

Theme Talk 2

Composing Our Unitarian Universalist Future: What's Possible?

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Good morning. It is great to look at all of our distinguished participants! You are like the “bright stars arising.” I really appreciate the dedication that you have taken, to be here, to be in this conversation and to allow us to compose together in words and images, feelings and convictions what our faith will look like as it unfolds in the decades ahead.

Our exploration into “Composing Our Unitarian Universalist Future” at this conference is guided by three questions: “Where are we now?” “What’s possible?” and “What’s next?”

Notice that each question has its own mood, its own tone, and its own particular posture. There is choreography to our conversation. Fortunately, we have a drummer here today who will help us to experience in body, spirit, and heart what it means to compose this faith together.

There is a discipline of describing “what is” before moving into the conversation of “what can be.” It is a helpful discipline. It allows us to experience the gap between where we are now and where we would like to be. Sometimes the gap can feel a bit overwhelming, sometimes that gap can feel compelling.

The conversation that we have today is about in the broader sense what we want to say “yes” to about our own future as Unitarian Universalist and what we want to say “no” to. The “yes” and the “no” are important ways of composing our future together.

We move this morning into an exploration of “what’s possible”—opening our imaginations to “what we could do”—before we discern and determine some of those steps of what we will do.

On the graphic chart that is in your packet: you will see that there are different terrains for our conversation:

- On the ground you can write down our strengths and challenges.
- In the sky you can imagine the vision themes and examples of what that vision would look like.
- On the path leading to the horizon are places for you to write specific steps we can take to get there.

Think of this chart as our “etch-a-sketch” as we sketch together Unitarian Universalism’s future.

Obviously, what we experience on “the ground” (what is now), leads us toward articulating what we aspire towards—the sky (what’s possible), and the path leads us to determine (what’s next). Each question is connected—to the other in our conversations—just like the organic nature of this picture with earth, terrain, and sky.

As we move into this particular conversation about “what’s possible”—let’s allow our imagination to be stirred. Let’s allow the deep desires that we have for this faith to be expressed—even before we might know how to respond to what our imagination shows us.

In our fast-paced, problem-solving culture in the world or even in the church, we have lost some of the deeper wisdom of the monastic tradition. Among some Benedictine monks they would pause between one activity and the other. In between prayer and work, they would pause in the midst of their activity and open their hearts and spirits to God. Thus, their prayers could take on the form of work, and their work the form of prayer.

Likewise, I ask that as we move from “what is” to “what’s possible” that we too allow ourselves to pause, to allow imagination and Spirit to do its work among us.

A Prayer for Our Work Together

As we enter a brief pausing together with attentive silence, listen to these verses by Antonio Machado. Let us tap into the images that can guide us:

God, is my soul asleep?
Have those beehives who labor by night stopped, and
the water wheel of thought, is it dry?
The cup's empty, wheeling out carrying only shadows?
No! My soul is not asleep! My soul is not asleep!
It neither sleeps nor dreams, but watches, its clear eyes open,
far off things, and listens, and listens
at the shores of the great silence.
It listens at the shores of the great silence.¹

“At the shores of the great silence,” let us gather there together at this moment, open and attentive to the deeper Source of all of our images of what can be. Let us be attentive to the sensations that occur before the words are even formed. Let us know once again the Spirit that attends with us, that beckons to us, that lures us forward. Let us gather at the shores “of the great silence,” to be nurtured there, and to draw from there a resource for our own imagining.

¹ Antonio Machado, “Last Night/Is My Soul Asleep?” In Robert Bly, ed., *The Soul Is There for Its Own Joy* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995), 29.

What is, What Might Be

Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman joins us on this threshold now between what is and what may be by offering this insight:

Value...is always a combination of what is and what may be. It is always a combination of actuality and possibility. When these two are combined we have what is called growth. Growth is not merely what is, not merely what might be, but it is that kind of change which increases what is, so as to approximate what might be.²

Notice, it is: “The kind of change that increases what is, so as to approximate what might be.”

So, at this juncture I would like us to notice the distinction between those two questions:

- What’s the problem?
- What’s possible?

What do you notice is different—in your tone of voice, in your perspective, in your mood, in where your energy and attention is directed?

When we ponder “what’s possible?” I believe we will discover that our imagination is not limited to just solving problems, it is about creating possibilities or, as Wieman says, “what might be.”

To shift our conversation from “what’s the problem” to “what’s possible” requires an ontological shift for us. Let us notice that that shift changes the conversation.

This foray into our imagination may seem diversionary for any of us who feel we have it all figured out (you know who you are) and who know what we should all do next (you already have your prescriptions.)

One lesson I have learned from studying the work of futurists in preparing for this talk is captured in this quote:

Action is great unless it is the wrong action. Those who are problem solvers are more likely to get there early with an answer that is wrong—even if it is right in the short run. Action is the home court of the problem solver. Problem solvers love to act, and they especially love to act quickly and decisively.³

² Donald Szanthy Harrington, *Outstretched Wings of the Spirit: On Being Intelligently and Devotedly Religious* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1980), 3.

³ Bob Johansen, *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present* (San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

This is not to say that to act and the willingness to act is wrong. It is just to say that if we can hold our actions in abeyance just long enough to capture our imagination that we might be able to construct together the right actions for moving forward.

So, let's talk a little about "what's possible?" I am going to share some of the images that I am going to share as provocations of the future. Imagine them as a moving picture in which you add images of your own.

The Future

I believe we need to be imaginative and not just reactive as we engage in the activity of "composing our Unitarian Universalist future."

When we listen to what some tell us the future may be like we will realize that *responding to "Where we are now?"* is not sufficient.

