

**6/15/2014 Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
Madison, CT**

“Love Reaches Out: UU Evangelism”

By Randall Spaulding

Reading: “We have not come here to take prisoners” by Hafiz (below)

There is an ancient midrash, or story retold by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

Jewish tradition says that the parting of the Red Sea was the greatest miracle ever performed. It was so extraordinary that, on that day, even a common servant witnessed more than all the miracles observed by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel combined. And yet we have one midrash that mentions two Israelites, Reuven and Shimon, who had a different experience.

Apparently, when the Red Sea parted, the bottom of the sea, though safe to walk on, was not completely dry but a little muddy, like a beach at low tide. Reuven stepped into it and curled his lip. “What is this muck?”

Shimon scowled, “There’s mud all over the place!”

“This is just like the slime pits of Egypt!” replied Reuven.

“What’s the difference?” complained Shimon.” “Mud here, mud there; it’s all the same.”

And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way across the bottom of the sea. And, because they never once looked up, they never understood why on the distant shore, everyone else was singing songs of praise. For Reuven and Shimon the miracle never happened. They couldn’t see beyond the muck.

So here’s the muck: Unitarian Universalist congregations and numbers are shrinking. Some use the image of a slow death to characterize liberal religious traditions in the 21st century, that perhaps in a short as three generations there will, in some place, few if any strong, communal settings where Unitarian Universalists gather each week in an intergenerational setting to worship, learn, and become equipped to be in the world. In three generations, Shoreline will be gone? My church in Hamden will be gone? You can think of others all around the country. Is this the reality we’re mucking around in?

Most of us are probably aware what Pew Research has been reporting for quite some time now: every mainline religious tradition is in some form of decline. Fewer and fewer young people choose to commit themselves to any particular faith compared with their parents and grandparents. More and more young people say that religion just isn’t that important in their lives—much talk is had in divinity schools and seminaries about these “Nones”—those who in surveys check the box marked “none” next to religious affiliation.

In a 2012 Berry Street Lecture in Phoenix, UU minister Fredric Muir mentions these concerning issues and also the fact that in this century the majority of the American population will cease to

look like most of us UUs with a “North **Atlantic**” complexion. Our UU communities and populations today carry a certain theology and way of being and doing worship that soon “will rapidly grow more cutoff and isolated from the U.S. population.”

Why is this happening? What’s going on? Haven’t we been open and inclusive—more so than many other communities, doing justice and serving our neighbors? The honest answer is, “yes.” And still the church declines. What is this muck? Muir says that:

...in spite of being a justice-seeking faith, in spite of the ministries to which we are committed, in spite of the marketing we have done, we have not grown. No matter how you slant the data, we have remained either relatively unchanged for decades... or we have shrunk considerably... Either way it does not look good; some might say it doesn't even look promising.

It’s not my purpose to be SNL’s Debbie Downer today, but to point us toward what it might mean to be aware of and respond to our present reality. What would it mean to acknowledge the muck, but to lift up our eyes—unlike Reuven and Shimon—and focus forward on the praising and singing up ahead?

Next week begins the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. A national gathering where thousands of children, youth and adults gather to worship, witness, learn, form and deepen relationships and discern policy and direction for the faith through sending delegates from congregations and using the democratic process to make decisions. This year the national gathering is close by, at the Convention Center in Providence, RI. Three of your own are attending as (delegates?): Mary Strieff, Elizabeth Santoro and Sue Schaedler. The theme this year hopes to address the very issue I have been talking about. Workshops, worship and dialogue will center on questions such as: how might congregations reach out to people who seek or embrace a spirituality but are not particularly interested in denominational loyalty, who don’t really care about identifying as a UU? How will we share the message of our liberal religion so that it is seen and heard in the dizzying and constantly changing world of technology and media without losing intellectual integrity or spiritual depth? If a core purpose of our faith is to help people grow in spirit and in service, how can we do that beyond our own, sometimes insular, enclaves in ways that offer transformation but hold true to our core principles? The GA theme “Love Reaches Out” hopes to get to these questions, and will address how UUs do evangelism, if they do it at all.

