

History and Perspective on Unitarian Universalist Socially Responsible Commitment

Alison Wohler, February 1, 2009

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

On Tuesday night of this past week, I joined at least ten other members of this congregation at the Empty Bowls fundraising event of the Amherst Survival Center. Every one of the 500 tickets printed for this fundraiser had been sold out in advance. Our congregation had joined others in our area by sending a portion of our Christmas Eve offering to the Survival Center for its advance publicity of the Empty Bowls project. The Pub, which had donated their space and kitchen and wait staff, as well as a considerable amount of the food, was packed to overflowing. Area potters had donated bowls in which to serve the dozen or so varieties of soup available to choose from. Celebrity personalities from the Town of Amherst were serving salads and bussing tables. There was considerable talk amongst the participants about the need for immediate shelter for the growing number of homeless men and women in our area, and this was the place to meet the movers and shakers. It was a fun evening, but also a chilling reminder of pressing need and hunger. I felt frustrated by everyday demands that limit my personal ability to respond to those needs.

Clearly there is a deep and widespread social consciousness in this valley of which we can all be proud and for which we can all be thankful as well. We Unitarian Universalists, as individuals, as a congregation, and as a movement, have always made significant contributions to the perennial need for change and care of those less fortunate and the marginalized. We believe that what affects one of us affects us all. We believe that how we bring alive the love and compassion we believe in is more important than the abstractions of our individual theologies.

Our social consciousness rises out of our Unitarian Universalist principles, which arise from both our understanding of the human condition and our love for that same human condition. Love and compassion are at the core of our faith, as they are at the core of all the religions of the world. These are the principles that drive us to care and to want to make a difference. They spring from our own natures – mind and emotion, reason and intuition, the self protective and the altruistic. They spring from our own experiences being human.

Just as we personally sometimes have trouble making the right decisions about ethical issues, so too did our Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist forebears sometimes have those same difficulties.

Somehow, in my enthusiasm for our faith, I had assumed that our tradition had always championed the separation of church and state. Not so, I found out only too recently at a lecture by Forrest Church on his book So Help Me God. Seems the Unitarians were part of what was called the Standing Order of only a few denominations, charged by the government with providing public worship, and supported by taxation of the people in the towns and parishes. Unitarians in general were not for separation of church and state because they would have lost their funding! This revelation was an affront to my personal distaste of putting money ahead of principle, not to mention a severe blow to my pride in my professed religion! The Universalists, on the other hand, were all for the separation of church and state because they were considered a minority religion in New England as our country was being formed and were thus ineligible to receive public funding.

On this issue of slavery, eventually the Unitarians caught up to the abolitionist position of the Universalists, but it did not happen right away. Many in the Unitarian pews were of the more wealthy folk, who either owned slaves themselves or profited from businesses that profited from slavery. Unitarian ministers who spoke out against slavery in the days before and during the Civil War often found themselves ostracized or ousted by their congregations. William Ellery Channing's "views on slavery increasingly alienated his congregation and they especially hurt him when they refused to allow the use of the church for the memorial for Channing's friend [and fellow minister who was also known for his abolitionist views] Charles Follen." (Historical Dictionary of UUism, Mark W. Harris, p. 97) That would be as if the Board of Trustees of this Society said I could not hold a memorial service here for my closest colleague in ministry, if that colleague had voted for John McCain in the last election.

These are not particularly proud moments in our Unitarian history.

Here is another historical example which again illustrates "how much a part of the national establishment Unitarianism was, and how vulnerable it was to conventional thinking, even at the expense of its ancient principles." (Bumbaugh, Unitarian Universalism: a narrative history, p. 137) "At outbreak of the [First World War], the American Unitarian Association called upon its churches to support the government and the war effort. In a clear violation of the principle of congregational polity [simply put that each of our congregations is independent and makes its own decisions], the Association announced that it would withhold all support of any church whose minister did not wholeheartedly support the war aims of the government." (p. 136) I have trouble even imagining how this could happen. But it did and we must own up to it.

