

Berry Street Essay

The Berry Street Essay was established by Rev. William Ellery Channing in 1820 for the Ministerial Conference in Berry Street. It is thought to be the longest running lecture series in the United States and is now traditionally offered at the conclusion of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association's Ministry Days conference, which coincides with General Assembly. Previous Berry Street essayists include William Schulz, Kenneth Patton, and James Luther Adams.

From iChurch to Beloved Community Ecclesiology and Justice

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There's a Change A-comin'

For 192 years, the Berry Street lecture has been an opportunity to reflect on those things of greatest interest and concern in our ministry. My topic has been reviewed and thoroughly discussed for decades. I'm talking about the future of Unitarian Universalism and our ministry. I cannot think of a time in my career when this didn't easily engage us. In fact, in preparing for this afternoon, it was hard to find an era when two aspects of our future--growth and justice--weren't high on the agenda.

There are a couple of reasons why these are important to us. One is our commitment to community ministry in its broadest sense, a commitment to justice that originates in the Jewish and Christian prophetic traditions. James Luther Adams named it: "[The] holy thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice."¹ It's this "participation" that brought us to Phoenix. Peter (Morales) articulated the call in his online web invitation when he said that this General Assembly would be "an opportunity to raise our voices together so [that] we Unitarian Universalists become an even more powerful force for good in our world."²

Another important reason is that our justice-making commitment and ministry is a way to grow Unitarian Universalism. We think: If others could just see who we are and what it is our faith means, they might seek out one of our congregations. There are likely few at this gathering who have not leveraged a justice-seeking event (by whatever name) as a way of promoting the congregation or institution or program you serve.

I am saying--and it's our common wisdom--that there is a fundamental connection between growth, justice, and a healthy future. And yet, 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 (if you use raw numbers) or we have shrunk considerably (if viewed as a percentage of the total U.S. population). Either way, it does not look good; some might say it doesn't even look promising.

We should pay attention to what has happened to the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches of Britain, with whom we share considerable theological, intellectual, and cultural attributes. Their last century has been disheartening. At best, it appears that British Unitarianism has another three generations before it dies (and for some, three generations is generous). I pray that I am wrong, but the numbers tell their story:

- They have closed 50 percent of their churches in the last 80 years;
- The largest congregation is 160 members;
- The average congregation has 15 members;
- In 2010, the total number of Unitarians was 3,690.

While my British friends shared how hard it is to get accurate numbers, accuracy is really not the issue. The issue is that the church is on the downward slide of the tipping point and there is no turning it around. All of this in spite of familiar-sounding attributes that should make for a bright future: a ministry and

assembly of congregations deeply committed to justice making; an increasingly multicultural and diverse society from which to grow, an outstanding history replete with culture-shaping luminaries, all of the resources necessary for a stable and thriving religious faith (that is, professional ministry, property, and wealth). One of their leaders shared with me that in his lifetime, they will likely become a minuscule community of faith with enormous riches (from bequests and the sale of property). But a vital and vibrant faith and church will be gone.

On leaving our British colleagues, here are a few of the questions I had: Is their Association (the Assembly) the proverbial “canary in the coal mine”? While they have passed the “tipping point” with little likelihood of revitalization, how far are we North Americans from teetering on this point? How far are we from tipping? Have we--will we--lose control of our future? There’s a perfect storm taking shape and pushing us to the tipping point, a major event forcing us to address these questions. “There’s a change a-comin’” that we have all read about; we have seen it in the making. A confluence of events is taking shape, the effects of which we are late to recognize and absorb.

Robert Putnam and David Campbell tell us about one of these events: “The U.S. Census Bureau projects that today’s minorities will [sooner than later] comprise a majority of the American population. No matter the metric, there can be no doubt that . . . the United States is becoming an increasingly diverse nation.”³ Which means that we Unitarian Universalists, with our North Atlantic look--as reflected in our demographics, theology, and epistemology--will rapidly grow more cut off and isolated from the U.S. population.

Another event described in research is hard to avoid, given its contrasting picture with the past. Whether your source is Gallup or Trinity College or the Pew Forum, the conclusion is the same: “Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith. . . . Compared with their elders today, fewer say that religion is very important in their lives.”⁴ This is the rise of the “Nones,” many of whom are young adults claiming no religious affiliation, as in “None.”

Ministry to and with “minorities” (that is, those who make little-to-no claim on a North Atlantic heritage), along with a ministry to the “Nones” could be a ministry of growth or justice making. You might want to go deeper into one of these; I will not. I will speak about our ministry from a different starting point: ensuring a future for our faith, growing Unitarian Universalism, which is a matter of justice and creating a healthy future; that is, this is a ministry of justice and growth. For us, the two are interdependent.

This perfect storm will have a transforming effect. It might force us--if it’s not already too late, and I believe it isn’t--to step back and start afresh, renewed in a vision that is bold and well grounded. What’s new about this picture is . . . well, honestly there’s not a lot that’s new--believe me, we’ve heard it all! What is different is that we know the results of inaction, of not responding to the data and what we see.

Here’s an irony: From Thomas Jefferson⁵ to Diana Eck⁶--with many in between--Unitarian Universalists have been told that we can be the religion of the future, not that we are but that we can be. We have what it takes, it’s been said, not only to weather the demographic challenges but to welcome and grow from them and, in meeting twenty-first-century needs (twelve years in!), sustain Unitarian Universalism for generations to come.

