

Go Tell It on the Mountain

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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I've been on the top of several mountains in my life, many of them in New England. Mountains are wonderful places to climb and enjoy. They also make great metaphors. On one particular mountain (perhaps it was actually more of a large hill) in Wales, that was named for the legendary wizard, Merlin, I remember looking down on the farmers below and feeling very connected to history – that this place had been just like this for hundreds and hundreds of years and other people had been where I was looking down on other farmers doing their afternoon chores. Somehow the view from this height was more insightful than merely seeing into the distance. People have always spoken about mountains as powerful places. Messages have been received on mountains. Messages have been given from mountains.

The song, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is very popular for many Christians. “Go tell it on the mountain....that Jesus Christ was born.” It is rousing and has a catchy tune. Unfortunately, that song doesn't work for most of us, here. We may celebrate the man, Jesus, and his message of love and compassion, but the word Christ commonly denotes Jesus' divine relationship as part of the triune God, and the trinity is by definition, not Unitarian.

I really like the concept, though, of climbing to the top of the mountain and shouting. I resisted the urge from the mountain top in Wales, although I did wave.

Do you remember the Doris Day song about her secret love that she shouted from the highest hill. My mother used to play her Doris Day album all the time when I was young. I know this particular song by heart. “Now I shout it from the highest hill. Even told the golden daffodils.....And now my secret love's not secret, any more.”

I hope it isn't, but might it be possible that we too often think of Unitarian Universalism as our secret love? Some of us don't too loudly advertise our religious identities, so one could possibly see a correlation between our spiritual lives and Doris Day's secret love. I know that we do love this place and this community and this UU faith/tradition/religion/association, but I imagine that most of us rarely shout about it in public. Unfortunately, in today's world it seems as if it's easy to get people riled up when you start to talk religion – or politics. I'd suggest that we really need more of those conversations, regardless of our natural tendencies to avoid conflict, but that's another story for another day. Thank goodness there's always more to talk about!

If you were on the top of a mountain, even a proverbial one, what would you want to shout to the people in the valley below about your experiences here at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst? What would you like people to know about this liberal religious tradition and our way of “doing” religion? What are the things that keep you

coming back each week and each year? And since Clare has so kindly opened the subject, what keeps your pledges coming every year? Why is this place so important to you, and has so much potential, that I'm sure you are even thinking about increasing your pledge? Or, what is it that might be leading you to that most important step, filling out your very first pledge card?

I might have you at an advantage, having studied the subject for some years now, but here are the things I would shout about Unitarian Universalism, from that imaginary mountain top – Doris Day's highest hill. I'd really rather these things were not so secret. In no particular order of importance, because it would be very difficult to quantify the relative merits of these admirations:

* I love Unitarian Universalism because it provides a means of asking all the so called normal religious questions, without the so called normal religious trappings. Why is there "something" rather than nothing? What does it mean to be human? How should we get along with other people – and the earth itself? What happens when we die? We are a living institutional example of William James' *The Variety of Religious Experience*. We can talk about issues, not doctrines, in words that everyone, no matter what their faith, can understand.

*We can explore and talk about all the timeless insights into the human condition without the need to use specific words or the requirement to extol certain beliefs.

*Our basis for ethical and moral decisions has a much broader base than it does for those in this world whose truth is contained in one book – or another.

*We can read the words of any wise or enlightened person, from any tradition, and take them to our hearts as part of an ongoing, evolving, personal, understanding of the truth. Revelation, for us, is not sealed.

* I love it that we embrace the need to continually evaluate the state and nature of our religious tradition. The UUA's Commission on Appraisal takes on a new aspect of Unitarian Universalism every few years, from our ideas about membership to our multi-dimensional theologies. Their current project is reviewing the seven principles and the list of sources from which we draw inspiration and custom.

* I love Unitarian Universalism because we really do try to find what is good in all religions and belief systems and to respect the right of all people to their own responsible search for truth and meaning.

* Maybe this last one is the most important after all. I love Unitarian Universalism because we truly believe that it is our actions in the world, and not the thoughts in our head or the words that come out of our mouth, that are the measure of our humanity and our religious convictions. What we believe is what we do is what we are.

