

February 21, 2009
UUFTC, Sonora

Unitarian Universalism: What Lies Ahead?

This week, I received good news from the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, back in Boston. The Committee is the part of the Unitarian Universalist Association that evaluates ministerial candidates and monitors the progress of ordained ministers. I bring this up because today is Association Sunday, when we honor and acknowledge our larger movement. Credentialing ministers is one of the important functions that our Association performs for congregations. The fellowshiping committee makes the determination, after graduation, to admit a candidate into preliminary fellowship. And after three evaluated years of preliminary fellowship, it makes the decision whether to admit a minister into final fellowship. So – the good news is that the Ministerial Fellowship Committee has decided to admit me into final fellowship. This is an important moment for this congregation – you have demonstrated your ability to work with a minister so that he or she can make steady progress toward final fellowship. I want to thank the members of my Committee on Ministry, who have worked hard to develop the ministry of this congregation and to help me to progress to final fellowship. Ronda Tamerlane chairs the committee. Also serving on it are Diane Doddridge, Dave Jenkins, and John Kramer. Their work isn't over though – the committee will continue to work with me over the coming years to give their input on how this ministry is doing.

Well, of course, I'm telling you this so that we can take a moment to celebrate! But I'm also using it to illustrate one of the important functions of our larger Unitarian Universalist Association. One of the hallmarks of our congregational polity is the right of each congregation to choose its own minister, and a congregation is unfettered in making that choice. Centuries ago, this might have meant calling a minister who had little formal education, such as Hosea Ballou and Thomas Starr King. Today, congregations typically want assurance that the minister they call has been through a thorough process of evaluation. And this is just one of the many functions that our association provides. I will be formally admitted into final fellowship at our next General Assembly, which will be held in June of 2009 in Salt Lake City. If you haven't ever attended a GA, this would be a great occasion to do so – to celebrate with me, and also to see our larger denomination in action.

As we know, UUs tend to be quite individualistic, and each of our congregations has its own distinctive style. We have little in the way of formal denominational hierarchy and rules, and we have no requirement of theological uniformity. No one can be required to subscribe to an oath or creed as a condition of membership. Nonetheless, we are part of a larger movement, and today we take a few minutes to consider what that means. Two weeks ago, we reviewed the history of the development along parallel tracks of Universalism and Unitarianism, going all the way back to the 2nd Century. As we saw, the two denominations grew side-by-side during the 19th century. And, after many years

of deliberation, they decided to consolidate into the Unitarian Universalist Association, in 1961. Many theological changes have taken place over the course of two centuries, along with changes in governance. But certain essentials have remained – speaking theologically, a commitment to reason, justice, and compassion; speaking ecclesiastically, we have retained our commitment to bottom-up governance from the congregational level as opposed to top-down governance by a church hierarchy of bishops, dioceses, and so forth.

UU congregations are organized locally into districts. Our district is the Pacific Central District. It extends from Fresno to Eureka, and from Reno to Honolulu. The district has a very small staff, and its offices are located in Berkeley. It exists more to serve as a resource for the congregations, than as a governing body. In fact, it has little or no actual authority over the congregations. It does hold various district-wide events, including District Assembly in the spring, and I encourage you to attend one of these – it's a wonderful opportunity to meet other UUs.

Each district is represented on a national board of trustees that meets regularly to set policy for the larger organization. The association itself is headed by a president, who is elected every four years by us – UU members. For the past eight years, we have been extremely fortunate to have been served by Bill Sinkford, who has done great things for the association, particularly in the area of anti-oppression and multi-cultural work. We will be electing a new president next June at General Assembly, and whoever wins, the election will be historic. Bill Sinkford is the first African-American to head a predominantly-white denomination. The candidates for the 2009 election are a Latino, Peter Morales, and a woman, Laurel Hellman. Either would be a first for us! We will also be electing a moderator, who presides over General Assembly and meetings of the Board of Trustees.

Our association, the UUA, is located in a historic building on Beacon Street in Boston – located next to the Mass. Legislature, and across the street from the Boston common. Boston is filled with historic Unitarian and Universalist churches, some of them dating back to the 1700s. As with most, if not all, large organizations, our headquarters in Boston has a complicated organization chart, with numerous departments and staff. Parallel to this staff are many committees and boards made up of UU volunteers from around the country. So – despite our individualistic nature, we are part of a pretty extensive national network. The good news about that is that most of the association's work has to do with supporting congregations rather than governing them. So, what are some of the benefits we receive from being part of this national network?

In addition to credentialing ministers, the association also supports two seminaries – Starr King School in Berkeley, and Meadville-Lombard in Chicago. But many of our ministers also come from other seminaries, as I did. A number of organizations are affiliated with the UUA, and many of them provide resources that we can use. The UU Service Committee, for example, does social justice and human rights work, here at home, and also internationally. There are very active organizations of UU youth and young adults, a UU women's Federation, and UU United Nations Office. For a number of years, I worked to create and to develop a

UU environmental organization. It was first known as the Seventh Principle Project, and has now become the UU Ministry for Earth.

