

Invest in Your Own Religious Freedom!
Rev. Charlotte Lehmann
15. March 2020
Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
Charlottesville, VA

GREETING & ANNOUNCEMENTS

WORDS OF WELCOME

Whoever you are
 Whomever you love
 However you express your identity
 Whatever your situation in life
 Whatever your experience of the holy
 As you come seeking love
 Your presence here is a gift.
 Whether you are filled with sadness
 Overflowing with joy
 Needing to be alone with yourself
 Or eager to engage with others
 All who welcome all are welcome here.

PRELUDE

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

We gather this hour as people of faith
 With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
 We light this beacon of hope,
 Sign of our quest for truth and meaning
 In celebration of the life we share together. (Rev. Christine Robinson)

OPENING WORDS *from* “The Indispensible Discipline of Social Responsibility:
 Voluntary Organizations” by James Luther Adams

In his essay “The Indispensible Discipline of Social Responsibility and Voluntary Organizations”, Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams wrote,

Immediately after the Second World War, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth
 ...pointed to a characteristic feature of any democratic society, namely, freedom of
 association.

Every totalitarian theory rejects just this freedom. Indeed, the rejection of freedom
 of association, the rejection of the freedom to form groups that attempt democratically to
 affect public policy, can serve as the beginning of a definition of totalitarianism.

...[O]nly through the exercise of freedom of association can consent of the governed become effective; only through the exercise of freedom of association can the citizen in a democracy participate in the process that gives shape to public opinion and to public policy. For this reason we may speak of the voluntary association as a distinctive and indispensable institution of democratic society.

...Any healthy democratic society is a multigroup society. [The voluntary associations in such a society] presuppose freedom on the part of the individual to be or not to be a member, to join or withdraw, or to consent with others to form a new association. [By contrast involuntary associations are groups into which you are born, such as family or the geographic location.] ...Taken together [voluntary and involuntary associations] represent the institutional articulation of the pluralistic society.

OPENING HYMN #404 *What Gift Can We Bring*

SERMON *Invest in Your Own Religious Freedom* Rev. Charlotte Lehmann

As part of “The Wi\$dom Path: Money, Spirit and Life!” – a UU Tapestry of Faith curriculum on the spirituality of money, participants are asked to share ideas for a sermon that they might preach on the Good News of Unitarian Universalism. They are asked to come up with a resonate message especially in light of what they are exploring about their personal relationship to money and finances. When I taught this class in Tallahassee, I warned them that I might use some of their talking points in a stewardship sermon. Which I did. For starters, I changed that sermon title from a dry “Voluntary Organizations and the Spirit of Stewardship” to a participant’s suggestion that his Good News sermon would deliver this directive: “Invest in Your Own Religious Freedom!”

Invest in your own religious freedom!

It’s a timeless message for our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

When people explore what it means to be a member of our congregation – as the congregation I serve did last month in a new UU orientation session and as we do in the multiple-session New UU class that is currently being offered on Sunday afternoons – they learn a little bit about UU history and theology. This includes what it means to be free religionists. They also learn about our congregational polity: that we are self-governing congregations, and have been so since our Puritan forebears wrote the Cambridge Platform in 1648. Congregational

polity means that the members are responsible for all decisions made by the whole, whether on a national level through delegates to the UUA General Assembly, or at home through their elected officers – in TJMC-UU’s case, the Executive Board and Finance committee make fiduciary and policy decisions – or by congregational vote on matters as required by the congregation’s by-laws. UU congregation members participate in the democratic process enshrined in our congregational polity and the fifth principle of Unitarian Universalism each year at the Annual Meeting and also during Special Congregational meetings on an as needed basis. Today, you officially ended your annual budget drive – also known as a canvass or pledge campaign – the results of which determine the budget for the next fiscal year. Presumably you, the members of Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, approve the final budget at the annual meeting at the end of the fiscal year. The investment in your own religious freedom is at stake!

So, thank you for your investment in your own religious freedom.

