupon a young man stood up in the back of the little group of worshippers. We knew him well. He was mentally ill. He had AIDS. “Sometimes when I go to the Salvation Army for dinner,” he said, “we sing this song. It's a good song. I know I'm a wretch.” Maybe we need to be in touch with our own wretchedness; maybe we could then cultivate the humility that would open us spiritually.

I asked earlier in the sermon, “Does it really matter that we are losing members?” Consider the times. Dissenters are losing their Civil Rights. Environmental protections are being swept away. In a wealthy nation more and more people, at least in my state, are hungry—in fact, we have the highest rate of hunger in the nation. Elderly folks can't pay their rent and pay for their medication, so some of them are skipping their medication or taking it every other day, instead of every day. Mentally ill people walk our streets, cold and disheveled. And we are now spending \$5,000,000,000 a month on two wars we started in order to bring peace. Has there ever been a time when we needed Unitarian Universalist values more? We can make a difference in this country. Our presence matters.

It matters to individual lives, too, and it matters to families. It is difficult to live life well. This is a culture that fosters isolation and loneliness. We need a place where we will be welcome as we are, where we can be free to find our own theological and spiritual grounding within a community of caring and respect and support.

It's time that we leave the adolescence of our religious movement—the focus on ourselves and our needs—it's time we leave our confusion about who we are. We are a religious movement. We are a free faith, grounded in love, with a noble history of tolerance and sacrifice. What a wondrous thing! We have healing to offer a hurting world. We have an invitation that is open to all. It's grown-up time. What are we waiting for? So be it. Amen.

PRAYER

Spirit of Life, we pray this morning that we might embody the principles that bring us together: to honor all persons, to honor the earth, to be ever open to revelation of your spirit in our lives. We are called upon to lead the way in these perilous times. Give us strength of purpose and courage of heart. Amen.

BENEDICTION

May we be worthy carriers of the flame of the free church tradition. Go in love, and go in peace. Amen.