What those naming our bright future have not told us is that in order to be this twenty-first-century religion, we must create significant change, changes over which--unlike the demographic challenges--we do have control. Fundamental to our survival is a paradigm shift, a frame-bending that goes deep into the history, character, and epistemology of Unitarian Universalism and its members because it goes to the essence of how we understand and see ourselves and, in turn, relate to the world at large, which means how we relate to our demographic context. Fundamental to our future is recognizing that our way of faith, from its ministry to its members, has been supported and nurtured by a trinity of errors, leading not only to ineffectiveness but to an inability to share our liberating message. That is to say that while Unitarian Universalism’s gospel is good news, it is losing its vitality and relevance.

The trinity of which I speak is:

- First, we are being held back and stymied by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing, and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times;
- Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news;
- Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.

These three organizing and corrupting narratives have shaped our story. Naming and addressing these issues and the results will be rewarding, meaningful, and terribly hard ministry. I have characterized this change as moving “From iChurch to Beloved Community.” In this process, we will create something that has eluded Unitarian Universalism: a doctrine of church, an ecclesiology that is grounded in congregational justice making, a doctrine of church that will guide and sustain us as we become the religion we (and others) know we can be.

Imagining Unitarian Universalism

How Unitarian Universalism arrived at this place of decision making is not unlike the personal stories we’ve heard from the thousands who have either remained Unitarian Universalist or left another path to become Unitarian Universalist. My story is not terribly different. Here’s what happened:

As a child, I loved church. My Disciples of Christ congregation felt liberal; its ministers were thoughtful and progressive. When Don Wheat, who later became the parish minister at Third Unitarian Church, was called, my spirit and his connected and I felt nudged toward ministry; that was in sixth grade. Theology, spirituality, and ecclesiology were immaterial to me; I loved our congregation and by high school was responding to the call to ministry.

Later, on April 22, 1970, near the end of my junior year in college, the “something happening here” that wasn’t exactly clear, came into focus at 2 P.M. It was the first Earth Day and I was in a class on American Transcendentalism; we were reading Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. It was a beautiful spring day and we convinced Dr. Cauger to hold class outside. We pleaded with him: Emerson, we told him, would approve! Against his better judgment, he consented. We sat in the grass and listened as he leaned against a large shade-tree and read aloud Emerson’s “The Divinity School Address.” It was as though he was channeling the Sage of Concord and speaking to me.

After class, I asked what religion Emerson was. Unitarian, he said. I asked if it still existed. “Exist?” he replied. “Yes, it exists! There’s a congregation on the west side. I’m a member. Do you want to go Sunday?” And that was that!

I cannot emphasize enough just how transforming the Address and other works of “Saint” Emerson were for me; they moved me and set me in a new direction. Benjamin Anastas critiques Emerson’s imprint on American identity, primarily his essay “Self-Reliance,” and captures how I felt for years:

The essay’s greatest virtue is it ordained [us] with an authority to speak what had been reserved for only the powerful, and bowed to no greater human laws, social customs or dictates from the pulpit. “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Or: “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.” Some of the lines are so ingrained in us that we know them by heart. They feel like natural law.⁷

Prior to my Earth Day epiphany, I was religious, but not spiritual because I never had the words to put to the spirituality I had known since childhood. Emerson provided what I needed to be both religious and spiritual. As I said earlier, my story is not unique; we clergy have heard versions of it from thousands.

As the Patriarch of American Transcendentalism, Emerson contributed to shaping twentieth-century ideology and the story Americans tell about ourselves. That story is about American uniqueness and individualism and has been expressed in a myriad of ways; one of those has relevance to the title of this presentation. When I began my preparation, I thought something on the role of technology would be of value. My interest took me to wondering what the “i” means that’s placed in front of Apple products. I found two explanations: One is that the “i” means “internet”; the other explains that the “i” stands for

“individual,” as in your own personal, individual piece of technology to be used for whatever purpose you want, to help you “Think Different” (which was Apple’s tag line). The theme of individualism was creatively and appealingly exploited in Apple’s commercial, a Kerouac-like celebratory homage to Emersonian individualism:

Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. They push the human race forward.⁸

Individualism not only shaped American culture writ large but shaped Unitarian Universalism: We comprise the church of Emersonian individualism; we are the iChurch. I’m not sure Emerson’s goal was for us to be “The Crazy Ones,” but Conrad Wright argues that the result was “the disintegration of institutional religion [because] one cannot build a church on Emerson’s dicta: ‘men are less together than alone,’ or ‘men descend to meet.’” Wright concludes, “For both Emerson and Parker, a true community is not painfully constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together, but is made up of atomic and unrelated individuals.”⁹

I am not an Emerson scholar, so I cannot say with authority, but let’s pretend, if only for the moment, that Wright’s view is wrong. I have read enough of Emerson to feel certain that he celebrated the gifts of individuality, the beauty of nature’s differences and diversity, of which humans are a part. We, as a nation and as a religious community, took the blessing and joy of individuality and made it an ideology, made it a theology, and did a very bad job of making it polity. We went from individuality to individualism and ended where, as Wright convincingly argues, Emerson took us, the demise of institutional religion.

While individualism may have been a bold and appealing way to create and build a nation and its institutions, and to grow Unitarian Universalism (it might even have felt natural or “God-given”), it is not sustaining: Individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we have committed ourselves. There is little to nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles. This was a way of dreaming and living before the storm.

