

WALKING MORE HUMBLY – AND THRIVING

Lecture 3 in the 2011–2012 Minns Lectures

What Was and Is Required:

Three Forums on the Renewal of Unitarian Universalism in the 21st Century

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The Rev. Alan Taylor, Sr. Minister, Moderator

Respondents:

The Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Johnson-Doyle

The Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie

What doth the Lord require of thee

but to do justly, to love mercy,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

The Rev. Buehrens

Thank you, Alan. I would tell you that this congregation, under your leadership, is already thriving – if I were sure that wouldn't keep you from also walking more humbly!

“What are you lecturing about?” my wife Gwen asked me when I told her it was time for me to write the third of these Minns lectures. “Humility,” I replied. She just looked at me. “You?” she finally said, “Well, that should be a brief talk.”

“It's not about me,” I rebutted. Now Gwen, you may recall, is a priest in the Episcopal Church, most recently a hospital and hospice chaplain. We've been married for forty years now. “It's about Unitarian Universalism learning to walk more humbly in order to thrive more, both spiritually and practically.”

“Oh,” she said. “That will take a lot longer.”

Just last weekend I ended ten years of ministry in Needham. The congregation has grown, but it is still the smallest that I have ever served, with under three hundred voting members or households. It's also the longest pastorate I've ever held. So my ties to people became deep and intimate. Leave-taking was not easy, although the congregation could not possibly have been

kinder. Witness the fact that starting this week I am enjoying three months of earned sabbatical leave. But last Saturday night they threw what can only be described as a “roast” for yours truly.

The only comparable event I’ve ever attended was given some years ago at the First Parish in Duxbury, Massachusetts, to celebrate twenty years of service there by my dear old friend, the Rev. Robbie Walsh. I was there as president of the UUA to praise Robbie’s wider ministry. Former interns he’d trained returned to thank him for his guidance and example. Lay leaders testified to his manifold virtues as a preacher and a pastor. Finally it was Robbie’s turn to speak. He reminded folks that, coming from East Tennessee, he’d always been partial to Doug Marlatt’s *Kudzu* comic strip, and especially to its clergy character, the Reverend Will B. Dunn.

I quickly thought of the strip in which Brother Will is umpiring a church softball game and calls out “Strike 83!” Then he says, “Playing by Unitarian rules, games tend to run long.” But the strip Robbie had in mind was the one in which Brother Will has decided it’s time for some continuing clergy education. So he enrolls in a correspondence course – one in humility. Going down to the mailbox, he opens the envelope containing his final grade. “A plus!” he yells. “Yippee! I mean... Aw, shucks!”

Then that was it. Robbie just sat down, in eloquent silence. I didn’t do as well.

But humility for individuals is one thing; for whole groups, quite another. Theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr or our own James Luther Adams used to major in making the distinction. For us as a whole religious people, authentic humility does not mean mere self-effacement – much less being so self-critical as to miss seeing our real power, influence, or untapped potential.

In my first lecture in this series, on justice-making, I said as much. We are so often unjust *to ourselves* when assessing who and where we are as a religious people. We prefer telling ourselves that we are small, shrinking, beleaguered, even in danger of dying in these hard economic times. And while that may be true in some particular congregations and regions, it is false overall. Moreover, when we blame “the UUA” – as if that weren’t all of us, we sound like Tea Party people blaming “the government” for all the socio-economic changes being suffered.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, one-third of all the Unitarian churches in the U.S. closed their doors; 40 percent of local Universalist churches. Too many depended upon a few wealthy patrons. But in this Great Recession, what has happened? The Baby Boom baby boomlet may have expired in our church schools, and voting membership, carefully held down to minimize the UUA “head tax,” may be flat, but according to surveys of religious identity, the number of people in the U.S. who identify as UU went up 20 percent in one decade. During the first year of the recession, 2009, total giving to UU congregations did not go down. Quite to the contrary: overall, it went up by 10 percent, in a single year!

