

Association Sunday 2008: The Larger Mission

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If you were ever in an evangelical or fundamentalist church, you know that it's common in those congregations to bring a Bible with you on Sunday mornings, because the preacher will make reference to the text throughout the service. There will be quotes from the Scriptures, and the minister will almost always preach the day's message from a specific verse or verses, selected for their relevance to the day's sermon. And, you would follow along in your own Bible.

This hasn't been the preaching and teaching style of our denomination, at least in the last 50 years or so. I'm actually not too sure what single book we might even use, if we were to try to revive the tradition. Perhaps we'd each look like the high school students I see walking around downtown, with huge backpacks full of books on their backs.

But today, I want to invite you to bring out one of our Unitarian Universalist "sacred texts," so that we can look at some meaningful words together and explore what they mean to us in this faith tradition.

So, please get out "Singing the Living Tradition," the gray hymnal. Share with your neighbor as you turn to the front of the book, to the page where you find the statement of our Covenant. The page we'll be looking at is like this.

In the large print text that highlights the preamble to our Seven Principles, there are some important words, especially in the context of today's focus for our time together. This is Association Sunday, and we're going to be talking about our connection to the larger denomination of Unitarian Universalism. Let's read those words together:

"We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, do covenant to affirm and promote:"

While each of us may personally embrace and interpret these Seven Principles as guidelines for leading a fulfilled and worthwhile life, or not, as an Association of congregations, we have adopted them as our statement of understanding and support for one another. They state for us some of the most important values that define and guide our denomination.

What I want to focus on today is the concept of Unitarian Universalism as an Association – a group of member congregations, each independent and self-contained, but choosing to be together as a larger body of people who are accountable to and supportive of one another in our common faith tradition. You will see that commitment highlighted in the paragraph at the bottom on the page, where it says:

"As free congregations, we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support."

We are free congregations, a part of our heritage since our separate denominations began hundreds of years ago. However, we are also more than just one Fellowship; we are more than just one town. In the United States, we are approximately 1500 congregations made up of over 225,000 people.

In each of our churches, we are responsible for our own governance, our own finances, our own decisions and choices. And, we are more than a mission of sustaining our own Fellowship, simply supporting our own community of friends and loved ones

within these walls. With our brothers and sisters in faith, within this Fellowship and in the Association, we have a larger mission in the world beyond our walls.

Why are we here? Why are you here? There are many reasons that each of us chooses to bring our presence and participation to this Fellowship. Some of us come from with a long UU heritage – this is our faith home because it's where we grew up and developed our sense of spirituality, self and place. For most of us however, coming into the circle of Unitarian Universalism represents the culmination of a search in response to deep yearnings of the heart and spirit, a desire to find a spiritual home and community where our mind is engaged, our heart is opened, and our spirit renewed.

When we share our stories about how our lives have led us to this place, to this denomination, we hear about each other's adventures in "wonderland." We wondered if we would ever find a place that would speak to us spiritually. We wondered if we'd ever find a community where our beliefs and values fit. We wondered if our free spirits, longing for the search, could find a place where we would be welcomed in, doubts and all, to find friends and companions for the journey. Every single one of us, whether we are cradle UUs, or long-time converts, or recently arrived fledglings, values our personal path as we search for the truth and meaning referenced in our Second Principle.

We are committed to our singular search, to finding our own paths and walking our own way on life's journey. We embrace this right and privilege, and we extend the courtesy of acceptance and love to one another, challenging ourselves to love one another and open our hearts wider. Our goal in community is to encourage each other in our pursuit of spiritual growth.

One challenge of our rational heritage, our independence and desire to maintain our individuality is that we can "hedge our bets" on our commitment to this faith, to this community. It's something like that great Woody Allen line – we're not sure we really want to be a member of a community that would actually have US as a member. We wonder if we'll be scooped up and moved beyond our rational and sober understanding of our search for truth and meaning. We wonder when the "real" requirements will be revealed, and we'll be required to submit to dogma and doctrine. So we hold back, a little or a lot.

While it's understandable for those concerns to be with us, let's refer back to our covenant. As UUs, we affirm that our search is free and responsible. We can believe in what we find here. We can have faith in each other and our experience in this community. We can let ourselves show up and be here fully, committed and willing to see and be seen.

There's another challenge to this dynamic, as well. Sometimes our commitment to our precious nurtured individualism makes it a challenge for us to be community. It's a tension that has been a part of our denominational dynamics for a long time and continues to challenge us today.

