

Reinventing Unitarian Universalism

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Sermon by Rev. Mike Morran on the occasion of the ordination of Sara Hayman.
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We are going to practice some heresy this afternoon. On this auspicious occasion, ordaining a Unitarian Universalist minister, a brand-spanking-new Unitarian Universalist minister, it is appropriate to consider the future of our common faith tradition, and the kind of ministry to which all of us are called.

I am going to wrestle with some rather large ideas, and I hope you will wrestle with them too. I chose this topic, Reinventing Unitarian Universalism, because I think it's time we took this seriously. I'm not going to spend a lot of time talking about our faults or flaws, but I will outline a few of them, and what I mean by heresy is not the questioning of doctrines, for we don't have any, but rather questioning some of our assumptions and practices.

I *will* spend some time on the context of the world we currently live in, and I want to begin with a quote from Reinhold Niebuhr, someone I will refer to several times. Niebuhr laid out some religious and theological shoes we would do well to try to grow into.

Here is a passage from his 1948 essay, *The Persistence of Faith*, (please ignore the gender specific language). *Mankind is always progressing, but the essential needs of man remain the same. Life continues to be fragmentary and to be challenged by death no matter how powerful men become. The fear of death prompts men to complete life falsely and to express their frustration in lust for power, envy of one another, and a sense of false security in material comfort and power. These corruptions are rooted in the very center of personality and can therefore be uprooted only by a radical change at the heart of personality. The renewal of life through repentance is therefore a message of hope and judgment for every age. It will yet prove its relevance and power to an age which imagined that intellectual progress would obviate the necessity of religious renewal.*

The idea he is getting at, is that no matter how sophisticated, enlightened, or scientifically advanced human beings become, we will always need something more, something religious, something hopeful that is hopeful in a truly ultimate sense, as opposed to a merely human, or a merely worldly sense.

The world appears to be proving him right. As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, I know I am not alone here in being more than a little taken aback by the resurgence of religion in recent years. From Fundamentalist Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, to the renewed authority of the Catholic Church, to the sheer political power of evangelical Christians in the United States, I realized last year that nothing in my secular education or the Unitarian Universalist religious education of my childhood has prepared me for the world we currently live in.

I don't remember it being *explicitly* said when I was growing up, but it was sort of implied, kind of assumed, that religion, or at least the traditional religions, were sort of on their way out. The assumption, or implication, was that science and reason were the real forces to be reckoned with, were essentially unstoppable, that *this* was the

movement that would slowly illuminate the world, would slowly educate the people of the world, and that someday, maybe not too far off, we just wouldn't need all the trappings of religious dogma, all those ancient stories of mythology sold as truth, all those propositions about the nature of reality that were dependent on something as fickle and as irrational as faith.

I'm not positive, but I'm pretty sure my childhood Unitarian Universalist minister was one of the people I got this impression from.

But let's look at reality. In poll after poll, year after year, the results are remarkably consistent. Somewhere between 85 and 92 percent of adult Americans believe in God. Fifty two percent believe that the second coming of Jesus will happen in the present millennium, (that is, before the year 3000) and fully twenty-four percent, nearly a quarter of the population, believe that the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world will occur in our lifetimes. Thirty four percent of adult Americans believe that Satan is not a metaphor for evil, but a supernatural being that really exists. You may be interested to know that just over fifty percent of the American population believes in ghosts.

Going strictly by the odds, (and I am not going to ask you to raise your hands or otherwise identify yourselves,) strictly by the odds, every Unitarian Universalist gathering is a gathering of religious diversity.

Interestingly, polls show that Americans believe in four quite distinct gods.

Just over thirty-one percent of the population believes in an authoritarian God, highly involved in each and every life. This God guides believers to make proper decisions and is responsible for major world events like tsunamis, wars, and the fate of nations. This God is furious at human sinfulness and punishes sinners.

Twenty-three percent believe in a more benevolent God, active in everyone's lives but slow to anger and punishment. The benevolent God influences people positively, is saddened by our sinfulness, and has only our best interests at heart.

