

OVER ALL

A sermon for the Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church

January 22, 2012

The Rev. Evan Keely, Interim Senior Minister

Walking together—what do these words mean in a denomination like ours, which includes considerable diversity of theological opinion, and which prizes tolerance of diversity?

The words come from the third chapter of Amos: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” It is a verse of interest to us historically, for it was frequently cited by the orthodox opponents of our liberal ancestors at the time of the Unitarian controversy (1805-25). The response by the liberals has had a lasting importance, since it has helped to shape our tradition down to the present...

If any community is to survive, and to accomplish anything, its members must have some common goals, some common purposes, a value system generally accepted, a consensus widely shared... Boundaries may be fuzzy, but they are there. No group can include everybody; no religious group can satisfy the religious needs of all. By the recognition of boundaries we identify the part of the ecclesiastical landscape that we are prepared to occupy, and the constituency that we are equipped to serve. Boundaries change; they are not fixed for all time. The consensus that unites us today is not the consensus that united us in Channing’s time...

So I submit that the orthodox had the right answer to Amos’s question: Can two walk together except they be agreed? No, they cannot—unless they are agreed on at least a few things of overriding importance. It is when they can agree on some basic attitudes and values that they are freed to tolerate much diversity in other matters.

from “Walking Together,” 1984
Conrad Wright¹

Why does Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church exist? What is its purpose? Why do we do the things that we do here? The same question could be asked about any Unitarian Universalist congregation, or any church, synagogue, mosque, mandir, temple, or any religious community. Starting next week, my colleague the Rev. Heather Janules will begin a sermon series on the mission statement of this church. I have discussed this with her a little, and I have no doubt that those sermons will be infused with her usual insight, humanity, humor and wisdom, and that she will lovingly challenge this congregation to think about those words: “to explore the eternal, to nurture community, and to build a more just world.” But before that holy work begins, I want to invite this faith community to think about not just that mission statement, but mission in general: the overarching sense of transcendent purpose that must be at the heart of every congregation in every religious tradition. What is the purpose over all of communal religious life?

For many, a sense of community is of paramount importance. It is easy to find congregants in any religious tradition who cherish the sense of togetherness, cohesion and friendship that can happen in congregations. Many people could look around this room right now and see the faces of others who are beloved, the faces of those fellow pilgrims with whom sacred memories of life-enriching and transformative experiences have been shared. This is a beautiful thing. Looking into each other’s eyes, we can and do encounter the holy in

¹ Conrad Wright, *Walking Together* (Boston: Skinner House, 1989) 25, 30-31.

this space and in the life we share in this church. Yet community is not the purpose of communal religious life.

For many, education and intellectual stimulation are highly valued components of the church experience. We can and do learn a great deal by participating in a church like this, where we have an abundance of religious education programs for all ages, several ministers, a variety of worship opportunities, a diverse music program, and a Sunday morning forum. Communal religious life is empty sentimentality and shallow pageantry without ongoing challenges to the cerebral cortex. Yet education and intellectual stimulation are not the purpose of communal religious life.

Social action is an indispensable aspect of being part of a faith community. Martin Luther King, Jr. was right when he said: "Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion."² Religious people must be concerned with issues of justice, opportunity, peace and freedom, and we must act to make a difference in the world. Our church would be a palace of vapid narcissism and self-satisfaction if it never became a Welcoming Congregation or a Green Sanctuary, if it never got involved in Action in Montgomery, if it weren't for CLARITY and the many other things that happen inside these four walls that strive toward making a positive difference outside these walls. Yet social action is not the purpose of communal religious life.

Human beings have been religious in innumerable ways since we first walked upright because we have need of comfort. We experience pain, loss and grief in life, and we seek ways of comforting ourselves and one another. A communal religious life that did not provide comfort would be empty and sterile; it would mean nothing to us when it mattered most. Yet comfort is not the purpose of communal religious life.

