

Theological Footnotes

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Feb. 21, 2010

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

(Webmaster Comment: This sermon is a response to questions submitted to Rev. Doege.)

• What can we do to teach the young when there are so few?

You know, I think this is the toughest question I got, because it is so real, and so important, and no one seems to have the perfect solution. Here are some thoughts.

We need to make the church and its programs as attractive to young families as possible. You already have a beautiful nursery--and from my vantage point in the pulpit it appears our youngest attendee is happy and comfortable there. That's a good first step. The program committee's request that I include a story for all ages in the service each week is another important step. It may have looked a bit odd all fall for me to sit there on that stool Sunday after Sunday, holding up a picture book with no children to look at the pictures or hear the story. But then along came December and a family with kids! What if *that* had been the week I hadn't read a story? What sort of message would that send visiting families?

Beyond these basics of hospitality to families, quality, formal religious education is vital--and a much bigger challenge. It is discouraging to RE teachers when no children show up for a carefully prepared lesson. And it's no fun for kids to be the only kid in the class, week after week. And if enough kids do show up to hold class, then the teacher misses being in the service. And then there is the best practice that calls for at least two adults to be with a group of children or youth at all times. It's a sound policy for all sorts of reasons, but can diminish the congregation quite a bit during the service.

I've recently been advised that having RE for all ages at a second hour works well for many smaller congregations. Families attend service together and then participate in age appropriate programming during the second hour. No need for children or teachers to miss out on the worship experience; no need for adults to come back during the week for their own religious education. It's an idea that I'll be discussing with families and other interested folks in the coming weeks. With so many of you already staying for lunch after the service each week, it seems this sort of extended programming just might work.

Now the part parents never want to hear. Religious education, or faith development as it is called these days, will only be effective, satisfying, community-building and life-changing to the extent that parents are committed, making church a priority, and enforcing the sometime unpopular policy of regular participation.

I once had a conversation with a man whose family background was Buddhist. When his children were young he had made the decision not to raise them within that or any particular faith tradition--preferring to give them the option of choosing their own path.

Now that they were young adults, however, and marrying into families of other faiths and starting to practice those faiths he was distraught. He wanted me to tell him how he could now, at this stage in their lives, help them critically choose a faith rather than simply adopting the one practiced by their partners. The sad fact, I told him, was that it was too late.

Similarly, a friend once told me that his un-churched mother had sent him and his siblings to Catholic school for an excellent education back in the forties and fifties, and was then aghast when her daughters married Catholic boys, converted and raised their children in the church!

Parents can have a great deal of influence over their children when they are young--for better or worse! But as adults, children will make their own decisions--especially if the message they got when they were younger was that religion didn't matter. I understand the number and variety of competing demands on children and their families: sports, music, scouting, academic olympics, drama.... Each can be a significant source of enrichment and life-long fulfillment for our children, and not one of them is the wrong choice. So, in the end, the parents, perhaps with input from their kids, but ultimately the parents themselves, have to make a choice and then stand by it. Church, Sunday school, youth group may come out on top; may not.

This question was asked with great urgency. I share that urgency. I watch and listen to those of you who grew up together in this congregation. I see the ease that has come from years of association. I hear the love and the laughter as you tell the old stories. I notice the ways your life-long grounding in Unitarian Universalism guides your activities, causes, endeavors and relationships, perhaps without you even knowing it at times. And I am filled with joy and a touch of envy. How wonderful to know absolutely that you belong to this community, that it has held your joys and your sorrows, your awkward teenage years and your coming into your full self. You want that for your children and grandchildren. I want that for your children and grandchildren, too. So we'll keep giving it our best shot. Trying new ideas. Re-trying old ideas. Trying again when it doesn't work. Celebrating the successes that come along.