So why are we so hard on ourselves? Perhaps, I suggested, because if we admitted our growing power and influence, we might have to do clearer thinking about how to use all of it!

The chief justice issues of our time are growing economic inequality and the erosion of authentic democracy through the disproportionate power of corporate money in politics. Yet we forget that Unitarian Universalists pioneered in developing socially responsible investing and shareholder activism, building broad coalitions to rein in corporate misconduct. It needs to be applied now to excessive executive pay, corporate money feeding stealth lobbying organizations like ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and super-PACs, just for starters.

Some may prefer pretending to be dying martyrs (how dramatic!) to more honest self-assessment, but it is clear to me that rather than using more effectively the power of who we already are – educated, middle-class, often professional and even affluent, influential – we prefer beating ourselves up about who we are not yet, even though we have also clearly been growing for decades, in diversity – theologically, ethnically, racially, and even economically.

My own favorite *Kudzu* strip, one that Gwen and I keep posted on the refrigerator door, has Brother Will on his knees, praying, “Smite mine enemies, Lord!” “Smite my worst enemy with a plague of locusts.” Suddenly Will’s own head is being swarmed about by insects, as he says: “Uh . . . Let me re-phrase that.”

Illinois UU lay leader Patrick Murfin, in his poem, “What Unitarian Universalists Should Give Up for Lent – If They Observed It, Which They Don’t, Most of Them,” lists the following:

Pews without padding, Nature Conservancy calendars.
Volvos, polysyllabic **verbosity**,
herbal tea, **austerity**,
National Public Radio, unread books in fine bindings,
isms:
 Liberalism, Buddhism, Humanism,
 Marxism, Feminism, Taoism, Vegetarianism,
 Conservationism, Transcendentalism, Atheism,
 Consumerism, Sufism,
 for Christ’s sake, Libertarianism,
Joys and Concerns, **pretension**,
committee meetings, Habitat t-shirts,
potluck tuna casseroles, black-and-white films with subtitles,
petitions, sermons, tofu and brown rice,
drums, **theology**
...
liturgic dance, poetry readings,
pride
...
bistros, pledge drives,
advanced degrees, **spirituality**,
coffee hour, sensible shoes,
philosophy, choir rehearsal,
arrogance...
gender-neutral hymnals, **learned clergy**,
natural fibers, string quartets,
whiteness, turquoise jewelry,
recycling, **self-congratulation**,
acupuncture, bird-watching at dawn,
yoga, Common Cause,
God, doubt,
egotism, **self-denigration**
...

One of my ministry students at Harvard, who read that poem at UU worship during Lent, admitted that she balked over the thought of giving up things like “recycling” or, God forbid, “learned clergy,” even as she knew how true, yet off-putting and self-defeating many of our other pride-filled habits can be.

Giving up anything, especially a habit, can be hard, for any individual, much less a group. Several years ago Gwen and I sold our four-bedroom house. To prepare for retirement, to cut expenses and our carbon footprint, we rented an apartment – across the street from my church. Two thousand five hundred books had to go. (But don't pity me; I have at least that many left!) My sermons had themes like "Renunciation," and "How Much Do We Deserve?" (I concluded, "Not a damned thing; we're just lucky to be here! Dependent on everything and everyone who came before, for whom we did *nada*, let's now focus on those who share the place with us now; and on those who will follow!")

But of all spiritual habits, especially for thoughtful, ethical people like ourselves, none is more invisible, pervasive, or off-putting than the habit of telling ourselves, and others, how we *should* behave. What the rules are, or should be. I don't know about you, but I hate rules! That's why I'm a UU! Religion, after all, is not just ethics, though we sometimes try to reduce it to that. When we preach nothing but law and political correctness, without any grace, we surely miss the mark, and the needs of many. As I once told five new students for UU ministry who can come to seminary with law degrees. "I like reformed lawyers. Recall the law; but learn to preach grace!"

