

Inspiration from General Assembly

Jamaica Plain, July 31, 2005, Karl Haakonsen

For the third year in a row, I've attended General Assembly, which for those of you who don't know, is the annual convention of the Unitarian Universalist Association. There has been a renewed effort coming from the UUA for spiritual muscle in the denomination; fine tuning our message to the larger world and giving our members a solid kick in the pants to inspire them to live that message and toward doing our part to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. Toward that end, I experienced two of the most inspiring sermons I've heard, one during the Friday night Service of the Living Tradition by Rev. Dr. Patrick T. O'Neill, of First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware, and the other on the Sunday morning service delivered by Rev. Robert Hardies, of All Souls Church in Washington, DC. I have made an attempt to fuse the ideas from these two sermons along with some of my own into one sermon for you today. I hope it works.

The reading today from the Desert Fathers was lifted from Robert Hardies' reading in the Sunday service during GA. In it, Abbott Lot was feeling empty, though he was pursuing the spiritual life. Many of us Unitarian Universalists can relate to the befuddled monk in the story. He's been working at the spiritual life for years: praying and meditating, trying out all the practices that folks have taught him, but to no avail. Something's still missing. As Hardies said, "He still hasn't found the answers to the questions that, in the quiet moments, make him tremble: Why am I here? What is my purpose? He still hasn't found whatever it is that will fill that empty place inside him... that longs and longs and longs to be filled."

We see people among us like Abbot Lot. Quoting from Hardies again, "Seekers who've been dabbling in the spiritual life for a while now; trying this and that. You know, a little yoga on Thursdays after work... maybe church on Sunday... the latest bestseller from Thich Nhat Hanh on their bed stand; searching... but not finding.

"In our story, Abbot Lot takes his frustration to his teacher and says, 'Master, I've tried everything you've taught me and it's still not enough. What more can I do?' And then this is where the story gets strange, because instead of telling Abbot Lot to be patient... to give it a little more time... or to trade in his yoga mat for a Buddhist meditation pillow; instead of that, his teacher stretches his hands up to the Heavens and each of his fingertips bursts into flames, and he says, 'Why not be totally changed into fire?'"

Hardies then went on to tell the story of Unitarian Universalist Minister James Reeb, who, in 1965 heeded Martin Luther King's call for ministers to join him in a march in Selma Alabama. Reeb did so, and was bludgeoned to death by four white segregationists. Many UU's are familiar with Reeb's story, and feel a sort of pride for his martyrdom. What many UU's don't know, however, is that, prior to becoming a UU minister, James Reeb was a conservative Christian with a severe Calvinist theology... where people who were poor and destitute somehow deserved their suffering. However, Reeb later got a job as a chaplain at Philadelphia General Hospital, where he ministered to the poor... some of them suffering from addiction. And there, he had a change of heart. This, Hardies asserts, is what Abbot Joseph meant by being totally changed into fire. Because from that point on, Reeb was on fire with a love and compassion so strong, that it ultimately led him to Selma, and to his death in the name of justice.

Rev. O'Neill talked of Unitarian Universalism's wrestling with a tendency to shift back and forth between "full-blown retreat from the world on the one hand, offering itself as sanctuary and refuge from the world - and full-blown engagement and confrontation with the world on the other hand. The Church as Comforter of our afflictions, haven in our struggles, on the one hand. the Church as Afflicter of our comfort and poker of our conscience; the Church as Righteous Prophet demanding our efforts to mend what is broken in the world; to heal what is wounded in our communities; to hold gently the sorrows and to address lovingly the pain of those perennially left out on the margins of society; the hopeless and the helpless; the war-torn and the hungry and the infected of the world.

"Perhaps no one figure in our history more personally incarnates the push and pull of our Unitarian Universalist dance between retreat and engagement with the world than our beloved idealist, Henry David Thoreau, who in his intentional withdrawal from society into the woods of Walden Pond for two years appeals to one very deep historic strain of UU sensibility; while his great essay on "Civil Disobedience" and his willingness to be jailed as an anti-war and Abolitionist tax protester makes him a hero in another chamber of the Unitarian Universalist heart.

"So when we ponder the sum and substance of our Living Tradition, it is to Thoreau's life and writings that we might turn for one source of inspiration and illumination. In his short life - Thoreau died at age 45- he penned a personal journal of some two million words explaining both the idealistic principles that he went into the woods to discover and to ponder, but also, lest we forget, the demands of a highly developed moral conscience that eventually called him out of the woods to actively engage in abolitionist confrontation with his society.

"When he moved into his rough-hewn cabin on Walden Pond on the outskirts of Concord on the Fourth of July, 1845, Thoreau wrote his immortal apologia for retreating into the sanctuary of Natural surroundings far from the madding crowd:

'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.'