We have been telling two stories, only one of which will deepen and grow our future. One of those stories, the one with which we lead, is from the Transcendentalists and is captured and articulated in the shadow side of our Principles. When used as an expression of individualism rather than an expression of the joy and celebration of individuality, the Principles come dangerously close to sounding like an ideology or creed turned theology and spirituality. This was discussed in the 1997 Commission On Appraisal report¹⁰ and then the following year, when sociologist Robert Bellah told a General Assembly audience that while he was “in solid agreement” with our social witness, he stood over and against the individualism in our Principles--a belief he saw as the strongest current in Unitarian Universalist history--which clearly places us in the mainstream of American culture.¹¹

Buried under the vision Bellah saw in our Principles, weighted down by the many sources that inspire our living tradition, as though it was a footnote, we find a second story captured in a sentence few ever get to or read, one that speaks to what will sustain and grow us. It is not the language of individualism, not of the iChurch but of covenant: “As free congregations we promise to one another our mutual trust and support.”

We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality yes, but not individualism. When Bellah suggested starting the Principles with “the interdependent web of life”--that is, with a broader view than just the individual--well, it didn’t go over well because, I suspect, people knew that living as a community in covenant is too hard, as if to suggest that individualism comes so easily because it’s natural (some would say it’s God-given!): Therefore it must be right! Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant, creating and sustaining a community by “promising to one another our mutual trust and support,” this takes extra effort. Yes, it’s hard and we all know just how hard it is, don’t we? Besides the misleading theology and spirituality of individualism, there are two related obstacles that individualism creates and supports that prevent the promise of covenant.

One of these obstacles is Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism. Given our faith's parallel development with the nation,¹² our proclivity to exceptionalism is no surprise. Randall Kennedy describes American exceptionalism. Using his words with a slight adaptation, here is how our version of exceptionalism sounds to many: Unitarian Universalism is a faith shaped by "perceptions, ideas, intuitions, and ambitions which posits, among other things, that [our way of religion] is uniquely virtuous, uniquely powerful, uniquely destined to accomplish great things, and thus uniquely authorized to act in ways to which [Unitarian Universalists] would object if done by other [ways of faith]."¹³ While there was an era in which Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism was robustly preached, today few of us (or the members of the congregations we serve) would ever be caught speaking the dialect of exceptionalism, yet we all know it gets spoken frequently. Whether as a source of pride, personal and community truth, embellishment, anger, clarification, or, strangely enough, welcoming--we hear the inflection of Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism from the pulpit, from newcomer's classes, from Sunday greeters, from those who are earnestly trying to explain our way of religion to the uninformed. As unique as our experience with Unitarian Universalism may be, it is not the only way. We must stay conscious of how we explain, defend, or share lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, isolating, even humiliating of others. The iChurch's exceptionalism is a barrier to sharing the good news of Unitarian Universalism.

A second obstacle shaped by the iChurch is our allergy to power and authority, which often results in its misuse and abuse. Our personal and institutional pasts give some insight into this issue. We have many reasons to be suspicious of hierarchical structures. Our histories have found us under the heel of systems of authority. Many of us left faith communities where no room was made for different views or disagreements. Our institutional and personal pasts explain why we take inspiration from Emerson's powerful words on the sanctity of the individual: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . . . Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world."¹⁴ As a college junior, these words were radical and empowering; I was at an age and place when I needed to hear Emerson's counsel. Now I see that what was good for me would not have been healthy for institutional growth and stability, not then and not now. Conflating the narrow path of individualism with the promise of institutional health is a misleading formula we have been using for at least two centuries, a formula that gets played out monthly in our congregations. Benjamin Anastas describes what may sound like a familiar scenario with sardonic and prickly words:

The larger problem has been Emerson's tacit endorsement of a radically self-centered world view. It's a lot like the model of the planets that preceded Copernicus; the sun, the moon and the stars revolve around our portable chairs, and whatever contradicts our right to harbor misconceptions--whether it be Birtherism, climate-science denial or the conviction that Trader Joe's sells good food--is the prattle of the unenlightened majority and can be dismissed out of hand.¹⁵

Unitarian Universalism's allergy and misuse of power and authority is a factor in our inability or unwillingness to welcome and listen to a diversity of interests and passions, without being distracted and immobilized, and then move forward, "promising our mutual trust and support" for the common good while walking as a community with space for those who disagree. This is as important for ministers as it is for those we serve. Failure at this is a contributing reason to our inability to grow and deepen and shape a healthy future. In those congregations where the antidote to the allergy has been found and administered, where there is a clear and deep understanding that addresses the potential of abuse and misuse of authority and power, those ministries are among our most vibrant, growing, and electric.

Promising our mutual trust and support is not easy, and the challenges of the iChurch are not new. These barriers were factors at the 1865 organizing meeting of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches. Wright notes, "The resulting tensions continued for a full generation or more. To this day, they remain imperfectly reconciled."¹⁶ Eventually, the proponents of the iChurch won the day, and the trinity of challenges and the barriers they created were ingrained; they have ossified.

If individualism led us to the iChurch, then covenant can shape the beloved community, where the promise of individuality and justice inspire, empower, broaden, and deepen all. *Beloved community* was popularized by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The phrase was authored by Josiah Royce, a scholar familiar

to King's teachers at Boston University School of Theology, where King completed his doctoral work. Gary Dorrien writes,

For Royce and the personalists expressed the ethical meaning of the kingdom of God. King taught that the foundation of the beloved community is the divine indwelling that equally graces all people: "There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the creator."¹⁷

Rev. Shirley Strong elaborates on Dr. King's vision: "I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power, and a respect for all people, places, and things—a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions,"¹⁸ which is to say beloved community is shaped by what we know and feel as justice.