Sixteen percent believe in a deeply critical, but rather distant God. This God doesn't interact much with the world, is deeply angered by our sinfulness, but generally leaves us to our own devices, and withholds punishment until the afterlife.

And twenty four percent believe in a Deist God; a kind of cosmic force that created the universe, set in place its natural laws and is now more or less detached, not really interested in judging individual human beings.

For those of you who like to do the math, that leaves about six percent of the population who are atheists or agnostics. I hope that doesn't make anyone feel lonely. Like a friend of mine told me the other day, if you're one in a million and you live in America, there are three hundred people just like you.

It is clear that the need to believe, or at least the inclination to believe in something beyond the physical world is an almost universal human phenomenon. It transcends nations and race, culture and language, geography and history. It is also clear that all those philosophers and thinkers, from Voltaire to Marx, from Freud to Bertrand Russell, from Steve Allen to my childhood Unitarian Universalist minister and countless more who prophesied the end of religious faith were just plain wrong. Here

in the present moment, at the very edge of time and the future, religion is doing just fine!

The trouble is that the world is *not* doing fine, and religion is part of the problem. There are great differences in the qualities, emphasis, and social values of religion, and one of the great hoodwinks of our age is the assumption that faith shouldn't be subject to close examination or criticism, but we are under no such restrictions. Our tradition is proud of our heresies, and I personally believe we should be highly critical of religion and faith. We should shine great bright lights of clarity and understanding on the beliefs of religion and faith, the implications of the various religious faiths, and on the practices of various religious faiths, including our own.

I sometimes hear people say that Unitarian Universalists like to be inclusive and don't believe in creeds, so it doesn't matter what someone believes. This is nonsense. It absolutely matters what we believe! What we believe to be right and true and moral and valuable has a direct relationship to how we live in this world, and how we live in the world has a direct effect on the rest of the people who live here.

More than any modern theologian I know of, Reinhold Niebuhr was concerned with the role of religion in politics and public life, and in particular was highly critical of the overlay of Christian faith and the great American myth. The Great American myth is the one we all grew up with. You know the one: those rugged pioneers who survived cold winters and harsh conditions to settle the wild continent, the brave and visionary statesmen who fought the revolutionary war for American freedom, the home of honest Abe Lincoln, the richest, the most advanced, and the most powerful nation on earth, the land of the free and the home of the brave, winner of the world wars, protectors of justice, the great success story, and so on and so on.

Niebuhr was relentless in putting America's Christianity in a more realistic historical context. He wrote with brutal clarity of the Christian, white Europeans who came to these shores, reared in the Calvinist doctrine of sinful humanity, who murdered Native Americans without number and without mercy, who enslaved and tortured millions of Africans, and later imported Asians for cheap labor and then let them die in factories and fisheries and railroad labor camps. He warned Christianity repeatedly not to get too caught up in what he called the delusion of American innocence. He wrote, "Nations, as individuals, who are completely innocent in their own esteem, are insufferable in their human contacts."

Niebuhr was a Christian with no delusions about human nature. He wrote plainly and honestly of the mixed nature of human beings, our tendency to nobility matched equally by cruelty and ignorance, our care for others just as often overruled by selfishness, the ever-present will to power, and the powerful forever tempted to play God to history. Niebuhr summed up his political argument in a single sentence that I would support being posted over every voting booth, in every courtroom, and on every government document. "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

The problem with much of religion in America, and Unitarian Universalists too(!), is that it is too consumed with the delusion of innocence to make a realistic assessment of itself, and so it continues to be blind to how destructive it has been and how

destructive it continues to be. This might not be so bad if this blindness were confined to houses of worship. But when this dynamic becomes thoroughly entrenched and enmeshed with the world's largest military industrial complex, when it begins to inform the making of our laws, the priorities of our national and international policies, the decisions being made about war and peace and poverty, we've got real trouble.

I believe the arrogance of religious certainty combined with the delusion of historical innocence, is a *wicked* combination that will ultimately poison, offend, kill, or corrupt everything it touches!

I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said, "When fascism comes to America, it will be carrying the cross and wrapped in the flag."

Having said all that, bear with me here, I don't necessarily want religion out of politics, and given the human need to believe, and after eleven years in the ministry, I no longer believe that a clean or lasting separation is even possible.

