

Yesterday, Today, & Tomorrow Where Does UUCS Go from Here?

By

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Our church year goes from July to July, and what a challenging year it has been. In addition to spending these final months mostly isolated from each other because of COVID-19, internal conflict has persisted throughout. But this only makes us human, by which I mean no slight to humanity. Our is a species that struggles to be more than what we are, to transcend our weaknesses and achieve our highest aspirations. When we fail, we often feel ashamed. But we can't achieve our aspirations if we don't often fail. Failure is nothing to be ashamed of, so long as we get back on the proverbial horse and keep trying. Then failure is just called practice.

That's why I said it's been a "challenging" year, not a "troubling" one. This difference is also one of attitude and mindset. If we are supposed to meet our highest aspirations without fail, then we are in trouble. We are always growing, transcending, becoming in this worthy effort, and we often struggle and fail in the challenge, which does not make us unworthy. If we don't fail, if we don't fail ourselves, if we don't fail each other from time to time ... well, there's no use finishing that sentence because perfection is inhuman, which makes it impossible to begin with. As hard as our challenges can be, they are necessary and normal and help forge us into better people and better communities.

As true as this may be, the conflict in our church has felt as shocking as it is embarrassing. "We're supposed to be better than that," some have said. That's one way of looking at it, that the height of human maturity and interaction is to coexist without conflict. But the opposite should also be considered: that we must not keep quiet just to keep the peace. As Unitarian Universalists we're supposed to be better than that too, better than just keeping our mouths shut, better than simply going along to get along.

As anyone who has read my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, or has heard me speak much at all these past twelve months, knows I think we're in the midst of a very dark period, globally and nationally, that is ushering in an unprecedented age of fascism and groupthink that is the very antithesis of Unitarian Universalism. Yet it has already overcome our liberal religion, just as it has many progressive and liberal organizations. Are we to go gently into that good night? Or rage, rage against the dying of the light? Are we to merely offer ourselves comfort-care as we watch our religion die? I think and hope we are better than that.

The turmoil that has manifested in our congregation, which I suspect had been festering for longer than most of us realize, is part of a global conflict that has been crystalizing for the past 35-years, beginning in the 1980s, taking increasing hold in academia since the late

1990s, and has since spread into other progressive organizations, including the Unitarian Universalist Association. It has a particular stronghold in Australia, the UK, Canada, and the U.S., and may soon bring ruin to Western culture's greatest aspirations: individual autonomy, freedom of conscience, equality, and democracy. When liberalism is at its best, these are the values it strives for. When it becomes extreme, however, it results in authoritarian systems like those begun by liberal revolutionaries in countries like Russia, China, Cuba, and Venezuela.

Unless you've been involved in academia, you may have missed it happening in the U.S. during these past decades: outside of hearing about Political Correctness when it first cropped up in the late 1980s to describe a puritanical reaction against language that some labeled offensive. Political satirist Bill Maher made his fame in response. His popular TV show, *Politically Incorrect*, lasted from 1993 to 2002. Serendipitously, the 1980s is the same decade that other *PC* also entered nomenclature, the personal computer, which has greatly empowered the PC culture, especially through social media, which may be most responsible for its resurgence today. This powerful and unregulated technology enables digital mobs to erupt and instantly destroy linguistic violators, with no evidence or due process, in what is now called *cancel culture* or *wokeness*.

While comparing such behavior to the Dark Ages—when barbarians sought to overturn civilization by burning every bit of literature they could find—philosophy professor Lou Marinoff says today's "universities have already been besieged and sacked by the new barbarians, and are now administered by them. Instead of burning great books, they merely ban them as inegalitarian."¹ He also says that now "The Constitution holds no more sway at Harvard or Berkeley than in Havana or Beijing."² Surprisingly, Marinoff did not write these words in 2020, but almost twenty years ago in 2002, after the Postmodern Endarkenment had already overtaken our universities.

Closer to home, only two weeks ago we learned the Spokane County Democrats have completely imploded because of the more overarching problem of Identity Politics. On June 5th, all of its Executive Officers resigned after being besieged by internal strife that included accusations against their Chairman. According to a recent *Inlander* article, last march a Spokane County Young Democrats statement on Facebook called for their resignations. "Over the course the last year," it said, "the leadership of the Spokane Country Democrats have, on multiple occasions, belittled young people, engaged in bigotry, refused to use preferred pronouns, and exhibited racism towards our members."³

¹ Marinoff, Lou, *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 2002, p. 144.

² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

³ Walters, Daniel, "Yelling matches, formal grievances, and preferred pronouns: How the Spokane Democrats self-destructed," *Inlander*, June 17, 2020.

Whether these accusations are true or not, I cannot say. What I do know is they are similar to accusations lodged against me in the aftermath of my book, which are entirely unfounded, although they come right out of the Identity Politics playbook that has become so effective in silencing those some disagree with. More importantly, we are four months away from a national election and have no organized Democratic leadership in our community because of the constant infighting resulting from disagreements about how to think and speak.