That investment in our religious freedom is another topic that people interested in membership in our voluntary organizations learn about when they take a new member class, or talk to members of the membership committee, stewardship team or the congregation’s minister. Now, the Cambridge Platform did make a mistake here, because up until the early 19th Century, everyone living in the local parish was expected to pay parish taxes to support the church. Overturning this matter is what led to truly free religious expression and the full and final separation of church from state. If you’re interested in this topic, look up the Dedham Decision of 1836. Interestingly enough, Massachusetts, ground-zero for Unitarianism in the U.S., was the last state to abolish parish taxes and make complete the real separation of church and state. Some time I plan to write another sermon about a judicial decision in New Hampshire, the New England state whose motto is “Live Free or Die!” that came sixty years after the Dedham Decision and also relates to the separation of church and state.

When people join a Unitarian Universalist congregation, they promise to “be faithful stewards, giving time, energy and money.” Unlike those faith traditions where members are required to tithe 10% of their household income, in our free churches, a financial contribution to the congregation is not a test of membership. While we love for you to dig deep into your pockets and pledge 10%, we don’t strip you of membership for not being able to do so. No one is turned away due to inability to make a monetary pledge. Nevertheless, we do ask that each and every member give what they can afford of their time, their talents and their treasure. The reality

is that financial contributions to support the congregation's life and work are necessary for this free religious community to exist and survive. Investing in your own religious freedom and the free religious society that is Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church ensures its presence here in Charlottesville well into the future.

All religious traditions and cultures recognize this need to take care of the future community; in Native American traditions this stewardship is often expressed as “the seventh generation of the seventh generation.” Unitarian Universalism has been around in these United States for more than 225 years already; seven generations beyond the next seven would put the tradition at close to 500 years young.

I want to shift from this discourse on membership and financial responsibility now to why it is imperative that each of us invest in our collective religious freedom. Let me refresh in your minds the opening reading from James Luther Adams (or JLA as a short-hand). Before I do, I should point out that Adams had first-hand experience of Germany's descent into the evils of totalitarianism under the fascist leadership of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists, commonly called the Nazi Party. James Luther Adams was profoundly disturbed by an encounter he had in Nuremberg in 1927. He learned from a union worker, who stepped in and pulled Adams out of the fray when JLA naively asked the people around him in a huge crowd at an annual mass rally about the meaning of the swastika and began to argue with them. This union worker extended radical hospitality to Adams, inviting him home to share a meager meal with his family. It was there that JLA learned “the economic distress out of which Nazism was born. ...that one organization after another that refused to bow to the Nazis was being threatened with compulsion. ...Freedom of association was being abolished.” This experience as well as experiencing first hand the “belated resistance of the churches to ...attack[s] upon freedom of speech and freedom of association” a decade later prompted Adams to ask himself some rather pointed questions:

What in your typical behavior as an American citizen have you done that would help prevent the rise of authoritarian government in your own country? What disciplines of democracy (except voting) have you habitually undertaken with other people which could serve in any way directly to affect public policy? More bluntly stated: I asked myself, What precisely is the difference between you and a political idiot?

The reading I chose for this morning follows immediately after these embarrassing and self-confronting questions. Here it is again.

...A characteristic feature of any democratic society [is] freedom of association.

Every totalitarian theory rejects just this freedom. Indeed, the rejection of freedom of association, the rejection of the freedom to form groups that attempt democratically to affect public policy, can serve as the beginning of a definition of totalitarianism.

...[O]nly through the exercise of freedom of association can consent of the governed become effective; only through the exercise of freedom of association can the citizen in a democracy participate in the process that gives shape to public opinion and to public policy. For this reason ...the voluntary association as a distinctive and indispensable institution of democratic society.

...Any healthy democratic society is a multigroup society. [The voluntary associations in such a society] presuppose freedom on the part of the individual to be or not to be a member, to join or withdraw, or to consent with others to form a new association. ...Taken together [voluntary and involuntary associations] represent the institutional articulation of the pluralistic society.

