

Reaching the Summit Who Goes Up Must Come Down

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
October 15, 2024

General Assembly, General Convention, Convocation, Annual Meeting, General Meeting, Symposium, Conference, and the like, all pale in comparison to the name we have chosen for our gathering, Yearly Summit. The symbolism of mountains summon all sorts of profound associations and feelings—accomplishment, strength, stillness, wisdom, vision, peak experiences, rising to the occasion, and Rocky Mountain highs. Humans have always made monumental associations with mountains. Moses encounters Yahweh and receives the Ten Commandments on a Mountain and Jesus is transfigured on a mountain. But it wasn't so long ago that the UK's famous statesman, Winston Churchill first used the imagery in reference to an important and significant meeting among us mortals.

In his 1950 speech advocating for a diplomatic gathering of world leaders to resolve major international conflicts, emphasizing the importance of dialogue at the highest levels to prevent war and promote peace, Churchill used the phrase "parley at the summit." So, what better name for a historic gathering of religious liberals who are devoted to the same principles of dialogue and tolerance and working peacefully together toward our common goals? During the past few days, we have parleyed in friendship, in-person and on Zoom, to support each other, to remind ourselves of our vital and perennial values, to prove to ourselves and as proof to the world that Unitarianism lives and remains a powerful force for good in our world.

It has thus been especially fitting that NAUA's first ever keynote speaker was the brilliant braver angel, John Wood Jr., calling upon us to realize that those with whom we disagree are not our enemies, but our neighbors and people with whom we share a human bond. This is so whether they are truly our neighbors, classmates, coworkers in the same community as us, or our neighbors for the sole reason that they are fellow humans, even if they live across borders and over oceans. Wood reminds us that what our divided communities and world need most right now can be summarized in the memorable Unitarian adage that *we need not think alike to love alike*.

Although this may be our first NAUA summit, it is not the first time we have stood at such heights, looking out at the world with our bird's eye view of the paths we ought to take, the path of human dignity and of freedom, reason, and tolerance. As members of our historic centuries-old liberal religion, we have oft stood upon this very mount and clearly seen the way forward; how we ought to proceed in the world and in our own church communities.

We have come to this summit, like all summits, for the profound view—the mountaintop experience of life—to gain perspective, to see the forest for the trees. But we cannot remain here for we know our life is in the forest, amongst the trees where our vision can be obscured and where we sometimes get lost and forget our path. Down below there can be

powerful events that wash away our paths and sometimes even destroy our homes. So, we return to our summit to find a new direction and to determine where to begin rebuilding.

This is why NAUA now exists, because our old home got washed away in a category 5 cultural storm that has turned what we once knew into a wasteland. And it is why we have parleyed at the summit this week, to celebrate having survived the disaster and how far we have come to regaining what was lost, to see more clearly what we have left to do, to recall our path, and to be overwhelmed and in awe of the vista before us.

We are awestruck by the beauty of our values, and principles, and beautiful way of living that leads us to devote ourselves to the greater good, to human welfare, to individual freedom and growth, to the protection and restoration of that natural world and our fellow creatures, to a more just and accepting society, to the end of warfare and hostilities, and to the fundamental rights of all people everywhere, to achieving our full potential as individuals and as a species. It is truly a beautiful and magnificent vision of what our world should be and could be, and it is the source of all our hope and meaning.

Yet it is also an overwhelming vision because, as clearly as we see it, it also seems so far away that it may never be reached. It is overwhelming because we also know that it is our responsibility to try. It is overwhelming because we realize we must soon leave here and return to the confusion of the forest to live out our profound values. It is overwhelming because we know we will sometimes stumble, sometimes encounter perils, barriers, and crevices, and sometimes we'll stray and lose sight of our path altogether. We know of this because, as John Lennon said, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." And, make no mistake, we are called by life, not our plans. So, we establish our congregations and relationships with other religious liberals to help remind us of our values, and to work together to demonstrate them. And, occasionally, we return here, to our summit, to regain our broad and inspiring perspective.

All of this is why, though the title of my sermon is "Reaching the Summit," its subtitle is, "Who Goes up Must Come Down." Just as Moses and Jesus come down from their mountaintop experiences to minister to the world, so must we. But this is difficult, even though it's all too easy to lose our way, to forget what we're about and how we ought to go about living our lives. This is why going to the summit ought to be an edifying experience, so that we leave with more than we came, as Moses left with his Ten Commands, and Jesus left transfigured, forever changed. Going to the summit changes us and allows us to leave with more wisdom and understanding, with new skills and knowledge for navigating the dense and sometimes dark forest, and feeling more inspired and energized to do what we must to live meaningfully as a transformative presence in the world and in the lives of others.