We have arrived at an epistemology opportunity, a break-through moment, where we must write a new narrative. Ivone Gebara says that "epistemology is nothing more than an invitation to think about how we know ourselves and the things that surround us in our everyday lives."¹⁹ We have an urgent need for what Jackie Lewis calls "storying," which means telling, writing, and living the story of who we will be, who we are becoming.²⁰ We must say and live how it is we want to know ourselves and the Unitarian Universalist story we want others to know, an epistemology that has, as all knowing does, ethical and justice consequences.

The vision of a deep covenantal community life as named in our Principles is bold and many of us--as do the members and friends of the congregations we serve and attend--recite our Principles with passion and pride as we testify, march, or speak with newcomers. What is vital is committing to this expression of our faith, not as iChurch, not from the narrow goal of individualism, but as the promise of covenant and beloved community. For example, this "Justice GA" is shaped by an articulation and demonstration of the vision named in our Principles, a vision that expresses the sacred value of individuality, of diversity, of each strand in the web of life; we are here to challenge the world by witnessing to Dr. King's dream of beloved community as embraced in our Principles, not to implement Emerson's iChurch. And there is so much more. You see, the Unitarian Universalist story for the twenty-first century begins not only with our historical commitment to social justice outreach but with congregational justice inreach; it begins with the congregation you serve or attend. Don't you see that your congregation is the beloved community? I will explain:

For five years, I was a UUA Empowerment Workshop trainer. Two members from the team would be assigned to a congregation who wanted to be more deliberate in their justice-making ministry. We would arrive with possibilities for several workshops built on their goals. Every congregation with which I worked said they wanted more engagement in the larger community; they were all about working for change "out there," in the world around them. Not once did a congregation believe they had to change, that they might become a model of what they were seeking, that they could become the beloved community. This is not surprising, since this is not how the iChurch works.

How often I have heard from those I serve--in my own congregation and in others too--that "we spend too much time and money on ourselves. We need to get out in the community and do more!" Yes, I am sure we need to do more and we are. And how convenient to want to reform the world because the work of shaping and modeling our congregations as beloved communities, not as the iChurch, means addressing the challenges of individualism, exceptionalism, and authority.

There is an urgency to telling our story of covenant and beloved community. The storm is passing over, and who will we be on the other side of it? For most of Unitarian Universalist history, we have lived the story of the iChurch, which birthed an ecclesiology that sacralized individualism, and not surprisingly, our congregations have not flourished. Knowing ourselves as beloved communities is a story the world awaits, and if not the world, then at the very least, those who ache and yearn for what we can be. "Now is the accepted time," W.E.B. DuBois reminds us, "not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow."²¹

This is ministry that some find nearly impossible. Yet, congregations that are living as or into the beloved community are what many seek as a faith home. This is a point overlooked: In most of the

analysis and commentary on the recent studies regarding religious identification and attendance, those who are reported as rejecting religion, especially the “Nones,” have not rejected faith but rejected the traditional institutions that claim ownership of faith--that is, congregations. Going beyond the numbers, here is what researchers found:

- Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell write that young adults have left organized religion due to its conservative politics: “Increasingly, young people saw religion as intolerant, hypocritical, judgmental and homophobic. If being religious entailed political conservatism,” they found, “religion was not for them”;²²
- When asked what was working for them about church, young adults at Middle Collegiate Church answered that three key values were social justice, non-judgment, and respect for diversity. “Moreover,” it is reported, “social justice was not only something that church members did out in the world but it was also something that shaped the culture inside the church”;²³
- Diana Butler-Bass notes that while 30 percent of Americans report as “spiritual but not religious,” 48 percent report “spiritual and religious.” She says that “while ‘religion’ means institutional religion, ‘spiritual’ means an experience of faith.” She concludes, “Large numbers of Americans are hankering for experiential faith whereby they can connect with God, the divine, or wonder as well as with their neighbors and that lead to a more profound sense of meaning in the world”;²⁴
- Putnam and Campbell summarize by noting, “To be sure, some of these young people will remain secularists. Many of them, however, espouse beliefs that would seem to make them potential converts to a religion that offered some of the attractions of modern evangelism without the conservative political overlay.”²⁵

Like a significant weather event that a meteorologist begins predicting days before it is upon us and urging us to prepare yet many simply ignore because they’re convinced they will remain unscathed, this storm is already being felt. There is no reason to ignore or deny its lasting and shaping consequences, which, I believe, might be a good thing. To feel its revitalization and regeneration, in order to broaden and deepen our way of faith, it will take some preparation and effort.

One step could be acknowledging and becoming more intentional about how we welcome the thousands who identify as Unitarian Universalists but do not participate in our congregations; that is, realizing that we are a movement and not just an association. But I’m convinced that many of these members of our Unitarian Universalist movement--not all, but many--will eventually visit one of our congregations, and when they do, what will they find? Will their expectations be met? Will there be congruence between the story they’ve heard us imagine and what they experience? What is the story they will hear and see, the iChurch or the beloved community?

Shaping a New Story

I am calling for a renewed and renewing story about how we and others know Unitarian Universalism. Twelve years into a new century, with the radar telling us that a storm is coming, knowing how this storm has affected others like us, I say we are in danger if we continue with the story of iChurch. In the aftermath of this storm, many will simply want to reassemble the old story into a meaningful and recognizable narrative, using our Principles and the lens of iChurch. But that story is over; it has ended; it’s a story that won’t take us where we must go; it is turning our backs on what we need for a healthy future, which is the beloved community, a community of justice, a religion and spirituality that Unitarian Universalism does have as a vital and vibrant part of our history. Unfortunately, too many have chosen not to build on the promise of covenant but instead to follow the tenets of the iChurch.