- **I have trouble with the first affirmation, “the inherent worth and dignity of all people” in light of the horrible things people do. Please respond.**

In partial response to your question, here is a poem from Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska:

Hitler's First Photograph

*And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers' little boy!
Will he grow up to be an L.L.D.?
Or a tenor in Vienna's Opera House?*

*Whose teensy hand is this, whose little ear and eye and nose?
Whose tummy full of milk, we just don't know:
printer's, doctor's, merchant's, priest's?
Where will those tootsy-wootsies finally wander?
To a garden, to a school, to an office, to a bride?
Maybe to the Burgermeister's daughter?*

*Precious little angels, mommy's sunshine, honey bun.
While he was being born, a year ago,
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky:
spring sun, geraniums in windows,
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper.*

*Then just before labor his mother's fateful dream.
A dove seen in a dream means joyful news--
if it is caught, a long-awaited guest will come.
Knock, knock, who's there, it's Adolf's heartchen knocking.*

*A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib,
our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well,
looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket,
like the tots in every other family album.
Sh-h-h, let's not start crying, sugar.
The camera will click from under that black hood.*

*The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau.
And Braunau is a small, but worthy town--
honest business, obliging neighbors,
smell of yeast dough, of gray soap.
No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.
A history teacher loosens his collar
and yawns over homework.*

Chilling, isn't it?

Somehow during our study of poetry last fall my UU ministers' study group got into a discussion of Satan. One of my colleagues contended that we need Satan and that Hitler is the late twentieth century/twenty-first century Satan. Another colleague read Szyborska's poem as a way of challenging the idea that Hitler--or anyone else--was evil incarnate.

Personally, I don't believe in original sin. Along with our theological forbears I reject the notion of the basic depravity of humankind. From this stance the question becomes whether or not one can lose one's inherent dignity and worth through one's actions. Is

there a line beyond which we no longer feel called to affirm the inherent dignity and worth of particular individuals?

It's a tricky concept because so often the reason we would deny someone his/her inherent worth and dignity is precisely because he/she has themselves stolen or destroyed or denied the inherent worth and dignity of others. Here again Hitler would be the favorite example, though there are others. Other individuals, other regimes. In the twentieth century alone, Pol Pot and Stalin, Rowanda, Bosnia, the Sudan. And of course there are acts of lesser scope that cast just as compelling doubt over the inherent dignity of individuals as does genocide: serial killing, systematic oppression, torture, rape.

I understand the uncertainty, the lack of conviction, the temptation to throw some outside the circle of worth, but I wonder, what then becomes of us? What becomes of us if we flinch in the face of one of our deepest values simply because someone else has rejected it first or more completely?

When my dad retired after 37 years with the Minnesota Department of Corrections, I spoke at the retirement dinner. I spoke about the relationship between his deep liberal faith as embodied by his participation in the Unitarian Universalist church and his commitment, all those 37 years, to community corrections--the Institution Community Continuum, work release, sentence to serve and other programs designed as alternatives to locking people up and throwing away the key. To make my point I quoted from *The Book of Merlin*, the unpublished conclusion to *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White. The words are spoken by Merlin to the aged and broken-spirited King Arthur:

You have been taking my advice too literally, king. To disbelieve in original sin, does not mean that you must believe in original virtue. It only means that you must not believe that people are utterly wicked. Wicked they may be, and even very wicked, but not utterly. Otherwise, I agree, it would be no use trying.

Dad was no Pollyanna in rose-colored glasses. He was far from naive but he believed in redemption and dedicated his life to it. And I believe in it too, because I learned it at home and I learned it in church.

- **Might there be grounds for a just war or is pacifism always the moral obligation. Does love of humanity necessitate hatred of some humans because of their behavior?**

I have not made a study of just war theory, and cannot speak definitely on the subject on my own behalf. My instinctive reaction is, probably there are grounds for just war, but in our age, with the stakes so high, the grounds must be stringent and the occasion for appealing to them must be rare.

As a religious movement, Unitarian Universalism's traditional stance has been overwhelmingly but not exclusively supportive of pacifism and conscientious objection to war.