In his essay, James Luther Adams discusses the historical roots of voluntary association and its relationship to the separation of church and state demanded 500 years ago by the churches of the Radical Reformation. Voluntary organizations that are concerned with social policy, such as civil rights, act on behalf of individuals to effect changes by political or nonpolitical means, persuading elected officials or the courts to enact laws that protect the rights and wellbeing of the marginalized and oppressed to the benefit of the whole of our society. It takes time to change the social order, as we well know. Adams notes that, “the voluntary organization is a means for the institutionalizing of gradual revolution.” He explains,

The voluntary organization at its best offers an institutional framework within which the give and take of discussion may be promoted, an institutional framework within which a given consensus or practice may be brought under criticism and be subjected to change. It offers a means for bringing a variety of perspectives into interplay. It offers the means of breaking through old social structures in order to meet new needs. It is a means of dispersing power, in the sense that power is the capacity to participate in

the making of social decisions. It is the training ground of the skills that are required for viable social existence in a democracy.

Replace voluntary organization with Unitarian Universalism, with TJMC-UU or with another social justice organization that this congregation works in concert with in this JLA excerpt and you have a description of the value and highly important role that our faith tradition and this congregation play in the world. When you engage in the work of this congregation, in the ministries of this beloved community as a volunteer and as a congregational leader, you develop skills that are transferrable to the other voluntary organizations you are or of which you will become a member. The reverse is true as well, of course, UUs benefit from the training and skills that its members bring with them from their careers, interests and hobbies. Each of you has something to offer that will help others to learn and grow, spiritually, intellectually, and as leaders in our communities. Each of us must develop our leadership skills and give back to this beloved community through ministry and service to the whole. It is simply part of what it means to be part of a voluntary organization, part of a faith tradition, part of a covenantal community such as this one. When you join this or any UU congregation, you promise to “help each other identify, develop and apply our gifts.” Hold each other accountable to this promise. Ask how can I be in service to my church family? If you don’t then we run the risk of having the shadow side of associational behavior when internal shifts in how power is wielded result in tyranny and conformism. Can you say, Oligarchy? Normally, we apply this word to governments that rule with an iron fist, refusing to hear the voices of the people it is meant to serve. But the phenomenon of reducing the role of shareholders belongs not only to large business corporations. If not attentive to the dark side, churches, universities and the like also run the risk of sinking back into social structures that do not serve as an instrument of freedom. Writing in 1962, JLA specifically lifts up “special interest pressure groups” and how they are not immune to this pathology of associations. When the power of the special interest group is exercised through collusion with other pressure groups there is a danger of ignoring the common good in favor of the demands of the few. As long as the gain for members of the voluntary association also benefit many nonmembers, the organization will stay clear of the dark side. Adams summarizes thus, “the health of democracy depends on the capacity of general welfare associations to function as countervailing powers against the narrower purposes of special interest associations.”

If we do not get involved in voluntary organizations with diverse membership, if we are “only on the receiving end of the mass media of communications, in the world of public policy,” we are political eunuchs, impotent and without substance. JLA is rather blunt in his assessment of those who do not fully participate in the democratic process. He wrote, “In the democratic society, the nonparticipating citizens bash their own heads in.” I don’t for a moment believe this is true of any of you, but we would all do well to remember the old labor slogan attributed to Joe Hill – “Don’t mourn, organize!” – or “Don’t agonize, organize!” which was said by feminist and civil rights activist, Florynce Kennedy. The latest twist comes from the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington, when Maryum Ali said, “Don’t boo, vote. Don’t get frustrated, get involved. Don’t complain, organize.”

Develop your leadership skills by serving this congregation. Share your energy and enthusiasm by facilitating an adult program that nurtures spirits, strengthens capacity, and informs minds. Raise your voice and cast your vote at every opportunity. Organize again. Get involved. Organize some more. Keep hope alive. Organize!

Unitarian Universalism is grounded in the principles of democratic society; its theology and practice articulate the benefits of a pluralistic society. We need to make sure that UUs continue to show up for justice, that the Good News of Unitarian Universalism is spread as far and as wide as possible, here in the U.S. and around the world. This month, the Church of the Larger Fellowship published an issue of Quest on the theme of “Thinking About Politics & Religion” with a half dozen thought-provoking reflections, which I highly recommend. You can find it on the Quest for Meaning website under the Quest Monthly tab (www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-reflections/quest-monthly/). And while you’re at it, take a look at the other resources available from the Church of the Larger Fellowship (www.clfuu.org), our largest UU congregation and a resource for these times that require social distancing.