To story ourselves as congregations of covenant and beloved community, we must engage this time of now by shaping a renewed and meaningful doctrine of church, one that “reverses the past, but trusts the dawning future more; and bids the soul, in search of truth, adventure boldly and explore,” as described in the hymn “As Tranquil Streams.”²⁶ Living as twenty-first-century Unitarian Universalists means shaping an ecclesiology that is religious and spiritual, covenantal and experiential, progressive and evangelical.

Beloved community is an ecclesiology. It needs no redefining. It is a doctrine of church shaped by justice. Beloved community holds at its core “the promise to one another [of] our mutual trust and support,” without which it could not be beloved. The ecclesiology of beloved community is the doctrine of church that every Unitarian Universalist congregation and program must live into.

I am not suggesting we abandon our historical journey of justice making in the world. But isn't it hypocritical and incongruent for us to shape the world with our vision of the beloved community, yet be unable or unwilling to do the same when it comes to the congregations and programs we serve? Or think of it this way: As beloved communities, we can model our vision for the larger world including the future generations of Unitarian Universalists. “Why,” asked Howard Thurman, “why has the church been such a tragic witness to its own Gospel?”²⁷ What must we do to become the beloved community? What must happen to shape this ecclesiology? How will we embrace and leverage a covenant of trust and support to break through an ossified and shrinking iChurch? The promise of religious and spiritual justice making, which is the beloved community, will be seen, demonstrated, and felt in at least these two ways.

First, all of the congregations and programs that we serve must name and weave into the fabric of their institutions the justice dreams that have historically been Unitarian Universalism. Surprisingly, I heard the foundation of this ecclesiology articulated by four who are not Unitarian Universalists. The setting was the Annual Meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland (a program of the church I serve). Members of a panel composed of Maryland Assembly Delegates were speaking to us--two women and two men from a diversity of faith backgrounds: Jewish, Catholic, African-American Baptist, and evangelical Christian. Each began their remarks with a short testimony expressing their gratefulness for Unitarian Universalism's support on important issues. And then each of them named an area of advocacy where we made a difference: multiculturalism and anti-racism, environmental justice, sexual and family values, care and civility as right relationships. As they spoke, I realized, this is what Unitarian Universalism has done at its best. Yes, there are blemishes we have worn in each of these areas--we know them well--and we are recognized by others for our contributions to shaping the beloved community in these four ways.

Multiculturalism, environmental justice, sexual and family values, right relationships--these four pillars of our justice-seeking and justice-making ecclesiology are the foundation on which every Unitarian Universalist beloved community is built. These are the religious hopes and dreams we want for our world; we must also want them for our congregations and programs. As a sign that we are a beloved community, every congregation and program that we serve or attend must put these pillars in the ground as if to say, “This is where we start. This is where we stand. This is the justice we seek and by which we will be held accountable. Each of these pillars requires a footing in which to be placed. This footing can be composed of policy, curriculum, preaching, by-laws, workshops--all the myriad of ways that make vision a reality. With a promise of mutual trust and support, we must covenant to stay at the table in order to contribute and become the story we yearn to write. Multiculturalism, environmental justice, sexual values, and right relationships are four chapters in our story of becoming a beloved community.

There is a second vital part to this justice ecclesiology. Knowing ourselves as a beloved community also means reconnecting with the soul-filled nature of this ministry. Shirley Strong notes, “Many social activists have come to realize there is something missing in the struggle for justice and human rights. We have lost our connection to spirituality, in the sense of being connected to something greater than ourselves—something whose inherent outcome is the creation of beloved community.”²⁸ Rob Hardies affirms Strong's insight when he writes that there is “a dangerous predicament in contemporary Unitarian Universalism: a dual crisis of spiritual hunger and historical amnesia.”²⁹ Decades ago, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend wrote on the same theme, saying liberalism had lost the moral high ground when we surrendered prophetic spirituality to the religious right.³⁰

Many Americans are seeking faith communities that are religious and spiritual; I suggest that we listen, that we heed their wisdom. It was this wisdom that led Carolyn McDade to pray “Spirit of Life”³¹ into being. In a letter, she explained, “During a time of intense social justice activism, I drove a friend home from yet another meeting. As I stopped to let her out I confided to her how dry I felt--like cardboard years in an attic: The slightest motion of air and I would disintegrate into dust. Even now I

remember the despair that image conveys. Finally at home, I moved to the piano. In the dark I sat . . . [and] in singing my heart was freed. There was no plan or expectation in that moment, only a deep and immediate plea by a despairing soul. . . . My ardent desire was to stay faithful to the movements I loved, to the people of these movements, their tally of goodness toward a world healthy and just for all.”³² Which is to say, she yearned, she ached for the holy and wholesome essence of beloved community. It was from that posture that “Spirit of Life” was prayed; a deep desire, a soul-filled expression for her spirit to be free and healed for the work of justice.

In the congregations we serve and attend, in the ministries to which we are called, we must ensure that there are ample opportunities to be religious and spiritual, to support and design opportunities that nurture prophetic spirituality and encourage people to not only have minds on fire but to keep their souls filled and their spirits afire as well.