According to another newspaper article this week, recent remarks by the chief executive of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington have led to a similar controversy among local Catholics. Spokane's Catholic Bishop, father Thomas Daly says when the executive "spoke of the church as racist, himself as racist and essentially all white people are racist—I thought it was a very simplistic way to look at the tragedy of racism."⁴ This, of course, is part of the debate going on in Unitarian Universalism after some declared it a white supremacist organization four years ago.

The bigger news this week was an open letter in *Harper's Magazine* on "Justice and Debate," that's been signed by more than 150 of today's leading figures, including names like Margaret Atwood, Noam Chomsky, Gloria Steinem, and Salmon Rushdie. The letter warns, in part, "The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blind moral certainty ... it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought."⁵ I am grateful for the moral courage of the letter's 153 signatories for confronting this Orwellian wrongheadedness head on. Are we to remain quiet while the "lifeblood of a liberal society," the lifeblood of our liberal religion, bleeds out just because the bloodletting is being administered by some of our friends? I think we must be better than that.

When a certain theologian was in town a few months ago, and he learned what was transpiring at our church, and of the repercussions to my career in the aftermath of my book, he said "Todd, it's happening to progressive organizations everywhere I go. Nobody can get anything done because they're being torn apart from within." So there's nothing inherently wrong with us or special about what we're going through. We are caught up in a culture war that has been quietly welling up for part of four decades. Yet our future as a congregation will depend upon our response to the ideological plague that is now upon us.

The future of Unitarian Universalism will depend on which side of history its congregations choose to stand on, including our own. Some have already decided to remain Unitarian

⁴ Zavala, Daisy, "Catholic Charities video sparks controversy, highlights failures to address systemic racism," Spokesman-Review, July 7, 2020.

⁵ "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," *Harper's Magazine*, July 7, 2020.

Universalist in name only, while disregarding our defining values: reason, freedom of conscience, and belief in our common humanity. They have, instead, redefined these values as white supremacy and oppression, further calling individualism, exceptionalism, and our resistance to authority, our religion's "trinity of errors," to be replaced with religious authoritarianism, under the guise of "covenant," that comes complete with new forms of dogma, heresy, original sin, and the silencing of nonconformists.

Some UU congregations have utterly rejected the illiberalism sweeping through our Association, while some remain tragically unaware of what's going on. Most, like ours, remain divided on the matter and are experiencing various degrees of conflict. So we are not alone. We are not weird. We are not a problematic church. We are dealing with a 40-year old cultural phenomenon that has become widespread.

How are we going to get through it without tearing ourselves apart? Some say just keep quiet and see if it passes on its own. Better not to make waves. I guess you know how I feel about that approach. Others say we should just concentrate on "healing" our own church. But what does "healing" mean? Does it mean we're all supposed to agree with each other or else keep our differences to ourselves, so we don't hurt anyone's feelings? Since the concept of "harm" now includes saying things others disagree with, the only way to keep from injuring others is to keep our mouths shut. I guess you know what I think about that, too.

Rather than *healing*, they prefer the word *recovery*. I think we need to recover, not only from the shock, embarrassment, and disappointment of this past year, but from the past forty. Some of you have heard me emphasize that I am not Jesus Christ, by which I mean I don't have the ability to heal anyone. Nor am I Superman, by which I mean bullets don't bounce off my chest. Like anyone, I hurt and am hurting. During the past months, the religion I have devoted 32-years of my life to has banned me, publicly condemned and censured me, conspired with our church leaders to get rid of me, and formally excommunicated me just last month. Hundreds of my colleagues, before even reading my book, denounced me as racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and classist, without offering a shred of evidence. And worst of all, some in our own congregation, whom I have known and loved, have treated me with disdain and disregard. It's been painful and I need to recover, just as I imagine many of you do.

But we also need to recover our senses as Unitarian Universalists and remember our religion is practically defined by our ability to lovingly disagree and to flourish unscathed by our differences. We need to recover our respect for one another by remembering Unitarian Universalists don't demonize, dehumanize, and dangerize people we disagree with. We need to recover our history and values as Unitarian Universalists by recalling the humanistic theology we were founded upon and its commitment to human agency and human freedom no matter what our beliefs. We need to recover love for one another, which is a verb not a noun, a behavior not a sentiment, that requires us to seek the wellbeing of everyone, friend

of foe. And we need to recover some joy in our lives together, which is what I hope and pray for us this year, that we feel the pleasure of our good company and that those among us feel the joy of a welcoming home where even dissenters—*wanderers, worshippers, lovers of leaving*—are embraced.

