

AUGUST 16, 2015

## **Sunday Sermon: “Unitarian Universalism and Me”**

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The year was 1970, Nixon was still president, the Beatles song “Michelle” played on the radio, “Mash” was on in the movies and “McHale’s Navy” was on the television. College campuses were alive with Vietnam protests and long hair and facial hair were in fashion. The governor installed in Sacramento, the capitol of California, where I lived, was the actor Ronald Reagan. The eastern bloc countries were strong and unified. No one had yet heard much of the moral majority, or the Religious Right.

I was a new, unmarried, 2nd Lieutenant in the Air Force going through flight school. My hair was short, but not as short as it is today. I had read “Three Prophets of Liberal Religion: Channing, Emerson, Parker,” in a Religion course in College. I went to the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento located near Sacramento State, now the University of California at Sacramento for the first time with a sports coat and tie and my short hair to find most of the congregation looked as if they had just come from the Woodstock concert.

At 23, I was ten years younger than anyone else at the service. The church building was the center for anti-everything protests. I felt like I was carrying a pro-choice banner into a pro-life rally.

The California UU’s were going through one of their hugging stages. Now, I am a New Yorker who was raised by a pair of non-emotional Lutherans. We did hug occasionally, but this wasn’t a funeral. After services, those members that did shake my hand did it with a sense of obligation and with a look of skepticism in their eyes. The service was on a high intellectual plane, in fact, the sermon made no impact on me apart from reminding me of a good college lecture. The music was all very classical and the hymns that were sung were done with the congregational enthusiasm of a dirge. After the service no one mentioned coffee hour to me. Out of courtesy for my obvious discomfort no one said much to me at all and after attending a few times I stopped.

The year was 1980. “Mash” was now a series on television. Even with the murder of John Lennon, The Beatles music still dominated the radio. “[\*The Blues Brothers\*](#)” was at the movies, and that same actor had moved from Sacramento to the Whitehouse. The eastern bloc countries were embroiled in their own conflicts

mostly in Afghanistan. The moral majority was now touting its own brand of morality to America.

I had lived in Las Vegas and Oxford, England, where both locations had Unitarian congregations. My hair was still short. I was now a married Captain with two children, flying fighter/bombers in upstate New York. I regularly attended a small UU Fellowship where the yearly program revolved around the term schedule of SUNY Plattsburgh. The average age of that congregation was still ten years older than me. The most common first name of the members was "Doctor." This experience of our faith was both the best and the worst.

It was the best for the projection of family that we felt being members of the Fellowship. Living more than 1000 miles from any family, the fellowship made a wonderful surrogate. Thirty-five years later, I still connect with many from that fellowship. The few of us that had children participated in the two or three class rooms in the basement. It was a family feeling because it was a family-sized congregation that couldn't vision itself being anything but family-sized, dominated by dedicated matriarchs and patriarchs who liked the fellowship as it was. Because of its size, members burned themselves out just keeping the congregation going. They would leave for a while and return when they were refreshed, rather than being refreshed in the congregational system.

Fellowship life was very homogenous. I think, by virtue of being the only person associated with the Air Base, I was the only non-Democrat in the congregation. At one of the services the speaker remarked that, "as Democrats and liberals this is how we should react to some proposed legislation." Well, in my short life, I've done some things I haven't been proud of, I've even voted for a Democrat more than once, but I had never been called a liberal Democrat before.

Also because of its size and the amount of energy members needed to expend maintaining the fabric of the church, this small UU church and others like it never really reached out to affect the community. This family congregation in a remote location in Plattsburgh NY also limits their growth by its homogeneous culture. They sit on the UU franchise and the only experience of our denomination anyone knows in this area is this small group. I saw the same dynamic repeated in other locations.

Morgantown, WV with a population of 30,000, home of the West Virginia University with a student population about the same has a lay-led fellowship of 30 members who meet in an A-frame. The architecture probably tells you as much about the demographics of the group as meeting them.