I want to share with you a paragraph from a recent article by the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs:

"Inherent in the history of our faith tradition is the tension between the Pilgrim's understanding of the church as a gathering of "visible saints" who have separated themselves from the sinful world and a vision of the church as a "beloved community" turned toward the public square, radically hospitable, deeply pluralistic, living out our ministry at the intersection of spiritual development and social justice."

This tension between facing inward and facing outward, caring for your own while remaining in contact with the larger world, separation and community plays itself out on so many levels in our lives – within our personal lives, but also within the life of our congregation - between and within UUFLG and our relationship with congregations in this area, this District, the nation, and the world.

We get caught up in the requirements and need of our own lives, tugged and pulled by the responsibilities and obligations that hold our attention on our own lives. We have so many things to do. And, it can be hard to find the time, energy, interest, and focus that we need to remind ourselves to reach out, remain curious, and find out what's happening in the world beyond our own lives. It's easy, sometimes, to become "hunkered down" in place; to create a routine that feels comfortable and want to just rest in that place.

There are, of course, always things that need to be done within the Fellowship to tend and nurture the "home fires," so to speak. And, when you find a community of like-minds and loving hearts, of course you want to spend time there. There is a special joy in the community we treasure, a joy in our old friends. It is comfortable and nurturing to be with the people who know you and who know the song of your heart, who will sing it to you when you have momentarily forgotten the tune. Our own Ralph Waldo Emerson felt that friends might "well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature," and said that "it is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them." That kind of safety, comfort, and familiarity is truly one of life's blessings.

But, we also need to nurture our connection to the larger denomination because there is so much to be done in the world, so many opportunities where we see the potential for our faith, for our values, for our kind of truth to make life better. We have a covenant, as congregations, to promote the goal of a world community characterized by peace, liberty, and justice for all. We all have a role in this mission, and we all know that we can't do it all alone, as much as we may value our independence and preserve our individuality.

We reach out and involve ourselves in the larger movement of Unitarian Universalism to deepen our understanding of what it means to be alive and engaged in the world. We open our hearts beyond our own community to remind ourselves that we are not alone in our commitment, that we are not the only ones striving to make the covenant real and alive in our lifetimes.

We seek others with whom to engage in the work because we know that each new relationship is a potential new door to a different world, a new set of possibilities and options. We reach out to be expanded, encouraged, and engaged.

It takes courage to extend beyond yourself to invite someone new into your life AND to invite yourself into someone else's life. Writer Anais Nin said, "Each new person represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." That new world of possibility represents our best hope for making our Seven Principles come to life, to see our mission to the larger world move forward toward fruition. We need our Association, and they need us.

Here are some ideas for getting started on fulfilling your own part of the larger mission, for expanding your UU impact on this community and in the community beyond our doors:

- Be curious about your faith: Read your UU World. If you don't yet subscribe, pick up a copy in the foyer. If you're a techie, visit the Unitarian Universalist website, participate in UU-related blogs and online communities. Check out books on our UU history and heritage, either from our own library (in the Quiet Room at the back of the sanctuary), or from the UUA bookstore.
- Take a week off from UUFLG now and then and visit other UU churches and Fellowships. When you're there, introduce yourself and talk to people. Then, come back to us! Bring back ideas of what you saw and what you liked and what you'd like to do here.
- Attend District Assembly, General Assembly, Leadership School, other UU learning opportunities. Go to retreat weekends, like the one we had the chance to participate in last weekend with people from San Jose and Fremont. Find out what it's like to be around a whole bunch of UUs. And, learn more about how, as a faith, we make consider our mission and move it forward in the world.
- Participate in social action projects that involve us with other UU congregations. Show up. Say "yes" to the opportunities you have to put your faith into action.

Autonomy in association. On Association Sunday, we remind ourselves of the value of being a part of the interconnected web of our faith tradition, of the support and encouragement we get to practice our beliefs and values in the context of a larger vision and mission.

I want to close this morning with the words of the Reverend Olympia Brown. Turn to reading #569 in the back of your hymnal, "Stand by this Faith." Rev. Brown was the first woman ordained into ministry by the Unitarians in the 1860s. I'm proud to be in a movement that was among the first to ordain women. Only the Quakers and the Universalists did it earlier; some faiths still don't.

Let's read together. (Do as a responsive reading.)

Amen.