

Tools for the Journey
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
October 23, 2011
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

Reading

Words of the Reverend Howard Thurman The Reverend Howard Thurman, theologian, minister, a Baptist with heavy Quaker leanings, Dean of Theology and Chaplain at both Howard and Boston Colleges, and finally the co founder with Dr. Albert Fisk, in 1944, of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples – the first fully multicultural church.

Every person wants to be cared for, to be sustained by the assurance that we share in the watchful and thoughtful attention of others—not merely or necessarily others in general but others in particular. We want to know that—however vast and impersonal all life about us may seem, however hard may be the stretch of road on which we are journeying—we are not alone, but are the object of another's concern and caring; we want to know this in an awareness sufficient to hold us against ultimate fear and panic. It is precisely at this point of awareness that life becomes personal and a person is free to ask and find answers to this question: What makes me come alive, and how can I share that aliveness with the world?

Sermon

Last week I talked with you about reaching out with your faith – about lifting your light and our light out from under a bushel. I got home in the late afternoon and sat down as I do each week with my dear husband, Mark and asked him for his feedback. This is always risky because my spouse is dead honest with me. So, I won't go into all the gory details, but he did say "it would've been nice for you to give some concrete examples of ways that people could spread the word." And Jane Matthews asked me, as she came through the line after the service last Sunday, "so what do we do?" Now if Jane, who is a long dedicated member of this congregation has that question – then we all, really have that question: what do we do to share our faith?

I can answer that two ways – one way is the punch list approach – here are the ten things you can do to share Unitarian Universalism with the world – or at least with one corner of the world. The other is to dig a little deeper into what it means to share your faith and from that will follow both the how and the will to share it.

So I want to answer this need for some sense of direction both ways.

So! To share your faith – you have to know what it is and then you have to be equipped to share it. For a Unitarian Universalist to know his or her faith, also has two aspects. We know we are diverse in belief here – it is the nature of a universal faith to embrace many paths. But we also know that we share some common ground – deep ground. A member of the congregation shared this week about a conversation that her daughter had with her boyfriend – a young man who attends Willow Creek Church. He asked her what Unitarian Universalists believe and she explained about the diversity of our beliefs about God and such – about how some Unitarian Universalists are theists and some atheists, some Unitarian Universalist and Buddhist, or Christian or Jewish or Muslim and then about the unity we also find together. Then he asked her – what do you

believe? You personally? Now, from what I heard, our young woman acquitted herself quite well and I can't help but wonder how the young man is processing that.

To know your own faith well, you have to have had time and practice in exploring and expressing it. Each of our young people is given a chance to spend a keystone year during eight grade, exploring their faith and creating a credo. Clearly, this was one young girl who had spent her time well.

To feel confident in that faith you have to test it against reason and reality. Last year the Reverend Scot Giles preached a sermon on the Flying Spaghetti Monster who created the universe and brought life into being with his noodly appendages. If you happened to believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster you would need to explore for evidence, reflect on other religious traditions and see if there was a common theme that might point toward the Flying Spaghetti Monster as a deep reality. And you might want to see if it sounds ridiculous – because absurd as the world can be – it is not ridiculous.

A strong faith needs to stand the test of dialogue. To see if, as you speak of it with others you find it grows deeper and clearer, and remains strong. You need to know that when others speak to you of their faith you can hear it open heartedly, respectfully, not feel yourself clenching up within – or feeling defensive, or feeling that you must change their minds. And still your faith thrives and beats like a pulse within you. There are few experiences as exciting as sharing that sort of dialogue with someone whose beliefs are very different from your own and seeing a common thread, a universal theme seeing the beauty of difference and celebrating how differently it is expressed by another.

To understand Unitarian Universalism as a shared faith, takes more than showing up on Sunday – though that's important. It takes time, reflection, dialogue, study. It takes knowing our history, our common practices and our diverse ways. Today, the large group of people who just shared the path to membership class are having a luncheon. During that class you get to know a little bit of Unitarian Universalist history, you get to share a bit of your journey and your story, you get to learn a bit about Countryside Church and learn about our aspirations of membership and you get to build the beginnings of some new relationships. It's a great process and I love participating in it – but it's only the beginning. Unitarian Universalism is a profound path and I only deal in a small portion of that on Sunday morning. The rest, we have to explore and even blaze together in reflection, dialogue, and study. I know that people's lives are busy – and that time is precious.