"When Thoreau came out from Walden two years later in 1847, he wrote:

'I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spend any more time for that one.'

"It was not until seven years after he left the woods that Thoreau finally published Walden to great acclaim. But in the years in between his leaving the woods and

publishing his famous account of why he went there, it was his essay on "Civil Disobedience" which gained his reputation. After the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1851, it was the work of Abolitionism, and involvement in Underground Railroad activity, and lecturing on "Slavery in Massachusetts " that occupied much of Henry 's time and thought. When the rabid Abolitionist John Brown visited Concord in 1857, Thoreau was among the Transcendentalist circle that first welcomed him and helped promote Brown's "radical chic" notoriety in the face of the federal government's continued cooption by the system, both North and South, that maintained Slavery as an institution.

"While he never lost his vocation as a Naturalist and botanist, neither did Thoreau ever lose his prophetic idealism for the great justice issues of his day. His spirituality, nurtured in periods of pensive solitude and in his daily ramblings in the countryside, and which he recorded in a voluminous daily journal over the years, was eventually formative of Henry's fierce moral conscience, a conscience always unafraid to speak truth to power; to take a stand for principle; to name the evils that afflicted his day. What a powerful icon he remains, what a shining example for what we in the Free Church might aspire to in our own time!

"Alas, it has been suggested by some that, of late, over the last twenty or thirty years now, Liberal religion itself has been in something of a Waldenesque retreat from effective activist engagement in the crucial moral struggles of our time. "

O'Neill went on with a charge to the newly fellowshiped ministers who were being honored that evening. He said, "Dare we hope to find again, in this newest generation of ministers, preachers who burn with unapologetic indignation in behalf of equal opportunity, equal education, equal health care, decent housing for everyone, the equal right of every person to marry whomever they love, and the right of every woman to be the sole decider of what happens to her body? Dare we look to you newest ministers of our Living Tradition for preaching and teaching that will pour concrete foundations under the moral arguments for a just society, for a world at peace?

"For these are moral human issues before ever they are social policies, no matter what party is in power, no matter who happens to be sitting in the White House, or sitting in Congress, or sitting on the Supreme Court. Our ministry has no moral right not to speak to these issues, no matter whom we might offend or make uncomfortable in our pews! Whether such preaching grows our membership or not, whether it is effective institutional strategy for our Association or not, these are the issues that will always determine the health and integrity of Liberal religion, or what's a pulpit for?"

Reaching his climax, O'Neill proclaimed, "For, Brothers and Sisters, I come to announce to you some rather alarming news tonight: In case you haven't yet noticed, Walden is burning! The woods, our beloved woods, are on fire! Our Eden, our idyllic retreat, our sylvan sanctuary from the mundane cares of the world, Eden is ablaze tonight!"

Pretty inspiring, challenging stuff. Especially for those of us aspiring to UUA ministry.

In the business portion of General Assembly, the delegation selected the Study Action Issue entitled "Moral Values in a Pluralistic Society". In two years, this will be transformed into a statement of conscience of the UUA. I will talk more about this issue and the process in the fall.

But for now, it is imperative that we consider the issues of our time... flagrant social injustice, racism, homophobia, warmongering... in a moral and religious context. We simply can't let the right wing define moral and religious values for the American people the way they have been doing ever so successfully. So much so that morality and religion in our culture have become synonymous with "conservative." A member of our congregation, who had grown up in a UU church elsewhere that was more secular humanist in its liturgy, when describing this church to his mother, said that it was more "conservative." Our church is as liberal as any UU church, but because we use the words "God" and "Jesus" in our liturgy, he equated that with being conservative. This is how deep the connection is between religious and moral values and conservatism. Few people

seemed to bat an eye when the media portrayed the election's outcome last year as being decided by people who were concerned about "moral values." The time has come for us religious liberals to take back our right to have a voice in morality.

Readings:

From Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience"

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?

From Desert Fathers (as quoted in General Assembly)

Our second reading is one of the legends told of the Desert Fathers; a band of monks who, in the third century, wandered the desert in search of God. The stories told about the desert fathers are a little like zen koans: they don't give easy answers; but invite reflection. Let us then reflect on this story.

One day Abbot Lot came to his teacher, Abbot Joseph, and said, "Father, as best as I am able, I keep my little fast, my little rule... my little prayer. But it's not enough. And Father, as best as I am able, I keep my meditation and my contemplative silence; and I strive to cleanse my heart of all unnecessary desires. But it's not enough. I still haven't found what I seek. Father, what more can I do?"

In reply, Abbot Joseph, the Elder, rose up and stretched his hands to the heavens, and his fingers became like ten burning lamps. And he said, "Why not be totally changed into fire?"