Some people come to church because doing so makes them happy. And is it asking too much that we find a place where we can find some happiness in a world so full of pain and uncertainty? If we did not find happiness here, we would give up on it, and the institution would cease to be. There must be some happiness in this house. We deserve it, because all beings deserve to be happy. And yet happiness is not the purpose of communal religious life.

A feeling of community, intellectual stimulation, social action, comfort and happiness are important aspects of being in a religious community, but they are not in and of themselves goals. They are among the signs that a congregation's purpose is being fulfilled.

A sense of community is a marvelous thing, and it must be present in congregational life if the congregation is to endure and thrive, but we can find community in many places. We don't need to build and maintain an expensive building on our own dime in order to find community, and we certainly don't need to contribute huge sums of money so we can afford to pay competitive salaries and benefits to employees who have been to seminary or who are professional musicians in order to create a cohesive and caring community. Our society offers innumerable opportunities to make meaningful connections with other human beings without the accouterments of communal religious life. If we are connecting meaningfully with one another in our church, it is because we are fulfilling the church's wider sense of purpose; otherwise this would only be a pleasant (though very expensive) social club.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958) 23.

Being part of a community of faith has to exercise and challenge our minds, and we can and do learn a lot by participating in an organization like Cedar Lane. But this is not and cannot be the essential and primary purpose of a religious organization. This has always been apparent to me, but it was particularly so in one congregation I served years ago which was trying to institute a Sunday morning lecture series, not at all unlike the Forum that contributes so richly to the life of Cedar Lane. One advocate of this program, attempting to persuade his fellow congregants that it was a good idea, remarked, “If this program succeeds, our members won’t need to read the *New York Times* — they’ll get their information here in the congregation.” This was an interesting remark, considering that the news organization in question employs a global staff of probably thousands of people and an annual budget that must be in the tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars; needless to say, the congregation in question had resources that were in no way comparable. There are plenty of organs in this Information Age that run circles around congregations in terms of providing information and educational opportunities. Even before the internet made available more information literally at our fingertips than we could ever assimilate in ten thousand lifetimes, one could always read an interesting book or take a course and learn far more about nearly any subject than one could pick up in even the most intellectually rigorous sermon or religious education class. Even Professor Conrad Wright, an intellectual’s intellectual, willingly conceded that “[a] church is not a thinking society, even though it may, among other things, foster the intellectual life.”³ There’s an old joke that at the pearly gates there are two signs, one that says “This way to heaven” for the blessed of all other faiths, and another sign pointing in a different direction for Unitarian Universalists that says, “This way to a discussion about heaven.” Do we go to church in order to know about truth, and justice, and God, or do we go to church in order to know truth, and to know justice, and to know God? Communal religious life exists not for the purpose of information, but faith formation.

Social action has to be part of who we are as a people of faith, because ultimately the message of any religious tradition for each one of us boils down to, “It’s not all about me.” But if social action and social justice were the primary purpose of religious communities, it’s hard to see how we could have more severely botched this high goal. First we go and create a congregation in which the primary social action goals are not enshrined in the organization’s name or its bylaws. Then we let people join the organization without asking them what their social and political ideologies are. Then we spend a whole lot of money on hiring staff members who have advanced degrees not in public policy, but in theology, and we expect these folks to be our primary leaders. There are plenty of organizations out there that have social action as their primary purpose, and they are structured primarily to fulfill that purpose. For instance, churches should help people who are hungry, but there are many institutions which exist solely to help the hungry. So social action is a *sine qua non* in communal religious life, but not its primary purpose. Religious organizations should feed the hungry, but more importantly, they should help their members to understand why people are hungry, and they should help their members find the compassion and energy to do what they can to end and prevent hunger.

