

That Does Not Speak To My Condition

(Quaker Proverb)

Dr. Eugene A. Brunelle

Do you agree that our Sunday service should be a **religious** ceremony, whose goal is to promote spiritual transformation, by speaking through its liturgy to our unconscious intuition, and through its sermon to our conscious rationality?

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Prologue

It is difficult to conduct effective Sunday services unless we have defined their nature and purpose. Some of you may share my conviction that our Sunday service should be a **religious** ceremony, whose goal is to promote spiritual transformation. It does so by speaking through its liturgy to our unconscious intuition, and by speaking through its sermon to our conscious rationality. However, it is unclear whether or not a majority of our congregation, or of our denomination, shares this conviction regarding the essential spirituality of our Sunday services. Thus it is hard to escape the conclusion that our religious goal has been somewhat obscured by a lack of definition and purpose. As Alfred North Whitehead has said, spirituality is what one does with one's solitariness. So Unitarian Universalism is sometimes subject to fragmentation, resulting from the centrifugal pressures of egocentric individualisms. Our Buddhist and Sufi colleagues remind us, however, that ego is what separates us from god. Our spiritual welfare therefore requires a centripetal countervailing consensus to promote our unity, in spite of our ego-centered differences. That consensus depends largely on shared assumptions about the nature of our Sunday services. So in this regard I would ask that my sermon today be understood as part of an effort to formulate a congregational consensus. This sermon (like all sermons) is a special kind of talk, one in which I am not just speaking *to* you, but in which I am also attempting to speak *for* some of you. But I cannot speak to your condition without first, like Jacob, wrestling with my own condition. I am trying to articulate a conviction that may be common, although not universal among us, but which might not otherwise be expressed.

1. Our Lost Congregation

I have recently been studying our membership book, and our annual membership reports to the Unitarian Universalist association. Let me tell you what I have found. It appears that we are running a serious, hidden deficit in our membership. In the last eight years approximately 150 new members have signed our membership book. So we have done well in attracting a substantial number of new members. But during that same time period, according to our annual reports to the Unitarian Universalist association, we have lost 103 members. That is equivalent to a whole congregation. These were not casual visitors, but people who had in fact signed our membership book. So we have not done so well in retaining the new members we have attracted. And that is my central concern in this sermon. Please be assured that in looking at these problems my goal is positive. I earnestly wish us well, but I think we need to know what our problems may be so that we can collectively do something about them. May I suggest that perhaps we need to ask ourselves why we have lost so many newer members, sixty-eight percent, in spite of the generous inclusivity of our professed goals?

Some of our departed members voted with their feet because we apparently alienated them. By leaving they told us that our congregational activities did not speak to their spiritual condition. So I also feel a need to try to speak on behalf of our lost congregation. They left quietly enough. There were no protests, and few formal resignations. They just walked out the door and never returned. That's what membership in this congregation did to them. Probably they did not all leave for the same reason. Dissatisfaction with some of our Sunday services may have been an important cause, although we don't know how many that may have been because we don't do either entrance or exit interviews. Some may have moved, and some may have originally joined for non-religious reasons. But a number of our continuing members have said that they find our services insufficiently spiritual, which suggests at the very least that we lack inclusiveness, and

perhaps reflect an “either/or” rather than a “both/and” spiritual attitude another factor may be that although we roll out the red carpet and claim to welcome everyone, sometimes that welcome seems to include everyone but Christians. It’s time we stopped hurling rotten eggs at Christianity. Many of us were once Christians ourselves, and to some extent still are. Moreover, Christians share many of our goals and constitute our largest potential constituency.

2. Obligatory Assumptions

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung believed that the goal of life was the growth of consciousness through spiritual transformation, and that the goal of religion was to facilitate that spiritual transformation. Our Unitarian Universalist covenant, our *principles and purposes*, reflects Jung’s view, and likewise “affirm and support Spiritual growth”. Consequently our Sunday services should be committed to, and function in accordance with that religious goal. If we have failed to make that commitment—if our Sunday services have failed to speak, as the Quakers say, to the spiritual condition of our members—if our services have failed to grab the congregation, failed to capture their imaginations, that failure is likely to have contributed in part to our loss of members for at least two reasons.

3. Two Faces of the Psyche

So in considering possible causes of our loss of members I want to look at two factors--our liturgy and our sermons--because our Sunday service speaks to the spiritual condition of our congregation in both ways. Let me start by trying to say what liturgy and sermons might be at their best. First, and most importantly, our Sunday service speaks through liturgy to the unconscious, to the intuitive, emotional, aesthetic face of the psyche. Liturgy is always primary to the sermon, primary to logic, primary to mere rationality. Liturgy has nothing to do with belief. Liturgy is the art of religious drama. And liturgy speaks by means of sensory experience, through color and light and shape and sound and dance and icon and incense and architecture and symbols, using the full panoply and palette of artistic experience as mediated by the senses.

