

## The Future of Our Faith

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

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May 8, 2011

I love Unitarian Universalism.

I discovered our faith over twenty years ago after months of drift and discouragement following the end of an intimate relationship.

At the time I had no idea what I was looking for. I now understand I was looking for meaning in my desolation, healing for my broken heart, hope in my hopelessness, and companionship on the journey of spirit.

Raised Episcopalian, I had not attended church for decades except to sing the familiar carols on Christmas Eve.

In Unitarian Universalism, I discovered a religion that honors the sacred without sacrificing common sense, that sees spirituality and social justice as inseparable, that finds religious authority not in the edicts of human hierarchies but in the stirrings of every conscience and in truth wherever it be found.

In these strange and thrilling times, when danger and possibility, delusion and revelation, oppression and revolution, catastrophe and triumph dance and intertwine so tantalizingly, we need Unitarian Universalism.

When religious and political fundamentalisms seek to divide and rule our societies, when fanatics burn the books and mock the gods of their neighbors, we need Unitarian Universalism.

When immigrants, Muslims, unionists, poor people, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people are demonized and harassed, we need Unitarian Universalism.

By the way, if you think our wondrous Commonwealth of Massachusetts is *so over* homophobia, count the votes on the Governor's Council. Three Councilors, one of them explicitly citing "family values," voted against the nomination of Judge Barbara Lenk, a lesbian, to the Supreme Judicial Court. One more vote against this experienced and respected jurist would have blocked her appointment.

When we sink into despair, when we are lonely and afraid, when we wonder where the world is heading, we need Unitarian Universalism.

I believe the world needs Unitarian Universalism.

But the future of Unitarian Universalism is not assured.

For years our numbers increased modestly—so modestly we actually declined as a percentage of the population. But we consoled ourselves that in comparison to the shrinkage in the United States of Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, we were doing okay.

But last year, Unitarian Universalism suffered a net loss of 1400 adult members, nearly one percent, the second straight year of decline. Religious education enrollment shrank by more two percent, the fourth straight year of decline. And for the first time in many years, average Sunday attendance also declined.

Here at First Parish in Cambridge, our membership, religious education, and Sunday attendance are all growing. But the increase in our numbers and those of other thriving congregations are not enough to offset the losses elsewhere.

Unitarian Universalists do many things well. But we if we want our faith to have a future, we've got to do them better.

I share our president Peter Morales's conviction that we can be the religion for our time. To fulfill this potential, I see seven gifts we must consistently offer and lift up in our congregations and in our movement.

(I could name more, of course, but someone once told me that seven was the largest number of ideas people can hold in their mind at once. Be that as it may, Unitarian Universalism already has seven principles, so I thought, why not seven gifts?)

The seven gifts are: **Love. Spirit. Transformation. Justice. Diversity. Hospitality. And commitment.**

Together, the initial letters form a handy acronym: LSTJDHC.

Maybe not so handy.

I believe our first and best gift is **love**—no surprise to anyone who's heard me preach.

Three years ago, when I candidated to be your Senior Minister, I admitted I had in me only one sermon to preach, and it's about love. Everything else is just a variation on the theme.

Love must be the beating heart of our religious life, our spiritual practice, our work for justice, our service to the community.

My biggest complaint about the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism is that, incredibly, they nowhere mention love. I believe that every Unitarian Universalist congregation must proclaim love, practice love, embody love, and stand on the side of love.

Love is not a sentiment. It is a demanding discipline and a constant choice.

It means that through all the discussions, disagreements, and even arguments among us, we abide in love and return to love, again and again and again. It means caring for one another through hardship, loss, and illness. It means forgiving those who have trespassed against us.

Love extends not only to neighbors, but also to enemies.

Whatever relief or sense of justice we may feel at the death of Osama bin Laden, love calls us to refrain from glee or gloating over any death.

I understand that today's young adults grew up in the shadow of bin Laden, a real-life boogeyman looming over their childhoods.

But I was moved by the words of Donna Marsh O'Connor, whose pregnant daughter was killed in the 9/11 attacks. "I have to say that neither I nor would anyone in my family celebrate or revel at the death of another human being, even if that human being is Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden is dead and so, still, is my beautiful daughter. . . . [Recognizing] the energy that came from the elimination of this criminal," O'Connor says, "[I]et's take that energy and reclaim our land as the land of the free, the civilized and the just."

That's love.

The second gift is **spirit**.

We must offer a worship and cultivate a life that is spirit-filled, joyful, passionate, and celebratory.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, himself a Unitarian minister, famously called Unitarianism “corpse-cold.” While the corpse has warmed somewhat in the last century and a half, locating the pulse is sometimes a challenge.

Gary Dorrien, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University, detects what he calls “a mildly depressed sensibility” in Unitarian Universalist worship services. “There is no church that’s growing that sings out of a hymnal,” he admonishes.

We are livening up our worship here at First Parish in Cambridge, but let me tell you—we’re just getting started.

I want our worship to touch the heart, challenge the mind, and uplift the spirit. I want people to leave this sanctuary every Sunday ten feet off the ground. I want the number-one comment overheard from newcomers to be “That rocked!” I want people to attend Sunday worship faithfully not just because they find the sermons interesting (interesting as those sermons may be) or because they want to see their friends (nice as those friends may be) but because if they’re not at worship an essential part of their life will be missing.

Spirit means not only spiritual worship but spiritual depth in all realms of life. We foster spiritual depth through practice and discipline—words not often heard in our congregations. Practice and discipline cultivate humility, curiosity, a sense of the sacred, other-centeredness rather than self-centeredness.

