

The Future of Unitarian Universalism: What's Possible?

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Introduction: The What and the Why

I want to talk to you this morning about how the religious landscape has changed since the middle of the last century...my lifetime, and what we as Unitarian Universalists have to do if we want to survive, thrive, and serve in this century. I feel urgent about this. I was raised in this faith. I have found a place here during every era of my life, though my theology and spirituality have changed several times. It is hard for me to imagine a good life without Unitarian Universalism. *I'm worried about us. After three decades of very modest growth during a population boom; which can only be called a success when compared to our compatriots in the Mainstream faiths which have plummeted in numbers, we're starting to shrink, too. Unlike the Methodists and the Presbyterians, we were miniscule to start with. It will take very little shrinkage to make us no longer viable as a denomination. So, If I sound cranky at times...it's the crankiness of fear. The world has changed around us, and if we don't adjust to those changes, we are going to die off.*

The World in 1950

So...what's changed in the world around us?



When I was born, in the middle of the last century, the Boston police were still using horse-mounted officers to ticket improperly parked cars.

And America was a church-going society. People who didn't go to church or synagogue kept the fact quiet. There was nothing else to do on Sunday in most locales besides going to church. Polite persons didn't even mow their lawns on Sunday morning and shopping was out of the question. If you got crosswise with your church, decided you didn't believe its creed or were angered by its policies, you licked your wounds and found another church, because belonging to a church was just...well...it was just necessary to a good life. It was especially necessary to a good life if you were raising children, and people who thought of themselves as good parents sent their kids to church even if they didn't go much themselves.

In this religious and social landscape, Unitarianism, and then Unitarian Universalism, offered people the opportunity to belong to a Free Church, and enjoy freedom from the requirements of doctrines

and dogmas that they didn't believe. Or to put it crudely:

THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

Successful Niche for UU's in the mid 20th century:

- “Unitarian Universalists are free to believe whatever we want to and most of us don't.”

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The Current Situation

The times, they have a-changed.

THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

A photograph showing two Boston Police officers in uniform riding Segways. They are on a paved path in a park-like setting with trees and a bench. A woman is pushing a stroller with a child in the foreground, and another person is sitting on a bench in the background.

Boston's Finest on Segways

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The Boston Police no longer ride horses in the normal course of their duties. And the relationship of society to religion has changed just as much.

In 2011 this is an increasingly un-churched society. Plenty of people don't participate in any organized religious observance...church, mosque, or synagogue. Most parents who bring their children to church are choosing church over soccer, TV, shopping, family time, and chores. Most school children go to school with Christians, Jews, and Muslims, those of other faiths, and many of their friends do not belong to a religious body. The right to believe what your own heart and mind suggest to you is true, including "nothing," is taken for granted in much of elder society and in virtually all of younger society.

When people decide that they don't believe what they were raised to believe, they often go for years without belonging to any church, because religion is no longer a privileged part of the social landscape in most parts of the nation. When they decide they want to go to church again, it is not because they want freedom; they've had freedom. Nor are most of them interested in "community," generally speaking. For general community they have Facebook and volleyball leagues and going out for a drink after work, mothers' groups, and the like. No, when they show up at our door, they show up looking for the one thing they can't get at the gym, or the Democratic Party headquarters or the mothers' group. They want a safe place to explore what happens to them when they start to deepen their lives. They are looking, in short, for a religious community, not a secular one. And the ones who try orthodox options and can't bring themselves, in all integrity, to sign on, or who already know what they don't believe; they are the ones who might come to us. It's these people who are our natural constituency...or to put it another way; these are the people we are supposed to be serving...this, our niche in the religious landscape.

If we don't serve their needs for depth, heart, spirituality, hope, faith, and love outside of an orthodox setting, who will?

Welcoming these folks into our congregations...and we are doing this in some places and to some extent, so we know it can be done...welcoming these folks into our congregations will require a fundamental change in our thinking about what we are doing and require a different focus on who we are. Here's one possibility.

THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

Successful Niche for UU's in the early 21st century:

- **“Unitarian Universalists worship and grow in spirit in religiously diverse congregations.”**

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I'm not wedded to this particular statement. I just want you to see how fundamentally different it is from what we were up to 50 years ago.

THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

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Successful Niche for UU's in the early 21st century

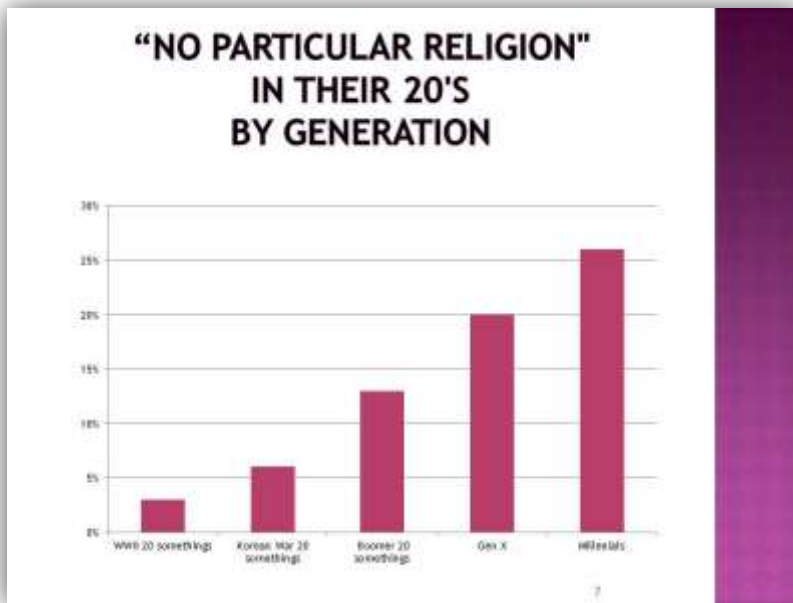
- **“Unitarian Universalists worship and grow in spirit in religiously diverse congregations.”**

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And just as the horse wranglers of police forces across the country have seen their jobs get smaller and smaller as cars, bikes, meter maids, helicopters, and Segways have entered the enforcement landscape, so the natural market share of churches devoted to “You can believe anything you want to here and we mostly don’t” is going to shrink from “tiny but disproportionately weighty” to “next on the chopping block.”

Younger people, by which I mean under 40’s, are increasingly unlikely to have ever been a part of a religious institution and increasingly unlikely to imagine ever joining one. Just to give you a sense of how the market share of all religion has changed over 50 years, here’s a chart showing the number of young adults who, when they were in their 20’s didn’t consider themselves a Christian, Jew, Muslim, or member of another religious faith...who answered, “no religion” when asked.



You see that about 3 percent of young people of the WWII generation said they had no religion, and about 6 percent of the next generation. About 12 percent of the Boomers in the 1960's and 70's claimed "no religion," 20 percent of Gen-Xers in the 80's and 90's, and a whopping 26 percent of the Millennial generation now.

Now it has to also be said, that in spite of this sea change in institutional loyalty, the general beliefs of 20-somethings have not changed that much in the past 50 years. They believe in God, pray, and expect some kind of an afterlife in about the same proportion as their parents and grandparents did at their age. They are not, really, secularists who believe that their spiritual side is non-existent or unimportant. Indeed, they often say that they are spiritual but not religious, meaning that they DO think that they have a spiritual side and it IS important, but it is not dependant on the institutions, dogmas, and specific beliefs as their parents imagined. Two issues make them particularly impatient with those religious institutions. These young and younger adults overwhelmingly believe that sexual orientation is a normal human difference, not a sinful behavior, and they overwhelmingly believe that there are lots of paths to salvation not just one. That is to say, while there are fewer young people interested in joining churches, ours or any others, than there were in previous generations, it appears that a lot of those who might join a church would be attracted to ours.

If, that is, we get serious about being a religion.

Here's the whole thing in a sound bite. You've probably heard this children's affirmation:

We are Unitarian Universalists.

We are people with open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands.

At some point in the 1990's, the Albuquerque DRE proposed that we teach our kids this affirmation so that they'd have something to say to their friends on the playground. I was all for our kids having something to say on the playground. But that time-honored statement was just...well, I said, you know, any Girl Scout could say that. It's just not...enough. I gave it some thought, fooled around with it a while...because really, it has some charm. Here's what we finally adopted:

We are Unitarian Universalists

We are a people of faith,

Who have open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands.

And yeah, it is true, that many Methodists and Catholics could say exactly the same thing...but it was closer. The kids learned it and were glad to demonstrate their learning and teach the adults, not only the words but the hand signs that went with it.

And I bet you can imagine what happened next. Somebody demanded to know exactly what I meant by "We are a people of faith." "I'm a person of reason," he said. "I am not a person of faith."

So I wrote a sermon. About how we all have faith in something. About how "the worth and dignity of every human being" is a statement of faith whose rationality is challenged every night on the news...but how we've decided to live as if it was true, anyway. About how the most utterly reasonable of us put our faith in reason, and how if that's how you're wired, that's just fine, and others are wired differently. And about how there's a difference between saying, "Each one of us is a person of faith," which could be construed as a doctrine which we don't have, and "We are a people of faith," meaning that as a group, we are about things of faith.

