

A Message from a Unitarian UU
Committed to Freedom of Conscience, Reason, and Common Humanity

By
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In 1887, 74-years before Unitarian Universalism existed, the Spokane Unitarian Society was founded and established bylaws stating, “The authority of its belief is reason, the method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion,” and its, “First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy.”¹

On November 7th, 1911, John H. Dietrich gave his first sermon to the Unitarian Society here. Dietrich had just been excommunicated from the Dutch Reform Church, the only minister it has ever convicted for heresy, but was, nevertheless, fully embraced by our Spokane congregation, which he served until 1916. He first began calling himself a humanist here, not merely because he no longer believed in a personal god, but because he believed in human agency, and human dignity, and human welfare. He went on to become known as the Father of Religious Humanism, was one of the 34 original signers of the *Humanist Manifesto* (almost half of whom were Unitarians) and remains one of the most popular speakers in Spokane’s history.

On November 7th, 2011, exactly 100-years to the day that Dietrich gave his first sermon, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane installed Todd Eklof as its minister. Since then I have done my best to minister to the beloved members of this congregation, through the tremendous loss of so many of our dear friends, through the political disaster our nation now faces, through the internal disagreements we sometimes face, through the ill feelings my hard decisions sometimes stir in others, through my own many shortcomings, failings, and ineptitude, all while remaining a prophetic presence in our community and in our world when I feel morally bound to do so. This week I received a call from two old friends, retired ministers, well respected in Unitarian Universalist circles, thanking me for having the courage to finally say what many ministers and other UUs have been feeling but have been afraid to say or are unable to be heard. One of them said, “What I have always admired about you Todd is you say what you know needs to be said no matter how unpopular it will be.”

Of the hundreds of messages of support and gratitude I have received from Unitarian Universalists from all over the country these past few days, supporting the distribution of my controversial book, *The Gadfly Papers* during last week’s UU Association’s General Assembly, this statement has remained with me and held me steady, even amidst the tremendous anger expressed on social media from those who disagree. As I say at the start of my book, “I can’t allow my wish to get along excuse me to simply go along. I must say what

¹ McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.

I believe is true and do what I believe is right, even if I'm wrong, and even if doing so isn't going to be fun." This seems to be some driving force within me, perhaps the result of my oppressive childhood. "For whatever reason," I say in *Gadfly*, "I've become a person who values the freedom of conscience and its expression more than much else."

For this reason, I want to begin by saying how grateful I am to all the members of this congregation who have offered your welcome words of support to Peggy and me during the past week. But, as importantly, I also want to embrace those who disagree with my book or may disagree with the way I went about distributing it, or have felt blindsided, saddened, or angered by my actions. You have every right to your opinions too and I honor your right to express them and during the past week have done my best to stand up for you as people I love and respect. I want you to know, my intention was never to hurt anyone. Please know that I am willing to talk with you, either in person, or in a group context during the coming days and months ahead.

Believe me, I know I'm not perfect, I know every moral decision I have ever made is accompanied by a moral dilemma. No such decision is ever clean, nor has the benefit of hindsight until after it has been made. A few days ago, Peggy asked if I would have distributed my book had I known the reaction against it would be so strong? I thought about it for a bit. I knew immediately the answer was, "no way," but I wasn't sure why. As I thought more about it, I realized this isn't because I think what I did was the wrong decision, but because I simply would not have had the courage. "Ask me again in a month," I said.

There have been many accusations against me this past week, including calling my book hate speech, racist, homophobic, and transphobic. Although I certainly disagree, I have done nothing to defend myself against these *ad Hominem* distractions from the real issues my book addresses. But I have spent whatever time I could countering false rumors against the UUA and its official response to my book, including statements claiming it had banned by book, removed it, escorted me out of the conference center, or asked me to sign behavioral contracts or guarantees I would stop distributing my book. Let me say emphatically, none of these things happened! From my standpoint, the UUA leadership has treated me with respect and dignity. Just as I respected their request to give them the space they needed during the remainder of the General Assembly, they have respected my request for the space I need. Any inappropriate comments and disrespect expressed toward me this past week, have not, to my knowledge, come from UUA leadership.