This is why we've had such an outstanding keynote speaker here and the many informative workshops, so that we leave our summit with something that endures and helps sustain us in the days ahead. And this is my hope for all of us; that we leave here a bit better off than when we arrived. We've been through some serious difficulties these past few years, as we've watched the shocking, destructive, and sometimes painful takeover of the Unitarian Universalist Association by people who are not committed to our liberal principles, and have, just recently, entirely abandoned them by discarding our historic commitment to the principles of individual dignity, freedom, autonomy, and democracy.

My point here is not to criticize the UUA for its choices, which have been affirmed by many of its members. It was their collective choice, either with intention or neglect, to turn the institution into something else, just as we have now made the only choice left for us, to begin to rebuild what was lost and destroyed in this storm. My point, rather, is to let what's happened to the UUA forever serve as a reminder of what can also happen to NAUA if we do not remain mindful of and committed to the values we claim to cherish. As you likely know by now, as a student of our Unitarian history, I like to use the simple, easy to remember list first summarized by Unitarian minister and historian Earl Morse Wilbur, "freedom, reason, and tolerance." Although, because I believe these principles are outgrowths of our more fundamental commitment to human dignity and wellbeing, I like to say that our religion is rooted in a commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and all peoples, a dignity that is achieved through freedom, reason, and tolerance, for these are the social technologies that create human dignity.

But neither I nor NAUA is here to tell you how to articulate and express your values. Nor are we here to bookmark them for you, or to frame them for you, or to write them down some place for you. Ours is a free religion, so that part is up to you. I won't go deep into my reasoning here, but I believe it was a mistake for the UUA to have ever included them in its bylaws, at least not the way they were, standing alone as a list without any historical context or explanation as to why they are our principles, which made them more creedal than meaningful and added to the false impression the UUA is the keeper and authenticator of our faith. I sometimes hear people say things like, "They got rid of the seven principles" or "We've lost the seven principles." But the only thing about their recent removal from its bylaws indicates is that the UUA is lost. Nobody can take away our principles but us. And no matter how we phrase them or where we keep them, they are meaningless if they are not incarnated in the way we live our lives and in the way we treat others.

To succeed as religious liberals, we must put our principles into practice, to be witnessed by others, not read on list. They must be expressed in our actions, not something we struggle to recall when attempting to describe what our religion is about. However we choose to express them in words (and that responsibility is yours, whether you own it or not), we need to embody them in action as much today as ever. We need to incarnate them amongst ourselves if our religion is truly going to be our religion, if it is truly going to engender the

sort of community and feelings we've been longing for in recent years and have experienced together this week during our first and historic parley at the summit.

But, just as important, if not more so, we must incarnate them in our world as proof of a better way. You'll notice this beautiful yet austere sanctuary at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane has lots of uncovered windows, which you only notice when you're looking toward the pulpit. Our architect, the brilliant Moritz Kundig, a member of our church for more than half a century before his death just last year, designed it this way so that no matter how lofty and inspired our thoughts might rise, we always remember that the place for our religion isn't within our sanctuary, but out there in the world, down there within the forest, amidst the noise, confusion, and conflict. These windows to the world exists to remind us that we must leave, that the world is calling us, pleading for our help, reminding us that who goes up must come down, down to earth where life is to be lived and where our religion has real meaning, down where our values and principles must truly be kept.

But what, practically speaking, do my lofty words mean? What do others see when we are practicing our religion? Manifesting Unitarianism beyond our sanctuary walls, below the summit where our lives must be lived, is difficult for us because, like anyone else, we are not immune to the worst influences of human society, the very worst of which, in my opinion, is the intolerance of those with whom we differ that has come to epitomize human attitudes and interactions. This is why John Wood Jr. calls his work "depolarization," because too many of us are ideologically divided nowadays. This is so not only regarding our big ideas, like politics, religion, and sports. Most people these days can easily become divided over insignificant ideas (like sports).

I say, "these days," but we all know such intolerance is not a modern phenomenon. It's probably part of our ancient biology and neurology, which kept our ancient ancestors safe by making them fearful of potentially dangerous strangers and of exploring new ways and untrodden paths. We don't need to be as fearful and suspicious of others today as our hunter-gatherer ancestors were, but their ancient fears remain with us. Throughout history, such fear, manifested as intolerance, has resulted in wars, oppression, slavery, genocide, persecution, inequality, and other terrible circumstances, and is still doing so today, to lesser or greater degrees.