The good news is that to recover all of this we don't have to do anything special. We just need to be true to ourselves in the midst of these circumstances, as in any circumstances. I doubt you will recall what I said in my first sermon after Trump's election four years ago, "The answer to the question, what are we going to do now, it to keep doing what we always do. To be ourselves. To uphold and promote our values and principles."⁶ You've heard me say similar things more recently in response to COVID-19. Like, "If our lives have meaning, COVID-19 is only the current context through which we must pursue that meaning and achieve its purposes."⁷ The same is true now in light of the conflict we have just traversed in our church and that we shall continue to traverse at this time in world history. To get through it, we must first go through it, and we must go through it as ourselves, pursuing our highest aspirations, adhering to our greatest values, even if we sometimes falter and fail.

During the past 133 years of its history in Spokane, our church has gone through many ups and downs, yet accomplished great things throughout because our members have stayed true to our purposes and values. In fewer than 25 years we went from 20 founding members in 1887, meeting in a shabby auditorium with rows of empty pews, to more than 800 attendees gathering in the largest theatre in town. During the early years, dues were a nickel a week, our Women's Alliance additionally sold baked bean lunches to downtown businessmen for 25 cents, and the entire church planned another 25-dollar fundraising project every month. Tight as things were, our congregation used what they could to sponsor a promising young child so she could attend a school for the deaf in Vancouver, Washington.

Then the Great Depression struck and by 1935 we were nearly inactive with no place to meet. Even still, we spent those years collecting and sending clothes, shoes, bedding, and whatever else we could rummage to the needy residents of Lewiston, Montana. We held benefits to support the Social Service Bureau's Baby Milk fund, to purchase books for the public library, and furnishings for the YMCA. It was by such actions our larger community has always recognized us, which is why in 1938, our golden anniversary, the local paper said:

Recognizing the right of private judgment, the sacredness of individual convictions, the moral obligation to be faithful to one's best thoughts, but requiring no assent to any theological creed as a basis of fellowship, the Unitarian society welcomes all who desire to promote the religion of truth, righteousness and freedom.⁸

⁶ Eklof, Todd, "Here We Stand: A UU Response to the Election," UUCS, Nov. 13, 2016.

⁷ Eklof, Todd, "The Emperor Has no COVID: How Philosophy Can be of Help During the Global Pandemic," UUCS, July 5, 2020.

⁸ Nov. 13, 1938.

During all our years, we've brought controversial speakers to the Inland Northwest, not shied away from them. Howard Taft, Booker T. Washington, Margaret Sanger—the founder of Planned Parenthood—and, more recently, Rick Steves to promote legalizing marijuana, were among them. We've called controversial ministers like Edwin Wheelock, an abolitionist with a bounty on his head, and the heretic John Dietrich, and M.M. Mangasarian, who wrote a book claiming Jesus is a complete work of fiction. Over the years, no matter our circumstances, our ministers and members did what Unitarians do, being among the first to protest the Vietnam War, to establish the first Planned Parenthood office in Spokane, the Spokane chapter of the ACLU, the Fair Housing Center, and the Human Relations Council. In the late seventies and early eighties, members like Karen Dorn-Steel and Bob Cook, along with our minister Bill Houff, exposed and stopped the radiation leaks coming from the Hanford Nuclear facility. More recently our efforts were of primary importance getting marriage equality passed in our state, which began a cascade throughout the nation: as well as marijuana legislation, which has put a huge dent in the racist drug war. We advocated ending the death penalty and got a moratorium on executions in our state. We tried to turn off the spicket allowing the flow of coal and oil through Washington and helped prevent the construction of new fossil fuel export terminals on our western shores as a result.

These are just the big things I can think of off the top of my head. When I think of all the other things we continue to be involved in, as individuals and as a congregation, we have nothing to be embarrassed about. We helped our neighbors at New Hope Baptist Church move out of the pool hall they'd been meeting at and outgrown for years, into what Rev. Happy Watkins calls, "a real church building." Among the thousands of dollars we raise and give to worthy causes and organizations every year, we recently raised more than \$4,500 to give to our neighbors at Morning Star Baptist Church, to help with some costly plumbing repairs, and thousands more to help children at the Vanessa Behan Center.

We've been through a storm this past year, and it has ended with about 10 percent of our members storming out. We wish them well in their continued search for truth and meaning; and remain standing with open arms and a friendly hand anytime they need us. Despite the harsh weather, our services have not shrunk in attendance and our finances have remained healthy: indicators of the resilience our purposes and values strengthens us with. And we have a new board of trustees, elected by an overwhelming number of our members, that is committed to work toward our recovery, mostly by assuring we do things the way we are supposed to: democratically, transparently, and compassionately, while abiding by our bylaws and norms, and, most importantly, according to our liberal religious values.

It is said the buffalo is the only animal that, when facing a storm, walks through it instead of away from it. I don't believe this is so. Unitarians are another animal that do not turn away when facing a storm. Girded with our great values, we turn towards and walk into whatever we must endure, difficult or not, to remain true to our values, to ourselves, and to each other. That's what we'll do this year, and it's how we'll transcend whatever adventures lie ahead.