

United First Parish Church in Quincy
Sermon by Rev. Michelle Walsh, 6/10/07

“Risking Religious Conversation”

Have you ever needed to dial information to get the phone number for the Unitarian Universalist Association downtown on Beacon Street? And if so, have you had the operator ask you to repeat the name a couple of times? [act out a little bit] It can be a little frustrating but also a humbling reminder of just how small a denomination we really are – just nearly 1050 congregations nationally at the last count, most of them about the size of our congregation here in Quincy, with just barely over 150,000 adult members worldwide. We are hardly the denomination of the mega-church, though the UUA did try to plant one in Texas recently, but without too much success so far.

Some of us are quite comfortable remaining a small denomination and feel that we can retain and promote a message of integrity much more successfully as a small but focused denomination. We argue that our limited time and resources need to be devoted to securing and developing what we already have achieved. Others of us are not too sure that this is in fact a healthy and viable position. We argue instead that we best promote and live out our message by growing in encounter with one another and with people who are significantly different from ourselves. Where do you think you might fall in this debate?

Our current UUA president, Bill Sinkford, has committed the denomination to growth during his presidency. In 2003, the New Congregation Task Force offered a vision of creating 50 new large churches of 1500 to 3000 members each over a five year period. Can you just begin to imagine a UU congregation of 3000 members? Well, this has not exactly been a fulfilled vision, and many parish ministers complain that such a vision diverts attention from developing and sustaining existing churches. However, perhaps we are throwing the baby out with the bath water. Perhaps both growth and sustenance are important elements in a UU vision.

We are nothing if not a denomination of grand visions – the former president of our denomination, John Buehrens, during his eight-year tenure, put us on the path of becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural denomination. And while we have done and continue to do a lot of educational work in these areas, we have only to look around our own congregation today to see how far we have yet to come in this vision, too.

Having a vision is very important – a vision can inspire us and lure us in a new direction and onto a different path. But it is also very important to know and to understand and to appreciate each step along this path toward the vision. There are pragmatics to climbing a mountain after all. One does not start out on the path without one’s backpack of supplies – definitely water, food, a first aid kit, perhaps a walking stick, and, most importantly, a map. If we want to achieve a vision of either denominational growth or our own church growth here in Quincy, then we do need to

sustain ourselves along the way and we need to know what is involved in each of the steps along the way – where are the pitfalls of which we should be careful?

Michael Durall, a church consultant, is a sometime critic of our grandiose Unitarian Universalist visions. In his book, *The Almost Church: Redefining Unitarian Universalism for a New Era*¹, Durall discusses the qualities that allow for the development of large congregations – or perhaps we may just think about the qualities that permit us to grow a little larger. This morning, let's focus on just one of the qualities he mentions – a comfort with being evangelical, a comfort which UU's do not usually have. But as we rethink and reclaim our language of reverence, perhaps the word "evangelical" is one that we may reconsider as well.

Despite its contemporary Christian connotations, the root meaning of "evangelical" is simply "messenger of good news." Do we believe that Unitarian Universalists have "good news" to bring to the world? To the degree that we do any kind of advertisement or promotion of who we are and what we offer, we are being evangelical as Unitarian Universalists. Is that OK? Can we get comfortable with being even more evangelical? Or do we want to rely on people somehow just finding us on their own?

As we rethink the metaphoric possibilities in our language of reverence, perhaps some similar issues come up around the word "evangelical" – we've been wounded in some way by others who use that language in harmful, intolerant, and life-denying ways, as others have abused words such as "god," "salvation," "sin," etc. Language, however, is enormously flexible and stretches and changes over time, albeit gradually, in metaphoric possibilities. We do throw out the baby with the bath water when we concretize any word into an inherent permanent meaning.

Let me suggest that Unitarian Universalism is an evangelical tradition, a radical one. How otherwise did we end up with so many martyrs in our history that we claim with such a deep sense of pride? On this day in UU history alone, June 10th, we have one anti-Trinitarian we claim who got burnt at the stake and another one who was nearly hanged a few hundred years ago. During the radical reformation, those kinds of things tended to happen to people who had a passion for their beliefs and were willing to proselytize. But what's different about our evangelical tradition is that we appreciated the value of a good argument and were willing to be changed by the argument, and we sought to protect each person's right to their own beliefs and experiences.