Religious life must provide comfort. I confess that there are times when I honestly wonder whether my profession serves any purpose at all. Then the phone rings, and a person

³ Wright, *op. cit.*, 44.

says that someone they love has just died, and they want a place where they can grieve and a person to minister to them in their grief; and then I remember that this business of professional religious leadership has some use after all. One of the challenges of communal religious life is that it obliges us to make a meaningful distinction between what is comforting and what is comfortable. To be comforted is to find hope in the midst of despair, to find solace in pain, to be reminded by caring words and caring acts that we are not alone. To be comfortable is to drift toward complacency, to resist alterations to the status quo, to avoid things that disrupt our ease. The line between being comforted and being comfortable is sometimes finer than we would like. Communal religious life does not exist to make us comfortable. Explorations of prayer, of justice, of truth, of eternity, of God are necessarily going to be uncomfortable at times; if they were never uncomfortable, we wouldn't be doing them right. We can't explore life's meaning with integrity and questions of right and wrong, life and death, the true and the divine unless we are willing to endure some discomfort, because there is too much at stake in those explorations in order for them to be easy and simple. Church can be an uncomfortable place sometimes. Thank God, we are comforted in our uncomfortableness by one another's respect and care, by feeling that by being here our lives are connected to something of enduring value and worth, and that the religious community we have committed to is worthy of our deepest loyalty and love.

We would not willingly participate in communal religious life if we didn't derive happiness from doing so, and the happiness we can experience in a place like this can be truly profound and uplifting and life-changing. A faith community like this one does not exist in order to make its people happy. The misconception that it does exist for that purpose is itself a source of great unhappiness in congregations. A congregation is not a restaurant, where we sit down, ask for what we like, and expect to like it and have every right to expect to like it, given that we are paying far more for the meal than we would if we prepared the food ourselves at home. Eating out is a lovely thing, but it is very different from going to church. The difference is that eating out is a consumer-oriented activity. We patronize restaurants as consumers, going to the ones that make us happy and avoiding the ones that don't, and in the former we literally consume things that bring happiness. We participate in communal religious life not with a consumer orientation, but a covenantal understanding. We owe little to a restaurant beyond paying the check, but in a covenantal community like a church, we owe one another a great deal. Here we gather to bring our best selves for one another's sake and for the world's sake; here we give of our ideas, our time, our money and our love in a communal sense of purpose. We go to restaurants for ourselves; we undoubtedly get something out of going to church for ourselves, but principally we go to church for each other and for the world. We go to restaurants to experience pleasure; we go to church to experience joy. There's nothing wrong with pleasure, certainly nothing wrong with the pleasure, in moderation, of feeding our bodies, but joy, real joy is what feeds our souls. That is part of the core purpose of communal religious life.

Communal religious life exists in order to encourage and promote a perspective on reality and life grounded in the context of a particular religious tradition, and to empower and liberate people through the practices and values of that tradition. This congregation is a Unitarian Universalist church; it offers a sense of meaning through the lens of that tradition, filtered through the particular history, experiences, values and aspirations of the people of this congregation. Like all manifestations of communal religious life, this is a human

organizations, fraught with the idiosyncrasies, foibles and failings of the beautiful and fallible human beings that have been and are a part of it. Yet it is grounded primarily in that identity: a Unitarian Universalist congregation formed sixty years ago in Bethesda, Maryland. Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church provides a sense of community to its members; it is an intellectually stimulating place where great learning happens; this church is a center of meaningful and committed social justice work; people find comfort here, and happiness abounds in this house, but none of these is the primary purpose of this church. All of these things are signs that the purpose of this church is being fulfilled. Lots of places, organizations and experiences can provide community, learning, social action, comfort and happiness, but only here can one experience those things grounded in the religious tradition that is Unitarian Universalism as it has been understood and lived among this people that is the Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church. If we are “agreed on a few things of overriding importance,” we are agreed that it is Unitarian Universalism, and this congregation’s experience of it, that is at the heart of who we are. The purpose of our communal religious life must therefore be to live by this faith as we understand it individually and collectively, to be a spiritual community that walks together guided by the light of this chalice.