But if your time is precious – invest it in your heart and soul. Invest it in your life – and, despite fun events like last night's auction, fundraising, service work, family sings, book groups, and coffee -- the purpose of this place is to deepen our souls and the purpose of deepening our souls is so that the world can live and thrive more deeply.

Now there is a famous quotation by Frederick Buechner, who said “the vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet.” I know that a great talk was given here this year by our own Bruce Bendix, whose passion is happiness – I mean he's made a study and taught classes on it. I'm not talking about happiness in the sense of gosh those 500 dollar shoes will make me happy but in the sense that the philosophers meant. Now, I've been hooked on happiness ever since I studied philosophy in college. And five hundred dollar shoes have nothing to do with it. Shoes – while certainly fun, though, for me, the fun would have transformed into sheer anxiety a whole lot earlier than 500 dollars – are merely *things* that will pass, wear out,

create trash. But there are things which transcend this passing nature – love, wisdom, the artistic and creative impulses – the things of the soul. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, of whom I'm not fond for reasons that could occupy another sermon, claims that the person who contemplates and achieves real wisdom experiences happiness so profound that it is ecstasy indeed. You can't prove that – but what you can prove again and again – is that the pleasure of things passes but love and wisdom magnify, endure, outlast death, and spread. In Greek the word for this would be *eudemonia* – from the root *eu* for good and *daimonia* for a spiritual being. So it has been translated as happiness but also as human flourishing.

Buechner said once in an interview said that if the world doesn't need what makes you happy then it isn't your calling. "When you are doing what you are happiest doing, it must also be something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done." So – *Eudamonia* and not shopping euphoria.

Like, if the world doesn't need your 500 hundred dollar shoes – and they don't -- then they won't offer you true gladness and though they may seem to be calling you on that website – it's a prank call. Now I'll admit that there might be some exceptions to this – I met a Unitarian Universalist a few years ago who makes wooden canoes. His canoes are glistening things of beauty. People use them, heavy as they are. And in the shaping of the wood, the crafting of the boat, in the appreciation, and the use of it there is a true gladness and it meets a sort of hunger. There's something about those canoes that approaches the sacred in the union of human being, wood, and water. It might not be sufficient for a vocation – but it would be more than a foolish pleasure. True happiness comes in the cultivation of the soul. And although we seldom think of that as we roll out of bed on Sunday morning – or head off to another committee meeting or ... you know – it is the gladness and the purpose of this place to cultivate our souls so that we can each discern where our deep gladness and world's deep need meet.

This takes time, introspection and dialogue.

For the last six months at least, Sheryl Skifstad, Krista MacTavish, Dan Wiseman, Mike Gilley, Judy Ball, Jeanie Michalec, Colleen Vahey, and myself have been working on a program you maybe just learned about -- called *Coming Alive*. It is based in part on a curriculum for Unitarian Universalist adults called *Harvest the Power*, in part on Dan Wiseman's considerable consulting resources, my professional resources and experience, and the insights and labor of the entire team. And I'm sure that each of us has a slightly different way of looking at this program. But at its heart it has to do with just what the name says – it has to do with coming alive.

It has to do with cultivating your spiritual ground, clarifying your sense of purpose, understanding the nature of congregational life. It has to do with having some time to reflect, share, and connect. And it has to do with learning how, in ever increasing degrees – to let your light out from under any bushel which may beset you.

Every so often someone will refer to it as leadership development. I can get with that, if by leadership you mean the ability to more fully live your principles and by your actions help others to do the same. If by leadership you mean a willingness to be a creative, positive, active participant in beloved community then I'm alright with it. If by leadership you mean being equipped to share your grounding faith, then I am there with you. But mostly I mean it to be a program in which we can find Unitarian Universalist grounding, connection, new insight, greater strength of purpose, practical congregational

skills, and new friendship. Leadership – well—it’s what the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King called “the drum major instinct – the desire to be first or best or make your mark. We yearn for some sort of greatness – and the most important greatness flows from what we have cultivated in our souls, in our minds.

