Standing on the Side of Love

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
October 3, 2010 – Association Sunday

We are celebrating this year and next the 50th anniversary of the consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations. Some call it merger, but that word implies that the two former identities went away, and I think y9ou can still see them today, so I use the word consolidation. I want to draw your attention to the graphic I drew on the cover of the Order of service, a rendition of a pendant I saw someone wearing at a party several months ago, a woman who was a lifelong Unitarian. She told me it was a symbol of the combined denomination which was in use just after consolidation, and it was about circles, based on Edwin Markham's famous poem:

He drew a circle that shut me out–
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

One of the most profound UU thinkers of the Twentieth Century, James Luther Adams, said that religious liberals "deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation. The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms." In other words, goodness, virtue, is not something which is free-floating in the air, but is embodied, incarnated, in particular secular institutions. Thus we have a denomination with a budget, buildings, by-laws in order to embody the values of our religion.

That is one strain of thought in liberal theology.
A contrasting strain is suspicious of all institutions and maintains that the spirit cannot be confined in churches or organizations, rituals or structures. Here's what Ralph Waldo Emerson urged the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1838:

> "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, — cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity. Look to it first and only, that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money, are nothing to you, — are not bandages over your eyes, that you cannot see, — but live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.[1]"

In that address to the Divinity School graduates, Emerson describes how first-hand religions experiences in one generation get frozen into institutional forms in the second generation, dissecting, defining and freezing the spiritual life out of them. He encouraged them to rebel, and in that encouragement, Emerson incurred the wrath of the Unitarian establishment of his day and was not invited back to speak at his alma mater for another thirty years.

So we have this contradiction right at the heart of our movement. We are anti-institutional and institutional at the same time, countercultural and establishment, spiritual and secular. And this does not just go back to the consolidation of the two separate denominations in 1961, but to the birth of those denominations two hundred years before and even to the early years of Christianity. Let me touch on a bit of history here.

Both our constituent denominations came out of liberal Christianity. If we can credit

[1]"An Address delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, and Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838 "published in *Nature: Addresses and Lectures* 1849".

those Gospel accounts deemed most reliable by contemporary scholars, the religion espoused by Jesus of Nazareth was countercultural in the extreme. As I said last week, Jesus gave instructions to his followers (Matthew 10) that when they went about preaching and healing the sick and casting out demons, they were to take no food or purse, wearing only a shirt without a cloak and no sandals. And in the early years of the Jesus movement after his death, his followers met in private homes, took care of each other and combined their property. There were no grand institutions, no temples in early Christianity.

All that changed in the Fourth Century when Constantine adopted the religion as the official one of the Roman Empire. Suddenly the church became the establishment and this meant that it had to have a doctrine, so the Emperor called the Council of Nicea which eventually produced a faith statement still recited in orthodox Christian churches today. The rebels and martyrs of an earlier age became the revered saints.

The Protestant Reformation was another outbreak of rebellion against institutionalized religion, but the various Protestant sects quickly established their own bureaucracies and procedures. In particular, the Church of England split off from Rome but certainly represented an establishment with the king at its head, and generated its own rebellious groups. Two of those, the separatists and the Puritans, sent colonies to Massachusetts. The Puritans set up their own government which was run according to religious principles. Though they had emigrated to avoid the Church of England, they promptly set up a system of community-supported ministers, but without the bishops -- they adopted congregational polity early on. By the time of the American Revolution, the congregational churches of New England were the establishment, and they continued publicly-funded worship after the adoption of the federal constitution, because the First Amendment's ban on an establishment of religion applied only to the federal government, not to the states.

