

Theme Talk 1

Composing Our Unitarian Universalist Future: Where Are We Now?

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At this 50th anniversary of the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America, we stand on new ground together. All the signs of the times tell us that *this* is a poignant moment in human history, in the story of the Earth, and in the ongoing development of religious thought and practice.

Indeed, it is a time to celebrate our accomplishments as a religious tradition—to recognize what specific chorus we sing in the sacred hymns of the world, and to know that we are both a refuge and a home to the yearnings of the human spirit for the Holy, for the True, for greater meaning, and liberating justice. Indeed, as Revs. John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker have declared we are called to be and to become a “House for Hope.”¹

That “house,” in my opinion, has had some home improvement in recent years. And—our “house” could be served by an updated inspection! That is what this anniversary allows us to do. We can ask:

- How firm is our foundation?
- What remodeling must we consider?
- What renovations are we willing to make?

Unitarian Universalists do not stand alone in this constructive task of composing ourselves in the face of what is currently happening and what is unfolding in our world. Many faiths and persuasions are finding ways to come into a deeper and broader understanding of what it means to be human in relationship with the ailing Earth, with increasingly interconnected global peoples, and with an aching, loving, growing, and living God, and with that is Holy.

This can indeed be a poignant moment in the unfolding of Unitarian Universalism as well.

This can indeed be a time of reckoning as we come to terms with all that is unraveling in our world and in all that we thought would always be secure. It just isn't so.

¹ John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 39.

Can we risk standing on this holy threshold together and asking ourselves: “Where are we now?” “What is possible?” “What is next?”

These are incidentally the three guiding questions for this Minns Conference program that has been generously sponsored by the Minns Lectureship Committee of First Church in Boston and of King’s Chapel. This is a gift of the Minns Committee to provide us this time—as a way of living out their central mission to support “creative theological and religious advancement.” So may we be grateful for sponsoring this opportunity for us to come together for these conversations.

The Movements in Our Composition

A few words about the design of the conference—and then we must dive in.

This evening we begin with a discussion on “Where are we now? “ We move tomorrow morning into our discussion of “What’s possible?” and then in the afternoon into a discussion on “What’s Next?” Each movement has a discipline of its own: “Where are we now?” aims to be descriptive. “What’s possible?” aims to be imaginative, and “What’s next?” aims to gather commitment.

And you might also imagine this conversation at times will feel like a dance that unfolds in both a patterned and improvisational way before you.

We may easily find ourselves “improvising” as a drummer would do in response to what is emerging, unscripted and unplanned...and that is okay as well.

Above all let’s not have the usual conversation with one another.

Let our discourse be religious in and of it self—allowing for the Spirit, the Creative to flow within and among us so that even we might be surprised by what we hear ourselves saying.

The Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman articulated a way of discourse that he called “creative interchange”:

Creative interchange...is the understanding in some measure of the original experience of the other person...Creative interchange is not limited to the acquisition of information alone. One also gets from others appreciations, sentiments, hopes, fears, memories, regrets, aspirations, joys, sorrows, hates, loves, pieties and other features of that vast complexity that makes up the total human being.²

² Henry Nelson Wieman, *Man’s Ultimate Commitment* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958), 22-23.

If we leave here only with the same ideas that we arrived with—then our devotion to this practice may have been compromised. If we only share information and ideas—and do not tap also into our “hopes, fears, memories, regrets, joys, sorrows...” then we have only engaged an already over-exercised part of ourselves and may have let our “hidden wholeness” slip away.

You have to know that as I have conversed with some of my colleagues here in preparation for this panel—I know that this is more than a speculative exercise for us—this truly matters to us not just because we are persons who care about what is Holy, we care about what is happening among us and that which wants to happen among us as Unitarian Universalists.

We know that the sacred and the profane are intricately connected—so at times we will speak about our faith *as a faith*, and other times we will speak about our *faith as an institution*, an organization, as congregations. We will discover together the interconnections and tensions between the two.

Grounding the Conversation

As I stand here in your midst, I must ground myself in a particular way in this conversation as well. I have travelled among Unitarian Universalists since I was 19 years old, and have served in Unitarian Universalist congregations. For almost 20 years or so, I have worked with Unitarian Universalist congregations and leaders around the continent. Within that time, over the recent eight years, my work has also included work with congregations and leaders of many faith traditions. This is all to say that I have seen the good, the bad and, if you can even imagine it, even the ugly in religious organizational life.

To stay true to my task here, I won't focus too much on the personal, except to say—I have to acknowledge that what fuels my passion for this topic is not merely my professional role. What fuels this conversation for me is my own aspirations and convictions as a religious person who cares for and desires experiences of meaning, of God, of service, and of liberation for myself *and* for others.

I believe that as we stand at this holy threshold of this 50-year mark, we are called—called to fashion a faith that *cannot just be sustainable as an organization, but must also sustain the human soul as a faith* in the promising and in the uncertain times ahead.