The program will be offered this year as a pilot and if we create it well it can become a part of how we simply grow together. Also this year Colleen Vahey and I will be offering a UU 102 class – a chance for people who have become members to spend an afternoon exploring contemporary issues in Unitarian Universalism and another class called Faith like a River, which will explore the history and impact of Unitarian Universalists on society and in the world. We take this journey of faith together.

Just as Howard Thurman wrote:

“We want to know that—however vast and impersonal all life about us may seem, however hard may be the stretch of road on which we are journeying—we are not alone ... and the individual person is free to ask and find answers to this question: What makes me come alive, and how can I share that aliveness...?” In an interview he once said “Find out what makes you come alive and do it because the world needs people who have come alive.”

For me, frankly, Unitarian Universalism is, at its burning core, about being alive. On all levels. It is about seeking our common ground – which is no simple task – but easily one of the most satisfying on a soul level. About seeking our own burning core: our meaning, purpose, and path. And then Unitarian Universalism is about taking that meaning and purpose and grounding it in the larger meaning and deep need of the world.

Every soul is seeking – every one here – even those of you who have found deep truths are still seeking – because that is the nature of being – it unfolds as we move through it. Thurman put it like this: Therefore, whatever creed there is, whatever theology there is, it is always a little out of date.”

That burning core that we seek – even when we find it, it keeps moving, it, too, is living – Thurman calls it yeasty. When a religion can neatly package itself so it looks like it stands still – watch out. It’s probably a trap. So another skill of sharing your faith, is making sure that you aren’t holding it so tight that it becomes frozen, airless and strangled. Thurman, again, put it well: ... I feel, once a religion is stated in terms of dogma, or interlocutions, perhaps, then it can become the source of propaganda... But as long as the experience is vital, the only real way that it can spread is by contagion, not by instruction, not by addressing the mind, but as something you catch, as you catch the measles... This is the nature of religious experience, whatever kind it is.”

Religion is contagious. I don’t tell you what to believe. I keep opening the doors and windows and providing a chance to catch it. It’s the light at your core, that shines from you – that’s the most powerful way to share Unitarian Universalism. Not the words but the spirit – communicates from you to another person and they begin to understand.

You have something to share because you know, you’re in touch with, you’re living in that place of deep vitality. You never need to push – the Reverend Tony Larsen said -- Unitarian Universalist evangelism is about sharing not shoving. It’s not about convincing people, especially those who are at home and happy in their faith but about reaching out to find those people who are wondering where they will come alive, those who are hungry for a meaning, eudaimonia, those who will thrive in this amazing faith of many facets and deep unity.

So – Jane asked – what do we do? As we get grounded and equipped – we share it gently. Sharing, not shoving. Neither hounding people nor hiding I wear this chalice all the time – a number of you do. And regularly I’m asked what it means. You can wear a shirt – like Jim Booth wore to the auction last night that says, Standing on the Side of Love and it will start conversations. You can wear a UU shirt when you go to do volunteer work. When you write your well thought out, rational, compassionate, balanced letters to the editor you can mention that you are a Unitarian Universalist and although you can’t speak for the whole church you can explain how your faith and principles inform your thinking.

You can have a family chalice for lighting at meals, like we do at home, and welcome guests into the saying of your family grace.

You can get involved in helping Countryside Church, Unitarian Universalist, do stronger outreach. Last night we raised... 10% of which will be skimmed right off the top for service and justice work in the world in the name of our faith.

This year, in the spring, I’ll travel to Boston, with our coming of age class of about 11 young people. We’ll go to Beacon Hill where the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist association is located at 25 Beacon Street, next to the Massachusetts state House. It will be a great historical trip, a good grounding – though I believe – that here in the Midwest where the Reverend Augustus Conant felt called to preach, where women like Olympia Brown and Mary Safford and so many others rode out into the wilds to start new churches, where the Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones grew our movement by leaps and bounds more than one hundred years ago – this is our Beacon and, you know – in every one of you – just sure as we have this chalice burning here – there is a beacon in each of you.

I offer you this challenge – to take up as you can. Take a moment here to think about three ways that you can share your faith. Maybe even this week. You can tell me about them over coffee – even better – tell one another and before you know it our Eudaimonia will be magnified a thousand fold. And our world and all our lives – will be brighter.