And yet cheap forms of grace, like the present popularity of a prosperity gospel, are like fast food – cheap, but neither good for the body individual nor for the body politic.

In my second lecture, about compassion, I spoke about trying to get my own parishioners this year to study with me Karen Armstrong's little book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Many said they read the book. Far fewer came to discuss it. Exploring what all that might mean, I learned that many of my UUs devoutly felt that they were already quite compassionate enough, thank you very much: liberal in their thought and politics, generous in their giving and forgiving. They implicitly rejected the idea embedded in Armstrong's title and introduction, that we are nearly all addicted – to being self-referential, lacking compassion, blaming others, reacting rather than listening, contributing to polarizing politics. (As a teenager I once saw in a glitzy shopping mall someone had printed on his T-shirt, "ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT NARCISSISM!")

Armstrong's thesis, in other words, got some intellectual assent; but not enough to convince most UUs of any need to enroll in a twelve-step program toward compassion. That's for someone else, surely. As they say in AA, "The first step is always the hardest."

"[E]veryone it seems/ is on some kind of road these days," wrote a poet friend, Ric Masten, "rolling from guru to guru we go/ like gypsies/ search not for a home/ but a space to park the wagons for a night// I doubt if anyone really wants/ to change his way of life/ though/ all of us I'm sure/ would like to know/ how to make the scary feeling go/ away."

When James Luther Adams taught theology at Meadville/Lombard and the University of Chicago, he offered a standing cash award to any student who could bring in a sermon from a then-popular evangelical broadcast that did not resolve all human problems through God's grace. No one ever collected.

Yet the alternative message when I grew up in the Midwest was a Unitarian broadcast – from Chicago's People's Church, where Dr. Preston Bradley preached his Unitarian version of Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*. Adlai Stevenson, I'm told, the son of a Republican Unitarian mother and Presbyterian Democrat father, who had chosen his mother's church and his father's party, after a family tragedy sought spiritual consolation in listening to Dr. Bradley. What he heard was no help: that each of us must pick ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps. As he's reported to have said on hearing Peale himself on positive thinking, "You know, even as a Unitarian, I find St. Paul increasingly appealing and St. Peale appalling!" A Lake Forest Presbyterian pastor came to call on him in his grief. He quietly joined that church.

I tell this story for several reasons.

First, it's a cautionary tale: about any cheap, optimistic individualism as an alternative to dependence on a larger grace. And God, do we UUs ever *hate* dependency! Many want to live life like the atheist who was defined as "having no invisible means of support"! Just the other day I called on an eighty-eight-year-old, a staunch Unitarian all her life. Now, after a cerebral hemorrhage, she has to endure physical therapy. She wants to start walking again – now! The PT

folks don't give her choices! Could I please file a human rights complaint for her with the United Nations? I said, "Shirley, I'll do better than that: I'll take it up with God." She laughed; she got the point.

Gwen had spoken to her about another cartoon, in which a guy is on his knees, praying, telling God, "You know recently I've given you some good suggestions. But no follow through!"

Second, in my new book, *Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People's History*, Stevenson's name never once appears. Why not? Because I'm sick of endless debates over was this or that famous person *really* one of us? And I dislike all attempts to tell our story by name-dropping, as though that could be attractive to newcomers, except by means of status attraction.

Chris Raible wrote a parody of one of our hymns about our tendency to name presidents, politicians, poets, writers, activists, musicians, architects – at last claiming, in a final couplet, that "all Nobel scientists/ were either Unitarians or Universalists." Many were; but never mind!

The real heroes of our faith have been much more obscure; even, humble. I also think that we can learn more from the stories of the failed and forgotten than from claiming the famed. And if Stevenson had two church affiliations – requiring several ministers of both denominations to assert publicly that he could do so [quote] "without contradiction" [unquote], so what?