Where Are We Now?

So, “Where are we now?”

Let's simply start with some facts.³ There are currently 1046 congregations affiliated with the UUA, about 162,000 adults and 54,000 children and youth within our congregations. Sometimes we pride ourselves on how small but mighty we are—and how much relative impact we seem to have.

Let's face it—whatever real and significant impact we make as congregations and as individuals is influenced by our relative small size as a religious organization—even though, I know, I know--we cast long shadows!

We might boost our confidence for just a moment when we recall that independent polls such as that conducted by the Religious Identification Survey 2001 found that 629,000 U.S. adults when asked an open-ended question about their own religious identity think of themselves as Unitarian Universalists.⁴

Enjoy that moment that we might say to ourselves “Wow there are a lot of Unitarian Universalists!”

Then, let's come back to planet Earth and also say, “Wow, only a very small portion of those who consider themselves Unitarian Universalists actually join a UU congregation. “ With curiosity and not with judgment we might ask ourselves, “What's that about?”

Before any of you are struck by an overwhelming fervor of evangelism—let me tell you that the average approximate seating capacity in our Unitarian Universalist congregation where the largest worship service is held is 188 seats. Unitarian Universalists in our congregations are most likely to be of European descent, college educated, and over age 60. So, even if the 629,000 adults who identify as Unitarian Universalists wanted to—not all would find a congregation to go to, or a seat in one of our congregations, or people whose life stage or experiences connect with their own.

So those are some facts.

These facts are all relevant to one aspect of our current and future reality—are we a religious organization that can sustain itself?

By the way, you might soothe yourself by knowing that Mainline Protestantism—now known in some circles as the “Oldline”—have similar concerns when it comes to diminishing numbers,

³ From the FACT (Faith Communities Today) survey of Unitarian Universalists and from internal statistics from the UUA.

⁴ That estimate was extrapolated from the random survey of 50,000 households released in October by City University of New York. CUNY's previous poll in 1990 came up with 502,000 adults calling themselves Unitarian Universalists. <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Unitarian-Universalist/They-Came-From-Other-Churches.aspx#ixzz1I6DgPMjV>.

decrease in church attendance, and the sustainability of their denominations—and as congregations in the future. Some of you would say, “Ah, what’s size got to do with it?” Or think, “We are a boutique religion of sorts, not for everyone—only for those with discerning tastes or a particular kind of appetite.”

Some of us would quote scripture and say, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains.” And others among us would say, “What’s faith got to do with it?”

I would enter the conversation by saying, in my opinion, that faith has a lot to do with it.

I wonder aloud—not just how big is our membership, but also, “How big is our faith?”

How big is our faith to hold and heal ourselves and others, to grapple with the emerging 21st century?

How big is our faith to propel us in directions that are truly liberating for human souls and human peoples? How big is our faith?

The question is a theological one—as well. I wonder out loud:

Could it be that the overwhelming numbers of those 620,000 people who identify themselves as Unitarian Universalists and are *not* part of our congregations—have bought into a theology that Unitarian Universalists have perpetuated time and time again in our own representation of who we say we are? Could it be that these folks who are not part of the “flock” of UU’s anywhere—understand that to be Unitarian Universalist means:

- Be on your own.
- Believe whatever you want to believe.
- Don’t be “religious” for God’s sake.
- Question and never ever feel any compulsion to find.

Could it be that those who identify as “Unitarian Universalists” and are not part of a congregation have bought wholesale—one of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s own—former marketing campaigns that Unitarian Universalism is “*the* Religion that puts its faith in you.”

I love you all—but I’m sorry, I don’t mean to cause any offense—but I’m not really that interested in a “religion that puts its faith in you.” Or, since we are on the topic, I am, personally, not that interested in being the “uncommon denomination”—separating ourselves out, and as my good friend Victoria Weinstein says, being enamored by our “terminal uniqueness.”

You wonder how countercultural we really are when we have sometimes tended to reinforce individualism and a “boutique” approach to religion during a time when collective action to overwhelming challenges is needed, when our souls need nurturing, healing, and the strengthened capacity for meaning making. When there is a yearning for God, for what is truly Holy.

Now, one of the new Unitarian Universalist Association’s new banner messages, “Nurture the Spirit, Heal the World,” feels more fitting for the times that we are in.

Who Are We Theologically?

This leads me to say that the work we have to do is theological as much as it may be organizational.

At this juncture—at this 50th year mark—we have some assessing to do about where are we theologically as well as organizationally.

I remember clearly one day in theological school, when I was about 32 years old, and was waiting with other students to get into the systematic theology class we were all taking. I overheard some of the conversation and it stunned me. Here were other students, many close to my age, some younger, some older, who were talking about how in writing their paper due that day they had made sure to make references and propositions close to those of the professor’s. In a somewhat stunned way—I wondered out loud, “Why are you doing that...aren’t we supposed to be writing about our *own* theology?” The stares I got back were stinging. How naïve I was—it wasn’t about theology, it was about the grade.