A UU minister tells the story of overhearing some women in the kitchen at an ecumenical luncheon. The women were apparently talking quite derogatorily about Catholics or Baptists and one of them said "Well, thank God we're Presbyterians!" After a little silence, a second woman said "We're not supposed to be Presbyterians. We're supposed to be Christians." After more silence, another said "Even that sounds arrogant. We're supposed to love one another, that's all." (from *The Simple Gifts of Liberal Religion* by

Davidson Loehr, First UU Church of Austin, July 23, 2003) I'd like to think that last woman's words are what we would say, as Unitarian Universalists.

Speaking of loving one another, I feel like telling people about *this* place too – *our* Society – *our* independent Unitarian Universalist congregation. We have a lot, that is worthwhile, to offer, and I want to share it with others. Here is what I would say from my mountain about us:

* Mostly what we have to offer is opportunity and possibility. Being a part of this congregation provides the means and the inspiration for worship and wonder, for thinking and questioning, for playing and laughter, for teaching and learning, for grieving and supporting, for becoming larger and more generous people in a hurting world.

* I love this place because sometimes, as in our earlier reading, the sum of what we are doing together becomes (if only for a fleeting moment) larger than the sum of what we are each doing separately. This is a place to be reminded of what is larger, more powerful, more beautiful, more loving than we have ever known. I like the intention with which we gather.

* Here we learn to model right relationships, and tender relationships, and respectful relationships. We even know how to laugh. Here we strive to become the embodiment of healthy and loving individuals who choose to be in this community. Here we do some things right and sometimes make mistakes, but we try to learn from it all. The Beloved Community some call it, and thoughts of it give us hope.

* Here we know the importance of being able to put out our hand to others when we are hurting, and the reciprocal love that keeps our hands ready to take those reaching out to us in their pain. Agate Nesaule, in *A Woman in Amber*, says “We have to believe that even the briefest of human connections can heal. Otherwise, life is unbearable.” The power of healing community is something I experienced myself in the Meadville, PA, UU congregation when I was very much in need of support and healing. I know how important *your* connections are to so many of you here. This is something truly great to shout from the highest hill. We will love you even, and perhaps especially, when you cannot love yourself.

*I would shout that Love is an important word here. We'd likely agree with Patch Adams who says that “it's time to take the healing power of love to the global level. It's time for a love platform” of government, with a policy called “Be Nice.” “If we spent our energy and resources uplifting people in need – spreading laughter and light instead of bombs and bullets – we'd live in a world that was happier, healthier and safer.” (CommonDreams.org, Nov. 7, 2006 *Be Smart: Vote for Love* by Patch Adams)

*We respect the importance of our reasoning minds AND the emotional/feeling aspect of our lives. Our intellect cannot be separated from our senses and our psyche. That's why we love to hear an intelligent, inspiring sermon and then hold hands and sing together at the end of the service each week.

* Something else I would like to shout from the hills, so that the Clara Barton District and the entire Association could hear it: This congregation appreciates its minister and cares about her as a real person, just as she cares about you. There is sincere and generous mutual ministry in this place and I thank you for that.

* I want people to know that we here at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst know the value of sharing our religious thinking and experiences *together*. We appreciate that the more diverse our community, the more complete our lives will be.

* Lastly, only because my voice is getting hoarse from all this supposed shouting, not because I've run out of things I love about this place, I am proud that we do not, at least most of the time, sit on our self-satisfied – chairs – and forget that there is always room for improvement – always more to do. This being religious and spiritual is a trip, or maybe I should say a journey. Here, there is never a dull moment.

Don't you just want to get up on a soapbox and shout?!

When you're finished, though, could you come down and fill out your pledge card? Please. I'm sure Clare's committee would appreciate not having to chase you around Amherst in order that we might have a reasonable estimate of the total pledges with which to work out next year's budget.

I encourage you to give as the love you have for this place deserves. I will be. Give for the ongoing expenses and for the improvements we need and for the more complete ministry we would wish to offer to the larger community. Give as a member who wants to help with the expenses of being a family ----- a very large family that owns a very large home.