Unitarians and Universalists did the same, for years! As I sometimes tell new member families where one still goes to Mass, or belongs to the synagogue, "Ah! ours is the one faith to have, if you're having more than one!" Because, at our best, we're humble enough not to be jealous. We simply find common ground in the human spirit and its needs, not in ideologies, isms, and abstractions; at least at our best.

I wanted to give this third lecture about what Unitarian Universalism needs to thrive in the years ahead here in Midwest, recognizing that this is the homeland of the religious humanism that made possible the consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist traditions fifty years ago. Beginning in prairie pragmatism and a shared concern for human spirituality and human action beneath the wide sky, humanism then took on multiple forms. One form, in the minds and

mouths of the wounded, angry, insecure, or intellectually arrogant, came to reject all forms of religion and faith, and to promote rationalism in a form as dogmatic as any *Summa Theologica*.

Now we are in a post-modern, post-colonial era. Western culture and its form of reason can no longer pretend to be universal. Yet on our UU intellectual and spiritual flanks there are still some decrying efforts by progressive people of faith like ourselves trying, however humbly, to build bridges between science and religion, between cultures and belief systems.

“I think that one of our most important tasks as Unitarians,” wrote Adlai Stevenson in a letter in 1958 (see, he did still identify with us!) “is to convince ourselves and others that there is nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics, without which life would become lifeless. Here lies the power of the liberal way – not in making the whole world Unitarian; but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination. Thus we can learn to grow together, to unite in our common search for the truth beneath a better and a happier world.”

But for some, as I have said, being a humanist came to mean being one of the “brights,” the intellectual elite, smart enough to avoid being sectarian, or even religious, or even spiritual. Daniel Dennett, the Tufts philosopher who is the source of that arrogant term, “brights,” speaks of frustration with those who say they are still interested in “spirituality” but can’t explain very clearly what that is. Then he himself, ironically, offers one of the best definitions I have read:

“Now let me try to put better words in their mouths,” he writes. “What these people have realized is one of the best secrets of life: let your *self* go. If you can approach the world’s complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to *proper* size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready to hand while dealing with the demands of

living is no easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you stay *centered*, and *engaged*, you will find hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural.”

[Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, pp. 302–3]

Tweak that last sentence to say, “It *need not have* anything to do with believing. . .” and I can agree totally. The question is no longer whether we UUs are religious humanists. Even “brights,” for good or for ill. I think we clearly are, at least predominantly so. Rather the question is whether our religious humanism will still insist in putting down other forms of believing and hoping, or whether it will be humble enough to be a catalyst of dialogue; for that is what we have always been when we have been most influential. Not the loudest, nor the most sectarian voice; but rather thoughtful listeners, defending human dignity while always critiquing human pride.

Some of the worst mistakes we have made in recent decades, I’m afraid, have been in thinking that we could imitate or adapt the methods of the Religious Right or of evangelicals in promoting our own purposes. William Ellery Channing, remember, cautioned his followers to “flee the spirit of sectarianism as the spirit of hell.” Because it is amazing just how much good can be accomplished by people who refrain from trying to claim all the credit.

We need to remember that our UU forebears began literally thousands of effective causes, in the form of schools, colleges, hospitals, charities; voluntary associations for the public good. Much of this, especially on the Unitarian side of the family, came from an establishment sense of noblesse oblige. But so what? It was humble in that it rarely placed any effort or institution for a wider good under a personal, family, or sectarian label. Most of what we have done for the world we have done in enough humility not to want public credit; only results for the common good.