I don't necessarily want religion out of politics, but I do want a fundamentally different kind of religion informing our democracy, and I think, with some help from Reinhold Niebuhr, that I can identify some of the core qualities of what is needed. This, finally, brings me to some organizing principles for reinventing Unitarian Universalism.

First, I think real religion stands forever in awe and in wonder at the mystery Life and Love and Divinity, and never, ever, ever, assumes that the mortal mind can understand the plan or the will of God. I shudder each and every time I hear our president, or anyone else for that matter, say "God Bless America," or "God is leading me," or like the woman security guard who shot the young psychopath at New Life Church just over a month ago, when she said she knew God was with her and was guiding her hand. I commend her bravery, but that is a tremendously shallow and myopic theology, eerily similar to the writings of the 9/11 terrorists, that conveniently overlooks who was guiding the hand of that young man as he took the lives of four innocent people before she got there. I'll be blunt. The only thing that kind of theology serves is self-righteousness.

Our tradition holds a place of reverence for the critical power of our minds for discerning truth, and we should use them when it comes to faith in public dialogue.

Appropriately humble in the face of what we can never understand, real religion then turns its attention to what is moral and good. Niebuhr insists on the relativity of all human perspectives, and that it is the social and the spiritual task of religion to discern moral clarity as far as possible, and to insist upon moral action. This is the proper function of religion in a free society, and I would add this is exactly and specifically the proper function of *our* religion in a free society.

Second, I think that in this day and age, with what we understand about the nature, the structure of matter, and the scope of the universe; with our grasp of the atomic, electric, elemental unity of all created things, religion should speak to and emphasize the essential relatedness of all things rather than the individuation of all things. This is essential, and I take issue with our own Unitarian Universalist principles for their emphasis on individualism over community and relationship.

Third, religion should speak to and emphasize transcendence and salvation in *this* world, right here, with what we are and with what we've got. And I would further define this transcendence and salvation in this way...

We are, all of us, we can't help it, people who suffer from isolation and alienation. It makes us afraid of death, afraid of each other, consumed with selfish survival, and slightly neurotic in an infinite number of ways. Real religion would speak to and be intentional about finding ways to overcome this alienation. I believe that to the extent we are able to feel ourselves as a part of creation and a part of each other, as opposed to separate from creation and separate from each other, to that extent, that *is* transcendence, and no dogma or creed is required! I believe this is what religion is for, and I think we all know this.

We even stumble on it now and then like I know happens in some of our small group ministries, some of our committees, some of our other groups, and even in our common worship. We just don't know how to do it reliably, and I think it's partially because it's so counter-cultural that we're actually afraid to be intentional about it. I suggest to you that this will require great courage on our part, and that overcoming this fear and aversion may be our salvation.

Which brings me to my last point, and one of my most fervent hopes for our transcendence as a community, as a people, as a faith. The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism is, "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." This sounds good, (non-dogmatic and all that), but it has always left me uneasy.

Here's the thing. These words fail to articulate that this act, this search for truth and meaning, has no substance or value for isolated individuals. Those words occur in the context of a document whose first principle is explicitly individualistic, and nothing that follows ever recognizes this essential, existential, theological error.

The truth is that the search for truth and meaning can *only* take place in the context of community and relationship. We are products of our communities: our thoughts, perspectives and beliefs come to us through generations of ancestors, completely grounded and sourced within the larger human community. Everything we experience can *only* take place within the language and symbols of human community. It can never be only an individual effort or an individual event! To imagine otherwise is to imagine... nothingness....

Instead, I suggest that we look at the search for truth and meaning in the context of the covenant we share with creation, the essential spiritual truth that we are all and always bound to one another, to creation, and to whatever divine forces may be working in the universe or within our endless imaginations.

I have reached the end of what I want to say for today, but I pray this is not the end of the conversation. There are possibilities for us as people of faith, possibilities for our spirits that are real and accessible, possibilities for our public witness we have not yet imagined, possibilities for healing the world that our faith, and our faithfulness can make real.

May it be so. Amen.