According to the Reverend Paul Sawyer who has written extensively on this subject, as early as 1790 the Universalist Church in America adopted a Statement of Principle against both slavery and war, "Although defensive wars are lawful, there is a time coming when universal love of the gospel will put an end to all wars. Hence members should cultivate brotherly love, considering all men as brothers."

Sawyer also points to William Ellery Channing's May 1816 Sermon on War, delivered before the Convention of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts. Channing, Sawyer argues, influenced the Transcendentalists, who started the neo-utopias, and also influenced Adin Ballou who wrote *Christian Non-Resistance in all its Important Bearings, Illustrated and Defended*, as well as Thoreau, who went to jail rather than pay taxes to support the Mexican War and, of course, wrote *On Civil Disobedience*.

For all but the most dedicated Unitarian and Universalist pacifists, such as Adin Ballou, the Civil War changed things, temporarily at least, as slavery was seen as a just cause for war.

Unitarian Julia Ward Howe, the lyricist of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, once the horror of the Civil War was over, advocated in 1870 for a Mother's Day of Peace, specifically for the ending of killing of husbands and sons in war.

Jenkins Lloyd Jones, General Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference was an outspoken pacifist. "Where are the newspapers that will anticipate the ghastliness of the battlefields, the gruesomeness of the hospitals...Let artist, orator, teacher, lawyer and above all ministers of religion speak out!" he wrote as preparations were made for World War I.

Meanwhile the Universalists were calling for a year for "an almighty crusade by the Christian Church against war".

According to Sawyer, World War I was another example of war unhinging the religious principles of the most dedicated pacifists. Indeed, according to a separate document of the UUA, among the fifteen active pacifist Unitarian ministers, only six still had their pulpits, at the war's end. One of those was John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Church of the Messiah in Manhattan.

At a meeting of the General Conference of Unitarians in Montreal in September 1917, Holmes, as Chair of the Planning Council of Ministers, a group charged to "present the position of the Unitarian Churches," outlined various positions discernible among Unitarians and urged the Conference not to commit to a particular one. He cited Unitarians' traditional support for free expression of minority views. "It would be difficult to name our reason for being if the privilege of non-conformity were denied or even

threatened among us," he reasoned. "By tradition and by practice we are dissenters. The cause of all dissent is our cause." Holmes proposed a resolution in favor of "the ministry of reconciliation, the preparation of peace, the establishment of social justice, the proclamation of God's law."

When Holmes finished speaking, William Howard Taft, President of the Conference and former President of the United States, denounced Holmes's report as an "insidious document" and moved a resolution attesting to the sense of the Conference, that the "war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world." Taft's resolution carried, 236-9.

The Universalists passed a resolution granting conscientious objection in 1925. The Unitarians followed suit in 1944.

When World War II began, 20 Universalist ministers signed the list of conscientious objectors.

In 1961 the Unitarians and the Universalist merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, and since that time more than half a dozen resolutions have been passed regarding draft reform, conscientious objection, selective service, amnesty, and repatriation for war resisters.

I have nothing to add on the second part of this question regarding love of humanity and hatred of individuals beyond my response to the previous question.

- **During WWII we lived in St. Paul and attended the Unitarian church. At that time they did offer communion at certain times. Do they still??? How is it conducted in a Unitarian church? It always puzzled me.**
- **Can you explain the different meanings in which communion is taken. It was done at Nora once.**

Ah, communion in the Unitarian Universalist context!! A recurring question. I don't know the exact statistics. Some UU congregations offer communion more or less regularly--once a year, four times a year, etc. Others never hold a communion service. Some UU congregations call the Flower Ceremony in the spring and the water ceremony in the late summer or fall "Flower Communion" and "Water Communion". Some congregations have rituals called "Apple Communion" or "Bread Communion." One friend and colleague held a Valentine Communion earlier this month--though I haven't heard the details.

