

“It’s Tougher Being UU Outside Greater Wayland”

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

On February 5, 2006

I spent a part of this past week in Indiana, up in the northeast corner where the hotel rates are low because there’s not much to do there in January besides the toboggan run at the state park ... which is less than scintillating this year, since they have had no snow. Only a week before, on UU ministers’ business I drove into Albuquerque, New Mexico, from the north, with the ski slopes in full view ... all of them snowless, since they had had not a drop of precipitation in 97 days.

In the southwest, though, they are holding on to hopes of wetter weather. In Indiana, they are as wet as they want, gray drizzly skies beyond end, without much hope of tourists seeking toboggan runs, much less adventuresome skiing. Instead, the inn owners count on sedentary folks like the UU ministers of the Heartland Chapter: my colleagues from Indiana, Kentucky, much of Michigan, and a part of Ohio.

They totaled about 35, mostly from small cities in rural areas. They get together once a year, and I was part of their program this year, as I was two years ago. They are young and old, women and men, Christian and humanist and Pagan and what-have-you, straight and gay and otherwise, all trying to make a vibrant UU presence in their communities, notwithstanding all the constraints of human nature, the petty disagreements, trivial distractions, and discord to which even the smallest community may be prone, and maybe those more so than most. They have to cope with that, and with their difficult social setting out there, which I will talk more about later this morning.

I was there mostly to listen to my colleagues preach, which luckily is something I like to do. I used to report back more often on sermons I heard, back when I was on the UUA’s credentialing body for ministers. I’d hear about a hundred sermons a year, and report back on the few I like best. And then the group decided it was rude to take notes when a person was preaching, and that was the end of that but for the occasional good story or image.

I do keep my ears open, though. Last time I saw my colleague in Carlisle [Tim Jensen] he said he was about to preach on his basic message, that all religion is comprised of four things: humility, compassion, generosity, and gratitude. Humility, compassion, generosity, and gratitude.

And that made me think of the line you may have seen – it showed up in a rabbi’s column in Newsweek last November, though I have also seen it credited to the late UU minister Rudy Nemser. It says that in all the world, in every religion, there are only four kinds of prayer, which may be summarized as “Thanks,” “Oops,” “Gimme,” and “Wow.” Gary Smith up the road in Concord rearranged them as Gimme, Oops, Wow, Thanks. A United Church of Canada minister adds “I remember,” in which you hold others in your prayer. UU minister Susan Rak adds, “Ouch”: Gimme, Oops, Ouch, Wow, Thanks. And our colleague Linda Anderson adds to the original four the prayer of “Help me,” citing the writer Annie Lamott’s words that, “Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me,’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’”

So there I was in dreary, drizzly Indiana, hoping to hear some sermon ideas like those, any one of which I may still preach on, though I can't help thinking, now that I've given you the titles – “The Four Elements of Religion” and “The Four Kinds of Prayer” – and told you in each case what the four may be – you can probably think through for yourself as good a sermon as I might give.

Along with the sermons, the gathered clergy had professional tales to tell, some woeful, some not so. A favorite was the minister who went to visit a family from the congregation at their home. The door was opened by the four-year-old in the family, who, upon seeing it was her minister, asked, “How did you get out?”

I heard a sermon on spirituality – as you might assume -- but it wasn't about experiences like the peace and sense of cosmic oneness one may have watching the sun set over the ocean. No, the preacher wanted to talk about spirituality as it lives and helps sustain us in the hard times, in the sad and the awful times, when the spirit persists, even granting some measure of peace or calm or at least the power to endure.

It was not in her peak times, she said, times of glee or high excitement, that she had most deeply felt connected to the deepest parts of her our soul, but being on hand for her mother's dying, or coping with an illness of her own, or some loss that required more strength than she knew she could muster.

Another minister spoke of the help that anyone can bring to those in such dire straights by their presence, their compassion and care, maybe especially in those situations one has contributed to oneself. His model was his three-year-old daughter. She had gone scouting about the house and found a lengthy fork from a fondue set, which she used to poke a nearby pokable item, which wasn't cheese or a bread cube but her father's behind. She was surprised – not dismayed at all, but surprised -- when her father reacted ... well, as if he'd been poked in the behind. It hurt, and seeing this, the three-year-old hugged her father's leg and said, “I'm sorry I fondued you.” A prayer of Oops.

I want to get back, though, to the subject I said I would speak on today, the situation of our congregations in the towns and small cities these ministers serve. It's not an easy go – the great majority of these ministers serve churches with memberships of 80-110 (ours here is about 350). For a church that size, it's a struggle to raise enough to pay the minister a living wage, and other staff are apt to be few. There may be a choir, at least on occasion, maybe not. There are smaller congregations whose ministers are part-time, and may not even have a Sunday school. Most have church buildings of their own, but many are still paying off the mortgage, and few have any endowment to speak of.

And yet they persevere, bless their hearts, and every now and then one of them has a growth spurt, or a successful capital fund drive. But these days, they are contending with another problem, one that weighs heavy on their minds: the religious climate in their cities and towns, which has grown so political, so conservative, so censorious, and so aggressively self-assured. This is religion without the humility, compassion, or generosity, and what gratitude it has is thanks for knowing oneself to be right, saved, and morally superior.

I am probably exaggerating, but hearing the chorus of voices speaking of the isolation and disapproval meted out to UUs in general in their areas, I came away awoken from the luxury of being a UU in eastern Massachusetts.

I spoke to a minister from western Michigan. There is a clergy association in her town, but being a UU, she's not welcome. She managed to have her church be part of an

interfaith event, causing the Baptist church to withdraw from the event. It doesn't help that she is the only clergy person in town who's a woman.