We’ve been asking and exploring these questions for a while now in our faith, but as Muir says, it hasn’t worked. We’re still declining. Why? Well, Muir lists three things, three ways that have led to both our ineffectiveness and our not being able to share our message of hope and liberation in ways that cause others to say “hey I want to be a part of this, how do I join?”:

First, Muir says that we are held prisoner to a “disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism” that keeps us from being set free to “engage the changing times.” There is a fine but important balance between individuality and individualism. Individuality is the celebration of “nature’s differences and diversity, of which we humans are a part.” Individualism is insisting

on one's individual freedom and action always over and above the community—we have made it an ideology, a theology, and it hasn't helped our institution at all.

Second, Muir says we tend to cling tenaciously and be held prisoner to an exceptionalism that others see as insulting and undermines our integrity at sharing our good news. Do we see our way and our path of reason and freedom as “uniquely virtuous... uniquely powerful in ways which UUs would object if offered by other ways of faith”? Most of us would say, “No, that's not us at all!” And yet our tradition has an elitist track record, and I have experienced an exceptionalist attitude in quite a few of our communities.

Finally, Muir says that we are held prisoner by our “allergy to power and authority which often results in its misuse and abuse.” We've left faith communities that were authoritarian and left no room to agree to disagree, but in the process we have turned 180 degrees and embraced unhelpful individualism instead, grasping tight-fisted to Ralph Waldo Emerson's mantra that the true “man must be a nonconformist... Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” Our allergy to power and authority makes it hard to listen to “a diversity of interests and passions—without becoming distracted—and being able to walk together with people we may disagree with, but with whom we have covenanted our “mutual trust and support” for the common good.

Seems like there's a lot of muck on our shoes, and I **could** spend a lot of time looking at the crud instead of looking up at you and other sisters and brothers of the faith for hope. “We have not come here to take prisoners,” says the poet Hafiz, but to surrender ever more deeply to freedom and joy. It's not our goal or purpose or desire to come into this exquisite world to hold ourselves hostage from love, to become a prisoner to that which leads to decline and ineffectiveness. It's not our desire to be held prisoner to individualism, or exceptionalism or to our allergic reaction to authority and power. And if those things are really what our faith entails, I, too would say, “Run, my dear”! “Run... from anything that may not strengthen your precious budding wings, or from anyone likely to put a sharp knife into the sacred, tender vision of your beautiful heart.”

Just as we sang our response to our joys and concerns this morning, it's possible and necessary to put these things on the table, to work to address them, but also to respond: “We forgive ourselves and each other... We begin again in love.” Despite the trend that people are less committed to institutional religion, people still hunger for community. They may seem to be more committed to a virtual Facebook community of friends, but we are human and haven't yet evolved beyond the need to be in physical relationship with one another: to form communal bonds of friendship and understanding, love and support. Good news out of all of those Pew Research surveys is that our country is ready for the message of Unitarian Universalism. More people than ever are open to the idea that all the enduring faiths have life-giving meaning, that humanism is as compelling a religious path as theism, that equality and justice are hallmarks of what it means to be human, and that reason and the use of our cognitive faculties are not to be left at the door when it comes to faith. These characteristics are not reserved for one type of culture or race or socioeconomic class, but span all peoples across our country including those who may be in the majority in the decades to come.

I see us as needing to take seriously two things in our faith. The first is addressing what it is about our history and religious culture that is leading us to decline—to seriously look at the muck on our shoes, but then to shake it off and move forward. The second is finding ways to *reach out in love* that are actually effective and inviting to others seeking the beloved community. Hafiz says that “we have a duty to befriend those aspects of obedience that stand outside of our house and shout to our reason ‘O please, O please, come out and play.’” Peter Morales, the president of the UUA, our religious denomination, in addressing Fredric Muir’s reflection agrees with him about the muck that’s on our shoes, and Morales says that we **have** to change. In fact, “Nothing short of culture change will suffice.” We won’t attract others and revitalize our faith just by becoming more tech savvy, or putting up Facebook pages or tweeting in worship or even holding bi-lingual worship services or hiring a person from a minority culture as a leader. Instead, “We must create a religion that leaves behind what has become stale, rigid, empty and dated... and we are going to have to give up the idolatries of individualism, exceptionalism, and adolescent anti-authoritarianism.” President Morales jokingly proposed a new t-shirt to read: “Unitarian Universalism: it’s not about you.”

Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? Why should we live? Why be good? Why is there suffering? These are the questions human beings have been asking since we emerged from our evolutionary past into the experience of being rational, wondering, questioning creatures. They are the questions that engage our religious sensibilities and communities—still! Our stone-age ancestors sat around glowing embers in the wilderness and wondered the same questions we do today. Great sages and prophets and theologians have written tomes about them. And post-modern, 21st century tech-savvy youth and adults are sitting around computers and smartphones, in coffee houses and bars and schools, homes and churches—and we’re wondering the same questions. The good news is that there are great things a generous faith has to contribute to those questions; there *is* singing and celebration ahead on the shore. But to get there it may require us to reach out in love in new ways, to do UU Evangelism with integrity, sharing the news that if you are invited to this place, you will not be held prisoner to individualism, elitism or unreasonable fear of authority.

Instead you will find arms reached out in love and religion that moves you and touches your soul as well as your prefrontal cortex! You will find a community that knows our feet are sometimes stuck with muck but affirms that muck is a part of life but we will not become so focused on the muck that we fail to see the singers praising and celebrating on the other side of the sea or fail to reverence the miracle of life happening all around us. And you will find a community nervous but ready to move beyond the status quo of our traditional complexion and culture, language and practice which nothing in our core values insists on. Instead we will affirm what we hold dear: that there is unity in our common humanity and that each person’s dignity and worth is inherent and universal. Let’s ask ourselves: what does the world need from us? Let’s enter into that conversation as a way of moving toward a new way of being. Let’s free ourselves and forgive ourselves so that we can reach out in love with a message that is so profoundly life-altering and life-transforming. What is that message? Believe it or not, that message is you!

I’ve asked Tracey Asti to share briefly how she came to be a part of SUUS: [Tracey shares her story of “the sign” that first brought her to SUUS, but that it is the people’s love that cause her to stay.]

Thank you, Tracey! You folk are doing something right and I laud you for the care you show one another and for the message you are sharing- a message that draws people to you.

As UUs meet in Providence to look to the future and to what it looks like to reach out in love, our challenge is to not get lost in clever methods and forget the message. All the high tech capabilities, all the ways to tweet and skype and get the message by innovative and creative ways... all the ways of doing church and worship and service that may not look anything like worship and church and service looks now... ALL of the methods to draw people toward a liberal faith will be in vain if we don't know how to do basic relational work with others. If we don't know how to love each other, to speak well and hold a hand, to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh and link arms with people we disagree with on some things so that the big things can be accomplished and the waters of justice may flow.

May this not be a time for nail-biting, but a time to risk, to shake the muck from our feet and venture joyfully onward, to discover together what is really meaningful, to be bold and not fear failure, and persist in living into a reality of love, here and now! I honor the message of Unitarian Universalism that is you today. I honor the spirit of courage, freedom and Light within you!

RESOURCES:

~Lawrence Kushner, Shemot Rabba 24.1

~Pew Research at <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>

~Fredric Muir, <http://www.uuma.org/page/BSE2012/>

~Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

~Peter Morales, <http://www.uuma.org/page/BSE2012response>

~Michael Werner, American Humanist Association, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/roy-speckhardt/welcoming-unitarian-unive_b_3542149.html

Shams-ud-din Muhammad Hafiz lived in the 14th century and is the most beloved poet of Persia, today called Iran. To Persians, the poems of Hafiz are not "classical literature" from a remote past, but cherished wisdom from a dear and intimate friend.

“We Have Not Come Here to Take Prisoners”

We have not come here to take prisoners,
But to surrender ever more deeply
To freedom and joy.

We have not come into this exquisite world
To hold ourselves hostage from love.

Run my dear,
From anything
That may not strengthen
Your precious budding wings.

Run like hell, my dear,
From anyone likely
To put a sharp knife

Into the sacred, tender vision
Of your beautiful heart.

We have a duty to befriend
Those aspects of obedience
That stand outside of our house
And shout to our reason
"O please, O please,
Come out and play."

For we have not come here to take prisoners
Or to confine our wondrous spirits,
But to experience ever and ever more deeply
Our divine courage, freedom, and
Light!