But in an area ripe with a population seeking our faith, the franchise limits the options. Likewise, because of their size and the size of most fellowships, our children never get to experience complete UU curriculum.

Given my experience as both laity and ministry in forty some years I also see this model as the worst of Unitarian Universalism. Universally, fellowship and pastoral-size congregations contribute no growth to our denomination. Like many fellowships throughout our movement, Plattsburgh has not grown numerically or in influence in their community since I was a member. In their history they tried professional ministry, but were not willing to give up any authority to the minister so any ministerial relationship is short lived. About the best that fellowship-sized congregations can expect is to keep their doors open, but that takes lots of energy by the few members who dedicate themselves to the fellowship.

The year was 2000. George the Second would soon ascend the steps into the White House, having been declared President by the Supreme Court. The Soviet Block was now a matter of history and our country was now the only superpower left with no real opposition and has relationship with Vietnam and China. You could still hear the Beatles despite the death of half of them. The religious right is now a political reality and is feeling its oats with every national election.

I was a member of congregations in Maine and Ipswich, England and was retired from my first career having closed two air bases in England, six detachments in Germany and one in Turkey. My head had become follicularly challenged. I've been to two seminaries and lived in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, West Virginia, New York and Chicago. My daughters had both finished graduate school. I was ministering to a small pastoral-size church in Charleston, West Virginia, the Capital of the State. I found smaller pastoral congregations are better than fellowships but they still have to use too much of their community energy to keep the congregation alive. Being in the capitol and the only minister-led UU congregation in the state allowed the congregation more access to spreading our gospel beyond the doors of our building.

One attempt to do this resulted in the membership committee obtaining a grant from the UUA Chalice Lighters to send out a mailing of 5000 invitations to a service.

Now West Virginia is ripe for introduction of liberal religion, every other storefront is one kind of Baptist church or another. In fact, they are the only state to legally use rattlers during Pentecostal church services. I got to attend one as visitor one time. The last minister to die from this practice was in May 2012. His father

had died the same way as a minister. The religion may not believe in Darwinian Evolution, but there seems to have some relevance with clergy turnover.

Anyway the membership committee obtained lists of people who would be good demographically: state employees, people working in social services and the numerous colleges and universities. The program was in motion. Unbeknownst to me, the committee sent the invite out the week before the worship committee scheduled a Soap Box Sunday. Now a Soap Box Sunday is a fun service where anyone who wishes may have five minutes on a soap box to tell the assembled about what cause they are passionate. Our junior high group was appointed time-keeper and they were given a stop watch and a gong. The mailing was successful and a dozen families appeared at our door, most of them over-dressed for this or any UU congregation.

Well I think the one that really got the visitors was a Wiccan who stood up and said, "I'm a witch and I'm here to bitch." Unfortunately, I was standing toward the rear of the sanctuary in front of the exit as the service came to close and nearly suffered bodily harm. No one new found a home at this fellowship as a result of this program.

I have had some fun with these stories over the years. I think from these events I have learned some lessons about myself and our denomination. In the 1820's Harriet Beecher Stowe, a daughter of Hartford and an orthodox congregational preacher, characterized Boston society, saying "All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarians. All the trustees and Professors of Harvard College were Unitarians. All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian Churches." Ten years later, Channing was still sensitive to remarks about his Unitarian churches from his orthodox colleagues who maintained Unitarian views "are suitable to the educated, rich, and fashionable and not to the wants of the great mass of human beings." How has our church evolved since Channing's day? In all our churches I found elements that were unwelcoming.

In California, I was different, I felt different, and I was meant to feel different because I was thought of categorically. This is being the outsider or one of the fences or walls we heard in our readings. In California, no one asked what I thought or felt about the state of the world. What I thought and felt was written in my short hair and sports coat and tie. But I too was unwelcoming; I too looked at California UU's categorically. I did not see the members of this church as individuals, but as others who were different from me. I was young and my ideas changed as I grew older. I am no longer the person I was 40 years ago, and the long-haired California rebels are probably retired stockbrokers or bankers. But how have we both really changed?

