

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“An Evolving Faith”

Rev. Sam Trumbore May 5, 2013

Reading

from a presentation to the St. Lawrence and Ohio Meadville combined District Assemblies in Niagara Falls by UUA President Peter Morales.

Today, church is rapidly becoming a bad brand. Younger people, especially the progressive and better educated, increasingly see church as hierarchical, rigid, out of touch, hypocritical and narrow minded. Being part of the church world once gave us some legitimacy. Today, being part of the world of organized religion makes us suspect.

While the tens of millions of nones are skeptical of religious institutions, they are not hostile to spirituality. All kinds of surveys show that nones often describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” They want depth and meaning in their lives. They want to connect with ideals that transcend their narrow interest. They long for community and intimacy. They aspire to lives in service of something beyond the banality of consumer culture. In addition, the nones are open minded. They accept glbt people without a second thought. Marriage equality is no big deal.

The nones are also accepting of racial and ethnic diversity. They grew up among immigrants. And the nones are also accepting of cultural and religious diversity. They have no patience for a perspective that says one religion has all the truth and is the one and only way. And the nones care about economic justice and the environment. We see their involvement in such things as the Occupy Wall Street movement. They care about issues like global warming and sustainability.

Do you see a pattern here?

THE NONES ARE US. They share our values and our aspirations. Our theology of freedom and openness, our emphasis on social justice as an expression of our faith, our full acceptance of women and of glbt people—all of this is in perfect alignment with the perspective of what is now a third of America.

One would think that Unitarian Universalism would be growing by leaps and bounds. But we are not... This gap between our obvious potential and our reality drives me crazy...

I have said many times that we can be the religion for our time. That isn't just a slogan. It is a core conviction that has shaped my ministry. Our potential is breathtaking.

This isn't about growth for the sake of growth. This is about serving people who are spiritually hungry and religiously homeless. We cannot ignore their pain. Reaching out is a

moral imperative.

Sermon

As I listened to UUA President Peter Morales at our combined St. Lawrence and Ohio Meadville District Assembly with more than 350 people in the Niagara Falls Convention Center, I wanted all of you to hear the words I shared with you this morning. The religious landscape is changing, and it is changing quickly. In the 1960's, only 5% of young adults said they had no religious identity. In 2000, it was 12%. Today, the nones, as they are called, are more like 30%! And I doubt that number will be dropping in the future.

As Morales pointed out, when these “nones” think of religion, they don't think of how we Unitarian Universalists do it. They think of how Jerry Falwell and James Dobson and Focus on the Family do it. These folks have poisoned the well for a liberal approach to religion. Thankfully, we aren't hurting like Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, and Episcopalian denominations are. They are seeing huge declines of membership, around 20 to 27%. But we aren't growing into our tremendous potential either. Like Morales, it drives me crazy trying to figure out what to do to reach the nones.

Part of the problem, I think, is the unprecedented time we live in. People just don't think religion has the answers for today's challenges. “How is going to church going to affect global climate change?” they ask. “What am I going to learn about natural resource depletion, fracking, extinction of species, proliferation of nuclear weapons and other WMD's?”

The explosion of communication technologies is changing what people want from religion too. If you want a world class lecture, listen to a TED talk when you're in the mood. “What can I get on Sunday morning that I can't get online or DVR?” they wonder.

What about the future? Historically, Unitarians and Universalists were very optimistic about the future. Many young people, however, are very pessimistic about the future, so different, for example, than the idealism the baby-boom generation grew into during the 1960's. I can still remember when I thought technology would solve all our problems. Today, so many young people are deeply ambivalent about it.

This changing environment is the challenge that is always in front of me and in front of the leadership of our congregation. When the times change, we must consider *changing with them*. And if we don't adapt to changing conditions, we will die. Maybe not immediately, but we'll soon follow the other denominations that are not adapting fast enough.