We must respond not *just* to what is—but to *what's coming*—in order to also know what might be.

In some of my learning from the Institute of the Future, I have come to understand that we may need to *step into that future now* in order to know what leadership skills need to be developed, to know what strategies need to be formulated, in order to refashion our sermons and religious education, in order to give input to where we put our resources and to discern the meaning of current events (from a broader context).

The Institute of the Future describes a future that has presented some of these "provocations" from the future; notice how there are indicators of some of these even now:⁴

1. A VUCA world: a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—"an amplified world of extreme urgency unpleasant surprises, and enigmatic choices."
2. Extreme climate variability.
3. The rich-poor gap will become more blatant and have significant implications for services.
4. Personal empowerment: people will want to act on their own behalf, organize themselves to maximize their impact on their society or culture.
5. Grassroots economics: internet and other forms of interactive media will allow differing economic structures and new opportunities for cooperation across great distances.
6. Smart networking: electronic communication will create powerful communities.
7. Polarizing extremes: some extreme groups may be more adept at using social networking to advocate for their point of view.

⁴ Ibid.

8. High-impact religions: progressive religions will strive to have a positive impact.
9. Health insecurity: much of whether people are healthy or not will depend upon their own behavior—what you eat, drink, exercise, how you live your life. Our concerns about the environment, global health, economy will also be health concerns.
10. Boomers will reinvent aging and what aging will look like.
11. Digital youth: the length of a generation will be shortened to about 6 years. So, for example, if you are 19 you will feel hopelessly out of touch with a 13-year-old.
12. Digital and the physical worlds will blend.

Those are just some of the snapshots of the future that futurists are presenting to us, and that I have heard other religious organizations trying to grapple with. It is important for us to understand that as we prepare for the future that is not just reacting to what is, but it is also a responding to what will be.

So What Does the Future Require of Us?

One thing that should become immediately apparent to us is that we cannot simply just do a little better what we are already doing. *It is not just today's challenges that we need to respond to as we "compose our Unitarian Universalist future." It is the challenges on the horizon as well as those on the ground.*

We need to step into this future now and ask ourselves not just, "What few home improvements do we want to make—in this 'House for Hope' of liberal religion of Unitarian Universalism? Our attention must go as well to the foundation of our "house", toward our possible renovations, and our necessary additions to this "house."

When we think of what's on the horizon—and not just "what is" we ask different questions of ourselves. We might ask ourselves questions specific to these challenges such as:

In our congregations, when we think about these particular "provocations" from the future we might ask ourselves:

- How do we prepare for the aging boomers who will do aging differently—as well as prepare ourselves for the "digital natives" and the rapid shift of generational perspectives?
- How do we "plant" congregations or create vibrant spiritual communities in an increasingly blended physical and digital world?
- How do we support people and communities in health maintenance as an integral part of our religious path?

- What is our role in addressing the gap between the poor and the rich—the ever increasing gap?
- How will we navigate the changes in our environment and reorient ourselves to live radically differently upon the Earth and create stories, practices, and rituals that ground that reorientation in a new way?

When we think about “what’s coming” we might also ask ourselves some broader questions—broader questions beyond the specific challenges. The broader questions take us beyond the programmatic responses, to the response to “How do we re-orient our souls to what is already arising on the horizon, as well as to what is?”

When we think of the conversations that we had last night we can begin to understand that this is all for the sake of strengthening the spirit not only for now, not only for getting over the baggage that has outlived its usefulness. We need to be preparing ourselves to be able to move upon the landscape of the world that is to come and to join with other people of faith and other people of caring and compassion so that we have something useful and significant to offer and to say.

Other broader questions include:

- What are the spiritual capacities that we need to cultivate?
- In what ways does our Unitarian Universalist faith perspective serve us? What constructive theology of our Unitarian Universalist theology must we do?
- What leadership skills and perspectives do we need to cultivate and to develop for what’s on the horizon not just for what is?
- What social networks do we need to intentionally construct?
- What partnerships with other peoples of faith do we need to cultivate and strengthen?
- And...what leaps of faith are we willing to make?

Moreover—and this for me is one of the most significant questions: “What spiritual bearings will help us as a liberal religious community to not only live within but to contribute to a world of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity?”

Some of our congregations are still making some “home improvements” to bring themselves to enter into 2011—if not 1985, depending upon where you are.

I am just saying that “composing our future as Unitarian Universalists” means more than a simple upgrade. Although an upgrade is a help, it is not the complete religious task at this juncture.

We Need Each Other

For any of us in this room this can be an overwhelming task. Yet, we need each other—we need to form alliances within and across generations so that we can be midwives together for constructing a religion that will not just get us over the immediate hump but will get us on the road to the future.

I share my own worry. I worry that sometimes we focus on solving problems—tweaking things here and there when we may also need to be asking broader and deeper questions of each other. I worry that we can be self-satisfied—because we think of ourselves as so intelligent, so progressive, so “right”—ready to hand out prescriptions to those UU’s who are less enlightened than we are—or to others we might consider “less enlightened” in their religious perspectives, only because their perspectives are different from our own.

When we truly ponder not just “what is” but “what will be,” then we recognize that a world of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity requires of us some humility-- to be able to state what we do not know as well as what we do.

This is part of what Marilyn was holding up for us when she had us look at our own pride that sometimes inhibits our capacity to have that kind of humility that allows us to embrace Mystery more forthrightly.

When we truly ponder what the future requires of us, we may hear a calling to not just be a House for Hope, but to also be greenhouses—greenhouses for a renewed religious and spiritual sensibility in order to be co-creators with the Spirit, and true artisans of the future that serves not us alone, but those we would aim to serve, our fellow pilgrims on this ailing Earth.