Nevertheless, there is one rumor I am compelled to address, that I was unwilling to meet with the UUA Right Relations team. I did meet with the Right Relations team on Friday evening, only a few hours after I began giving my book away. I am grateful to the two members of this congregation who accompanied me and bore witness to that meeting. A couple of hours later, around 9:30 PM, I received a call at home explaining a policy restricting the distribution of materials to remain within one's assigned booth in the Exhibit Hall. A

request I agreed to honor. That call was interrupted by another caller telling me a Co-Moderator, a UUA Board Member, and another member of the Right Relations team wanted to meet with me for the expressed purpose of discussing the “disruption your book is causing,” and that a time had been set for 7:00 AM. Given the strained hostility that had been directed my way during my first meeting, in which I was surrounded by five Right Relations members, none of whom had read my book, only one of whom had gotten less than half way through it, and having no means of arranging the kind of support or advocate I needed to accompany me, I respectfully declined the request. I was then asked not to return to the General Assembly, a request I honored.

It was only after rumors were flying that I’d been banned and escorted off the premises, that I received a message inviting me back if I was willing to meet and enter back into right relations and a covenantal relationship. I was not willing to meet under the circumstance for a few reasons. Firstly, I do not feel I am the one out of covenant. Rather, it is the new culture that prohibits freedom of expression, honest dialogue, and dissent that violates our Unitarian Universalist principles, our respect for the worth and dignity of every person, and for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I feel I am in right relations with our denomination for having the courage to call us back to these principles. I also bristle at the idea there is some church authority that can simply call me late in the evening and summon me to a 7:00 AM meeting. This is not the Unitarian way. Our church and our ministers have complete autonomy to govern ourselves. We are not summoned to meetings by Papal authorities for writing books they disagree with. More importantly, in our denomination, ministers have a right to have advocates with them in any such meetings. We call these advocates Good Officers. I was also called last weekend by a colleague who strongly advised me not to attend any meetings until I have had time to establish Good Offices and also suggested I should not have agreed to the first meeting that I did attend. So, I’m not sure how it became known that I received a later communication inviting me “back into right relations and covenant,” that I had refused before being asked not to return, but this is not how I remember it.

I want to take a few moments now to say a little about my book, its distribution, and, what for me, is the surprising response to it. I knew there would be some backlash, but not that it would create a firestorm only a few hours after I began giving it away, before anyone could possibly have had time to read and consider it. That’s on me. That was a serious miscalculation. A more serious mistake on my part was leaving a box of books at our booth after I had been asked not to return to GA. Although I stopped distributing the remaining boxes of hundreds of books I had planned to give away, I did not think to ask that the remaining box at our booth be tucked away. I could not have conceived that some Unitarian Universalists would verbally assault some of our volunteers and feel much remorse and shame over this and have done my best to call those I know who were impacted to offer my apologies.

By the way, again, in defense of UUA leadership, there has been another rumor going around that the UUA confiscated our books. I have been told, to clarify this matter, that representatives of a specific group also in the Exhibit Hall were responsible for taking the books and that it was a UUA official who ask that they be returned.

I wrote my book alone. It's mine. I'm responsible for it. Again, I am sorry for any unintended hostility that has been directed at any of you or our congregation because of it. Although I've spoken about some of my concerns in the book from the pulpit over the past months, let the board know that I was writing a book I would be giving away at the GA that I expected to draw some hostility in my direction, as well as the nature of the book, and stated my intentions during our Annual Meeting, I did not share the book with our membership prior to the GA, except for a few people who helped me edit it for typos or helped defer the costs of its printing. This book is an expression of my personal freedom of conscience and was in no way a Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane project. Once again, I deeply regret any blowback any of you have received or any negative comments about our church that have been expressed. I neither expected it, nor intended it.

I'm not going to go into the contents of the book here. I have plenty. They are free. You can take one and read it for yourself. Rather, I would like to turn now to what I believe is the most important part of this conversation. It's bigger than me, bigger than our church, and bigger than the UUA. I'm talking about the rise of fascism and groupthink in American society, especially as it is manifesting on the far Left. I have long considered myself about as left as liberals come, but that's not true anymore. Not because I've become more conservative, but because the fringe to the left of me has become so extreme, in my opinion, it now resembles creedalism given its obsession with the purification of language, dogmatism with its refusal to permit dissenting views, and fundamentalism with its readiness to demonize anyone who disagrees.