The kids still use this as their very own affirmation. It's a small thing...one of a thousand little shifts towards being serious about being religious that you get to take in 23 years.

Here's another. This one...not involving cute kids with darling hand signs, was a huge risk.

We were in the process of making some adjustments to our worship service. In Albuquerque we tend to make changes by doing trial periods, so that when we ask people what they like, they will actually know what they like. This time, we were trying out several changes, in the offering, in the greetings, and almost as a lark, I added the possible practice of beginning the pastoral prayer with my saying, "Peace be with you," and them responding, "And also with you." I'd been on sabbatical, you see, and visiting around my interfaith colleagues' congregations, and I had been so touched by this mutual blessing as a part of one congregation's life that I asked them to indulge me, told them how much it would mean to me to have their blessing, reminded them that it was only for a six-week trial and then, no doubt, they'd vote it out of the liturgy. But...they didn't. That was 10 years ago now. It remains one of the poignant moments in the liturgy to me. Now, sometimes, even the

lay worship leaders do it, and people tell me that it's one of the predictable times in the service when they can feel themselves tearing up. Me, too. Maybe that's because I feel that deeply as a blessing; mine of them, and theirs of me.

I'm not saying that every UU church should include this piece of liturgy...it works well in our blended worship and would not work everywhere. But if there's not a place in the liturgy where people find themselves tearing up, something they come for even if the sermon topic is not so interesting that week, then the liturgy needs work.

Larry wants me to talk about the interesting things we've done in Albuquerque to grow, attract younger people, and serve rural populations, and I'm going to do that, and you can take ideas home and try them out. But it's not what you should do first. What needs to be done first is to really think about the 45-degree shift we need to make, not as churches here and there, but as a denomination, towards depth, heart, spirituality, reverence, and faith. Feed that hunger, and you might not even need a band. (Although I'm all for bands.)

I learned this one astounding Sunday afternoon, when, exploring what we could do about our crowding in worship, I went to our young adult group to ask them how they would feel about adding a noontime contemporary music service. I thought they would be the natural constituency of such a service, but I also knew that they were in the habit of sitting together at the 11:00 service and then adjourning to a hike, a discussion, or lunch. I wondered if they would be willing to change their schedule to attend this later service. In short, they were not. They thought a contemporary worship service was a great idea for other young adults...the ones we have not reached yet, but they liked their schedule just fine. And besides, they said, "You know, Christine, you don't have to bribe us to come to church with our favorite music like they do in other churches." And when I looked stunned, they continued, "You know...you're not trying to get us to believe unbelievable things and we get a lot from the sermons. The music's ok at second service...some weeks it's great, but we come," ...they started helping each other out here. "We come because the whole service...It helps, you know...during the week and stuff...."

When I got over my disappointment I told myself that I'd just gotten a huge compliment and should be very pleased. We started a contemporary music service anyway, and the young adults come when one of their own is performing, but others have come...that's another story. It starts with religious depth.

So. Religion first...and hospitality second. Deep hospitality, which knows that when one welcomes a stranger, one is likely to be changed by that stranger.

If we want to be hospitable to Gen-Xers and Millennials, we just have to adjust to the fact that they are image-based learners and that they were not given a classical musical education. They've had TV and the Web and textbooks with pounds of full-color photographs in them. A page of text

without a picture, five minutes of sermon with no visuals...it's like a foreign language. Unless they took band, the hymnal is Greek to them, the hymn styles are arcane, and the organ is meaningless.

That doesn't mean that every one of our churches has to hire a band and do PowerPoint...though many should. But hospitality demands that we notice differences and accommodate them and maybe even try to enjoy them.

We don't have to change everything to give young adults the notion that we live in their world.

I think it would be possible to keep one's historical liturgy and have a vibrant young adult presence, for instance...if one has a really intentional website and Facebook presence that shows young adult faces and which explains that liturgy in the visual terms young adults are looking for.

I think it would be possible to keep the organ and the hymnal....if the hymns are carefully chosen, carefully taught, sung often, and played just a tad faster than they have been...especially if other parts of the service are visually lively.

I think it would be possible to continue with our highly verbal, intellectual style of sermonizing, if the music were lively and the website welcoming. You get the picture.

I know this works because these are some of the things that two congregations and I have done, in two very different parts of the country, over the past 30 years. Both congregations were energetic and growing during the years they were also working at figuring out how UU's could be religious and still free. Both vastly outperformed statistical expectations. Both in the end got younger, more diverse, and more vigorous in their cities. I don't say this to brag, and by no means was it my work alone. I say it because I want you to know that in this path lies real hope.

