

Thoughts on the Future of Unitarian Universalism¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Welcome to our worship together. Today, our theme is the future of Unitarian Universalism. To loosen up how we think about the future, we are changing a few things about the present—first of all, we are beginning our service with more singing than we usually share. I invite you to breathe deep, and enter a spirit of celebration and joy!

Sermon

We live in a constantly changing world, in which the future is no longer expected to look like the past. So what will the future of Unitarian Universalism look like? How might our UU movement change to face a changing future? And, what might UUs offer to the process of change to help create a more livable and just future? On the other hand, what might be holding us back from making a difference for more people? What might we do to enhance the growth of our movement?

My colleague, the Rev. Fred Muir, explores these questions in a book of gathered essays, called *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*. Today I want to share with you some gleanings from this collection. Rev. Muir begins with the proposition that the philosophical source of our UU story is found in the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was pivotal in shaping our faith, and also our nation, towards an embrace of individualism. Muir writes:

Emerson suggested... As a nation and as people of faith, we don't need to follow the ways of others; we are unique. As individuals and as a people, we have all the knowledge and resources we need to shape a meaningful and sustaining identity. As Unitarian Universalists, this Emersonian individualism is embodied in our First Principle, which proclaims the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." As citizens of the United States, individualism... is embedded in our foundational documents.²

Individual identity *is* something to celebrate, and for many it has been a counter-balance to oppressive structures, enabling people to find a measure of freedom. But Muir suggests that this Emersonian individualism became a kind of creed or dogma with a shadow side, expressed in anti-authoritarianism and exceptionalism,³ and which, he suggests, is now corrupting both Unitarian Universalism and the United States. With such a strong focus on individualism, we do not have the capacity for creating communities that can contain our best visions. He writes,

We are being held back and stymied by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times. We cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news. We refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.⁴

1 Copyright 2017 by Rev. Myke Johnson. The ideas and text of this sermon have been gleaned by me from Fredric Muir's collection of essays, *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*, (Skinner House Books: 2016). If you like the sermon, I encourage you to read the book directly. If you wish to copy the sermon for other than personal use, please contact me before doing so.

2 Fredric Muir, *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*, (Skinner House Books: 2016) Kindle edition, Location 167.

3 Op.cit., Loc. 189.

4 Loc. 308.

Muir calls us to a restoration of other values within our history, such as generosity, pluralism, and imagination, and most particularly the idea of covenant, which can be a bridge from this rampant individualism into a vision and practice of the Beloved Community. He writes,

"If individualism led us to the iChurch, then covenant can shape the Beloved Community, ... [the idea of] Beloved community was popularized by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. ...Rev. Shirley Strong elaborates on King's vision: "I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power, and a respect for all people, places, and things—a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions..."⁵

In another essay in the book, Rev. Thomas Schade expands on these ideas. He writes:

The unholy trinity [of individualism, exceptionalism and anti-authoritarianism] is the remnant of an obsolete story that we tell about ourselves. In that story we are a band of rebellious freethinkers, cantankerous and difficult to manage—the kind of people to whom the cliché “like herding cats” applies. In reality though, we are living a different story now; we are trying, in our way, to build congregations that foreshadow the Beloved Community. Our thinking is still iChurch, but our practice is more Beloved Community that we think.⁶

Schade says that we can't lose touch with that “moment of self-assertion when a person says, 'No I cannot stay here... I must go my own way.'”⁷ But we are being called to more than that. He says the problem with individualism is that it encourages “self-centered and entitled human beings, people who are narrowly loyal to their clubs and unable to either lead or follow in the broader society. ...It sustains people in feeling ill at ease with the world, uncomfortable with difference and themselves, and isolated and filled with an aggrieved sense of entitlement.”⁸

Rather, he says, “We go on a spiritual journey to awaken in us a Deep Universalism, to transform our lives so that we embody human (and beyond) solidarity in a world divided by injustice and oppression. Deep universalism is the discovery of the self, and the discovery of the self in relationship to the whole of humanity, the consciousness of Beloved Community.”⁹

Rev. Cheryl Walker also looks at the tension between individualism and community. She writes:

Individualism is so attractive in the beginning. For many people who felt the heavy yoke of being in communities of faith where they could not fully be who they were, individualism tastes like the food they have been hungering for. But it is good only when we are starving. When we have had our fill, we look for food to sustain us for the long journey of life. That life-sustaining food can be found only in true communities of shared purpose and values, where the individual is affirmed but is not worshipped.¹⁰