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are voluntary organizations. You are free to join the congregation as a member at any time. We do ask that you sustain the life and work of the congregation by contributing financially within your means. We do ask that you volunteer your time and your talents as well.

Let us remember that, as members of a UU congregation, we agree to support each other’s search for truth and meaning. We promise to nurture each other, this community, and our hopes for a better world. We encourage each other to live ethically. We reach out to all,

expanding our circle of caring. We help each other identify, develop and apply our gifts. We commit to being faithful stewards, giving time, energy and money. Doing so, we live our values and the principles of Unitarian Universalism.

May it be so.

SILENCE

OFFERTORY

DEDICATION OF THE OFFERING

We accept these gifts with gratitude. May we use them wisely and for the highest good.

MEDITATION HYMN #1043 *Szekely Aldas (Szekely Blessing)*

LIGHTING CANDLES & WRITING IN THE SANDS

JOYS AND SORROWS

PASTORAL PRAYER

guest speaker (1-3 minutes)

Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, we ask that you be with us and among us during this time of uncertainty which requires us to keep our physical distance from even our beloved spiritual community.

We ask for understanding in the midst of conflicting messages, for clarity around the facts of this global health crisis and understanding in the wake of difficult choices and decisions for the common good.

We ask for fortitude to cope with social distancing and the heightened anxiety of those with whom we communicate.

We ask for strength of body, of mind and of spirit, knowing that these are the kind of times none of us has lived through in more than one hundred years, although some of us have experienced this level of fear for our physical health or safety under other circumstances.

May we draw upon our past experiences in helpful and life-sustaining ways.

May we apply lessons learned from history and the knowledge gained from scientific study. May we temper emotion with reason, but not dismiss the pastoral need to acknowledge the impact of our feelings.

May we express gratitude towards all those who are laboring to keep us safe and healthy; may we also be grateful towards the ones who are making the difficult decisions to contain the

spread of the virus, the spread of illness, the spread of fear and anxiety, and the spread of violence in all of its forms.

May we be caring and compassionate towards all of our human family.

May we be kind and loving towards ourselves.

May we be well.

Amen. Blessed Be. Nameste.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

CLOSING WORDS

The Reverend Sue Browning wrote about Reverend A. Powell Davies in her Quest monthly reflection entitled “The Heart of Democracy.” She explains that Davies identified the democratic method “as a nationwide core value of faith.” Browning provides this quote from a 1954 sermon delivered by Davies:

[Unitarianism] is an inclusive, not an exclusive faith, based on individual freedom of belief... finding salvation not through someone else’s martyrdom, but by education and the disciplines of democracy.

...A ...commitment of the Unitarian faith is to democracy – not merely as a political system but as the just and brotherly way in human relations.

...We think that discussion is the path to true agreement. We are educators one of another, and all can learn from each.

We are well aware that democracy can be a discipline – sometimes a harsh one. But this is part of its value. We grow by learning to get along with other people. We grow even more when we learn to respect and like each other, to have a concern, each for all, in the words of the New Testament, to “love one another.”

As Browning points out, “For Davies, democracy was not only a public institution, but was a moral institution as well.”

Browning continues that, “Our democracy is not a guarantee. ...The imperfect institution needs to be protected, and improved, and this is the mantle we are all called to carry. ...For democracy to work we need to bring our whole selves to the process – head, heart, and energy. ...We are called to deeply engage, even knowing that probably means our hearts will break. ...To authentically participate. To listen, and to speak up. To risk to trust in a democratic system

we know as imperfect, but which in its most engaged forms may be our best hope to get through the challenges of human relations.”

This is why we must invest in our own religious freedom.

Let us go in peace and grow in love having made such a commitment to our selves and our society.

HYMN OF GOING FORTH #318 *We Would Be One*

BENEDICTION & EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

POSTLUDE