I'm sure there are some examples, somewhere, of Universalist positions we might not agree with today, but I could not find them. For the most part the Universalists seem to have been consistently more in line with our current thinking on social issues. In general Universalist congregations were of a different sociological makeup than Unitarian congregations. These were not the folks in powerful positions themselves, and that shows itself in the history of Universalist social consciousness. Mark Harris writes in his pamphlet, *Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith*, "From its beginnings, Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. The Gloucester church included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown. Universalism was a more evangelical faith than Unitarianism. After officially organizing in 1793, the Universalists spread their faith across the eastern United States and Canada, promoting the belief that all people are the children of God, rather than a chosen few." In George Huntston Williams' book on American Universalism we read that "With John Murray and in the course of two hundred years development, Universalism has perceived its mission as the affirmation of the restoration of all creation in ultimate harmony." (p. 82) I believe that what we think of as the most characteristically unique underpinning of Universalism, that all are equally deserving of love, plays significantly in our now common Unitarian Universalist mission to equity, justice and compassion.

But even after our merger, there is another example of a considerable debacle, called the Black Empowerment Controversy, that happened in the late 1960s over issues of race and power within the denomination. It's a complicated story involving a "division between advocates of integration and advocates of black empowerment" that John Buehrens described as "competing

strategies for maintaining a sense of white liberal innocence – one involved pretending to be color-blind, the other involved paying reparations.” (Soul Work, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, ed., p. x) The work of anti-racism and its extension, multi-culturalism, continues within our Association. David Bumbaugh writes “Unitarian Universalism was forced to face a legacy at least as old as racism – its location in the upper middle-class, and the challenge that represented to a religious community which seeks a world of equity and justice.” (UU: a narrative history, p. 200)

We have made mistakes. There remains work to be done, even within our congregations and our Association. But let’s spend some time on the positive as well as the negative.

Following the debacle of the Black Empowerment Controversy, the UUA eventually (10 years later) undertook an internal audit of its own racism. “Within 10 years [of the audit] the UUA reached the goal of 20 percent of the headquarters staff being people of color. In 2001, an African American, William Sinkford, was elected president of the UUA.” (Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism, Mark W. Harris, p. 385) Numerous initiatives, workshops, and congregational programs such as Journey Toward Wholeness have followed and while there is much work to be done, much has already taken place.

I could not possibly get through a list of the accomplishments of Unitarian and Universalist individuals, and their congregations, through the years. Both faiths, and particularly the women of both faiths, worked tirelessly for women’s rights, including the right to vote, the right to an equal education, and the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution. Our traditions were instrumental in the creation of the Public Library system in this country. Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross. Unitarians and Universalists marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama. Two, James Reeb and Viola Luzzo, were murdered for their involvement in those marches.

We have been among the first denominations to work for reproductive rights and enabled the counseling of many women through the years on their rights concerning abortions. Our ministers were well known, as well, for their counsel to young men seeking Conscientious Objector status during the years of the Vietnam War.

Over 150 years ago the Unitarians helped establish Beacon Press, an independent publishing firm that would “publish books aligned with its enlightened mission regardless of the bottom line.” In 1937 Frederick May Eliot, then president of the American Unitarian Association, wrote “We feel that it is essential that there should be a press in this country to combat the forces that would destroy liberalism.” (Beacon Press and the Pentagon Papers, p. 4) In 1971 Beacon Press published The Pentagon Papers, living up to that mission, and coming under the scrutiny of the FBI in the process. Publishing houses that can speak truth to power are increasingly necessary in our world, as we are well aware. Beacon Press lives on, despite frequent financial emergencies.

Arms of the UUA, such as the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, supported by the Association and by individuals, work around the world to combat injustices and promote our UU principles. Our children have been collecting Guest At Your Table contributions that are part of the UUSC’s efforts to combat world hunger.

