

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield  
Taking the Long View  
January 26, 2014  
Rev. Maddie Sifantus

OPENING WORDS

David Pohl (SLT 436)

We come to this time and place:  
to rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community.  
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness, and beauty of life;  
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;  
To rekindle the flame of memory and hope; and  
To reclaim the vision of an earth made fair, with all her people one.

TIME FOR ALL AGES In the Elevator Adapted from Dan Harper

If you're a Unitarian Universalist kid, sometimes it can be hard to explain what a Unitarian Universalist is. Maybe you're at school, and one of your friends says, "Do you go to a church or a synagogue, or anything?" And you say yes, you go to a church, and they say, "Which one?" and you say you're a Unitarian Universalist, and they say, "What's a Unitarian Universalist? What do you believe?"

What do you say then?

Adults have this problem, too. This is the way I imagine it for adults: you're in one of the office buildings in downtown Boston, and you get on the elevator with someone who says, "I heard you say that you're a Unitarian Universalist. What do you Unitarian Universalists believe, anyway?" And the doors close and the elevator starts to go down, and how do you explain Unitarian Universalism in ten seconds?

Now sometimes I take the easy way out, and I don't really explain when someone asks me, "What do Unitarian Universalists believe, anyway?" It's kind of hard to explain what a Unitarian Universalist is, so I might just say, "Well, we can believe anything we want" -- which isn't true, but it's the easy way out. Or I might say, "You know, Unitarian Universalist -- it's the old historic church behind the linden tree a few doors away from Zuzu's and across from the Rockery" -- which doesn't say what Unitarian Universalism is at all! -- but it's easier than trying to explain our religion.

Well, you adults are on your own, but I have some ideas for kids can say.

If you're a little kid, and someone asks you what a Unitarian Universalist is, you could say, "I'm a Unitarian Universalist, a church where people have open minds, loving hearts, and hands that are ready to help." To help you remember,

there are even little hand motions that go with it [show]. Now you try it with me: "I'm a Unitarian Universalist, a church where people have open minds, loving hearts, and hands that are ready to help."

If you're a slightly older kid, I have a little saying that can help you remember what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. It goes like this: "It's a blessing we are born, and it matters what we do. What we know about God or the holy is a piece of the truth. We let the beauty we love, be what we do. And we don't have to do it alone."

It's a blessing we are born -- that means each and every person is important -- and it matters what we do. What we know about God is a piece of the truth -- and one of the things some people know about God is that God doesn't exist. We let the beauty we love, be what we do -- in other words, we try to live a good life. And we don't have to do it alone. This little poem was written by two Unitarian Universalists named Sheri Prud'homme and Laila Ibrahim.

Here, try saying it with me: It's a blessing we are born, and it matters what we do. What we know about God is a piece of the truth. Let the beauty we love, be what we do. And we don't have to do it alone.

Now if you're in middle school or high school, I recommend a different approach. When someone asks you, "What do Unitarian Universalists believe, anyway?" you can say, "We believe in asking good questions." -- then you turn it around on them, and ask, "And what do you believe?" And then everything they say, you can respond with another question -- so if your friend says, for example, "I believe that Jesus is my lord and savior," you then ask politely, "What do you mean by lord and savior?" It's a great way to learn what your friends really believe about religion. And it's a pretty accurate way of showing how we Unitarian Universalists ask each other lots of hard questions. Be warned, though -- asking all those questions can be extremely annoying -- if you're not careful, you can really annoy your friends.

One more time: little kids can say, "I'm a Unitarian Universalist, a church where people have open minds, loving hearts, and hands that are ready to help." Older kids can say something like this: "It's a blessing we are born, and it matters what we do. What we know about God is a piece of the truth. We let the beauty we love, be what we do. And we don't have to do it alone." And if you're in middle school or high school, you can try saying: "We believe in asking good questions. And what do you believe?"

If you forget those, you can ask me again in coffee hour after Sunday school is over!

MEDITATION IN WORD AND SILENCE

*Victoria Weinstein, Church of Greater Lynn in Swampscott*

The church is a body.  
May this body breathe and be together in the spirit of hope  
May it feel held by comfort.  
Those who seek consolation, may they find it in the solace of this moment.

The church is a body.  
It is as strong as all the men and women who have ever gathered within its walls.  
It is the power of all they dreamed and all that they have done.

The church is a body.  
It is as vulnerable as the most newborn and untried of its members.  
It is ancient, and it is ever new.

The church is a story.  
It is the story of lives that are interwoven,  
brought together in this place and this time  
for the simple purpose of caring for one another,  
and helping one another along the arduous path from birth to death.

The church is a vision.  
It is a vision of unity amid diversity,  
It is a vision of reverence for all of creation,  
It is a vision that beckons us beyond the concerns of our own skins.

