

Guilt by Association

Sermon delivered October 2, 2011
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Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia

“Who needs Boston? Why should we give them any money?” is often the cry of independently minded Unitarian Universalists, many of whom have never been to Boston, and if they have, have little but disdain for the “Mother Ship,” our Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters at 25 Beacon Street. In the past, I might have expressed similar sentiments. But I’m here to tell you, I need Boston, and so do you.

I have preached, and will preach again, on the rocky history of Unitarians located outside Massachusetts and the Boston Brahmins of our heritage. Often those in far-flung places were looked down on by Boston, and it was only on the frontier that the first women were welcomed into our ministry, because the men didn’t want to go so far away from civilized towns, and they were not willing to settle for smaller compensation.

We’ve come a long way since those early days. While we have yet to elect a woman as the president of our denomination, our immediate past president, Bill Sinkford, was the first African American president, and our current president, Peter Morales, is our first Latino president. More than half of our ministers are now women. This is an accomplishment to be very proud of, since some faith communities still don’t allow women to be ordained leaders.

For the past five years, the UUA has promoted Association Sundays, with the idea that our combined resources can have a larger impact on our denomination and the larger world. The funds collected today will not go to the general operating fund. This year, the UUA has joined with the UU Ministers’ Association, or UUMA; the Liberal Religious

Educators' Association, or LREDA; and the UU Musicians' Network, or UUMN, to celebrate our association with one another and to raise funds for the continuing education and professional development of religious professionals.

Why should this be important, at a time when churches and their members are struggling? After all, how many of us who have been educators have not gone to numerous workshops where the jargon far exceeds the useful information? Raise your hands. Yet I also had the privilege of attending conferences very carefully designed for effective transfer of information that would be useful to a teacher. As an experienced conference-goer, I can truthfully say that there have never been any workshops that the UUA designed where I have not learned something valuable. The UUA takes extraordinary care both in choosing relevant topics and experienced presenters and in designing the programs themselves.

As well as continuing education for religious professionals, the funds raised today will go toward scholarships as well as a comprehensive assessment of the ministries within the denomination. This includes not just parish ministries, but community ministries, music ministries, and ministries of lifespan religious education—that is, religious education for all ages.

It's easy not to see the need of this fund drive. You have a minister in front of you, after all, who sounds fairly intelligent, even though she is not much out of seminary. Why train her more? Well, with any position there is a learning curve, and I don't pretend to have all of the answers. Continuing education serves to keep ministry fresh and to encourage self-evaluation.

Musicians in our congregations have benefited enormously from the UU Musicians' Network, which has regular conferences and, as the name implies, networks to share new and newly rediscovered musical pieces. Many of our musicians are composers, and if you look in our hymnal you will see a chalice in front of the names of those composers who were or are Unitarian Universalists. Some of you may have seen the newer, teal-colored hymnal that includes many musical pieces written by our contemporary UU musicians. The development of this and any denominational resource involves a great deal of collaboration and training on the part of those involved. The teal hymnal resulted from the desire to be more culturally inclusive in our Sunday worship and in the material that is available to our member congregations.

This congregation has been deeply involved this past year with the *Welcoming Congregation* curriculum, and we have now embarked on the *Green Sanctuary Program*. The *Our Whole Lives* comprehensive sexuality curriculum, a program with sessions for all ages, and its predecessor, *About Your Sexuality*, developed in cooperation with the United Church of Christ, have received accolades. If you check the UUA website, you will find references to countless other curricula developed for our use, right here in Brunswick.

All of these programs take money. They are not simply sent to us out of Boston down the coast from the Charles River and into the marshes.

Another aspect of this year's collection involves scholarships for our seminary students. As a recent seminary graduate, I can't tell you how important this is. If I had not received scholarships, I would have had to take out even more student loans than I did, and I might not be standing here in front of you. In case you haven't heard, our

seminaries today are in desperate need of financial support. The financial support from the UUA is much less than it used to be, and we have only two Unitarian Universalist seminaries left in the entire country—Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, and Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. As I speak, Meadville, my alma mater, has only two remaining residential seminarians, and the rest are on-line or distance learners that meet at various locations throughout the year. The campus that has been in Chicago's Hyde Park since 1926 has been sold and the school will relocate to rented space in the Chicago Loop at the end of this semester. This is just one sad tale in a series of seminary closings from many denominations throughout the country in recent years. Because of this decline, a high percentage of our ministerial graduates attend non-UU seminaries. There was a time, back in the 1960s and before, when seminary educations were subsidized completely—those chosen for slots in the schools were given free tuition, as well as room and board. While that is perhaps an unrealistic goal for today, those of us who continue to believe that liberal religion is an important part of our lives need to support the future of our leadership as best we can.