I want to mention another organization, from which we benefit greatly. I have mentioned it before – it's the California UU Legislative Ministry, with offices in Sacramento. UULM, as it's known, exists outside the formal Association structure. It is supported by individual contributions, almost like a congregation, and by a few grants. The Legislative Ministry has played a major role in state-wide efforts to secure the rights of Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. UULM actually formed the PAC that receives and distributes funds for the campaign to defeat Proposition 8. It has also played a major role in the effort to obtain affordable access to health care for Californians, and it is developing a task force to work on state-wide issues concerning water and global climate change. I've been serving on the board of UULM, and I value it highly as a resource for UUs. We need to have a voice on how policy gets made in California.

Okay – So that's a very quick tour of our national organization. For the rest of our time this morning, I want to talk about how I see our national, and international, movement growing and developing in the future. What lies Ahead – I believe that we have a very important role to play. Over these past several weeks, we have seen the beginnings of a very scary economic meltdown. Many of us, and many of our fellow Americans stand to be badly hurt by this economic crisis. On top of that, we have a disastrous war in Iraq that we need to end, a war in Afghanistan that is spinning out of control, a looming health care crisis, and the all-too-real threat caused by global climate change. All of these can be traced in one way or another to our heedless, materialistic worldview. We have taken a radically materialistic approach to modern-day life. We have acted on the philosophy that all we need to do is to make lots of money, and buy lots of toys, and that's the way to happiness.

Well, this economic crisis has exposed the economic bankruptcy of our materialistic world view. But far more important, I believe, is that this worldview has been bankrupt from the outset – it has been bankrupt morally, ethically, and yes, spiritually. We have lived as if all we need is material plenty. But that's not enough for human beings well-being, and it never has been. The current crisis only throws a spotlight on what has been true for many years. People sense just how empty this materialistic worldview is. And they're looking for something else, something to believe in, something to help them to feel that their lives have meaning and purpose beyond simply making money and buying stuff.

These last few weeks, I have been watching innumerable video clips on my computer – videos about the political campaigns heading toward November 4th. The clip that affected me the most was one in which an interviewer was questioning people who were walking into a rally featuring Gov. Sarah Palin. People were quite open in remarking on their distrust of an African-American candidate and also their distrust of Muslims. Many of them made it quite clear that their beliefs about the candidates were connected with their Christian beliefs. But what was most striking out of all of this was the fear and the anger that came through in the comments. People were expressing an almost palpable fear of

someone whom they see as different, as well as virulent anger at people who are “not like us!”

It seemed to me that these people were looking desperately for something to believe in, for something to hang on to to validate their world. And it was clear that they have been fed a steady diet of fear – fear of the “the other.” And I think there is a reason for the searching people are doing – they want something they can believe in, something to validate their lives, something to give meaning and purpose. And it makes me so sad to see how this seeking has led them into places where all they can take away is fear and anger. And make no mistake – when people’s fear and anger are stoked, the threat of violence rises as well.

Well, what does that have to do with us, and with our denomination, as we celebrate Association Sunday? Just this – our mission in the world of the 21st Century is to counter the fear, and the anger, and their potential for violence. In our reading this morning, Rebecca Parker expressed this as a matter of learning again to “live with reverence.” She was speaking not of reverence for some sort of god-figure, but of reverence for life itself in all its manifestations. Reverence as an embodiment of love! Reverence that sees every human being as sacred. Reverence that respects – that glories in – the complexity and the vastness of creation. A reverent worldview, in the sense that Dr. Parker means it, would reject the worldview that sees the earth as trash to be discarded; the worldview that sees all human beings as simply self-interested individuals; the worldview that sees violence and force as legitimate means of getting our way in the world.

Millions of people, throughout this country and throughout the world, are suffering from spiritual starvation. They want more out of their lives than endless consumption. And our mission, I suggest, is to reach out to starving souls and to provide the spiritual, ethical, moral sustenance they are hungering for. Reason has always been a pillar of our movement. Regard for knowledge is a major part of who we are. Even as we study, even as we seek the truth, we need to apply intelligent, persistent care in our seeking. We need to see the constant need for revolutionary new understandings, expressing reverence for the ongoing search as doing holy work.

Similarly, we need to have a sense of sacredness about the work we do for social justice and against oppression. We do it not to win political struggles, or simply to promote economic betterment, worthy as those goals may be. We need to do it out of a sense that all of us are brothers and sisters, that we are all connected. When done this way, social justice work, too, becomes holy work.

And in this sense of the sacredness and connectedness of all life is manifested in the promise of love. Because at the root of it, that is what we are really about. And in my view, any religion must be about love, or it is not worthy to be called a religion.

This comes back around to our movement, small though it may be in the grand scheme of things, because the message of love is done best when it is done together.

Let us dedicate ourselves to the thinking, the research, the practice, and the learning that enable us to bring meaning and purpose to thousands of starving souls.

Let us be witnesses for science and learning that show us how connected, how interdependent, all life is!

And let us work for social policies that embody our responsibility for one another and for the Earth.

Let us dedicate ourselves to using all the means at our disposal to bring more compassion and love into the world.

Let us be witnesses for the power of love to turn the world around!

May it be so. Blessed be. And amen!