Spirit means acknowledging we are people of faith.

We don’t all have faith in the same thing. Many of us do not have faith in the divine or any conviction of things not seen. But if we have faith in nothing—not in love, not in hope, not in human potential, not in spirit of life—if we have faith in nothing, we’re not a religion, we’re a discussion group.

The third gift is **transformation**.

Some Unitarian Universalists caution that to offer transformation is to promise more than we can deliver. I respect the integrity of that objection.

But I would rather make the promise and then keep it.

Is transformation too much to ask from a religious community?

When people walk into an evangelical Christian church or a Muslim mosque, they enter with the hope and the expectation that their life will be changed. Why should we offer them less?

We must offer transformative worship, transformative spiritual practice, transformative covenant groups, transformative pastoral care, transformative opportunities for service and justice-making. We must constantly and explicitly invite, empower, and equip people to live the life not only of their dreams, but of their highest ideals.

Transformation is not becoming someone else, but becoming who each of us truly is: loving, creative, powerful. This is a transformation each of us yearns for, even if we may not know it.

The fourth gift is **justice**.

Michael Eric Dyson says, “Justice is what love looks like when it speaks in public.”

We work for justice not out of an arrogant assumption that we know what’s best for people because we are Unitarian Universalists, but by entering with humility into

conversation and coalition, respecting the leadership of others, listening to their stories, and learning from their experience.

As we work for justice, let us never forget it is holy work.

Unanchored by spiritual discipline, activists too often become snared in ambition, grandiosity, and self-righteousness. As Paula Cole Jones reminds us, “The purpose of working toward social change is not only to solve problems but also to realize our common humanity.”

The fifth gift is **diversity**: intentionally embracing the vision and indefatigably demanding the reality of a multiracial, multicultural community of all ages, classes, colors, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities and expressions.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted over and over even in the depths of apartheid, we too proclaim: “We are one people and we can be reconciled.”

Diversity means reflecting America and welcoming the world.

Diversity means letting go of our old ways, habits, and assumptions.

Rev. Meg Riley calls our congregations to go “beyond tepid, silent, open-door inclusion. [We] must commit,” she says, “to living engagement with one another, to learning about the complexities of each other’s lives, to enjoying the vitality that difference can offer. Prophetic congregations go beyond just keeping the door open—they offer genuine mutuality to all who walk through it.”

The sixth gift is **hospitality**: a warm personal greeting to everyone who enters our doors, a welcome so authentic and generous and irresistible that you can’t help coming back.

Rev. Christine Robinson invites our congregations to practice “deep hospitality, which knows that when one welcomes a stranger, one is likely to be changed by that stranger.” This is a hospitality not only of smiles, but also of sensitivity, of wanting not only to hear, but also to understand.

This radical hospitality is the responsibility not only of ushers and greeters and ministers, but of every one of us. Whatever other gifts we may offer in worship and religious life, if our visitors are addressed cheerlessly or ignored entirely, they are unlikely to return, and who could blame them?

I’ve saved the most difficult gift for seventh and last: **commitment**.

Many of us come to Unitarian Universalism bruised by other religions. Like bitter divorcés, the last thing we want to do is marry again! Or maybe we’re just chronically fearful of commitment. Why should we settle down? Why not stay footloose and fancy-free? Why give up our freedom?

Because freedom without commitment is freedom squandered. More powerful than freedom *from*—from orthodoxy, from authority, from interference—is freedom *for*: for love, for service, for justice.

Unitarian Universalist martyr Francis David died, Rev. Marilyn Sewell declares, “so that we could be free—not to squabble over petty concerns, not to run our own ego trips, not free just to reject, but to choose—to choose to follow our conscience, and to choose love. This is freedom with commitment; freedom with limits, constraints; freedom that is grounded in spirit; freedom that is harnessed to holy purpose.”

Freedom with commitment binds itself willingly by covenant, like the Congregational Covenant we recite each Sunday and the Covenant of Right Relations we read responsively this morning.

Freedom with commitment takes responsibility by joining the church as a member, giving generously in financial support, and volunteering to serve and to lead.

Freedom with commitment spreads the good news of Unitarian Universalism, inviting family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to Sunday worship and church programs—not to proselytize a belief system but to share this religious community as a blessing.

Now, commitment might sound like a gift from you to Unitarian Universalism, and it is.

But it's also a gift from Unitarian Universalism to you. As I know from my own marriage, commitment makes better the person who commits. It fosters faithfulness, devotion, humility, courage, and spiritual growth. Which is why the most demanding religions—Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventism—are the fastest growing.

Love. Spirit. Transformation. Justice. Diversity. Hospitality. Commitment.  
Seven gifts.

Seven empty words, unless we live them.

If we live as them as Unitarian Universalists, the future of our faith knows no bounds.

So may it be.

Amen and Blessed Be.

### **Benediction**

We must not stop here,  
However sweet these laid-up stores,  
however convenient this dwelling  
we cannot remain here,  
However shelter'd this port  
and however calm these waters  
we must not anchor here,  
We will sail pathless and wild seas,  
We will go with power, liberty, the earth, the elements,  
Health, defiance, gayety, self-esteem, curiosity;  
We will go to that which is endless  
as it was beginningless,  
Forever alive, forever forward,  
I give you my hand!  
I give you my love . . .  
Will you give me yourself?  
Will you come travel with me?

—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road” (excerpted)

### **Suggested Reading**

John Gibb Millspaugh, ed., *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists* (Skinner House, 2009)