As many of you have heard, less than a day after distributing it, more than 300 claiming to be UU ministers signed a letter condemning my book. I do not wish to disparage their decision to do so in any way. I leave it to others to decide the merits and wisdom of doing so. Here I would only point out the letter confirms the very ideologies I take exception within my book. It states, "ideas and language can indeed be forms of violence," "Predictable 'freedom of speech' arguments are commonly weaponized to perpetuate oppression and inflict further harm," that "zealous commitment to 'logic' and 'reason' over all forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture," and concludes by stating that if those unwilling to accept what they have determined are the core competencies required to be a UU minister, then "those who cannot or will not commit to developing the musculature of resiliency, humility, and lifelong learning required may indeed find that UUism is no longer an appropriate home." The letter makes these extraordinary claims while requesting that others not even read the book.

Nor did I feel I needed to ask permission to give my book away at the GA. Handing out tracts, pamphlets, and other self-published writings has been part of General Assembly culture for as long as I know of. There has been much online criticism about my process, which only further distracts from addressing the book's contents, and I'm quite sure if I had written a less controversial book, say, about the historical significance of Rev. John H. Dietrich in Spokane, nobody would be objecting to my process.

As one who has been in touch with other UU ministers over recent years and heard about what's been happening to some of them, I could not, in good conscience, simply play it safe by saying nothing. It's not who I am. I had to intervene and help give our common concerns a voice. Some of these stifled voices, afraid of being accused of all manner of evil if they even hint they might disagree with what's now happening, have been writing me throughout the week thanking me for speaking up. One of them, for example, a layperson, wrote, "under the continuing ferment. Many of us out here are supportive of your book, and we find more people every day who have found the courage to stand up. So, be of good heart, and of good cheer. Your words needed to be said." Another said, "Thanks for writing your book. I'm a retired minister in a small town... The insane reaction to your book just shows things are getting worse by the minute. I'm sure you have received tons of hate mail, so I just wanted to give my thanks. Keep up your work. We need voices of sanity."

Of the 50 different people writing me in support of my actions, most of whom I have been in continuing contact with, half are UU ministers, half are laypersons, and 34 percent are women. I want to spend a little time sharing a sampling of what some of them have said, though I have edited out any personal details that might reveal who they are or where they are from.

One person writes, "Please, please keep speaking out for humanity, reason, open conversation, curiosity and nurturing of diverse opinions." Another says, "I want to thank you for publishing 'Gadfly.' I picked up a copy while I was at GA and it helped me enormously as I was struggling to make sense of what I was experiencing at GA... I was raised Unitarian; I have been an active UU, and was president of my UU congregation... I continue to feel saddened as political correctness seems to have been substituted for science and reason." And another, "Thank you for the courage to give voice for we UUs who are not entirely aligned with the radial and (I think) untethered agenda unleashed in our church in the last couple years. I have complained to our leadership that there is a growing and unconsciously pernicious orthodoxy that hushes, demeans, and pathologizes those of us who are not perfectly aligned with our emerging Ministry of Truth. I feel increasingly marginalized and I am relieved to hear from some pulpit that I am not alone. I am also sorry that you may suffer for your honesty."

One minister writes, "Sending prayers and a quick message of support and encouragement—you made a conscious decision to stick your head above the parapet: Brave man!" Another minister says, "My heart bleeds for you, and even more it bleeds for the many religious liberals (regardless of their politics) who no longer feel welcome in UU churches. I resigned

my membership... after an experience somewhat similar to what you are now going through." Still another minister, a true friend of this congregation whom I shall not name at this time, says, "I must admit, sadly, that I agree with what you say in those essays. Sadly, because I believe the UUA has abandoned its principles. I've had misgivings about the response to the three incidents you mentioned: the hiring issue, the LREDA conference, and the UU World controversy. I know personally the writer involved in the latter and believe she was treated unfairly. I didn't know reason, logic, and fairness were tools of white supremacy. You probably expected to receive censure for your efforts, but I suspect there are many like me who support your position. I wonder how many people read your book before joining the chorus of outrage?" Another minister who says, "I have a bunch of those so-called 'marginalized-identities,'" and doesn't agree with everything I write also says, "The way our colleagues are acting in response is disturbing to me. Your views seem to me to be worthy of debate rather than censure and they are views that I know would be widely shared by many. (Although I do find some of your arguments a little densely written, not wrong but not clear and easy to understand.) I agree with you that current trends are endangering the liberal religious tradition of the conflict of ideas leading to a wider truth." Another, fairly new to ministry, says becoming a UU minister was bittersweet, "It was sweet because I finally got here and have gained potential opportunities to do work I love for pay and with professional recognition; bitter for many of the reasons you express in your essays, especially the need to overcome both internal and external obstacles that would have been nowhere near so daunting or time consuming without the problems you discuss."