And, “True community doesn't happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group.”¹¹

5 Loc. 417-422.

6 Loc 567-70.

7 Loc 653.

8 Loc 666.

9 Loc 672.

10 Loc 891

11 Loc 881.

Rev. Parisa Parsa expounds, “Maybe the Beloved Community is just this practice, right here, right now, of encountering the holy in each other and striving and failing and loving and celebrating over and over again, finding new circles of practice beyond our own communities, and doing that over and over again.”¹²

Think about it. These are questions for us to continue to explore. How are we at A2U2 balancing the tensions between affirming our individual identities, and affirming our communal relationships, affirming a deep Universalism which is a sense of solidarity with all beings?

Another important tension in Unitarian Universalism that the essays explore is a shift from intellectualism to more heart-centered, experiential, spirit-filled worship. Especially among young adults, new experimental communities have sprung up in urban centers, with a heart-centered approach to worship and congregational life. From one such community, for example, comes an emphasis on *experiencing* the power of love, the power of music, and the power of deep sharing. Sanctuary Boston co-founder Rev. David Ruffin tells a story about the aha moment that led to its creation. He says:

I was sitting in a park near my home on a gorgeous early summer afternoon, trying to step away from the pressures and stress of the day, when the serene scene of a young boy and his father caught my eye. The boy had a stick and was digging dirt, exploring beneath the tall grass. The man was reclining in the grass with his feet stretched out, his shoulders back, and his head tilted toward the sky (one eye, presumably, still on the little guy). As the young boy passed within his father’s reach, he scooped up the child in a spontaneous, completely unrestrained embrace and began nuzzling him in the chest with abandon. The boy threw his head back and giggled with glee, arms dangling beneath him, soaking up the unexpected shower of affection. I, too, was surprised into laughter.

I remember reflecting that, at least as far as I could see, the boy had not done anything particularly remarkable to inspire this sudden display of affection. He hadn’t dug his dirt more deftly than average. Rather, this was a parent’s natural response to his child’s being.

I felt my eyes get full. It was one of those moments when something you believe in, or want to believe in, hits you anew, right in your heart.

[He goes on,] I thought, *Yeah. That’s how much. That’s how much I’m loved. No pre reqs. That’s how unrestrainedly, enthusiastically, playfully, spontaneously, fully I and each and every one of us are loved.* By whom-what-how-why can remain a marvelous mystery, but love’s embrace reaching out for all, I felt that truth throughout my body.

And then, almost in the same moment, another thought arose: *That’s also how much love I have within me.* That’s how much care, compassion, consideration, creativity, affection, affirmation, appreciation, *love* are within me and each and every one of us, waiting to pour forth freely, liberated from the crippling restraints we’ve internalized and externalized—a natural response to the gift of life shared.

12 Loc 804.

That's the truth we're here to realize in our living.
That's the "good news" experience we're called to receive and to share."¹³

Ruffin remembers walking into a UU congregation, hurting, and being lucky enough to encounter a sense of being enveloped in the warm presence of prayerful song, and feeling love actually come and embrace him. But later, he realized his experience in many other UU congregations was more like a gentle pat on the back, rather than a warm hug. Along with other ministry students in Boston, he began a new religious community to embody this enthusiastic, inspiring form of worshipping.

Some of the building blocks of their worship vision were these: Worship should be experiential—engaging the whole person, body, mind, heart, soul. It should be spirit-filled, enthusiastic, filling worshippers with the spirit of love. It should be heart-centered—with less information for the head and more space for connection and vulnerability and, it should include music that moves.¹⁴

Another young-adult-led, alternative community which includes many of these experiential elements is the Original Blessing community in Brooklyn, NY. Rev. Ian White Maher, one of its founders, also wrestles with the huge social and environmental issues that we face today. His essay was perhaps the most compelling of the collection, for me. He writes about his community:

It is a congregation that has grown out of a great love for the history and legacy of Unitarian Universalism ...as well as a deep concern that what it currently offers, both theologically and culturally, is not enough to meet the challenges our world is facing.

