

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Trust in the Greater Good”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
February 28, 2010

Introduction

I want to thank all of you for coming to this special service today, kicking off the Annual Canvass. I can't tell you how important this canvass is. In a few weeks you will be calling a new minister. The potential candidates have been learning all about you. They are interested in knowing how you honor your past, and are making plans for the future, but most importantly they want to know your level of commitment to the present. The Canvass Committee would like for me to remind you of the importance of the renewal of your commitment, how joining a church is about an affirmation of values, and the importance of connecting and reconnecting to this community of caring persons, and making a covenant together. Yes, I want to remind you of all of these things today as you consider your commitment of time and your financial resources. I also want to remind you that we are part of something larger than ourselves. This is the meaning of spirituality to me. I want you to make a spiritual commitment to a belief in the greater good, beyond our individual lives. When you join this church you are also joining a larger liberal religious movement. Our world needs liberal religion, and it all begins here.

For two weeks now many of us have been watching the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia. It has been a most inspiring event. For many this is a time to raise the flag of their country in patriotic fervor. We keep track of the gold, silver and bronze metals. I see the Olympics as much more. It is a time to be citizens of the world, hear the stories, and praise the successes of others. How could you not want to sing “O Canada” when Scott Moir and Tessa Virtue won the Gold in Ice Dancing? So elegant. So beautiful. Or how could you not be moved by the Canadian, Joannie Rochette, the figure skater who completed her short program just two days after her mother died in Vancouver. She then won the bronze medal on Thursday. She put her emotions aside, skated her best. We all shared her tears. As the commentator, Scott Hamilton said, “it is beyond the Olympic competition.” The Olympics should be a time to step outside our normal patriotism and celebrate the greater good.

Before I develop this theme, I want to thank Wendy Repass and the participants from the Gay Straight Alliance for their service last week. I congratulate you as a congregation for continuing on the road as a Welcoming Congregation. It is an ongoing process, even after you have been given the label.

In 1972 as a United Methodist I had very mixed feelings about serving as minister of a church that could not accept gays and lesbians as human beings of worth and dignity. I hoped that it would be soon that America would apply the principles of the Civil Rights era to the lives of gay and lesbian people. It was with great pride that I joined a movement that encourages gays, lesbians and transgender persons to come out of the closet and be honest about who you are and whom you love.

I remember when Massachusetts first allowed gay marriage. I beamed with pride again when the court case of Goodridge vs. the State of Massachusetts decided in favor of Gay Marriages. Hillary Goodridge is the Program Director of the UU Funding Program in Boston, and I am pleased to call her a friend. Seven of the twelve couples in that case were Unitarian Universalists. I understand there were 48 weddings celebrated at Arlington Street Church that same day. What a proud moment for our Association. This doesn't mean that we have always been perfect. As we will discuss this afternoon, our history as regards race has sometimes been rocky.

The same can be said of our treatment of women in the ministry. Today we say with pride that the majority of our ministers are female. If we are going to be honest, we would also have to say that in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century our Association discouraged women from entering the ministry and did not support them in their efforts to become leaders of our larger churches.

For the last twenty years I have been teaching UU History in many of our leadership school, districts, and churches. One of the things I hear from participants is appreciation for honesty about our history, telling stories of failure as well as success. We haven't always looked to the greatest good.

Individual Freedom and Responsibility

As I look back at the '70's, I know we took something from this period. We worked on personal relationships, and encouraged our members to grow and develop. I also feel we got away from the central

message of Unitarian Universalism—that we are a religious movement that celebrates actions for the greater good. Individual rights are an important part of our message, but responsibility is not to be forgotten.

I was pleased to see the revisions in the curriculum “About Your Sexuality” as it evolved into “Our Whole Lives.” Instead of focusing on individual freedom, our new curriculum emphasizes responsibility and ethical behavior, talks about sexual harassment and abuse. To be honest with our past means we must talk about these issues as well as the need to be free. Today we are talking more about our covenants and responsibilities as Unitarian Universalists. We have come along way since the 70’s.

Surrender to the Greater Good

The history of our movement for the last twenty-five years has included a growth in the diversity of our movement, theologically, spiritually, ethically, politically, culturally, and racially. Just go to General Assembly to witness the many sub-groups that use GA as their annual meeting. This summer the General Assembly is in Minneapolis. Next year it will be in Charlotte, North Carolina. You can attend one of literally hundreds of annual meetings, workshops or speakers on each of our particular interest groups. A majority of the attendees don’t attend theme talks and worship, but enjoy the activities of their choice without feeling attachment to the larger group. The question we are all forced to face in this twenty first century is: Is our primary attraction to the smaller group that feeds our specific needs at the moment or is our commitment to the greater good? Is the larger group willing to accept input from all the diverse groups that make up our denomination? Can a committed humanist and a pagan worship affirm that greater good and learn from each other? Can the spiritualist and the rationalist sing and dance together?