I'll stop with a note from my friend. Rev. Richard Davis, that he wrote, not to me, but to you. When I asked if he wanted me to keep it anonymous, he said, "Please use my name. You can only hide so long." Here's what Rick wants you to know:

As you may be aware your minister has written a book that has stirred much controversy within our movement and several hundred of his colleagues have written a public letter condemning his work. Please do remember that there are approximately 1200 or so other UU ministers who have not signed this letter. I don't know where the rest of my colleagues stand on this issue, but please know that I consider Rev. Todd to be a very courageous minister who is stirring an honest conversation that can truly help us find our way to beloved community. I admire him tremendously and am honored to call him a friend.

I could have filled this entire sermon with similar messages and statements and still not exhaust all of them. I cite a few here, not merely to prove I have much support, but to prove, whether everyone agrees with us or not, there are too many of us, too many Unitarian Universalists, too many persons who have been hiding in the shadows beneath the heavy cover of silence, and I took it upon myself to give voice to us all because that's what I am called upon to do. And I hope and feel confident that by doing so our denomination will now have to have an honest, open, and, eventually respectful conversation. For those colleagues who wrote the infamous 300 letter, or have been demeaning me on social media, I hold nothing but love and respect for you and your right to speak your mind. For those dear souls

with marginalized identities, my nonwhite sisters and brothers, my gay sisters and brothers, my transgender sisters and brothers, my differently enabled sisters and brothers, and anyone else who has experienced my words as frightening and injurious, I am deeply sorry for your emotional pain. Please know this was never my intention, and that I will continue to do my best to weaken and eliminate the systems that discriminate and oppress anyone in our society and world, as I have steadfastly and bravely done throughout my twenty years of ministry. I hope for all of us, as the dust settles from this emotional storm, that we can come together in honest dialogue to address ways we can move forward together, truly together, birthing something new and extraordinary as the two sides of this difficult debate learn to listen to each other, and hear each other, and learn from each other, and find a meaningful way forward, if we can. Although it can't be our only point, because the world outside the UU bubble has many concerns calling for our response, nor always the main point, the marginalization of persons based upon their identities may be the best starting point for our dialogue since it is the one point all Unitarian Universalists strongly agree must be addressed, even if we have different thoughts about how best to go about it.

I'll close this longer than usual sermon with the following anecdote. When I was in college, a fellow ministerial student had been a 4th generation Jehovah's Witness before becoming Southern Baptist. When his newborn daughter needed a blood transfusion to save her life, Paul and his spouse refused because of their faith. But after the hospital got a court order giving them the authority to provide the transfusion anyway, they got in hot water with their religious authorities for not illegally kidnapping her from the hospital. Meanwhile, all the Southern Baptists in the area, because that's about all there are in Texas, where this occurred, heard about it on the news started providing solace to Paul and his family. When the Jehovah's Witness's discovered an unauthorized version of the Bible in his home, given to him by a Baptist minister, they summoned him to a tribunal, to possibly excommunicate him. Not sure what to do, frightened for his future, and with no one else to turn to, he asked the Southern Baptist Minister for advice. The minister looked at Paul almost with disbelief that he could be so blind to what seemed so obvious. "Well, don't go," he said. It was so simple yet was like a lightbulb going off in Paul's mind; a real paradigm shifter. He had been so immersed in his faith, so under the weight of its authority, that he didn't realize he could just say "no."

I have always remembered this and have benefited from it ever since, working to catch myself in my own paradigms, to remind myself when I am summoned by the self-appointed authorities of my life, I don't have to go, I don't have to simply go along.