It isn't just the exclusion but the whole drift of religion in these areas. One minister saw that there was a traveling event coming to town designed especially for teens. For \$11 a person could go through a structure, sort of like the Disneyland ride past figures singing "It's a Small World After All." Except here, the story was one about a teenage girl who gets involved in the temptations of young adulthood, starts to give in, but gets to visit Hell, where other teens act out their agony, imploring the heroine to reform her ways lest her fate match their own. At which point who should show up but Jesus, promising her salvation if she accepts him as her savior. My colleague paid her money, took the trip, and came out very upset. She tried to get the local clergy to object to such fear-mongering -- but with little success.

The mood out there, they say, has turned ugly. The coupling of certain political issues like abortion and gay rights to religious belief has made it almost scary to be religiously liberal. And this in places where our congregations themselves can be pretty conservative politically, I'm told, especially on an issue like Iraq.

The ministers there speak wistfully, defensively, about those of us from "blue states," as if we live in a parallel universe from where they live and work. And I don't think their constant awareness that they live and work in a red state is tightly tied to a political party, though it does mostly line up that way. But in terms of presidential politics, New Mexico and New Hampshire were red states last time, but UUs there aren't feeling ostracized or isolated. Whereas a senator from the Dakotas running for reelection this year has already been publicly attacked for being a UU.

One of the big issues when the Constitution was drafted was, should there be a religious test for public office. Most states had one, and nearly all had had one once. It was a real battle, but the decision was to leave out any religious requirements for public office. Now, though, such requirements are slipping in implicitly. Adlai Stevenson ran for president in 1952 and 1956 as a Unitarian and Lutheran both. I do not think a UU could run for president today and have any hope of his campaign going anywhere.

And yet here we are in eastern Massachusetts, with a concentration of UUs unmatched in the known universe, where we have lots of the prettiest, most churchy-looking buildings, often right in the middle of town, with long, distinguished histories and some tidy endowments. Our meetinghouses are not only paid for already, we didn't have to build them in the first place -- the town did that for us.

I notice that in the letter from Stephen Winthrop, our canvass chair this year, that is in the church newsletter you will receive this week, he sites among the purposes to which our donations to the church go, the aid we provide to Unitarian Universalism as a movement through the UUA. I read that and thought immediately of those fellow UUs who are holding up our banner, making our stand, offering our liberal religious alternative in places where you can't just drive to the next town (like Sudbury or Framingham) if there weren't a UU church there, where no other clergy will marry you if you're gay or welcome your children to their Sunday school, where no voice would exist to challenge the notion that being religious means opposing abortion rights and science.

But while I do want to honor our connection with our fellow UUs who are defending our religion in places where it is considered all but disreputable to do so, I don't want to close without raising a positive prospect, the hope that things may be

starting to change in the land, and the pendulum starting to swing back, maybe even soon in those places where religious moderation has been in short supply. Among a growing number of others, both Republican John Danforth, former senator and a minister, and Democrat ex-President Jimmy Carter have issued fervent appeals for fellow Christians to reclaim a more traditional, less politically ideological faith, one that comports more comfortably with the Bible and Jesus' own teachings than with the agenda of the radical right. Blessings on their efforts: Jesus had a powerful message to offer the ages, and as you may recall, he never once mentioned homosexuality, evolution, or abortion.

In the meantime, I think we owe it to those who live where that change has not yet begun to remember them, help support them, and in our own political activities seek to strengthen the forces of thoughtfulness in every party. And I'm not just laying it on those of you who are Republicans, hoping you can wrest the party back from the radical religious right. I mean, how did your party become dominated by the likes of Carl Rove, Tom DeLay, and even folks like Pat Robertson and that Dobson guy that I would rank as dangers to our country and its basic beliefs?

But UUs of liberal political outlook had their own embarrassing episode just last month when our UUA Washington Office, an operation we maintain because there are clearly matters we care about (ones that we've taken a religious stand on, that deserve to have a voice in the capital) decided to oppose publicly the nomination of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court. For better or worse, whether you support that stand or oppose it, I don't think such a declaration will happen again. We are on the side of thoughtfulness,

So that is my sermon, though just before the Auction broke up last night, Erin Splaine, the other minister here, said people were looking forward to my comments about the cartoons that featured the Muslim prophet Mohammed that had set off a worldwide fury among offended Muslims who were demonstrating against Danish embassies and boycotting Danish products because a Danish newspaper had first published the first offending cartoon.

If you were not here to hear my sermon on January 15, you may be surprised at my response. In that sermon I took on the old response of religious liberals that everyone should try to honor every other tradition. Horse feathers, I said in effect, echoing the great and powerful book by Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*. Some or many parts of most of all religious traditions are simply not healthy, it should be conceded. The drive of the Christian crusaders to assume control of the Middle East was simply stupid. The need of Modern Muslims to have Mohammed shielded from any satirical portrayal is just as far-fetched.

So if as Erin suggested you want to hear me talk about the cartoon flap, I am on the side of Danish cartoons, of Danish freedom, of Danish butter, and of anything else that helps free the human spirit from the oppressive weight of clerical or political demand, whether it be to repress a cartoon, reject a judicial choice, or suggest that only one candidate, one party, or one political outlook is particularly holy.

As long as we all might try to agree -- Republican, Socialist, Libertarian, Democrat, Green Party, or whoever -- that none of us has the authorization of the divine, however much it may seem so to us and enliven our efforts, praise be -- may our common efforts help create that world more fair and just and kind and bounteous that every one of us, and every good soul in every place, devoutly desires to see come to pass upon this sorrow earth and soon. So may be it be. Amen.