The sociologist E. Digby Baltzell, who taught at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and who coined the term WASP, White Anglo Saxon Protestant, once wrote a book more of us should know, called *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*. It begins by asking why

Philadelphia, founded by Quakers, and the largest city in America at the time of U.S. independence, did not become as influential as Boston did. Quaker culture, Baltzell answers, with its refusal not only of participation in war, also discouraged participation in government. Quakers may have made fortunes; but Philadelphia lawyers often turned down appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court to make those fortunes. This was not humility, any more than the refusal to doff one's hat to anyone, or the insistence on calling everyone *thou* and *thee*. Meanwhile, Boston Brahmins were building up 'the hub of the universe,' 'the Athens of America,' spending their fortunes and their time working to serve the common good, in causes from public education to anti-slavery, from women's rights to civil rights. Most of the public universities across the prairies and out on the West Coast, were founded by Boston-trained professors. That is why in Berkeley, California, where the first president of the university was Thomas Starr King's son-in-law, you find streets nearby named "Channing Way," and "Bancroft," after the minister who became AUA president when Channing declined.

There are times when the current preoccupation with class, race, and gender privilege as the only lens for self-criticism gives a distorted picture. The recent book by my colleague Mark Harris, for example, *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, first delivered as lectures in this same Minns series, paints only a partial picture of the real dynamics. It almost entirely forgets that between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the majority of new Unitarian and Universalist churches were quite class-inclusive. They were given by families of means but intended for and attended by factory workers, immigrants, farmers, and people of small or no means, and their families. When, during the presidency of Frederick May Eliot, between 1937 and 1959, Unitarian membership grew by some 250 percent, largely thanks to the founding of lay-led fellowships in college towns and growing suburbs, it hardly seems fair to me to accuse Monroe Husbands, who led the fellowship movement, of intellectual elitism. In many college towns, like Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was later ordained, the new UUs reached included labor organizers, students in the first generation of their families to go to college, a rich diversity. Would it have been better to take our faith tradition where no one was asking for it? I doubt it.

So it is now, as led by Peter Morales, we ponder how Unitarian Universalism can thrive not only in congregations, but also beyond. One promising path forward is being forged by CLF, the Church of the Larger Fellowship, led by Meg Riley. Visit www.questformeaning.org, their new website. Notice that it does not lead with a sectarian label. It is only a humble start, but it aims to attract some of the millions who say they are both seekers and thinkers, spiritual yet rational, ethical if not religious in the sense of claiming only one revelation as a source of truth.

Earlier this spring a professor at Andover Newton Theological School, a teacher of Christian Bible organized an adult education class for lay people, an interfaith group, drawn from a synagogue, a mosque, a mainline Protestant church, and a UU congregation. I was asked to speak about our UU understanding of “revelation.” I quoted, of course, the hymn by William Channing Gannett, with its great lines, “Revelation is not sealed/ Answering now to our endeavor/ Truth and right are still revealed.” Not to mention Emerson, at the start of his first book, *Nature*, complaining that “the foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”

But I did not put down the wisdom of the Q’uran, the Torah, the Bible – all fonts of what Thomas Hardy said great poetry and high religion have in common, “imaginative compassion.” Rather I talked about how all our traditions teach that alongside the sacred texts and history of each faith their lies also the self-revelation of the divine in the Book of Nature. And how, in the twentieth century, we Unitarian Universalists have helped lead the way in paying attention not only to natural science as a source of revelation, but also to social science – to help guide us in how to serve compassion most effectively, even humbly.

There are balances we to be kept alive to truly thrive: the flame of faith *and* the light of reason; both, and the need for a chalice to hold both; the moral law within *and* a sense of grace, though always purchased at a cost; imaginative compassion *and* authentic humility, but without self-denigration; justice-making, but without over-estimating our powers or wisdom; the wisdom that can come from self- knowledge, but only if we know better our shared history; and, finally,

openness to new occasions teaching new duties without ever despising what our forebears all gleaned from experience – I could easily go on!

But, as my wife Gwen once said after hearing me give a talk like this, “You know, dear, if you were paid by the word, we’d be rich by now!” So let me just end with a prayer, one found in our hymnals, at number 496; taken from the words of our late ministerial colleague, Harry Meserve:

“From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us. For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven. From making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured. For telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected. God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting and insurgent lives, help us to be as good [and humble] in our hearts as we have always wanted to be.”

Amen, and amen.