In the silence, may we abide as one body in the spirit of faith, hope and love that is  
the story and the vision of this church.

SERMON            Taking the Long View

I wonder how many of you have gone up to the balcony and looked down at the sanctuary from the old pews up there? I know many of you do sit up there for our Standing Room Only concerts when it is especially reserved for members of our congregation. Have you walked up the steep stairs of the narrow staircase and sat in the curved pews and looked down at the people below, the chancel, the old organ pipes, and the Baptismal fount we inherited from the closed Woburn congregation, and seen the light slanting through windows? Did it give you a different perspective on this place? Did you wonder about who the people were who sat in these pews ten years ago, twenty years ago, fifty years ago, one hundred years ago, or more? Of course, some of you WERE here ten and twenty years ago and more.

Those of you who have been here longer, how much change have you seen during your time within these walls. How much have things changed *outside* these walls in the larger world in twenty or thirty years?

When I think about the changes in our world, it really can seem overwhelming! My Dad who died at almost 100 in 2007 often used to talk about the changes he saw in his lifetime—from the first automobiles in Waltham, private homes getting telephones, air travel and so much more. In my own lifetime, I remember my high school boyfriend who was somewhat of a science nerd waiting for the school bus with his slide-rule hanging from his belt. That slide-rule was made obsolete just a couple of years post high school with the coming of the calculator that an individual could afford.

I can still remember a sermon given by Ken Sawyer in my home church sometime mid-80s when he talked about how getting his first personal computer was transforming the way he wrote sermons. I can remember myself making the switch from a typewriter to a computer in 1992 when I was writing a thesis on my work with the elder chorus, the Golden Tones. But the changes kept coming! VCRs and DVD players, all manner of kitchen gadgets, and who knows what else! Just listening to music means that in my house I have thousands of records and a still working turntable, a giant TEAC reel to reel tape recorder, piles of audio-cassettes and CDs...but, wait a minute, now you don't even need to store music in your house! You can listen to it on your iPod or other device and have your music on the Cloud. And then of course there is the cell phone and the smart phone. Whether we like it or not, the changes keep on coming.

One of the times all these changes have struck me lately in a big way was on my recent trip to visit my son and his family after Christmas. I have two grandchildren, Pascale who is 8 and Sebastien, who we mostly call Manu, who is 5. Pascale got a Kindle for her birthday in November and Manu drags around his Dad's iPad. They spent a large portion of their vacation playing something called Minecraft. Fortunately I wasn't completely in the dark since our DRE Tabby had told me about this game which she plays herself and is all the rage with the kids. In fact it is probably going to be included in our game night which will be Saturday, February 22 if we can figure out the computer part of it. However, I still felt nearly hopelessly at sea as I tried to figure out what Pascale and Manu were doing! It is some sort of virtual reality thing which has morphed into some sort of community. How to feel old!

So how do the changes all around us affect us here in this *faith* community, in this historic building, with the changes in demographics all around us, not to mention the dwindling interest in churches and synagogues in our culture at all? Or we could ask the question that UU Minister and Consultant Robert T. Latham did in a white paper back in 2010, "Does Unitarian Universalism have a future?" What

does our faith offer that the secular world doesn't and how can we optimize on that to make what we do around here the best that we can be (I sound like some kind of commercial)? Or we might ask ourselves in Latham's vein, "Do we have a future?"

Even though we are small—and let me tell you that there are many UU congregations much smaller than us, in case you didn't know—our destiny is in some ways tied to the larger world of Unitarian Universalism. When our current UUA President Peter Morales in 2010, he met with us ministers at General Assembly and issued a warning I had heard before: membership in Unitarian Universalism is declining. No matter how you tweak the numbers, there is a decline. It has to be said that there has been a decline across the board in all denominations since the seventies, and there are many reasons for this one could speculate on. Robert Latham believes that it all comes down to mission. Latham writing in the same year Morales was elected said,

"Here is a cultural truth: institutions succeed to the extent that they effectively fulfill their mission. Yet, nothing has been more troubling in our religious movement over the past fifty years than the notion of mission. We have been confused about its definition, wondered why it was important and replaced it with ineffective substitutes. We have even divested the larger religious movement of any responsibility of definition. Instead, we have placed the onus on the back of local congregations. We have declared that the mission of our religion is up for grabs. The outcome has been diffusion of definition with its consequent social impotence."

In my now over five years with you and all the planning that went into the Bicentennial last year, I have heard much of your history of these same last fifty years Latham talks about. Wakefield has never been big in that time frame. In fact, membership ebbs and flows with the years but stays around 65. One wonders why. The Outreach Committee, the Board of Management and I have spent time wondering about it. It is probably a mix of things. But we figure that now is a good time to focus on that notion of mission and planning. With the Bicentennial behind us, our religious education program ably being handled by our new DRE, the Capital Campaign underway, and the future opening up ahead of us, how will we make the decisions that move us forward, with whatever that might mean?

