

Willing to Be Changed by What We've Started

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Let me begin by painting for you a picture. A postcard, if you will, from the future of Unitarian Universalism. One vision—one among many—of what might be “next” for Unitarian Universalism. It’s Sunday morning at First Unitarian and the minister—arms outstretched—stands before the faithful. The keyboardist sounds a contemplative chord and the minister begins his prayer of invocation, asking that God’s spirit be upon *this* place, *these* people. As he prays, his congregants—some with eyes lifted to heaven, others with heads bent—echo his prayer with whispered “Amens.” “Yes, God.” When the prayer is over, the minister says: “Greet your neighbor. Show them a sign of God’s love.” And what follows is a “passing of the peace” that is anything but peaceful. The room is filled with loud greetings and big bear hugs and laughter. The welcome is joyous and bracing! Like the love of God.

From amidst this holy cacophony, the band begins. First just some noodling on the electric organ, then a plaintive human voice, then a driving beat on the bass and drum set. And soon the old New England church is rocking to a joyful psalm of praise. Some sit and sing, with their hands in the air. Others stand and sway. Still others clap in rhythmic accompaniment. An usher walks down the center aisle, passing out tambourines to those who want to add their voice to the beat. When the hymn is over, the preacher steps into the pulpit and delivers a 40-minute sermon that feels like it’s over in five. He begins slowly, in a learned and philosophical mode, examining passages from Scripture that speak of the worth and dignity of every person. Which, the preacher reminds his congregation, “means each and every one of you gathered here today.” Hungry for that reassurance, the congregation responds with grateful calls of “Amen!” and “Thank you, God!” And the preacher rides this wave of energy, taking the sermon—and his voice—to a new level. Now his words are stirring and powerful. Now his stories have folks laughing and crying as he builds to the Good News. The Good News that God, despite everything that they’ve been told, God loves all souls, not some. “So go from this place,” he says, “and share that message, share that love with a world that so deeply needs it.” And with that, the congregation propels itself out into the world on another wave of song.

Now I share with you this “glimpse”—this postcard—from the future of Unitarian Universalism, aware that some of us might find this vision appealing, and others appalling. Still others of us might find it unfamiliar, but intriguing. In any case, most of us would agree that it’s a far cry from the Unitarian Universalism we know today. That’s why it’s important that I let you know that the worship service I just described isn’t just a vision from the future; it’s a pretty accurate description of worship last Sunday at All Souls Church in Washington, DC. The future, it turns out, is already here. The future is now.

Now, I wasn’t the preacher, and this wasn’t even our regular worship service. Though that, too, involved a drum set and hand-clapping and shouts of “Amen.” Even a tambourine. This was a service we hosted in our sanctuary immediately after our morning service. It was the fourth anniversary celebration for a black gay church in DC called City of Refuge. A church we worked in solidarity with on the issue of marriage equality. A church whose pastor is a good friend of mine. A church with whom we are being drawn into deeper and deeper relationship, so much so that they could think of no place they’d rather celebrate this special occasion than All Souls.

Not that it wasn’t a stretch! Most folks from City of Refuge came up in the Pentecostal/Holiness tradition. Up until a few years ago, most had never heard of Unitarian Universalism, much less trusted it. So it was a big deal to choose All Souls as the location for this anniversary celebration. And for the All Souls folk who attended—because they invited us to join them—the Holiness worship was a bit of a stretch. Everyone, I think, was a little changed by the experience. Having started down the road of interfaith and multicultural relationship, we were all being asked to stretch. To change. “Willing to be changed by what we’ve started.”

The preacher at that service had his own story of change that he shared with us. His name is Bishop Carlton Pearson. A decade ago, Bishop Pearson was one of the most famous black televangelists in the country, pastoring a mega-church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He told a story on Sunday about how every day on his way to his church he’d pass by All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa and sneer in disdain. Just like all the Unitarians sneered at him on TV. The future looked bright for Bishop Pearson and his congregation until one day he received a troubling revelation. One day he was convicted by the belief that God loved, and would save, *everyone*. All Souls. When he began to share this Universalist gospel with his congregation, first they tried to change his mind. And when they couldn’t change his mind, they changed pastors. Within months, his congregation of thousands had dwindled to a remnant of a couple hundred.

