

The Promises We Make, the Promises We Keep

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Three weeks ago, Beverly and I traveled to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to participate in a special convocation of Unitarian Universalist ministers from all over North America. The call to the convocation announced that we would be invited to explore "the transient and the permanent in liberal religion," and seek to define the enduring center of our religious faith as we move into a new millennium. The planners of the convocation had hoped for a gathering of about three hundred ministers. When all of us had descended upon Hot Springs, there were more than five hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers gathered to discuss together matters central to our future as a religious movement. Much to the surprise of all of us, this turned out to be the largest gathering in the history of our movement.

I am not quite certain what I expected of this convocation. Convened in Hot Springs, Arkansas, the boyhood home of President Clinton, a resort community famous for its baths and spas, this convocation could have been another of those opportunities to get away from the folks back home, recharge the batteries and renew old friendships. But from the moment of my arrival at the hotel, I had a sense that this was not going to be that kind of gathering. I arrived early because I had been asked to be a facilitator for one of the more than thirty groups which would be meeting together throughout the course of the convocation. I was handed a schedule which indicated that each group would meet together morning and evening to process a series of specific concerns and produce consensus statements around each of them. In addition, the convocation would meet morning and evening for extended services of worship. Special affinity groups would sit together for lunch throughout the convocation, and workshops and learning groups would meet in the afternoons. The nature of the convocation could be discerned from the fact that "personal time" was scheduled from six to eight each morning.

Now, over my thirty-eight years in the Unitarian Universalist ministry, I have had occasion to attend a great many gatherings of ministers. I must tell you that most of the time, such gatherings are occasions when men and women who spend their lives in this strange and curious occupation find a rare moment of release. Our gatherings tend to be times when we can let loose the pent-up cynicism which we dare not unleash at other times; occasions when we can give voice to the disappointments, the frustrations, the pain and insecurity which are part of our professional lives and which go unvoiced most of the time. In the company of colleagues we experience the rare freedom to grouse, to express our misgivings, to reflect openly and honestly upon our professional lives. In the company of those who share the ironies of ministry, we can laugh at ourselves, our

profession, our pretensions. Such occasions are profoundly important, but they are not often times of deep and intentional deliberation. I read the schedule that had been handed to me, and I wondered what in the world I had gotten myself into when I agreed to facilitate. I steeled myself for revolt, for an outpouring of anger and frustration and refusal to participate as we tried to herd over five hundred individualistic Unitarian Universalist ministers through this rigid and demanding process.

Once more, I was destined to be surprised. As the buses from the airport in Little Rock began to disgorge their loads of ministers, the usual high level of energy, the warm greetings, the friendly banter, the genuine delight at being together filled the lobby of the Arlington Hotel. Even the fact that the hotel had given away one hundred of our rooms to other guests, and many of the ministers had to be housed in other accommodations did not suffice to weaken the genuine delight at being together. But underneath the usual outpouring of emotion and energy, I sensed something else. These people had come to this place not just for a chance to relax in the middle of a busy church year. They had devoted precious time, and significant resources to attend a gathering which they believed had important work to do, and they had come to do that work.

From the first meeting to the last, it was clear that these women and men--a gathering which included at least half of our ministry--were serious about the movement they served, about the profession to which they had been called, and about the need to structure a response to the challenges which confront us as one millennium ends and another begins. Over the course of five days, in groups of fifteen to seventeen we sought to define the changes occurring in the world around us, and the challenges those changes presented to our movement, our congregations, our ministries. In those same groups, we sought to examine our understanding of ministry, and how that vision served to empower us or inhibit us as we sought to confront those challenges. In those same groups, we sought to define the resources, personal, spiritual, corporate and structural that we must have if we are to minister effectively in the world into which we are moving.