A Unitarian Universalist doctrine of church for the twenty-first century, an ecclesiology of beloved community, must be religious and spiritual. This won’t happen on its own; that is, we will not simply slide into congregations that story justice making. Gary Dorrien noted repeatedly in his three volumes on American liberal theology that from 1805 to 2005, many of the significant shifts in theological reflection started in church pulpits.³³ Early on, Unitarian Universalist ministers were among the most prophetic of these voices. According to Dorrien, this changed:

American Unitarianism took a humanistic, arguably post-Christian turn in the late nineteenth century that arrested its theological creativity. It produced no important theologians in the twentieth century, and even its dominant religious-humanist perspective was best expressed by thinkers outside the Unitarian tradition.³⁴

I know that some of us would argue with Dorrien’s assertion--especially the part about having no important theologians in the twentieth century. But might there be a relationship between theological imagination and ecclesiology? Is it coincidental that a lack of a theology-shaping creativity could match up with the demise of even the pretense of an acceptable Unitarian Universalist doctrine of church? These are important questions, but here is my point:

An ecclesiology of beloved community that is built on the promise of mutual trust and support; Unitarian Universalism’s letting go of iChurch; addressing the obstacles of exceptionalism, power, and authority; becoming congregations that are religious and spiritual--these will not happen without the bold and prophetic leadership of you, dear colleagues, you who our congregations and programs have called and hired to preach, teach, model, and lead the way. Without us, the hope and promise of the beloved community as a Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology will not happen. Writing about the storm passing over the world-wide Anglican Communion, Diana Butler-Bass speaks to our condition too: “[This] is about the gap between a new spirit and institutions that have lost their way. Only leaders who can bridge this gap and transform their institutions will succeed in this emerging cultural economy.”³⁵

This will not be easy ministry; it may be the most challenging ministry we have ever done; some even say it might require a miracle. There’s a lesson for us in a story told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner: Jewish tradition says that the splitting of the Red Sea was the greatest miracle ever performed. It was so extraordinary that on that day even a common servant beheld more than all the miracles beheld 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 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.

Reuven and Shimon simply couldn’t get past the muck on their feet. We all have some kind of muck on our feet, don’t we? All of those issues and challenges that get in the way of moving forward;

some of them are personal, others may be part of your congregation's history, some are in the Association. For decades, even centuries, many have been complaining about the muck they see everywhere, unable to keep their eyes on the prize, which is the promise of the beloved community. How sad, how frustrating, how uninspiring. Some would say it's hopeless.

No. We are a hope-filled people. Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change.³⁶ Let us leave here this afternoon with hope in our hearts, ready to sing songs of celebration and justice, committed not merely to watching but making the evidence change as we serve and attend congregations shaped by an ecclesiology of beloved community. Blessings on us all. Amen.

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Notes

1 Quoted in Kathleen R. Parker and Lee C. Barker, *Sacred Service in Civic Space: Three Hundred Years of Community Ministry in Unitarian Universalism* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Theological School, 2007), p. 18.

2 Peter Morales, www.uua.org/ga/2012/invitations/192553.shtml

3 Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), p. 260.

4 www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx

5 In a letter to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, 1822, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian." Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1922, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, edited by Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp.1458-1459.

6 Diana Eck delivered the installation sermon for Rev. Galen Guengerich at All Souls Church, New York City, October 28, 2007, in which she said, "You are, in my estimation, the church of the new millennium."

7 Benjamin Anastas, "The Foul Reign of Emerson's 'Self-Reliance,'" in *The New York Times Magazine*, December 2, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/12/04/magazine/riff-ralph-waldo-emerson.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=the%20foul%20reign%20of%20Emersons%20self-reliance&st=cse

8 There are many websites that offer a full discussion and viewing of the commercial. Search on the poem title.

9 Conrad Wright, "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Structure," *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989), pp. 86-87.

10 Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997).

11 Robert Bellah, "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective," 1998, www.robertbellah.com/lectures_7.htm

12 For years I have been interested in the ways that UU history and U.S. history run parallel, with the continua often coming so close.

13 Randall Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), p. 192.

14 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Riverside Editions, 1960), p.147.

15 Benjamin Anastas, op cit.

16 Conrad Wright, "Associational Proliferation and Bureaucratic Development, 1865-1898," in *Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997), p. 68.

- 17 Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 394.
- 18 Shirley Strong, <http://chaplaincyinstitute.org/rev-shirley-strong/toward-a-vision-beloved-community>
- 19 Ivone Gabara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 20.
- 20 Jacqueline J. Lewis explores this in *The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leading Multi-Racial and Multi-Cultural Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).
- 21 W.E.B. DuBois, in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), #502.
- 22 Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell, "Walking Away from Church," in *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/17/opinion/la-oe-1017-putnam-religion-20101017>
- 23 Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, "Doing Church and Doing Justice: A Portrait of Millennials at Middle Church," (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2011), <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/05/doing-church-and-doing-justice-a-portrait-of-millennials-at-middle-church/>
- 24 Diana Butler-Bass, "The End of Church," in *The Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/diana-butler-bass/the-end-of-church_b_1284954.html
- 25 Putnam and Campbell, op cit.
- 26 Marion Franklin Ham, "As Tranquil Streams," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), #145.
- 27 Howard Thurman, in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 254.
- 28 Shirley Strong, op cit.
- 29 Robert Hardies, "Praying with Waldo," unpublished thesis, p. 2
- 30 Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, "A Rebirth of Virtue: Religion and Liberal Renewal," in *The Washington Monthly*, February 1989.
- 31 Carolyn McDade, "Spirit of Life," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), #123.
- 32 Carolyn McDade, "A Public Request," in *First Days Record*, October 1995, p. 3.
- 33 For example, see Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. xxii.
- 34 Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 4.
- 35 Diana Butler-Bass, "Spirituality, religion collide," in *USA Today*, April 16, 2012, p. 9A.
- 36 Jim Wallis, "Faith Works," in Paul Rogat Loeb, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p. 203.