But perhaps today we feel uncertain about exactly how to risk religious conversation – whether it is here among us or out there in the broader world. We lack role models or we have only had negative role models. Perhaps we fear somehow imposing our own viewpoints by their mere expression. Or perhaps we fear some type of retaliatory anger or maybe worse yet, dismissal of our experiences and beliefs – either of these may feel the worst when they occur in our own extended families rather than with

¹ Durall, M. (2004). *The Almost Church: Redefining Unitarian Universalism for a New Era*. Tulsa, OK: Jenkin Lloyd Press at All Souls Church.

strangers. Yet still, there may be untold possibilities that we are missing when we don't take these risks as the opportunities are posed. Let me share one recent experience, and then I am interested in hearing about some of yours.

Over the Memorial Day weekend, I was home in New Jersey visiting my family and my mom sent me off to her favorite hair salon for a haircut. Sitting in the chair, I mentioned to the hairdresser, Joanne, I was going to be ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister next Sunday. "I'm not much of a churchgoer," Joanne said. "What's a Unitarian Universalist? Is it an evangelical church?" "No," I replied, and I mentally got my UU elevator speech ready. Bill Sinkford suggests that we all develop a few sentences in which we could describe Unitarian Universalism to someone in an elevator while traveling between just a few floors.

"Unitarian Universalism," I said, "is actually two denominations – Unitarianism and Universalism – that merged into one in the 1960's. While they came out of the Jewish Christian tradition, they organized around ethical principles and social justice when they came together and appreciation for all of the world religions." "Oh, so it's an evangelical church," Joanne repeated. Clearly Joanne had some experience with evangelical churches that was leading her to read my explanation as evangelical!

"Well, not exactly," I repeated. "At least not as evangelical churches are typically thought of since we do focus on appreciating all of the world religions, not just Christianity. And our commitment to social justice is very strong – we've been at the forefront of civil rights movements historically, including now in terms of marriage equality and gay rights." At this point I saw Joanne freeze a bit with the scissors in her hand, and I found myself wondering – is this really a good time for me personally to risk this conversation?

However, I was then pleasantly surprised because Joanne proceeded to launch into a description of her disappointment with a Catholic friend who had not wanted to have a gay bartender at her wedding and who was becoming judgmental toward her former friends. We were able to find common ground in a perception of Jesus' message as liberal and progressive, even radical in its hospitality toward others. I joked that at a recent BGLT conference at Boston University, radical Christians had implied that to take the Christian message seriously meant to be fully prepared that the second coming of Christ might be in the form of a poor black gay man. Joanne laughed heartily and joyfully at that.

So we were on a pretty mutual wavelength when Joanne took the conversation to another level of risk for our engagement. She spoke of an older brother who suddenly died and her belief in an afterlife and in God, whom she always referred to with male pronouns. She was worried about another older brother who had challenged her own beliefs but seemed to offer nothing in return and who had no spiritual practices. I struggled in that moment as to whether I should simply listen, but Joanne wanted to know what I thought and I only had my own experiences to offer to her.

So I took the risk that I would not be saying exactly what she wanted to hear, but that maybe she would find something in it regardless. I said that I agreed with her that spiritual practices can be enormously helpful and comforting, particularly during such a time and that I had benefited from having a Buddhist spiritual practice at the time of my paternal grandmother's death and spoke briefly on the experience of transcendence in Buddhist wisdom. Again, the conversation became surprising when Joanne revealed that her 18 year old daughter was interested in Buddhism, though she herself struggled with understanding her daughter's interest. I was able to share some references by Thich Nhat Hanh, such as *Living Buddha, Living Christ* and *Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, that sought to bring Christian and Buddhist perspectives into dialogue. Joanne was very grateful for those references, and I also happened to leave her with the website for the UUA.

So you never know where the door is going to lead once you open it, no matter how nerve wracking opening it might be. I'm wondering if some of you have had experiences trying to explain Unitarian Universalism or your beliefs or experiences and how that has gone for you. Are you comfortable being an evangelical UU? Let's share briefly together and see what we can learn of the pitfalls and opportunities of risking religious conversations.