The discussions were intense and profound. Many of us confessed our deep fright before a world we felt ill-prepared to understand, to enter, to confront effectively. Many of us gave voice to the profound sense of loss which accompanies any time of rapid change and possible growth. Many of us spoke of the resentment we felt as we realized that the world we had prepared to serve, the church we had been called to serve were changing and were demanding of us skills and talents and knowledge and styles which were foreign to us. It is as if sometimes we are being required to speak a different language in a world grown suddenly strange and unfamiliar.

And yet, we spoke with equal passion of our conviction that Unitarian Universalism had a special message, a special vision, a special mission to the world of the twenty-first century. We spoke to each other of the profound commitment to a world of justice and peace which has been central to our religious heritage. We reminded each other of the work we needed to do to confront classism and racism and all the other "isms" which function to marginalize people within our congregations and in the world at large. We spoke of the necessary balance, which we struggle to maintain, between respect for the

individual and respect for the web--social, communal, natural--in which the individual is embedded. We affirmed our commitment to a religious vision which is rational, critical, *and* profoundly spiritual. And we embraced anew the importance of our churches and our ministries in a world grown mean and cold and heartless.

In the middle of the convocation, we were asked to arrive at a consensus around an answer to the question, "What is the enduring center of our Unitarian Universalist faith?" Here, as you may imagine, we confronted our most difficult challenge. Ministers care passionately about the religious convictions which motivate them and inform their personal and professional lives and none of us was happy to see his or her deepest convictions homogenized into a consensus statement. There was strong resistance to any such effort in almost all of the groups, and yet many of the groups wrestled their way to important statements. One group said, "We believe in the power of love and the interconnectedness of all life. Out of this we discover god, the holy, the sacred. (We) emphasize the importance of living justly and honoring each other's differences. We are seekers in freedom who use the tools of reason and imagination to build a world of love and justice." Another group said, "In the midst of mystery, the creative power of transforming love engages us with the tragedy and beauty of life to awaken compassion and and call us to justice." A third group said, "There is a center, describable but not definable. We affirm: Our freedom to approach it by many paths, that it makes demands on us, that it manifests as the power of redemptive love." And a fourth group said, "Rooted in our reverence for the mystery of life itself, we affirm our faith in the transforming power of creativity, in the divine spark within each heart, in the dance of healing our own and the world's brokenness, in the experience of ultimate connection and in the ongoing conversation of each with all."

All of these and many of the other statements crafted by the small groups seemed to share a common spirit--a concern for the worth of the individual, a faith in the possibility that change need not be loss, only, but may represent the necessary precondition of transformation, a commitment to sustaining the human conversation, a concern for justice among individuals, within society, and embracing the earth itself.

In the end, the convocation was not able to merge these many statements into a single consensus statement. While there was a profound unity of spirit, the names by which we named that spirit were too diverse, and too important to be subsumed under any common denominator. Anyone who hoped that the convocation would produce a definition of the center of our faith suitable for framing and hanging on the wall was destined to be disappointed. Nonetheless, the work toward that goal was important, and most of us came away from the attempt with a stronger sense of our own center, and with a conviction--in the words of one of the groups--that "There is a center, describable but not definable." If nothing more, we are all engaged in the same conversation.

If we were not able to craft a consensus statement describing the enduring center of Unitarian Universalism, we surprised ourselves by coming to remarkable consensus in another area. The organizers of the convocation asked us, in light of the discussions we had had--about the challenges we confront, about the nature of our ministries, about the

center of our faith--to name the most important things we might promise to do together that would make the most difference in our efforts to minister more effectively in the twenty-first century. Each of the more than thirty groups was asked to come to consensus around five promises; then the entire convocation was asked to prioritize the list which resulted from combining those promises. In the end, the convocation was convened into plenary session and presented with a document which had emerged as a result of that process.

As the plenary session opened, in good Unitarian Universalist fashion, there was a line of people at the microphones, each person in line prepared to offer an amendment to a statement no one yet had had a chance to read. For an hour and a half, we discussed and we debated; we added a few words and removed a few words; we shifted clauses around and inserted commas and removed commas and in the end, we had crafted a covenant which was adopted by the more than five hundred ministers present, with only a handful of dissenting votes. We were stunned. None of us believed that so large a gathering of irascible, individualistic, egotistical ministers could ever come to so solid a consensus. It was a token of the seriousness with which we had approached the task that we were able to craft a statement which virtually all of us could affirm.