The reason we are at risk, of course, is every living thing is subject to evolutionary forces. Our congregation, like every other collection of people, is a living organism. As an organism we are subject to Darwin's five laws of evolution:

1. Organisms produce more offspring than can survive.
2. Organisms face a constant struggle to survive.
3. Organisms within a species vary.
4. Organisms best suited to their environment survive.
5. Those organisms which survive will reproduce and pass on their genes.

Unitarian Universalism is *one* species of religious organisms. We are in competition with other religious denominations for membership. Without recruiting new members and retaining old members and our youth in sufficient numbers, we will not continue to exist. We are one of a wide variety of organizations that strive to serve people's needs for *identity, meaning, community* and *growth and development*. The genes we want to pass along are pointed to by our UU purposes and principles and our congregational mission statement you'll find poetically recast as our chalice lighting. For us, reproduction is recruiting people to adopt and/or affirm our genes, incorporate them into their identity and share them with others.

Our UU species has some distinct survival advantages in this new environment that are different from religions based on a single revelation or teacher or tradition: Our bottom up rather than a top down approach to religion adapts better to the increasing distrust of authority in our culture. We place the ultimate arbitration of truth and faith in each person's mind and heart rather than in a revelation, a doctrine, a prophet, or a cleric. Each source may have great influence over us, but we make the final decision of which to follow and what to incorporate. Thus we are egalitarian and democratic rather than hierarchical in our governance and guidance.

- The systems we create, then, have different characteristics. Our congregations tend to be more flexible, open, adaptable and innovative rather than rigid, closed and stable.
- Our congregations are forward thinking into an unknown future without a fixed endpoint. We see ourselves as co-creators and shapers of that future that we *can* and *should* influence to support the flourishing of life in this world. The flourishing of life is in alignment with the processes of evolution. We are not anchored in an idealized past that should be reconstructed in the future that has an end-point of salvation or an after-life.

Our Unitarian Universalist species also has liabilities that put our survival at risk:

- Because we are not reliant on external authority for our sense of identity, we can easily stray from a sense of interdependence. This can weaken our sense of connection with our congregations and thus weaken our sense of commitment to the whole. Tightly connected communities have an evolutionary advantage over lone individuals.

- For that reason, all organisms need sources of cohesion to keep people together. Without theological or ideological cohesion, we can default to sociological sources of cohesion. That can introduce a narrow social-economic-racial cohesion that binds people together. Social-economic-racial uniformity could be a huge barrier to congregational growth and development. Monocultures are more vulnerable than communities that support rich diversity.
- All religious organizations struggle with the balance between serving others versus serving themselves. It's the club mentality problem. Our rejection of a common holy commission and obligation makes us very susceptible to this problem.

Make no mistake in assuming our survival advantages will overcome our perils. There is no sure bet on our survival, growth and development. During the nineteenth century, there was a time when the Universalists were a very fast growing religion. They fizzled for a number of reasons, not the least of them changes in Protestant denominations de-emphasizing hell-fire and damnation preaching.

So, what kind of evolutions of Unitarian Universalism might we be seeing? That of course is the rub. Right now, *I'm not sure if we know.*

I've been researching how evolution works this week by reading some articles by business consultants. I love looking for institutional lessons from the business community because you can see all the processes of evolution working in corporations right before your eyes. Companies are organisms that are constantly competing with each other, striving to better adapt to their constantly changing business environment. Their means of production, customers and ideas for ways to serve them are always changing. A church that fails to appeal to a younger generation may take several generations to die. A business that fails to serve its customers can die in months, even weeks.

The source of genetic variation for today's corporations are innovations. These come in two types. The first, and safest, are incremental innovations that are adjustments to current processes and products. We see them all the time, new and improved products that are in a smaller or larger jar, come in a new flavor, or have a new feature.

The second type are revolutionary innovations. Something completely new and different. Apple has made its fortune on introducing revolutionary computer products. The Mac, the iPhone and the iPad were revolutionary products that changed how we interact with computers.

The problem with revolutionary innovations is you can't see them coming.

In the religious sphere, people like Buddha, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed were the innovators that introduced revolutionary change in their religion. Each Christian denomination that has survived has in its origins, its DNA, a revolutionary idea that speaks

meaningfully and persuasively to people's needs and concerns.