Intolerance toward Unitarianism was formalized as far back as 381 CE, when the First Council of Constantinople met to fully establish Trinitarian doctrine, making the belief in just one god and in a human Jesus, a crime of heresy. When, centuries later, the Unitarian idea reemerged during the Reformation, the reformers themselves despised it, burning its founder, Michael Servetus to death and violently persecuting and suppressing its adherents. Much later, at the start of the Cold War, McCarthyism emerged in the U.S., which equated liberalism, in general, with communism, giving the government the excuse to silence just

about anyone they wanted on spurious grounds. Such hostility subsided once the Cold War was in full force and its greatest fear was Russia, and external enemy. But once the Cold War ended, it was right back to demonizing and dehumanizing liberals, the nation's internal threat. Just last week, Donald Trump said, "the bigger problem is the enemy from within ... We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics ... and it should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary, by the military, because they can't let that happen."¹

I bring up our history as religious liberals, who have, at worst, been violently persecuted and, at best, too often hated, threatened, and misunderstood, to make that point that we of all people should understand the importance of tolerating those with whom we disagree, whether in the wider world or amongst ourselves. But, as all of us know, this hasn't always been the case. The Unitarian Universalists Association itself has become extremely intolerant and closed to viewpoint diversity; our congregations are sometimes divided over differing opinions; and, sometimes, we simply and thoughtlessly dislike those with whom we disagree because this attitude is part of the larger societal milieu of which we are a part.

I've observed this attitude widen and deepen over the past four decades beginning with the advent of cable television and the elimination of certain broadcast regulations, resulting, at first, in the advent of entirely partisan programs like *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, then *Fox News*, and later *MSNBC*, and, eventually, to the almost ubiquitous expression of biased viewpoints from lots of mainstream news outlets, and now on countless online blogs and YouTube programs. Such behavior has presented all of us with a detrimental societal model for dealing with disagreement. Namely, to see those with whom we disagree as our enemy and to use whatever means we have to silence and discredit them—resulting in today's era of extreme polarization and to a society that cannot come together long enough to solve our common challenges because we fear, mistrust, and often hate each other. We cannot move forward as a society, as a global human family, until we learn to live together peacefully and cooperatively in a world of many differing beliefs and ideas.

Unitarianism, because of its commitment to human dignity and to freedom and reason and tolerance, may have the solution to this troubling situation, but, again, we are not immune to its worst impacts ourselves. During my workshop on reason just a couple of days ago, participants could not help but get caught up in their own opinions about a relatively insignificant matter, even when the entire point of the exercise was to become emotionally and ideologically objective. By now, I'm guessing that some of us can't even remember what the subject was that we became so obsessed with, and, if we can, we don't care nearly as much about it now as we did then.

Here's how it happens; An idea presents itself and prompts a positive or negative emotion in us. This emotion then creates a belief about what is right or wrong about the idea. Then we just as quickly moralize our opinion about the idea so that it is not only right or wrong,

but righteous or unrighteous. In short, we have a subjective belief, which we objectify as an external truth, then moralize as the only truth. Subjectify, objectify, moralize. And once we moralize our opinion, no matter how petty the matter might be, we feel justified in demonizing and silencing those with whom we disagree. We make them our enemies.

It's hard for us to do otherwise because this attitude, again, is ancient and has been powerfully reinforced in the modern age. But, in practice, our religion is meant to help us overcome this instinct so that we can become a less anxious presence in the world and model the kind of tolerance we so strongly believe in. Unitarianism, when practiced, makes us thoughtful and mindful so that winning the argument isn't nearly as important as the common freedom for all to think and speak for themselves, because we not think alike to love alike, nor to live peacefully and productively together.

This means, for instance, if we go online and comment about the ideas of others, others whose faces we cannot see and whose humanity we don't readily recognize, we must put our faith into practice by tempering what we say with a spirit of honesty, objectivity, and respect. It means not leaping to a state of self-righteousness during which we start assuming the worst motives of others, which we cannot know because we are not mind readers. It means speaking our truth and considering the truth of others. It means not disliking others just because we are dis-like them. It means not assuming, just because we don't win the argument, the system is rigged. Just because we don't get our way isn't a catastrophe and doesn't mean the whole world is unfair.

And so, my dear friends, it is now time for us to descend the summit and return to our lives and to the world. Whatever wisdom and inspiration you found during your mountaintop experience here, I hope you leave like Moses, with something to share with others, and like Jesus, a little different than you were before. But most of all, I hope you'll leave with a greater commitment to practice our liberal religion in your life, in your home, in your community, and wherever else you go. You won't get it perfect, that's why it's called practice. But our way of living is what the world needs most right now. So, for the love of humanity, we must be a new kind of Unitarian, a more committed kind of Unitarian, a more thoughtful kind of Unitarian than we have been of late, the kind of Unitarian who doesn't care as much about what we believe, or about what others believe, as we care about how we live and how we overcome our trivial differences and greatest challenges, and embrace our common humanity. The world is calling.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-suggests-hell-use-the-military-on-the-enemy-from-within-the-u-s-if-hes-reelected>