This was a state of affairs which did not sit well with the other denominations – Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians and the new evangelical group called the Universalists. The Universalists were small farmers and workers and were initially very suspicious of education. Hosea Ballou, the great theologian of the movement, had little formal education himself, and became a minister when Elhinan Winchester heard him preach, clapped him to his bosom and ordained him on the spot. The early Universalists were much more interested in the spirit than buildings, doctrine or budgets. Many Universalists in the early years belonged to Methodist or Lutheran churches which they would attend on Sunday morning and meet on Sunday evening with a group of people convinced that God was too good to damn anyone to hell. This seesaw between institutional and rebel played out in the disestablishment movement in Massachusetts; the Universalists in the early Nineteenth Century made common cause with other Protestant denominations trying to disestablish the Congregational church, which by this time included many churches and ministers of the new thinking which came to be called Unitarian. So Congregationalism was fending off the disestablishment challenge from outside while dealing with this growing theological controversy within its own ranks.
orthodox wanted to evict them. In 1817, the foremost liberal minister, William Ellery Channing, delivered his sermon Unitarian Christianity which crystallized the liberal thinking and accepted the name Unitarian which the orthodox had been trying to hang on the liberals for a decade. But Channing was opposed to making a separate denomination, and only pressure from the orthodox Congregational ministers pushed the liberals into a separate organization. Under these circumstances, the American Unitarian Association was thus founded in 1825. The Universalist Church of America had organized itself in 1785, though "organized" may be overstating the case. At any rate, two separate denominations came into being and coexisted alongside each other for a hundred and fifty years. There had been suggestions and overtures about getting together during that time, and many individual churches and ministers had dual affiliation with

the Unitarians and the Universalists. They produced a joint hymnal in 1930 and merged the youth organizations in the early 1950s.

By 1959, the two denominations were deep into a well-planned process for voting on consolidation. The towns of Chatham and Harwich might well look to this process as a model for how to merge their school systems. All of the pros and cons were set forth by the joint committee so that everyone voting on the proposal knew what the risks and benefits were.

I want to read you an account of a pivotal moment in the process, in 1959.

"As the actual accomplishment of consolidation neared, feelings ran high. Though a preliminary vote clearly indicated that merger was the option preferred by most Universalists and Unitarians, there were still those who questioned its advisability. Would consolidation dissipate resources better used to strengthen congregations? Would merging churches mean lessening the presence of liberal religion in many communities? What would each denomination be giving up of its own character, values, and traditions?

"These differences and doubts came to the boil at the 1959 assembly in Syracuse, New York. Some one thousand delegates gathered to vote on the Plan to Consolidate offered by the Joint Merger Commission. After a short time together, the Universalists and the Unitarians divided into separate sessions to consider the plan. The agreement was that as each group found something that required amendment, the proposed amendment would be sent to the other for their consideration. In the end, they had to agree to the same plan. Fifty-seven amendments were made and voted on in this back and forth manner. But the most contentious point, the only one that brought the assembly to a halt, was the wording of the Purposes and Objectives of the yet-to-be denomination. The wording the Commission first proposed read, 'To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in their essence as love to God and love to man.' This wording was adopted overwhelmingly by the Universalist delegation, which then waited for their Unitarian counterparts to do likewise.

"But in the Unitarian assembly the reaction was intense. Some wanted the clause struck as coming too close to a creed, but, at the other end of the spectrum, there were those offended that no mention was made of the religion of Jesus or the Judeo-Christian heritage. A new version was proposed – 'To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by Jesus and the other great teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, and prophetically expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition as love to God and love to man.'

"This set off a debate on the very nature of Unitarianism. It was a debate that had been carried on since the nineteenth century. Did Unitarianism stand firmly in the tradition of Christian churches, or did it offer a new universal form of religion for all people? Ultimately, the statement proved too narrow to be accepted. Another version was offered, removing the reference to Jesus, but retaining the phrase 'our Judeo-Christian heritage' – 'To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in our Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man.' This, too, was unacceptable to the Unitarians who felt that it placed the religion firmly in the stream of Protestant Christianity. The vote to reconsider the new wording failed by seven votes of the six hundred delegates present.

As the meetings ran late into the night with no agreement at hand, it looked like

the assembly and the merger were at deadlock. Still, most of the six hundred delegates stayed in their seats. Donald Harrington, minister of the Community Church of New York later wrote these words about that night in Syracuse:
'I felt very discouraged and went to bed. About one o'clock, somebody pounded on my door. It was Percival Brundage saying, "Don, can't we do something about this?" and he showed me some wording that he and
some others had continued to work on. I said I agreed but that since we had already lost the vote to reconsider I didn't know what could be done.
'At about three o'clock, there was another knock on my door. It was one of the leading Unitarian Christians and he said, "Don, we've got better wording. Are you still with us?" And he explained that he had persuaded the Universalists to reconsider, which meant that the rules permitted the Unitarians to vote again, as well.'
"The new proposal passed, only one word having been changed. 'Our' became 'the' and the Unitarian Universalist Association was created 'to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man.'[2]"

Now this issue may seem petty today, but there have been many other conflicts in the years since over just such language issues. For we are a diverse group, and there are competing ideas about our identity. Putting the Unitarians together with the Universalists just increased the range of opinions and traditions. But notice that after all the wrangling, what they settled on was a call to love.