We believe that the future of Unitarian Universalism depends on becoming a transformative spiritual force committed to leading people out from the wilderness of individual prosperity and into the joy of communal intimacy and solidarity. This movement begins by reimagining our faith communities as sites of spiritual transformation committed to healing the world rather than as sanctuaries tucked away from it. Only by committing ourselves to a process of deep spiritual conversion will we be capable of resolving the environmental and social collapses occurring all around us...¹⁵

These crises are "the ultimate consequence of the misaligned spiritual condition of human beings, which allows us to prioritize fulfilling short-term individual desires over short-term individual sacrifices that would provide long-term survival and prosperity for our species and other species."¹⁶

Maher also challenges a common UU assumption that human beings have the power on our own to create the changes we need. He says, instead, we "believe humanity needs help from the divine and creative life force that is greater than the selfish interests of our individual egos." He uses the word God intentionally, and suggests that UU's need to get beyond their habit of beating up on the "old bearded man" idea of God. He defines God as the creative life force. He says,

At Original Blessing we feel called to help people experience God—the creative life force—and to restore a sacred relationship with our planet. We are saying, "Wake up, wake up! Put down your ego. Submit to transformation." We believe that our survival

13 Loc 2709.

14 Loc 2821.

15 Loc 2064-72.

16 Loc 2082.

as a species, and the survival of so many other species, depends on more religion, not less.¹⁷

He also challenges the individualism of UU congregations, “a spiritual home that tells you you are okay just as you are. The only real problem is we are not okay. We are really not okay. The world is falling apart.” He acknowledges that

The idea that we need to radically change what, why, and how we express spirituality in worship will disrupt many Unitarian Universalist congregations who may insist that there must be another way to address the impending calamity. But without a deep spiritual surrender that releases us from what we pretend we already know, we will not have the capacity to change our thinking and our perspective for understanding the world around us.¹⁸

[He continues:] Original Blessing believes that the impending collapse will be resolved by people who are willing to actively seek an experience of transcendent interdependence with the planet and who ask to be transformed by the creative force called God. ...We must change ourselves or we will die. As upsetting as it may sound, many Unitarian Universalist congregations are presently not up to the task of being houses of spiritual transformation, because we have not decided that we want to be houses of transformation. We want to be houses of comfort and nurture....¹⁹

[And finally, in case this sounds more somber than he means, he says:] The Original Blessing community is driven by a desire to praise the beautiful world we grew out of, just as the grass grew out of it. We are a mystic congregation, meaning we believe that the desire we feel for a deeper spiritual connection is God's desire for us. We are desired by Creation... We are not isolated beings whose experience is bound by the limits of our epidermis. We are part of a great cosmic experience, and our spiritual calling is to seek transformation in order to come back into alignment with God, the greater life force... We want a path that helps us become healers of the planet.²⁰

Such strong and prophetic vision from our younger Unitarian Universalists! And what compelling questions to wrestle with. Can human beings on their own heal the planet, or do we need a spiritual awakening, and the help of the greater life force, the divine? Are we here in church for comfort, or are we yearning for spiritual transformation? Are we attached to the forms of worship with which we are currently familiar, or are we hungry for more spirit, more heart, more love?

I was inspired by the vision and creativity of these alternative young-adult-led communities. I will say that in my own UU journey, the churches I have experienced have leaned in the direction of more heart-centered worship that has deeply touched my spirit—Arlington Street Church, First Parish in Brewster, Massachusetts, and here at A2U2. But how much more might we do? At the beginning of our worship today we experimented with more singing, and fewer words. My hope for today is to spark your imaginations as we ponder the future of our faith.

17 Loc 2144.

18 Loc 2125.

19 Loc 2136.

20 Loc 2157.

I invite us now into a brief time of thought and conversation on some of the questions that were raised. How are we balancing the tensions between affirming our individual identities, and affirming our communal relationships? Are we attached to the forms of worship with which we are currently familiar, or are we hungry for more spirit, more heart, more love? Are we in church for comfort, or are we open to spiritual transformation? Can human beings on their own heal the planet, or do we need a spiritual awakening, and the help of the greater life force?

Take a moment to ponder the questions, and if you'd like to share a thought, then I will come round with a microphone, if you raise your hand.

Worship included a congregational conversation on the questions raised.

Following our services today, we explored related questions raised by the Black Experience and the Future of Unitarian Universalism, through a video and discussion with 35 people. That video (including introduction and responses that we did not see) can be viewed at <https://vimeopro.com/user9111141/spring2017minns/video/214155347>

Closing Words

May we find a way forward in an uncertain time,
may we find our way together in love.
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.