Response to the Berry Street Lecture

A Unitarian Universalism Beyond Unitarian Universalism

Rev. Peter Morales

Let me begin by thanking Fred for his essay and for inviting me to respond. Fred, you have given us a gift and issued a challenge. I hope our colleagues and all Unitarian Universalists will use it as the basis for discussions in the coming months.

As I reviewed my highlights and marginal comments after reading the essay, I realized that I agree with so much of what you say that my response was in danger of being a litany of “yep, that’s right, preach it, well said,” and the like. I agree with at least 99 percent of what you say. The other one percent is not important.

What is important—what is critically important to every one of us in here today and to the future of our faith—is what we *do* with these insights.

I really have two things to say in response. First, we have to change. Second, we ministers have to lead this change.

First, we have to change. Make no mistake. *Nothing short of culture change will suffice.* The issues before us are not technical. The challenge before us is not to make incremental improvements in worship, religious education, pastoral care, and social justice programs. No. We must do what our ancestors did: We must create a religion that leaves behind what has become stale, rigid, empty, and dated. And, as Fred has explained, we are going to have to give up the idolatries of individualism, exceptionalism, and adolescent anti-authoritarianism. (I have an idea for a new UU t-shirt: “Unitarian Universalism: It’s not about you.”)

We must take the core values, the fundamental religious center, of our tradition—a religious vision of reverence, humility, compassion, community, and commitment—and create something new.

In short, we need a new Unitarian Universalism. *We need to change, and we need our ministers to lead that change.* And, dear colleagues, if we are going to lead this change to a new Unitarian Universalism, we ministers are going to have to change, too. This won’t be easy. We ministers like to think of ourselves as courageous leaders of change. Sometimes that is true. It is also true that we ministers are trained to be a conservative force. We come from and through traditional institutional forms—congregations, seminary, the profession of ministry. We love these institutions and we are taught to maintain and preserve them.

We have been trained to maintain the status quo and we have been rewarded for doing just that. This is especially true of our parish ministers and particularly true of the ministers of our larger churches. I know. That is my background. I am a parish minister. I loved my large congregation. I still do.

Now we are called to move beyond the religion we have known and loved. I am not talking about rejecting any of what is good, but I am talking about real cultural change. We have been called to ministry. Today being a minister means we are called to move beyond our comfort zones.

What must we do? And what does the Unitarian Universalism beyond Unitarian Universalism look like?

I don’t pretend to have all the answers. But I think the rough outlines are pretty clear. The Unitarian Universalism beyond Unitarian Universalism must be a religion that:

- *Goes beyond belief.* Let me suggest that our religion is not about what we believe, or what we think. It’s about what we *love*. Religion is about what we hold sacred. Religion is about what moves us, what touches our souls. We have got to get way beyond being a religion focused on the left frontal lobes. We have to be a religion of the whole of human existence. As I look at congregations that thrive, I see that what they share is more emotional than it is cognitive.

Thriving congregations are passionate; they look beyond themselves; they take their ministry seriously. You can feel the spirit of loving community—and we can feel that right away. It does not matter if the minister is young or old, male or female, theist or humanist. It matters that they are *alive*. It matters that they have *gotten religion*.

- *Goes beyond the congregation.* I am a parish minister. A vital congregation is a precious and beautiful thing. It can be an incarnation of the Blessed Community. Yet we also know this: Congregations that look beyond themselves thrive. Congregations whose focus is inward tend to decline. We also have to explore forms of spiritual community that go beyond the traditional congregation. Religion is about connections—connection with the infinite, connection with our deepest sense of ourselves, connection with one another. It really isn't about you. (Worse yet, it isn't about me, either!) It is about *us*. People connect in more ways today and will connect in more ways tomorrow.
- *Goes beyond our traditional demographic.* This is pretty simple. We either get past being a religion of the anglo educated class or we will perish. Look, there is nothing in our core values, in our principles, that is anglo or middle-class. At the center of our faith is the recognition that all human beings are one and each human being is precious. We believe that all cultures bring gifts to the common table. The implications of this are earth-shaking. We have got to move beyond our little cultural enclave.

Yes, we have to make profound changes.

Second, *we ministers must lead this change*. A few years ago I was at a consultation with a handful of ministers from some of our fastest growing congregations. One of the major take-aways I had was the realization that these ministers were very different. Their leadership styles varied from what I called “Joan of Arc” to “sheep dog.” Their ages were all over the place. What they shared was a passion for our faith, an understanding of their context, and *the willingness to lead*.

Leadership is not tyranny. Leadership is a relationship of trust that has been earned. Leadership is about passion, vision, honesty, and competence. We Unitarian Universalists have got to learn to trust one another. We process things to death. We have to nurture leaders, grow leaders, authorize leaders, and let leaders lead.

We ministers must lead the cultural change, the religious reformation, of moving beyond individualism, beyond exceptionalism, beyond our demographic enclave, beyond petty anti-authoritarianism.

We face a staggering challenge and a breathtaking opportunity. Our world is changing with dizzying speed. This faith we love is in real danger of rapid decline. It also has fabulous potential. The hunger for a progressive faith like ours is palpable.

I believe we can move from iChurch to the beloved community. I believe it because I have experienced it, because I see hundreds of examples of it.

We can do this. We really can. But we can do it only if our ministers lead.

Fred, you have given us a gift with this lecture. Thank you.