Over the next year after that crucial moment in Syracuse, the history continues, a plebiscite of congregations was called and 95% of Unitarian and Universalist congregations participated. 88% of Unitarians said "yes," as did 79% of Universalists, and in 1960, the separate but side-by-side annual meetings of the AUA and the UCA voted "yes" to consolidation. A special worship service was held at Boston's Symphony Hall with the pulpits previously used by William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou[3].

Most of us who have been in this movement for a while develop kind of a love/hate relationship with the UUA. We feel the institutional strength and energy of the movement is in our local congregation and those nearby, and Beacon Street seems distant from our concerns. Yet when there is a crisis in the congregation, a conflict or a ministerial transition or a question no one knows the answer to, who ya gonna call? – usually Beacon Street or the District Office. It's good to know you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Our own Gene Pickett was one of the most effective stewards of the UUA; when he was asked to reflect on his years as President, he said this:

"I was a strong institutionalist and knew well that the values and ideals of liberal religion could be effective and influential only if they had a vital and solid institutional base. But I also knew that we as a religious movement have

---

[2]From a workshop on the Unitarian and Universalist consolidation that is part of Living in the Stream: Stories from Unitarian and Universalist History a sixteen-workshop adult program written by Rev. Alison Cornish and Rev. Jackie Clement that will be published this fall as part of Tapestry of Faith.

http://www.uua.org/documents/stew-dev/assnsunday/2010/worship_resources.pdf

[3]Ibid,

traditionally been suspicious of a strong centralized Association. We have been fearful that strength would mean power, rigidity and control. But I am convinced that our Association can be both strong and flexible – an institution of which one can be critical while still being committed to it.[4]"

Of the fifty years since consolidation we will celebrate in 2011, Gene's presidency closed the first half, ending in 1985. His was a steady hand at the helm. Today our Association is going through some retrenchment and trying to figure out what makes churches grow.

Of course, we've all been engaged in this question as long as I've been in the movement, – my involvement began a year before Gene became president. But this new initiative, called leap of faith, has one welcome feature: it is trying to tap the wisdom of the congregations rather than imposing top-down solutions from the UUA. UUA staff identifies congregations falling in two categories: those who have experienced substantial growth in the recent past, and those which seem poised for growth. Then each of the congregations in the first category will mentor a congregation in the second. The program tries to see, in other words, whether the particular components conducing to growth can be taught. It is this Leap of Faith growth program you are being asked to support in your contributions today.

Now we're doing our own study on growth here and looking for ways that this congregation can reach out beyond its borders to impact the larger community and to draw other people into the circle of the Meeting House. But we can get wisdom from anywhere, and I the UUA has some or is developing some through this leap of faith, then we can certainly use it.

Emerson was right that religion without spirit is dead, but James Luther Adams was right that the decisive forms of virtue are institutional. Our UUA has been giving a lot of thought to how to institutionalize the spirit, how to make our values visible and give them legs in our communities and the national stage. The most promising initiative is the Standing on the Side of Love campaign. This social change movement supports equal marriage and immigrant rights among other issues. It was to stand on the side of love that many of my colleagues went to Arizona to protest that state's new immigration law. Standing on the Side of Love shows up where people are harassed or disadvantaged because of their sexuality.

This movement is grounded in the broadest interpretation of religious values, the love command which was fought over by those delegates in Syracuse 51 years ago, and was given by Jesus's interchange with a lawyer just before the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-28), but it is much broader than Christianity or Unitarianism or Universalism.

Love and I had the wit to win, we drew a circle that took him in. The circle of concern, the circle of love, is drawn as wide as can be. What is your UUA doing? It is standing on the side of love. To walk our talk, for our love to have a lasting impact on the real world, for us to build the beloved community, we need bricks and mortar and bylaws and budgets. I invite you to visit the UUA headquarters next time you're in Boston; it's right next door to the State House.

Amen.

---

[4]From Tom Owen-Towle, *O.Eugene Pickett – Borne on a Wintry Wind* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996 pp. 144-5.