

Our Unitarian Universalist Legacy: Received and Promised

A Sermon for Silver City UU Fellowship

by Rev. Claudia Elferdink

Sunday, October 11, 2009

Reading: "Here's to You, Ralph Waldo" by David Blanchard

It's a startling image, isn't it?

Ralph Waldo Emerson shaking your toe, right on your foot- and waking you from an afternoon nap!

Dreamer, Darer, Doer. Why is this famous long-dead religious writer and philosopher reaching out across time to you?

Not only does he wake you, but he has the audacity to make a demand: "Seize your life...and speak at last your own revelation."

Now, what does that mean, really? Emerson is calling you out of our UU tradition. Having no creed is hard! This is our question for the morning, learning to live up to our tradition, to seize our life and speak our truth, our own revelation, and carry it on.

Actually, we have many voices from our Unitarian Universalist past calling us to carry on our faith, some famous, some not. We have inherited a legacy that is not for shirkers. Some people believe not having a creed is easier. It's not! I believe we actually have one of the most difficult faith traditions. Our leaders and prophets are a tough act to follow. And it is our work to pass on this honest and vital liberal tradition. Those who came before call us to speak our own revelation—a sometimes powerful, daunting and dangerous undertaking.

Do any Unitarian Universalists from our past speak to you? Can you name any? Just speak up!

(How about Leonard Bernstein, Judith Sargent Murray, Clara Barton, Beatrix Potter,.....)

We would not be here in this room without them. Men and women here in Silver City, now gone, laid the foundation for this Fellowship. They all lived and died, in part, to make this congregation and all of Unitarian Universalism vital and meaningful. They showed up and shared a common dream. They made pledges and promises which they kept.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves, back to Ralph Waldo. Emerson was pretty nervy. Just two decades after his friends shook the Boston establishment by coming out as Unitarians, the youthful Emerson proclaimed a new view embracing world religions and nature as a source of revelation or truth. It was called transcendentalism. He seized his life and

caused a big controversy on the heels of the earlier Unitarian controversy.

As brilliant and unsettling as our man Emerson was, he had others who lived long before him who were reaching across time and wiggling his toes in afternoon naps.

Emerson was part of a whole circle of Unitarian clergy and philosophers in America in the early 1800's that included Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody and William Ellery Channing.

One key person whose writings reached out to Emerson's crowd from the 16th century Transylvania was Francis David, one of the earliest ministers to call himself a Unitarian. He was part of a whole community of liberal thinkers including Faustus Socinius, John Sigismond and Michael Servetus who carried forward Unitarianism, often at great cost to their lives. They showed up, made promises and stood by those promises. David lived during the Protestant Reformation. He was one of those pesky thinkers who kept pushing the envelope.

Luther's reforms were not enough for him. Francis David was a leader of what came to be known as the radical reformation by rejecting creeds and placing the individual and the congregation as the center of religious life. No top down announcement of truth for Francis David.

Listen to his thoughts. You can read along if you want in the back of your hymnal, reading #566. Now remember that Francis David was writing 500 years ago.

In other words, no creeds. No trinity. Common purpose for the common good, promises kept.

Truth, often called revelation, is not fixed. Revelation is not sealed. Truth or revelation evolves and changes. It is subject to reason and knowledge. Each person must speak their truth. We need different perspectives to see what remains the same and what changes. In David's time, that was heresy. He died in prison as a result.

Welcoming different perspectives was the message in our opening words today. It is the message of liberal religion. And it was the message that came across the ages from the radical reformation to the Transcendentalists and liberal thinkers in Boston.

(repeat opening words by David Blanchard)

“Seize your life...and speak at last your own revelation.”

This mandate provoked new thought in 20th century Unitarian Universalism in the form of humanism, feminist theology, process theology

and liberation theology. Each brought a new wave of how we see ourselves and spawned new congregations. Too often we forgot a basic understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist: we are a non-creedal tradition. What keeps us together is our promise of good faith, forgiveness if we fail, and a commitment to start again to heal misunderstanding.