I share with you now the covenant of the 1995 Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Convocation. These are the promises we made to each other, and by extension to you and to our movement as a whole:

*In the midst of mystery
And in the enduring presence of religious Community,
The creative power of transforming love
Engages us in the beauty and tragedy of life
To awaken compassion,
Call us to justice,
And invite us to live in harmony with the earth.*

In light of our commitment to our Unitarian Universalist faith and our responsibility to our colleagues, congregations and the world:

We covenant to affirm that at the heart of our faith is a profound sense of the holy and a critical trust in the power of reason. We lift up this universal religious experience, while respecting our different languages and symbols, in worship, religious education, fellowship and service.

We covenant to hold ourselves and each other fully accountable to our vision of ministry and to the code of professional practice of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, embracing as a Beloved Community an ethic of loving, honest, and respectful engagement.

We covenant to embody what we proclaim: to relate authentically to others, live a simple and balanced life, encourage and support personal spiritual practice, model generosity

and abundance, look for hope and take care of ourselves.

We covenant to develop and articulate a clear and compelling vision, along with the theologies, commitments, financial resources and skills necessary to fulfill the mission which flows from it.

We covenant to educate ourselves about the realities of our biases, privileges and complicity in oppressive social and economic systems, work to eliminate classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and especially racism, and commit ourselves to ongoing vigilance in this task.

We covenant to challenge ourselves and the communities we serve to stay engaged with the world and to develop networks to take effective action for the sake of justice.

This do we covenant with one another and with all that is holy.

When the vote was over, there was momentary silence in the hall--a silence during which I felt two divergent reactions--a disappointment that all our work had produced only this modest statement, and a sense that something important had just happened. It was not the carefully crafted and refined statement anyone of us might have produced in the quiet of his or her study. But we had made some important promises to ourselves and to the movement to which we had given our lives. And suddenly I felt a conviction that while the sacred may remain forever indefinable, but that there is something sacred about the fact of promises--the promises we make and the promises we keep. We had not been able to define the enduring center of Unitarian Universalism. We had danced around it; we had pointed to it; we had affirmed its reality. We had not defined it. But we had approached it in the covenant which we had willingly embraced, in the promises we had made to each other.

This is perhaps the most important lesson I have drawn from this largest gathering of our ministers in history. In some way, the center of our movement is to be found in the promises we make to each other. In the making and the keeping of promises, we come close to the sacred and the holy. A short time ago, we met as a congregation to choose a path for our future. Some of you may be pleased with the result of that meeting. Others may feel, as I do: profoundly disappointed and relegated to a second-class status in this organization. However you feel let me remind you, in light of that meeting, of the promises we have made to each other, our covenant: "We unite to seek truth, to serve humankind, and to dwell together in peace, reserving to all individuals the right to their own beliefs concerning the nature of God, humanity and the universe." In that promise, written in our constitution, I hear an echo of that enduring center which is "describable but not definable." In making and keeping that promise to each other, we constitute ourselves a religious community with obligations to each other and to the larger world outside these walls, outside all walls.

There will always be much about which we disagree, or cannot find the worlds which speak our underlying agreement. There will always be among us the simultaneous sense

of loss and of excitement as we confront a world which, in defiance of our efforts and our votes, will not stand still, which is always changing and confronting us with the need to respond to change. There will always be among us honest differences about the language we use and about the nature of the world and what we are called to be and to do in the world. But underlying all the disagreements, all the hope and fear, all the honest differences are the promises we make: "to seek truth, to serve humankind, to dwell together in peace." As a religious community we will be judged not by our agreements or by our disagreements, but by the promises we make and above all, by the promises we keep.