After his fall, one of the first people in Tulsa to reach out to Bishop Pearson was Marlin Lavanhar, the minister of All Souls Tulsa. He offered refuge to Bishop Pearson and his congregation. Now, every Sunday at 9:30, the black evangelicals from Carlton’s church and the mostly white Unitarians at All Souls are discovering together what the gospel of Universalism

looks like in a multiracial, multicultural Unitarian Universalist Pentecostal context! What's NEXT for Unitarian Universalism is what's NOW. The future is knocking at our door.

These two stories—the stories of the relationship between Bishop Pearson and All Souls, Tulsa, and between City of Refuge and All Souls, DC—are stories about how bonds of relationship and solidarity can transform us. After last Sunday's service, Bishop Pearson and I reflected on the improbability of such a service taking place at a Unitarian church. He laughed and said to me: "Rob, I never thought I'd see the day when a brother walked down the aisle of a Unitarian church, passing out tambourines." We both laughed. But we also realized that that image—that moment—represented something important. Something transformational. Something about "what's next" for Unitarian Universalism.

When Larry Peers asked me to speak about "what's next" for Unitarian Universalism, I immediately thought of a line from Brian Wren's hymn, "Bring Many Names." As you know, each verse of the hymn imagines God as a different member of the human family: father, mother, elder, child. It's Wren's evocation of a "young, growing God" that speaks to me on this occasion. Listen, again to the lines of the familiar hymn:

Young, growing God, eager still to know,
Willing to be changed by what you've started.
Quick to be delighted, singing as you go;
Hail and Hosanna, young, growing God!

Today I'd like to suggest that we will only achieve the future of Unitarian Universalism if we, like Wren's young, growing God are "willing to be changed by what we've started."

What, exactly, have we started? Let's pick a date. In 1992, we began a journey. We call it "A Journey toward Wholeness." Fueled by a vision of a Unitarian Universalism different from what it is today: an anti-racist, multiracial, multicultural vision. Now on that journey, we've had our stumbles and our false starts. But now, almost 20 years later, we're on our way. And President Morales has said repeatedly that for us to be the religion for our time—the religion that can minister to an increasingly multiracial, multicultural America—then we must continue this journey that we're on. So at this point on the Journey toward Wholeness, the question is no longer, "Should we be on the journey?" Or, "Do we have the right map or hiking gear?" *The real question is, "Are we willing to be changed by what we've started?"* Are we willing to go where the journey leads us, and take the next step, and then another? Because if we are to finish the journey that we've begun, it will require tremendous change within Unitarian Universalism. Change at both the institutional and personal level.

I'd like to make some observations about some of these changes based on my experience as pastor of one of our more racially diverse congregations. Recent surveys show that nationally,

11 percent of Unitarian Universalists are non-white. At All Souls, on the other hand, people of color make up more than a quarter of our congregation. We've still got a long way to go, but we've made some progress, and I'd like to share with you some of the ways we've been willing to be changed by what we've started.

Put the vision at the center and measure your progress. At All Souls, our mission to build Beloved Community is shared every Sunday in worship, and it's at the very core of our mission statement. And we keep statistics to measure how we're doing. Every member who joins fills out a detailed demographic survey. You'd be surprised, when you ask them, of the hidden diversity in your congregation. We are more diverse than we think, if we allow people to share that with us.

With whom are you in relationship and solidarity? We basically won't take on a social justice issue that does not draw us into relationship with communities of color. We're very clear about that. Our marquee social justice programs now include teaching ESL, rebuilding New Orleans, and building affordable housing in the church's neighborhood, all done in solidarity with communities of color. When we take on issues that aren't traditionally considered "people of color issues," we make sure that we build diverse coalitions. So for instance, when we led the religious coalition for marriage equality in DC, my co-chairs in that struggle were two heterosexual African American Baptist ministers from a predominantly black neighborhood east of the Anacostia River. Together we built the most diverse clergy coalition for marriage equality of any state in the Union.