Sometimes the “new thinking” got confused with “right thinking.” It can be hard to remember that “revelation is not sealed.”

We Unitarian Universalists indeed have a varied and dynamic story. Passing on this honest and sometimes risky tradition of “speaking our own revelation” takes great care. We have survived because we have created and maintained strong and healthy congregations guided by enduring principles respecting individuals, fairness and compassion. Practicing tolerance and protecting diversity is our high priority. We create a web of considered promises and covenants which safely hold the life of our congregations. Without strong covenants holding together our diverse and lively congregations, we would not survive. This covenantal tradition is a critical piece of our inheritance. Besides inheriting an honest and lively liberal faith tradition, we have inherited a tradition of covenantal congregational life that is evolving. We are just beginning to appreciate this essential part of our legacy.

Here at Shoreline UU, we are the current embodiment of the hope of our congregational grandmothers and grandfathers. We are the dreams of Francis David and William Ellery Channing and the people buried in our Memorial Garden. It is our turn at the oar to protect and challenge our tradition by “seizing our lives...and speaking at last our own revelation.”

How will we protect and nurture our congregation and pass it on to the next generation? What legacy will we leave for our dynamic faith tradition? How will WE be remembered?

In the late nineteenth century, some Unitarians wrote a song entitled “A Hundred Years Hence.” In it they boldly predicted the end to racism, war, social class and gender discrimination in the next century. The first verse still speaks to us- listen:

*One hundred years hence, what a change will be made
In politics, morals, religion and trade,
In statesmen who wrangle or ride on the fence,
These things will be altered a hundred years hence*

Needless to say, we’re well past the beginning of the twenty-first century and those lofty ideals have not all been met. But there is no doubt we are further down the road with multi-racial and women’s suffrage;

women, gays and lesbians in ministry; and some improvement in civil rights for racial minorities.

I believe that moving forward in being truly non-creedal religious communities is a great test of our times. Learning to do this well may be our greatest gift to future Unitarian Universalists. Although this quality has been a defining part of who we are for over five hundred years, we are just beginning to do it well.

Often, as congregations formed, they were shaped by the religious ideas of that time. Unitarian or Universalist churches that were founded in the early 1800's began as Unitarian or Universalist Christians. The core culture of those societies often remains Christian to this day. In contrast, UU Societies like our own that began in the 1960's often have a strong humanist core. Too often, whether relatively young or very old, congregations have trouble remembering that we are committed to being non-creedal. We are not only Christian nor humanist.

We are still learning tolerance. It matters how we face this challenge. It matters to us and to those who follow us.

Do you remember the story I told last year about the little girl who was sent to the great teacher's palace to learn about life? After waiting a long time, the teacher met with her and gave her a spoon with a few drops of oil. He told her to walk around his palace and see all the beautiful tapestries and paintings and return with the oil in the spoon. She returned with the oil, but she had focused so on the oil she had seen none of the beauty. So she set off again and enjoyed the beauty but returned with an empty spoon. This is the lesson, the wise man told her, to protect the oil and see the beauty.

This, I believe is our challenge, to protect both the non-creedal core of our faith and the vibrant covenantal life of the congregation that makes our Unitarian Universalist tradition possible.

In a hundred years, when from our graves we wiggle the toes of napping Unitarian Universalists, will they thank us for the legacy we left behind? Did we speak our own revelation in a manner that freed them to speak theirs a century from now, in the year 2109?

I close with the words of Forest Church, the much-loved minister we lost this week from All Souls Church in Manhattan.

“Let us never forget what a privilege it is to be part of this great movement and to pronounce its saving faith: one Light (Unitarianism) shining through many windows (Universalism),” ...“Let us continue our quest together, with awe and humility, with saving openness and saving doubt, never forgetting to honor those who charted our way.”

He wrote a legacy for us in one of his last books, *Love and Death*,
“The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying
for...The one thing that can't be taken from us, even by death, is the love
we give away before we go.”

So be it.