I reserve the word *communion* for a ritual sharing of bread and wine done in remembrance of Christ--and I have never presided over such a ritual. In the broadest possible sense of the word, life in a faith community is rife with communions--sharing of physical and spiritual nourishment--but I think using the word outside of strictly Christian context leads to confusion. The UU congregations that offer such a communion tend to inhabit the UU Christian end of our larger theological spectrum.

As far as I know, Unity Church Unitarian in St. Paul currently offers a communion service once a year, late in the evening on Christmas Eve. I've not attended and cannot elaborate on how it is conducted.

- **Does the cross have a place in UUism?**

The simple answer is yes. And, the simple answer is no.

The historical theological roots of Unitarian Universalism are firmly entrenched in the Protestant Reformation of the Christian faith, thus yes, if only historically, the cross has a place in UUism.

On the other hand, our theological forebears long ago rejected the idea that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, landing on the side of fully human, period. And these days the prevailing Unitarian Universalist view of Jesus is that it was neither his miraculous conception and birth nor his crucifixion and miraculous resurrection that matter much, but rather the life of justice, peace and love he lived and preached in between his birth and death. As such, the cross, symbol of his death, while not without meaning, is certainly not a central symbol of our faith.

And on the third hand, many of our churches and publications display the cross alongside the flaming chalice, the Star of David, the Star and Crescent and symbols of the world's religions. And that's an absolutely appropriate place for the cross within Unitarian Universalism, too.

- **A tour guide who comes to Nora said that Nora is the only rural church in the U.S. Is he correct?**

I assume he means the only rural *Unitarian Universalist* church in the U.S. And you know, I don't know. I'm sorry I didn't get to this question earlier in the week so I could make a couple calls to find out. I do know there are more than a few UU congregations in very small towns and cities across the country. I don't know if this is the only one outside city limits. I'll get back to you!

- **I would be interested in hearing your view on what happens to our spirit/soul when we die. In that same vein, do you believe in spirits or ghosts? Do you think we can be guided and/or haunted?**

I think death is the end of life. Period. This life in this world is all we can be certain of. I have neither seen nor heard nor read anything to convince me otherwise, and frankly, I'm not even very curious. Brain activity ceases. Heart stops beating. Breathing slows then stops. Death.

Yet years ago when my sister brought home an Iris DeMent CD and announced there was what she considered a UU song on it, I had no trouble picking out the one she meant on first listen. It was, of course, the one with the refrain *I'll let the mystery be.*

*Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from.
Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done.
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.*

*Some say once you're gone you're gone forever, and some say you're gonna come back.
Some say you rest in the arms of the Saviour if in sinful ways you lack.
Some say that they're comin' back in a garden, bunch of carrots and little sweet peas.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.*

*Some say they're goin' to a place called Glory and I ain't saying it ain't a fact.
But I've heard that I'm on the road to purgatory and I don't like the sound of that.
Well, I believe in love and I live my life accordingly.
But I choose to let the mystery be.*

For me there is no contradiction in holding simultaneous beliefs in basic biology and vast mystery. Life followed by cessation of life is what we know. But, as we learn over and over again in our individual lives and as a society, as a species, there is much we don't know. Much we may someday know as our collective body of knowledge expand. And, perhaps, much we may never know. Mystery. Biology. Both, it seems to me are facts of life--and death. And at times our discussions, our questions call for one and at times they call for the other.

Given my basic stance, other-worldly guidance or haunting doesn't seem likely to me. But those we have loved, and those who have had great impact on our lives whether beloved or not, do continue to inhabit our lives, our realm of being, after their deaths. We recognize their wisdom or folly in books they held dear. We hear their warning or their blessing in music that shaped their lives. We see their guiding hand or their caution in the work and art they left behind.

Thank you for the questions. Thank you for listening. This is always a fascinating exercise for me--challenging and satisfying in a different way than my usual sermons. May we all continue to question, finding challenge and satisfaction and fascination in the asking. Amen.