Now...I know that this is a challenge to those of us who have been around a while. There are clearly lots of UU's who still prefer a UU'ism which is an alternative TO religion, rather than an alternative RELIGION. Way too many of our ministers are not prepared to take on the mantle of being spiritual leaders, which is a risky business even if there's no controversy about it and downright suicidal in all too many UU places. And with as many lay-led congregations as we have? What shall we do?

Nurturing Deep Spirituality

Making these changes will take the kind of emphasis, movement, buzz, cachet that UU's are actually very good at generating. Think about how virtually every UU RE program offers OWL, sexuality education. Consider how many of our small churches suddenly wanted to make the leap from Pastoral to Program sized, and how many middle-sized congregations are stepping up to Policy Governance. We're actually pretty good at the psychology of the herd.

So if as a denomination we wanted to be serious about religion and spirituality?

We'd be doing whatever we could to get spiritually based programming to lay-led congregations. I'll just stop here and add what Larry alluded to a while back. In Albuquerque we video record the sermon and make those sermons available for an extremely modest cost to lay-led congregations who subscribe. They can have any video they download from the website, but we particularly package up our four "UU 101" sermons a year into an easy-to-use format which requires no technical savvy. It's our own little UU Ted Talks! Would you like to join that network? UU Ted Talks starring your own minister and visitors to your pulpit, and available to lay-led congregations all over the nation who otherwise have to make something deep and worshipful out of local politicians and sociology professors.

If we were serious about fostering a spiritually deep UU'ism in all of our congregations, we'd figure out a way to train and authorize and get supervision for lay ministers.

And more large congregations would join Albuquerque's outreach to rural populations by establishing branches in small towns, outlying suburbs, and other isolated areas. We have three such branches of our congregation which meet in small towns in New Mexico. They are members of the church, pledge to the church, worship with the church using worship leaders who get training together each year and those very same videos. They come to congregational meetings via phone hookup, and access ministerial services and leadership development advice in the same ways Albuquerque groups do. It's been very energizing to the congregation to be a pioneer in this matter, and we're lonely!

And...

We'd expect that our ministerial candidates would have at least as well developed an understanding and practice of multi-faith spirituality and spiritual practice as they do of multi-culturalism and social criticism. This is not the case at the moment, and the consequences pervade our ministry.

We'd invite our mid-schoolers and high-schoolers to think that "our whole lives" means that we have a spiritual self, not just a sexual one, and we'd offer well-crafted, well-funded, well-supported programs and retreats by well-trained leaders to entice them to explore with us.

We'd be devoting an entire GA to deepening our spiritual lives after the one that we devote to immigration reform.

And we'd focus on making our congregations safe places to discuss spiritual subjects and our own, precious, tenuous, hard-to-talk-about spiritual lives. We have to help people understand that the tools of college debate teams and scientific laboratories are fine for those enterprises, but they are problematic around matters of faith and spirit. It's hard enough to put the largely wordless spiritual life into words. The shy, wild soul doesn't respond well to being chased, questioned, hounded, and there is still too much scorn in our discourse about faith.

In my early ministry, my older colleagues talked about their building projects and how, "If you build it, they will come." These days, my colleagues are talking about their re-structuring projects and how, "If you re-structure, you will grow." I want the next buzz to be about heart. "If you deepen, you will attract." "If you risk offering heart, spirit, god, prayer, blessing....without demanding that people believe specific things about these practices, you will grow."

There's a saying which I love, when I think about my mixed emotions about undertaking change, which is that most people spell the word change, L-O-S-S. I get it that secular Unitarian Universalism has been really important to some people and that change will be a loss. I get it that those of us who grew up singing those Germanic hymns accompanied by a powerful organ look at the drum set in the chancel and spell it L-O-S-S.

And then I think of another important piece of doggerel wisdom, which goes like this: "At the bottom of God's pocket is....change."

Which if were translated by a theologian would read: "Change is the very heart of reality, and the meaning of your life is to go with that flow, into the future."

I myself am a big fan of "Where have All the Flowers Gone," and Kenneth Patton, and traditional old church buildings. I learn by listening, not by looking at pictures, and while I have been converted to the joy of singing with hands free and face pointed up at a screen rather than down into a book, I wish I didn't have to think about PowerPointed sermons. But I do. Because if I don't, two generations of the people we're supposed to be serving won't feel served. And because a denomination I love and know to enhance life will get weaker and weaker for missing them. That's not what I want. I know you don't either.

You are very brave, and very dedicated to be here today, and I appreciate that!

Peace be with you all.