Who's on our staff? To build multiracial multicultural churches, we must have multiracial multicultural staffs. We can't control who visits our church on Sunday, but we do have control over who are our professional leaders. We don't have large staffs, so every decision counts and says something about who we are and want to be. Sometimes you need to think outside the box. For example, All Souls recently called as our associate minister an African American UCC minister who grew up a Baptist just a few blocks from All Souls. Her mother still lives within walking distance of the church. Right now, DC is a city divided between older, African American residents and younger, white transplants. Susan and I represent each side of that so-called "divide." We are not supposed to be the ministers of the same church. The fact that we are means that we are willing to be changed by what we've started.

Who's up front in the pulpit? When folks walk into church on Sunday mornings they look around and ask, "Are these my people?" "Do I see myself here?" It makes a big difference who's on the chancel and in the pulpit. At All Souls we've called for a moratorium on what we call "Vanilla Sundays." That means that it's against the rules to have a Sunday when only white people speak from the chancel.

What are we singing? And how? Music is crucial to our congregational culture. Your culture won't change if your music doesn't. Draw together a music team that is multilingual musically. At All Souls we have a venerable organ. The kind of organ that out-of-town organists like to come and play when they visit. And so we have organ music. But right next to the organ is the drum set. And we have percussion just about every Sunday in church. Forty-five percent of our congregation is under the age of 40, and I chalk that up to a vibrant, joyous, and diverse music program.

What stories are we telling? What readings are we sharing? We audit every worship service to ask ourselves from which cultures and traditions is the wisdom coming. Whose stories are being told? I ask myself as a preacher, "Am I writing a sermon that will only appeal to people like me?"

So this isn't rocket science. It is, however, difficult, and we must be intentional. Any future we create for Unitarian Universalism must be intentional. Or else we won't have a future.

In closing, let me raise a concern that often gets raised when talking about building multiracial, multicultural community. All the time, I hear people say that we'll never become more multiracial or multicultural because our theology does not appeal to people of color. I believe this is a lie that we perpetuate to keep ourselves from having to change. Bishop Pearson gets invited all over the country to preach the gospel of Universalism to largely African American audiences. He said to me on Sunday that he believes that Universalism will be to the 21st century what evangelical Christianity was to the 20th. The next growth movement. "You've got the theology," he said to me, "It's the vision you don't have. You can't imagine Unitarian Universalism as anything but a movement of white New Englanders."

As we move forward along this journey one of our greatest assets, I believe, is our gospel. The gospel of Universalism—of God's love for all people. As you know, I serve a church called All Souls. And I know I'm biased, but I happen to believe that All Souls is just about the best name a church can have. It kind of says it all. Those two words sum up all that is good and holy and true about religion. I mean, can you imagine a church that called itself, "Some Souls Church"? But isn't that the de facto name of the dominant religious culture in America? The religious right worships a God of some souls. A God who plays favorites. A God who picks and chooses, separating the wheat from the chaff, the saved from the damned, the chosen from the forgotten.

The Good News that we Unitarian Universalists have to share—the Good News that Bishop Carlton Pearson is sharing—is that a God who picks and chooses is no God at all. It is an idol. And against this spurious faith we must preach the old Universalist gospel of a love that invites ALL souls to the welcome table, not some. A love that can take hold of our hearts and lead us to

lives of meaning and purpose. Our gospel of Universalism is BIG enough and GENEROUS enough and LOVING enough to capture the hearts and minds of the people.

Sometimes folks say to me, “Rob, this gospel of Universalism almost sounds TOO good to be true.” When they do, I always remind them of something that Mae West once said. She warned, “Too much of a good thing . . . is wonderful!” Other folks worship a god of some souls, and they have the audacity to call that the “good news.” We stand for a commanding and transforming love that embraces ALL souls, and I dare say that is the even better news. It is a gospel that will serve us well as we move boldly into our future. Thank you.