A Language of Reverence

I believe the answer is “yes” if we are willing to listen to each other’s stories, look for the common ground and have a willingness to celebrate those things that brought us to this movement and continue to stir our feelings of love and commitment.

Several years ago, Bill Sinkford, the former President of our Association, encouraged us to use “A Language of Reverence.” Dean Grodzin, one of our scholars, edited a book by that title. Laurel Hallman, former Senior minister of First Unitarian Church in Dallas, wrote an essay for that book, “Images of our Lives” after the religious education curriculum by that name.

Many of us have been talking religious language all of our lives. If you study the history of humanism you know that many of our leading humanists whom we should be proud to call leaders in our movement, have been speaking religious language that goes back to before the Reformation. It is my hope that we can affirm both our humanism as well as our newer religious movement that have developed in the last twenty-five years, and will emerge tomorrow.

In Laurel’s essay she notes that many of us combine seemingly opposite theological positions as we describe our theologies today, using words like Christian-Humanist, Agnostic-Christian, or Rational Mystic to describe our present theological positions. Laurel then concludes:

I now think it was the beginning of our attempt to extricate ourselves from the hard theological boundaries with which we had closed ourselves off from one another and from our experience of religious imagination and deep reality.

The challenge facing our Association today is an admission that we are an Association with many different theologies and our worship experiences should affirm and promote all of them. We should not have to apologize for our Christian, pagan, Buddhist, theist or humanist beliefs. Each of our groups needs to be willing to hear the words and stories of the others. I encourage each of the sub-groups here at TJMC to do just this. Plan worship together and hear each other’s stories and styles of worship. The poet, Anne Sexton, give us a model. Her poem is titled “The Awful Rowing Toward God”:

I’m mooring my rowboat
At the dock of the island called God.
This dock is made in the shape of a fish
And there are many boats moored
At many different docks.

“It’s okay,” I say to myself,
with blisters that broke and healed
and broke and healed—
saving themselves over and over.
And salt sticking to my face and arms like
A glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca.
I empty myself from my wooden boat
And onto the flesh of The Island.

The question I am asking this morning is: Are we willing to dock on that island together? Are we willing to hear the prayers of others and affirm their words, or will we go into separate rooms and refuse to look for our common ground?

A New Style of Worship

I encourage you to look at the youth of our Association as models for how we should be together. When the young people of our Association reorganized in the 1970’s after the demise of the LRY (Liberal Religious Youth) they began with a process in which they looked for common ground. It resulted in a revitalized YRUU. Our youth often point the way to the right answer. Can we adults follow their path and look for our common ground? Can we celebrate our UU values together? Can we value each other’s answers to the basic religious questions?

Our world needs this message of trusting the common good. Congress needs this message. Why did it take a year for the different parties to sit down and listen to each other? The Israelis and the Palestinians need this message. Why can they not sit down and talk together? The people of Afghanistan and Pakistan need the message of trusting the common good. Last, but not least, all of us need this message as we help to rebuild the nation of Haiti and reach out to Chile, one home at a time, embracing one child at a time. I ask you today to listen to this call. Do what you can. Yes, you are only one, but still you are one. You cannot do everything. But still you can do something. And because you cannot do everything, you will not refuse to do the something that you can.

The Canadians are another good model for us. After the terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, all incoming flights were grounded. Most of those planes landed in Gander, Newfoundland, a city of 10,000 people. The people of Gander hosted over 7000 people, fed them, offered them clothes, medicine, and welcomed them into their homes and meeting places. Friends were made for life. A man from England and a woman from Texas met and were married later. The people of Gander trusted the greater good, and showed their love and support for people who were confused and grieving great loss.

I close this morning with a prayer. When Laurel Hallman was minister of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas she would begin her prayers with these words:

We pray in the names of all those, known and unknown, present and absent, remembered and forgotten. We pray in the name of all the helpers of humankind.

Our prayer today is that we may seek a better communion with nature, a better world for all people, wholeness for those broken, peace for those at war within themselves and each other. We can find that better world if we would only trust the greater good that is beyond our individual lives. May we affirm that greater good as we gather for worship in prayer and music, study and reflection, understanding and creating that better world we all seek. May we look out for each other, hold on to common values, share our talents and resources for the betterment of the common good. So may it be. Amen. Blessed Be. Namaste.