Nothing less has the power to penetrate the darkness and cold isolation of our spiritual condition. This is the function of liturgy; this is the function of art in religion; this is worship; this is the celebration of life. This is an antidote to a dry and desiccated world, devoid of emotion and drained of spiritual significance. Buddha once simply held up a lotus, intending that the lotus would be his entire liturgical presentation. But since only one of his followers understood he then delivered a sermon in words for all the rest, who, perhaps like some of us, were impervious to the art and drama of liturgy.

So, like Buddha’s service, ours speaks primarily through liturgy to unconscious intuition, and only secondarily through the sermon to conscious rationality. Although less important than liturgy, rationality is an essential part of Unitarian Universalist religious services. And rationality speaks by means of words, by means of logical verbal concepts, although at best words merely supplement the transformational richness of the liturgical experience. Incidentally, we are rarely aware of the liturgy of words themselves—of the harmonies and overtones of sounds and meanings—although it is always present, even in sermons. Sometimes we call it poetry.

What is the distinctive characteristic of a sermon? You might say that a sermon’s subject is like an ordinary orange, and the preacher’s job is to squeeze the spiritual and ethical significance out of that orange. To explicate the inexplicable; to extract the extraordinary from the ordinary we are accustomed to dividing the world into independent spiritual and secular realms. It is significant that in ancient Hebrew there is no word for religion. So in Judaism today there is no division between the spiritual and secular worlds, and consequently there is no such thing as a secular subject. The everyday world is full of spiritual significance. Every possible subject is fraught with

spiritual and ethical meaning, and therefore charged with ultimate significance. In the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “the world is charged with the grandeur of god; it will flame out like shining from shook foil”. Some of you may prefer to call that grandeur the spiritual and ethical significance of the universe. But that should not prevent you from being charitable, or from withholding affection from colleagues who use different words for the great mystery. Ultimately the purpose of all sermons is the same--to extract that significance, that grandeur, that mystery, from the orange of the ordinary. Failing that, all sermons are hollow and empty and spiritually blind.

So Rabbi Micah Greenstein, of Temple Israel, in Memphis, Tennessee, points out that in Judaism there is only one world, and that it is simultaneously secular and spiritual. He goes on to say that this doesn't imply a removal from the everyday world, but instead, becoming aware of the spiritual and ethical presence and purpose in everything. He concludes by noting that a sermon should say, “pay attention, because something awesome is happening all around us, and the everyday world is full of mysteries and wonder”. A good sermon extracts that inherent mystery and wonder. If a talk does not do that it is not really a sermon. But the unique purpose of our Unitarian Universalist religious services, in combining liturgy and logic, is still spiritual transformation. And a service which attempts to speak to our total spiritual condition must deliberately appeal to both faces of the psyche; to both liturgy and logic; to a world that is simultaneously secular and spiritual; and to elicit the spiritual from within the secular. Or as the poet William Butler Yeats says, to search deep within “the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, the place where all dreams start”.

4. Professional and Non-Professional Services

We have two groups of Sunday Services. Both groups generally seek spiritual transformation of the congregation through liturgy and sermons. But these groups vary significantly in effectiveness. Typically, about 30 professional services a year are conducted by our minister, and 20 non-professional services are conducted by others. The most effective group of services has been those conducted by ordained Unitarian Universalist ministers, who are professionally trained to present sermons and to design liturgy. By ministers such as our own regular minister, Rev. Jeff Jones, and during his recent sabbatical, by ministers like the Rev. Alane Cameron Miles, the Rev. David Takahashi Morris, and the Rev. Edward H. Piper. Our non-professional ecclesiastical leaders generally lack training in designing liturgy and delivering sermons. Consequently the professional group provides more fully developed liturgy and more spiritually significant and relevant sermons. That is what they have been educated to do. That is why decisions about liturgy and sermons should rest primarily with the minister, in consultation with congregational representatives such as the Sunday services committee. That is what our Unitarian Universalist ministers have been trained and qualified to do. Authority in religion may sometimes be questionable, but there is no substitute for competence. With the possible exception of the King James Bible, no great work of art, or scientific discovery, has ever been made by a committee. Nevertheless, some of our members, and even others who are not members, have made valuable contributions to our services, both through sermons and through liturgical enrichment.

But the non-professional group of services, on the whole, has been less effective in speaking to our spiritual condition because its liturgy is often skeletal, and its sermons (or sermon-substitutes) do not try to extract the spiritual or ethical from the ordinary. The problem is our system, not our participants, who deserve our thanks. But when weak liturgy and ineffective sermons both occur in the same service the whole ceremony tends to stray from its purpose. It is inappropriately designed and therefore cannot speak to the spiritual condition of the congregation. So while we recognize and welcome the positive contributions of non-professional services, we still need to ask ourselves seriously whether the liturgy and sermons involved may

have been significant limiting factors in the failure of our services to speak to the spiritual condition of the congregation, and therefore a cause in part of our loss of members.