Among the many current issues toward which our Unitarian Universalist social consciousness takes us today, is our Association's efforts, beginning in the 1970s, for gay and lesbian rights in this country. We have been powerful advocates for Freedom to Marry legislation across the country, continually pressing the point that marriage is a civil right. Following the approval of Proposition 8 this past fall in California, the UUA has joined with other faith organizations in filing a brief with the California Supreme Court arguing that Prop 8 poses a severe threat to the guarantee of equal protection for all and was not enacted through the constitutionally required process for such a dramatic change to the California Constitution. Bill Sinkford, in a recent letter to members of our Association, wrote "Justice is knocking, and our work is helping to open a very heavy door."

"In house" work on the subject of making sure we, in our congregations, are as accepting of alternative sexualities as we are demanding the state should be, led to the creation of the Welcoming Congregation program. I am proud to be serving a congregation that did the hard work that certification as a Welcoming Congregation demands.

I am also proud to be part of a Green Sanctuary congregations. Green Sanctuary is a multi-faceted program of UU Ministry for Earth, an extension of our seventh UU principle that calls us to be responsible for our actions in the interdependent web of our existence on this Earth.

Unitarian Universalists today are outspoken about the injustices of violence, torture and war. Our own UUSA social justice committee is currently co-sponsoring an opportunity of public awareness about the Guantanamo situation. Sabin Willitt, defense attorney for several Guantanamo detainees, will speak later this month at Smith College, and several of our members will be going. The Social Justice Committee is hoping that more of you/us will find it possible to attend, as well. I told Nancy Foster I would mention this lecture in my sermon. I know that another of Nancy's passionate interests lies in the area of the degradation of our civil liberties – at least under the past President and his administration. – so I'll mention that too particularly as it is another area of significant UU concern and action.

Current study action issues encouraged by our Association (following their introduction at General Assembly) are on the subjects of Peacemaking and Ethical Eating. Our congregation has participated in some aspect of both of these issues.

There is much good work by people in this Society that I do not have the time to include in my sermon this morning. We have wonderful, generous, and inspiring people among us, including our children, who fill me with admiration each and every day.

And I want encourage us to remember that every aspect of our social consciousness is important. Richard Gilbert identifies four categories of the work of what he calls our "Social Imperative:" social services and giving, social education, social witness and social action. (from his book [The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice](#)) These are all important. Not all of us can march in protest or write fiery letters to the editor. Let us remember that every contribution to the efforts of change are valuable and not to be diminished.

We can clearly see that much of what happens at what we consider to be a congregational or Association level of social awareness is really or at least begins with the work of individuals. We can see that within our own congregation. We have members who are devoted, personally,

to innumerable areas of social need and reform, but it is sometimes difficult to enlarge those efforts beyond the personal, or at least committee, level. It has always been this way, particularly at the level of the UUA. Sometimes it is our commitment to individual rights, or the autonomy of our independent congregations, that holds us back. Sometimes it is the limitations under which we operate in a country that believes in the separation of church and state.

In a reflection on democracy and social justice in our UU history David Bumbaugh commented “Despite our penchant to picture our movement as radically committed to social justice, the fact is that as a movement we have been religiously liberal and socially conservative and therefore, throughout most of our history, the real work of social justice has been done by individuals, often marginalized precisely because of their commitment to social justice. In the great crisis of the nineteenth century, the issue of slavery, the Unitarian movement was immobilized by its social conservatism. Individuals...took bold stands, but they were not supported by the churches. The Universalists, despite the ordination of women to their ministry, were never able to pass a significant resolution on women’s rights. It is unlikely that continued consolidation of power in the UUA will produce unconventional thinking about or radical responses to the issues of our time. Social Justice, for the foreseeable future, will remain the responsibility of individuals and special groups who retain their independence and thus, their ability to prod from the outside the central power structure.” (www.25.uua.org/uuhs/UUresources/Bumbaugh03032000.html)

From our earlier responsive reading during the New Member Ceremony, we read:

“Blessed are those who know that the work of the church is the transformation of society, who have a vision of Beloved Community transcending the present, and who do not shrink from controversy, sacrifice, or change.” (#728, Singing the Living Tradition, by John Buehrens)

Blessed are those, indeed.

Let us take a moment for some silent and personal reflection, after which we will join in our final hymn.