The day before Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and each visionary leader that formed a new religious sect or denomination was born, the revolutionary change they brought either didn't exist or didn't have the interest or attention to bring them to life. Nobody saw it coming.

I believe we are in that “day before” time in Unitarian Universalism. There is so much potential for us as a denomination to grow and develop *in this climate*, we are just waiting for the right person, the right moment, the right event, that brings our movement enough attention for us to catch fire. Right now, there is a lot of experimentation in our congregations, and there needs to be even more as we adapt to find what will bring the nones into alignment with us. As President Morales points out, we have what it takes to become the “religion for our time.”

I'm your resident innovator in this process. I'm constantly watching what other congregations are doing to see if their experiments are working or not. I'm regularly talking to my ministerial colleagues to find out what they are doing. I monitor discussion groups of ministers and lay people who are talking about these innovations. I have my own hypotheses about what might work to attract people to us that I try out. In a way, each Sunday service is an innovative invitation for people to join us.

And I also have an agitating role to stimulate growth and development in our congregation.

Anyone who says they like innovative change hasn't had their sacred cow slaughtered. It is human to the core to want to get things to a place that we like them and then strive to keep them that way. We love homeostasis, getting things into a holistic balance. Sometimes I think I can tune the order of service to perfection that will satisfy everyone. Forget it! There is an unresolvable struggle between innovation and homeostasis.

However, evolution says: adapt or die.

So, what kind of changes do I imagine? Here are some of the ideas and experiments I've heard or read about:

- The UUA wants to experiment with gathering UU's together in non-church settings. That might be a virtual congregation like the group of virtual congregants that meet weekly in a computer simulated environment called “Second Life.”
- Maybe a congregation will meet in a computer chat room once a week, a park, a library or a bar or someplace facilitated by an electronic meet-up software platform.
- How about a flash-mob congregation that meets to do social justice work.
- I'd like to go to a UU music festival that gathers all the musicians that sing our values. UU Camps and conferences can be their own congregations for short times.

- What about a theologically themed UU congregation – say a UU congregation that does Buddhist meditation practice each Sunday with the minister giving a dharma talk. Maybe a UU congregation that celebrates Jewish holidays rather than Christian ones. What about an Earth centered congregation that follows a seasonal cycle. Maybe a Taoist approach?
- Could there be a UU Center for the Arts that didn't have worship services at all but came together for classes and did communal artistic projects that express our values.
- There might be a place for a UU congregation dedicated to one specific cause, such as protecting the environment, alternative energy, local food, peace, gender equality.
- I'd maybe be part of a Transcendentalist Club that would worship by taking nature hikes, maybe beginning and ending with some worshipful elements and then having a potluck.
- Maybe these could be (and are) subcommunities within individual congregations.

These are just a few ideas bouncing around in my head. Some may work and most will fail. Remember that only the ones that attract and hold people will survive. The only ones that will survive are the ones best adapted to the current environment, conditions and the needs of people today.

And still, I expect there are ways to live our UU values in community that none of us have yet imagined.

All that said, there are core Unitarian Universalist structural identity elements that you'll recognize in any of these innovations. Like a backbone, arms and legs, eyes and ears, nose and mouth, there will be elements to these innovations we'll recognize are Unitarian Universalist. Things like a commitment to inclusion; respect for individual conscience, a pluralistic approach to faith and belief, democratic process, a commitment to the interdependent web, world community and shared responsibility for ministry to each other. Whatever new form arises, for it to be UU, it will need to have UU DNA in it.

The one that may or may not be the future of our movement is what we are doing right now. Even the Sunday morning hour may not be sacred. Whatever the future holds for us I have faith in the value and continuity of our UU genes however they are embodied.

I close with these words by George Bernard Shaw: Some people see things as they are and say why? I dream things that never were and say, why not?

Like green life leaping forth on branches in spring, may our innovations bring new life to the religious tradition we love and through which we are loved and express our love.