As an aside, this professor in a meeting one-on-one later in the semester after reading my paper called me a “Lunitarian.” I’m convinced to this day that it was a slip of the tongue—I made no reference to worship of the moon in my paper, and she was a Lutheran, so she just started off with Lutheran, merged it with Unitarian and...out blurted this word, “Lunitarian.” That’s my story and I’m sticking with it.

Years later I found myself facilitating a small group of clergy—mostly Unitarian Universalists, one United Church of Christ minister. This was a “clergy community of practice” group to help clergy to reflect upon their own ministries, and to give support to each other around challenges. During the course of one of the discussions, some of the clergy spoke of how careful they had to be in using “God-language” in worship...and how often they felt they had to hide some of their own true theological ideas and religious sentiments in order to not arouse a segment of their congregation who had allergies to religious language or were in different stages of their journey out of the conventional religion.

I believe and hope that many of our UU congregations are moving beyond this hypersensitivity and reaction to religious words and language. I hope so, for while in our congregations, we may be doing all kinds of verbal ju-jitsu—the world around us is shifting dramatically and calling us to deeper engagement and transformation.

In their report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, the Commission on Appraisal of the UUA, after a three-year study including conversations with Unitarian Universalists, declared in one of their reflections this:

Such ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what UU's are about religiously may be our greatest liability and the greatest obstacle to achieving our potential as an empowering and liberating faith for the twenty-first century. (p. 138)

They go on to ask some probing questions:

What is the substance of our faith? Just what is enriched and ennobled by the religious pluralism for which we are grateful? If we say to anyone, "you belong," what is it that they are invited to belong to? (p. 139-40)

The Commission on Appraisal in this report goes on to make some recommendations: focus on theology, promote spiritual practices, make peace with our religious past, affirm theological diversity among ministers. All of these I am seeing glimpses of even now across Unitarian Universalism as we take on the deeper theological and spiritual work that a sustaining *faith* and sustaining *faith organization* need. Maybe, we are growing up at age 50!

I recall one UU congregation that invited its members on a Sunday morning before the service to go to their specific corner—the "humanist corner," the "Christian corner," the "pagan corner,"—I don't recall all of the categories—but you get the idea. If truly we are a gathering of various perspectives, then we need to continue to find ways to engage those perspectives so that we might observe again and again in our midst the miracle of being human, the transformative power of dialogue, and the emergence of grace.

I would say we tend now to at least tolerate a variety of religious points of view, but we can improve upon how we *engage* each other theologically in ways that we can deeply learn from and be enriched by our experiences.

I am embarrassed, and cringe at times, when I hear some Unitarian Universalists rely on some generic outmoded understanding of modern Christianity as the target of their own intellectual derision. I have been in many non-UU congregations that are more liberal and progressive, more "spiritual than religious" than many Unitarian Universalist congregations I have been in.

So, “where are we now?” we are in a world that has changed in some dramatic ways since the early and the modernist-leaning Unitarians and Universalists forged a path together.

In his book, *What’s Theology Got to Do with It?* United Church of Christ minister Anthony Robinson addresses this religious task for religious liberals in our time:

We postmoderns are no longer so confident of our ability to figure everything out through reason and science. We have discovered other ways of knowing—the mystical, emotional and intuitive. We are intrigued by mystery and we long for mystery...[Our times] have spawned new interest in spirituality, in religious experience, and in encounters with the sacred, the numinous and the divine.⁵

We are at a poignant moment in which the tectonic plates are shifting and we are invited to find new ground.

Church historian Phyllis Tickle says in her recent study, *The Great Emergence*, that there is a trend in the Christian and Jewish tradition that every 500 years these traditions have a rummage sale—and put out the things that no longer serve their future in a world that is emerging.

What would be in our Unitarian Universalist rummage sale? And, for the sake of what would we let go of it.

A Blessing for Our Time Together

Let us pause to recognize the ancestors who have fashioned this faith sometimes through the ultimate sacrifice of their own life or social comfort. We hold this faith “in trust” for them.

Let us also remember the present and future generations who will be served by the conversations that we will launch through this conference. We hold this faith “in trust” for them—as well.

Before proceeding blithely on, we can do nothing other than pause, to ponder, and re-compose ourselves. In taking time to ponder may we carry forward across that threshold some of the best that we have to offer as a religious perspective and people to the world.

May we recognize that we will necessarily have to leave some things—even our most cherished opinions about ourselves and some of our own irrelevant habits of mind or practice behind.

⁵ Anthony Robinson, *What’s Theology Got to Do With It?: Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 13.

Yes, it is up to us to find what sacred sparks need to be released within and among us so that indeed there is “more Light” to be shared “more Love somewhere” to guide us forward. May God bless our holy task on these days that we have dedicated for this purpose.