I have been told by ministers who have been in the profession longer than I that the process of entering fellowship—of being accepted as qualified for the Unitarian Universalist ministry—is notorious for being more difficult than any other denomination. For that reason, some of those who aspire to the UU ministry first seek fellowship in other denominations, then try to gain fellowship with us. We have a history through the centuries of valuing an educated clergy, of expecting our children to learn valuable lessons in religious education rather than verbatim catechisms of pre-approved dogma, and of listening to and participating in music in our worship services that is

professionally prepared and relevant to our mission. We simply can't let this fall by the wayside because we are going through hard times. We need to insist on well-rounded, well-educated clergy, religious educators, and musicians.

Part of the money raised today will go toward a comprehensive assessment of our ministries and how we want to shape them for the future. This is a multi-faceted study, and one that has been taken up in related ways by other members of our denomination. There is a committee that has been meeting to study our annual General Assembly to see how it might be redesigned to be more effective and more inclusive. The UUA Commission on Appraisal, of which I was elected a member in June, which is charged with choosing a relevant topic every four years and reporting back to the General Assembly, is currently analyzing the issue of ministerial power and responsibility.

I believe that it is imperative to make our denomination relevant to the age in which we live. The first report of the new Commission, way back in 1936, also at a time of uncertainty, was entitled, *Unitarians Face a New Age*. Since then, we have emerged and become Unitarian Universalists, and that merger posed its own set of challenges. Yet UUs have never been afraid to face the future. We are stereotyped as notoriously optimistic people. But that optimism must be tempered with realism and dedication to do the hard work that we discern needs to be done—and that includes raising sufficient funds to get the job done.

As with most organizations today, the UUA has stripped its budget down to meet the financial times. It has laid off employees and combined programs. No one in Boston these days will be squandering our money. While the funds raised for Association Sunday, as I have said, do not go to the general operating fund, they will be used in other

terms for what should be part of the basic infrastructure of our congregations—the support of leadership and an analysis of what that leadership should be about and how it will get there.

We stand on the shoulders of giants. Our dual traditions go back to those who died because they would not renounce their beliefs. They include Michael Servetus, born Miguel Serveto near Zaragoza, Spain in about 1511, burned at the stake in 1553 in Geneva by John Calvin; and Polish physician, politician, and Unitarian bishop of Transylvania, Francis David, or David Ferencz, who questioned doctrines related to the Lord's Supper, infant baptism, predestination, and the worship of Jesus, and who was tried for the crime of “innovation,” and died in a dungeon in 1579.

They also include those ahead of their time, such as the only Unitarian king in history, King John Sigismund II of Transylvania, who issued a proclamation of religious tolerance, called the Edict of Torda, in 1568, at the urging of Francis David, and who died at the age of 31.

They include, in more modern times, the Rev. James Reeb, civil rights leader and Unitarian Universalist minister, who was severely beaten in Selma, Alabama in 1965 and died two days later in a Birmingham hospital; and Viola Liuzzo, Unitarian Universalist activist, murdered by the Ku Klux Klan, also in Alabama in 1965.

The education of our clergy and other religious leaders allows for the education of our congregations about our theological and social histories. It provides for continuing, thoughtful pastoral care for our members. It makes possible a continuing discernment process that places us in a continuing arc of history toward the future and our place in it.

Financial support can also go a long way toward one of the goals that we keep saying we desire—that of increasing our diversity. With improved funding for seminary students and other religious professionals, many of whom would not otherwise have been able to afford seminary, but who might grow into being some of our most talented and wisest leaders, will be able to answer their callings. Our leadership will become more ethnically and economically diverse, but will still be able to maintain its high standards of leadership. Our ministry together, what James Luther Adams called “the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing,” will continue to reach out to a broader spectrum of people, and naturally have a wider influence in our justice-seeking, world-changing mission.

Both our past UUA president, Bill Sinkford, and our current president, Peter Morales, have been committed to our increasing diversity among our ranks. This has included a strong presence in defense of immigration rights and in ministry to migrant workers, in prison ministry, and in increasing our chaplaincy in the Armed Forces. Educated, diverse UU clergy in these areas can greatly increase our visibility in the larger world, and thus increase our influence.

This congregation proudly stood with its Standing on the Side of Love banner. While the giving of love is free, getting out the message costs money. How important to you are well-trained, diverse religious leaders? How many people do we want to reach today? How much money can you spare?