5. Contrasting Liturgies

If Judaism and Christianity and Buddhism are typical, a spiritually resonant liturgy cannot be created overnight. It takes millennia; Judaism, for example, with its deeply moving liturgy, is perhaps the oldest continuing religious organization in western civilization. The emotional power and dramatic spectacle of the Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic liturgy is hardly matched by any more recent Protestant or Unitarian Universalist ceremonies, and they tend to emphasize their sermons more than their liturgy. Unitarian Universalism, during its far briefer history, has never been notable for its liturgy, which is skeletal at best. But the simpler liturgy of our professional Sunday services has often been enriched by water services, animal services, flower services, and compass-point services. Similar celebrations do not often occur in our non-professional services. In our professional services the choir is frequently available, sometimes in white shirts and black pants or skirts. So a variety of liturgical music as well as hymns are usually part of the professional service. This musical enrichment is usually missing in our non-professional services. Our professional services often feature both responsive and unison readings and litanies, which are absent at other times. We usually have flowers when an ordained minister is in the pulpit, but we rarely see them at other times. So our professional services have a far richer liturgical context than our other services.

6. Contrasting Sermons

Our professional sermons are also presented by ordained ministers whose qualifications and competence are supported by their seminary training and degrees. These sermons usually deal with spiritually significant and relevant subject matter. But in our non-professional services the talk, or sermon-which-is-not-a-sermon, usually does not seek the spiritual significance in the secular orange. Consequently, such presentations at times are unable to speak to the spiritual condition of the congregation and are somewhat at odds with our ***principles and purposes*** which “affirm and promote *spiritual* growth”. Yet almost any secular subject can become prophetic if picked up by its spiritual or ethical handle. That is to say, secular subjects can be transformed and redeemed if the emphasis is firmly placed on their spiritual and ethical implications. If it is not, the speaker misses an opportunity, and the congregation misses enlightenment.

The fifteen or twenty minutes allotted to the sermon are also used at times in non-professional services for a variety of other presentations, talks, programs, and performances. These are not intended to be sermons. They are often secular in content and offered by well-intentioned individuals. But these presentations also usually do not attempt to be spiritually significant or relevant. By secular standards, many of these presentations are admirable in their own right, but however excellent, however interesting or informative however educational or entertaining, such presentations do not speak to the spiritual condition of the congregation, and are therefore tangential to the reasons many of us come to this fellowship on Sunday morning. Thus they are inappropriate in what is explicitly intended to be a religious service. If these presentations were to occur in a context which was not a religious service, say on a Sunday afternoon or a Wednesday night, there would be no reason to question them on religious grounds.

7. Grow or Die.

We urgently need to make our non-professional services more professional. That is, we need to improve both their liturgy and their sermons, and to focus more sharply on our primary goal of spiritual transformation. There is no reason why a non-professional service could not have an enriched liturgy and a spiritually significant and relevant sermon. There is no reason why such a

ceremony could not facilitate spiritual growth more often and more effectively. Perhaps if we looked a little more closely at the spiritual significance and relevance of future non-professional presentations, and the qualifications and competence of forthcoming speakers, we might be able to meet more of the legitimate spiritual and ethical expectations of the congregation; we might be able to speak more fully to their spiritual condition; we might be able to reduce our loss of members and retain the confidence and loyalty of more of those who once so hopefully signed our membership book. If we are to grow spiritually and match the physical growth of our new building we can no longer afford to remain the prisoners of our informal and now inadequate origins our problem is not getting new members but retaining new members.. Do you think our fellowship can survive or grow if we continue to loose 68% of our new members? I have suggested that an artistically richer and more resonant liturgy, and more spiritually significant sermons, would do much to stem our loss of members. And it would also be quite in keeping with our Unitarian Universalist covenant.

epilogue

Unless we wish to ignore our covenant, our ***principles and purposes***, our Sunday service should be a liturgical ceremony, designed and intended to promote spiritual transformation, by speaking through its liturgy to our unconscious intuition, and by speaking through its sermon to our conscious rationality. If those are not the goals of our Sunday services they become merely another unredeeming secular pastime.

Our modern lives are almost entirely secular. But some time ago a teacher advised us to give to Caesar the things of Caesar, and to give to god the things of god. He did not advise us to genuflect before the Caesar of secular concerns. Many of us come here seeking spiritual sustenance and growth, but some Sunday mornings we don't find it here. The problem is that our non-professional services too often fail to speak fully to the spiritual condition of the congregation. Being spiritually blind, they fail to capture our imaginations. They do not engage fully either our aesthetic sensibilities or our rationality. They do not reach widely and deeply enough into the foul rag and bone shop of our hearts, the place where all dreams start. *Are our departing members telling us that too many of our Sunday services are spiritual failures? Is that why so many of our members have left? Have they sought and found elsewhere the spiritual sustenance they too often could not find here? Have we failed to grow beyond the narrow horizons of our now inadequate origins? Is our Unitarian Universalist spirituality too weak to retain the loyalty of the majority of our newer members?*

In considering our alternatives is it too much to ask, that in a religious organization, one hour a week be devoted exclusively to our spiritual needs? Is it too much to ask, in the environment and sanctuary of Unitarian Universalism, that ecology of the spirit be preserved from the toxin of secular encroachment?