Montaigne once wrote, "No wind serves him who addresses his voyage to no certain port." And R. F. Mager wrote, "If you don't know where you are going you are liable to end up someplace else." Where do we want to be next year? In five years? In ten years? In fifty? How do we even start figuring it out?

Less than a week after I started with you back in January 2009, I took a workshop at Andover Newton Theological School which was called "Leadership

on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading” from a book of the same name published by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. I had previously read Heifetz’s previous book, “Leadership Without Easy Answers.” He was one of the lecturers in the workshop and it is from him I got the idea of going up on the balcony and seeing what we can see. He writes:

Few practical ideas are more obvious than the need to get perspective in the midst of action. Any military officer, for example, knows the importance of maintaining the capacity for reflection, even in the “fog of war.” Great athletes can at once play the game and observe it as a while—as Walt Whitman described it, “being both in and out of the game.” Jesuits call it “contemplation in action.” Hindus and Buddhist call it “karma yoga” or mindfulness. We call this skill “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony,” an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, “What’s really going on here?”<sup>1</sup>

It is a good process for each of us in our daily lives, developing the skill to step back and ask ourselves, “What’s really going on here? And I believe it is crucial for us in of this congregation to step back and ask ourselves, “What’s really going on here?” We get some busy, each of us, with the day to day, caught up in the minutia of living and the stresses of life, that it doesn’t come naturally to pause and take stock. The same is true of our church. There has been so much to do in the last five years I have been here. Remember the new roof? Repairing the back exterior wall of the church? The new paint in the foyer? The new paint this past year on the exterior? These are all what Heifetz calls technical fixes to technical challenges. The roof was leaking so a new roof fixed the problem. But there are other challenges which he calls adaptive challenges. These are the ones we face when we want to think about who we are and how we want to be. These are the ones related to mission and vitality...so that we will be the “living tradition” we talk about, rather than a Universalist museum.

How do we do that? First of all we start with conversations. In fact we did start with some conversations a couple of years ago when many of us had what was called “Gathered Here” conversations. I have been in touch with the District and we are hoping to have a meeting with someone from the District with members of our Board and Outreach Committee in early February, if schedules mesh. Yesterday members of the Outreach Committee and some committee chairs met. What is hoped for is a significant planning process where we can step up onto the balcony—all of us—maybe not all at once—and get some perspective on how we can define our mission. Ultimately, according to Latham, all religions have the same

---

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Business School Press (2002), 51).

mission which is to create a sense of purpose and direction for the community and ultimately for the culture in which communities are housed. All religions ask the great questions of existence: Who am I? How do I know what I know? Who or what is in charge? What is my purpose? And what does my death mean? The trick is, all religions may answer these questions differently.

So our business here is to ask these questions and transform lives. But at the same time, we are a non-profit with a building and bills to pay. At the same time we want to respond to the needs outside our doors. At the same time we want to have programs and potlucks and welcome newcomers and just plain find a little time of peace in a busy week. And we are a diverse and devoted group of people. How can we move towards a common goal? How can we have what Latham calls “Unity in diversity?” He cites a Hagar The Horrible cartoon. It is of a Viking boat. Some of the oarsmen are paddling with the blade of the oar and some with the handle of the oar. Some are rowing forwards and some are rowing backwards. The boat is moving in aimless circles and zigzags. And, Hagar, standing at the helm with hands cupped around his mouth, is shouting: “Will you quit saying different strokes for different folks.”

I suspect all of you have ideas for what you would like to see happen here in the next years. Some I have heard are:

- More numbers—more adults, more children, more money to pay the bills
- Handicapped accessibility so that everyone can access all parts of our building, including the sanctuary and the rest rooms
- The tower-belfry-steeple project completed
- Full time ministry
- An active choir
- What’s your idea?.....

I have my ideas too:

- Partnership with the Wakefield Westgate Church in England as part of the UU Partner Church Council
- A lay ministry team to help address the pastoral needs of the congregation
- Active use of our front and side lawns with updated landscaping, benches and maybe space rented to Sabatinos with tables for dining alongside their building
- A little free library
- Collaboration with Reading, Melrose, Medford and Malden with the eye of sharing staff, working on social justice together, religious education activities and sharing our gifts
- Collaboration with groups in town to improve the quality of life for all

- I could go on.

So it is time for discernment and discussion. I am sure we will not all agree all the time about any of it. After all, we're UUs. But if we are pointing towards a common purpose, we can transform lives and we can be transformed. Stay tuned for what the next steps will be and we hope every voice will be heard. Let's go to the balcony together, shall we?

I end with these wise words from *Alice in Wonderland*:

"Cheshire Puss", Alice began...

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to", said the cat.

"I don't much care where...." said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go", said the cat.

Blessed be. Amen.