Rev. Peter Morales is the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations and former senior minister at Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado. He is the editor of the fifth edition of The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide (Skinner House Books, 2012).

Response to the Berry Street Lecture

Inreach

Rev. Kimberly Tomaszewski

It is an honor to be with each of you this afternoon, and it is my greatest privilege to be sharing the stage with my mentor, Fred, and President Peter Morales. Following these two, I also risk agreeing and amending both Fred's and Peter's offerings. I do have a few things to add, though. . . .

Among the many exclamation marks and underlining that I did when first reading Fred's lecture, there seemed to me to be an unspoken assumption in Fred's offering that I continued to get hung up on. And that assumption is that, as Unitarian Universalist ministers, what drives our ministry, at least in part, is Unitarian Universalism.

I was raised in this tradition and the oddity of that meant that I have had to defend the long name of our faith and its meaning from an early age. Unitarian Universalism is so much a part of my identity that the idea of it being coined a "chosen faith" is, to be frank, tiresome, to me. As I moved through the process of becoming a minister, I expected that I would be held accountable to this tradition, its legacy and future.

Fred, you have often teased me after I preached that you would have been harder on the people, and so today I say the same to you.

It was only after entering the ministry that I was, for the first time, met with the trinity of errors you named. Colleagues who wondered how I didn't know the names of ministers serving our largest congregations; who said I couldn't be a Unitarian Universalist with my love of the Christian texts and rituals; who shared their call to ministry as a want to be a part of "the club"; ministers who defined their faith, like so many of our people, by the rejection of other religions, rather than the affirmation of belief or call.

I expected that I would be held accountable to this tradition, its legacy and future, to the thing that drove and shaped my ministry, but instead I was challenged to keep up with the trinity of errors. This is the muck and mud I carry with me.

Reading and hearing Fred's essay, I continue to ask myself: Is one of our goals to do Unitarian Universalism well? Or is it creating an empire around a minister or a building or an institution? Is it simply being a liberal community for the Spiritual But Not Religious and the Nones? I guess my question really is, and it's the question I believe I heard Fred asking: Do we want more links, or a greater density to our faith? And if it is the latter, this is the inreach before outreach. This is the justice interdependent with growth. This is doing Unitarian Universalist ministry.

You see, I don't think individualism is rampant in our people by accident but rather because we, our leaders, are not articulate in what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, what it means to be Religious. Not simply that a lack of creed does not mean a lack of belief or a belief in anything. There is, of course, that issue that still needs attention. But that as Unitarian Universalists, and therefore as a religious community--by joining this tradition, as Fred named--we enter into covenant with one another. By signing our membership books, we do in fact consider it a conversion into a larger community and a longer legacy. That there are *expectations* of how we will be with one another, with ourselves, and in our search for whatever we call the sacred. There is individuality upheld within this covenant, but there is also vulnerable and divine connection that we are called, by this specific faith, to seek. Individualism alone does not foster this.

I do not think exceptionalism is a narrative our people have created because they have finally found their home and wish to mock others for differing choices. We write our own narratives. This is, as Fred said, spoken in the pulpit, in our New Member classes, in the banners we hang and bumper stickers

we stick: “We do things differently here.” “The Uncommon Denomination.” Once again, never claiming what we are, what our starting point is, Unitarian Universalism for its own sake, but rather a response to everything else. As if we only exist if others do as well. And therefore we can exist better than they do.

And lastly, I do not think our allergy to authority has grown from the grassroots. I am not so green as to not know the effects of disgruntled congregants. And yet we have given away--and I do mean given--the authority we have been called to live into to members who are the loudest, who are the most in need of pastoral care, who have the largest pledges. Authority on our faith is given away to the Nones, the Spiritual But Not Religious. We have heard this question asked numerous times already this week: Whom or What are we accountable to?

I asked Fred why he wanted me to speak today. He reminded me that, having been born the same year he began his ministry at UUCA, I represent some piece of our future. This is strange to me because we all know that saying that children who were raised in our faith either leave or become ministers. And I often wonder if I have done both.

Yes, I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. And yet, for a smoother beginning into ministry with the Nones and the Spiritual But Not Religious in our pews, I silence my faith, this tradition, and the legacy I was blessed to be given.

In what other tradition might we hear that the words “as Unitarian Universalists” from the pulpit of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, from the mouth of a Unitarian Universalist minister, could offend so many? I will be the first to admit that liberal religion to the Nones and the Spiritual But Not Religious, preaching only to our specific communities or working without the partnerships of neighboring colleagues, is at times much easier than a calling to a tradition, a legacy, and a faith. But as long as our ministries are driven by this trinity and not by the greater tradition, individualism, exceptionalism, and authority issues will persist--and the justice dreams that had been historically UU, will be only that.

For the sake of filling the pews, to show that we are ministers to take note of, or for the stature of joining a club, I worry that we have fallen silent to our roots and thus clipped our wings. We have become individualized when we need each other most, at times boastful without action, and allergic even to our own authority when we are the ones who have chosen and been chosen to lead this faith.

We can be the best community, or many individualized unique communities, sects even, but that will not be the depth and richness that is Unitarian Universalism. That will not see us into the hard work of beloved community.

We have to begin at home, in our congregations, and with our people. Including our people in this room. We can't expect to be saved by those outside our walls when the people within are still waiting for each of us to fulfill what the tradition they have been told about promises.

I pray that for the sake and drive of Unitarian Universalism, we return to our people, and our colleagues, ready to recognize and challenge this trinity of errors of which we are a part.

Fred, thank you for your work, your guidance, and your ever-persistent love of this faith and its traditions.

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