We, UU's, are passionate in our beliefs and should 'bring the good tidings to all the afflicted and all those who mourn,' as one of our songs suggests. In California the members were as passionate as I was to see a world of justice; we had just chosen an alternate means for arriving at that just society. How often in the next forty years did I allow this thinking to obscure the individual? In the political arena we allow this thinking to speak for the individual. This is particularly evident during this political season.

Categorically, Republicans are capitalists who only think in monetary terms, the economics of greed, if you will, or religious fundamentalists who want to impose their American on the rest of us. Conversely, Democrats are all bureaucrats who want more power and money to create their public organizations to control our lives.

While the seventies thinking was bad, today it is worse. I have heard many UU's talking about the Religious Right or the Right to Lifers in ways that demonize or objectify them as people. Listen to the rhetoric about tea party candidates. Listen to the rhetoric surrounding Ferguson. It is easier to attack people when we can turn them into objects rather than relate to them through similarity.

In my view when demons are created, we have given the people we demonize too much power. We have made them supernatural. What are these people, but individuals who feel passionately about their causes?

When the Sacramento UU's made me feel unwelcome by categorizing me, they denied that I had the same goodwill that they so wanted me to see in them. Likewise, when I looked at their customs and dress, I did not see our sameness. I saw our differentness.

But part of this differentness is the culture we create in our UU churches. Some of it is inviting, some of it isn't and sometimes the culture may have a different effect on different visitors. A visitor from a black church tradition would view our casual dress as disrespectful and not welcoming.

We have other ways of making people feel unwelcome. On a search for a congregation a few years ago, I had an interview with an old Unitarian Congregational church in rural New England that described itself as Christian Unitarian. I asked what would happen if four pagans showed up at a meeting. One of the interviewers told me he would suggest that they would probably feel more at home at the church 20 miles south. This dynamic of belief has become one of those issues that are dividing us. Many of our meetings founded in the fifties were

humanist congregations. Many are now growing but the new members are more theist and looking for “spiritual services” and do not object to using the G word occasionally. This is another dynamic that can divide us.

One January about twenty-five years ago I had to take a four-week course in Denver. Now my wife would probably say that I always seem to disappear at difficult times, like when the moving van arrives. She would also tell you that the January average snowfall in Caribou, Maine, where we lived at that time was over 80 inches. And, yes the snow shovel isn't my favorite tool, but duty called. So I packed my downhill skis and went to Denver.

Unfortunately, I developed an infected sinus so I couldn't ski the first weekend. Instead I went to the Unitarian Church. This was an old church with a large circular sanctuary which subsequently burnt down. At the beginning of the service they asked for visitors to identify themselves. I was uncomfortable introducing myself to 200 strangers.

I don't remember much about the sermon, or music or the readings, but I do remember two people who came over to invite me to coffee after the service. I remember Denver UU's as welcoming. I don't know much about the Denver Congregation, what any of their theology, political or sexual orientation, was but whatever it was, as far as I was concerned they were living it.

Well, the year is 2015. Mash is still on cable someplace. The Beatles “Michelle” plays only on Musak in elevators and easy listening stations. There will be a “*Halloween*, something” in movies this fall, but Jamie Lee Curtis only advertises Activia Yogurt to the generation with white hair like hers. Many former adversary countries are now allies. The president is now a Democrat fifteen years younger than me. My hair tonic of choice is now Solarcane, not Vitalis, and a spurt of hair growth usually occurs in my ears. Some of the leaders of the moral majority and the Religious Right are out of jail and back on television being moral. I am no longer ten years younger than most members in churches.

I have now come to feel that what we believe either in theology or economics or politics is no longer so important. What is important now to me is how what I say I believe is reflected in the way I interact with the world. My Christian colleagues put it this way: "Be careful how you live your life, it may be the only gospel anyone reads."

In an ever evolving, but never ending world. Amen.