

Growing Our Faith: “Now is the Time”

Rev. Stephen A. Landale
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, Oregon
October 14, 2007

CHORAL ANTHEM
“I Dream a World”
by James Langston Hughes
(music by Joan Szymko)

*I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind –
Of such a dream, my world!*

SERMON

What a beautiful song. I was delighted when Tom (Music Director Tom Sears) told me about this piece in late August.

Since then the military overwhelmed peaceful protests led by monks in Burma, and the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sudan have continued, among other wars, terrorist attacks, and among many other forms of violence in our world. So today I'm even more grateful for this dream. “I Dream a World” was written by James Langston Hughes, an African American poet who died in 1967. This poem of bright, vibrant faith was composed by a man who lived under Jim Crow nearly all of his life. It was set to music by Joan Szymko, a well-regarded choral conductor from the Pacific Northwest, rehearsed and performed just now by the Sanctuary Choir with Tom's leadership. What a blessing to come here on Sunday morning and hear a poetic dream like this set to music, in a time such as ours.

I'd like to talk with you about two other dreams this morning. The first is a dream of someone you probably don't know, a dream I dearly hope you will take to heart. The second is a very well-known dream of somebody nearly all of you know of and many of you love, a dream I hope you will question and re-interpret.

The first dream I heard from the pulpit of the First Baptist Church in Oakland, California. It was preached neither by a Baptist nor a minister, at least not an ordained one. The congregation was Unitarian Universalist; we rented space with the Baptists for half a year during church reconstruction. The preacher that Sunday was my soon-to-be friend Laila

Ibrahim, whom I consider one of the best church leaders and ministers I know, even though all of her church involvement is on the side of her nine-to-five life, founding and managing a preschool, and, now, taking a sabbatical to write a novel. Laila was raised Unitarian Universalist in southern California and particularly values her years in the youth group – where she befriended my friend Dan, the atheist I described to you two weeks ago, who learned to love Duke Ellington’s hip verses about people who don’t believe in God not existing themselves.

That Sunday from a Baptist pulpit, Laila smiled and asked us to imagine Unitarian Universalism as the next great world religion. Several nervous chuckles broke out, including from seminarian Steve Landale. Laila went on to say something like this, “Really. What would the world be like if we had congregations all over the world, committed to the worth and dignity of every person, and religious news regularly gave account of our actions? What if there were a billion people walking on this path with us?”

I found it difficult to wrap my mind around this notion, as perhaps you are, too. But why not imagine this? What *if* Unitarian Universalism had the scope and influence of other world religions? How would the world be different? How would you feel if the word “religious” became commonly associated with our values – our respect for the worth and dignity of each person, and for the interdependence of life – than with a vengeful deity, or even with an afterlife?

I’ll come back to this dream. Now to the second dream, or at least an imagining, by John Lennon. (The beginning of the song was sung by church musician Lynn Smith):

*Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too..*

When I imagine a world with no religion, I have to admit I see a lot more disappearing than just my paycheck. I see much violence disappearing – sectarian violence, violence against women and children, even wars. Not all of such violence by any means, yet probably a good portion of it. It can be challenging to discern when religion is actually the cause of violence, or merely its excuse or banner. Yet no objective observer can seriously doubt the tremendous amount of violence meted out in religion’s name.

Consider only the history of the United States. If you dropped a penny on one side of a scale each time a voice was raised in the name of religion on the side of peace and justice, and a penny on the other side each time a religious voice spoke against what we now consider justice, I don’t believe the results would look good for organized religion, despite the peace and justice work of Unitarians like Theodore Parker and Universalists like Clara Barton, and Quakers, Congregationalists, Catholics like Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, liberal Jews, liberal Muslims, Buddhists like Pema Chodron, and many others. Despite so many efforts for the good, explicitly religious voices were raised to justify genocide of the native peoples far

more often than they were raised against it, and I believe the same is true of slavery, at least until the Civil War. Religion has weighed in more heavily on the side of women-as-property than women-as-equal-to-men. Today we hear far more religious voices opposing civil rights for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people than we hear in support. And war, as always, is presented as the will of God.

Recently I read a book that appeared on my doorstep, Christopher Hitchens' meekly named best-seller, *God is not GREAT: How Religion Poisons Everything*. In a conversation about God-talk, a church member offered me a copy of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*; he delivered it along with Hitchens' book and a note, "Two for One Special." I'd been meaning to read some of these popular anti-God books. I was prepared to be turned off by Dawkin's biting sarcasm and found myself, somewhat to my surprise, thinking, "Well, yes, he's sharp-tongued, so what? He's British. He's funny. And well-reasoned, though I disagree with him on some points." More on Dawkins on another Sunday.

Hitchens makes a strong, sometimes well-detailed, argument on organized religion as the source of much evil in the world – including violence misattributed he claims to ethnic cleansing – yet he also makes several wild assertions, such as Martin Luther King being a Christian in name only, ignores positive contributions of organized religion such as carrying the Civil Rights Movement, and largely refuses to distinguish among different religions.

One could just as easily argue that government is the source of evil in the world. Yet the number of true anarchists is small, for most of us realize that doing away with government altogether is neither possible nor desirable. What we need are good governments, truly democratic ones.

And, what we need are good religions. What poisons the world is not religion per se but anything that teaches people to disregard life. Stalin's poison was just as lethal as that of any religious tyrant. Anything that teaches us that some humans are worthy and others are not, or that patriotism or Heaven or anti-Communism or anti-Westernism should lead you to treat humans as less than human, this is poison. Anything that teaches us to treat the earth as a disposable resource, this is poison, whether it be in pursuit of an eternal Heaven or the sacred GDP, Gross Domestic Product, the measure of our society's success that goes up when we build prisons, sell arms to both sides of a war, or produce pollutants. Gods come in many guises, religious and secular. To the person or the river poisoned, it makes no difference if the poisoner's god was a deity in the sky or a secular god, like the GDP, or nationalism, worshipped by atheists and believers alike. Attacking all of the religious gods indiscriminately is emotionally understandable but ultimately misses the mark.

When John Lennon invited us to imagine a world without religion, I don't think he meant religions that model true tolerance and respect for life, that teach its members to greet others with curiosity and care, regardless of their beliefs. Yet this might not have occurred to him, or he might not have cared, since the word "religion" has come to be so strongly associated with fundamentalist, judging, this-world-hating religions.

I hear this wariness of religion echoed in the voices of people who say they are "spiritual but not religious." I think I know what they mean. They want a deep sense of connection, help in living an ethical life for themselves and their families. They don't want the angry god, maybe not any anthropomorphized god at all. And yet, when I hear these words, I feel sad. "Spiritual but not religious" often winds up meaning, in a church, focus on personal spirituality and keep the organization weak and harmless. Make sure it's not putting any demands on you or anyone else.

There's a bumper sticker I used to see often, "Commit random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty." This is an answer to the journalistic cliché, "Random acts of violence and senseless acts of destruction." This bumper sticker message is a lovely reminder of how to restore one's soul.

{It also suggests that acts of kindness and beauty are contagious – as in the insurance commercials I keep seeing during the Major League Baseball playoffs, when one person's random act of kindness is observed by another person, who extends kindness to someone else, which is observed by yet another person... the commercial ends with a woman stopping a pizza delivery man from stepping out into the street and into a speeding truck.}

While I love this message, I believe it is insufficient. The problem is that while people on the religious left are committing random acts of kindness, mostly as individuals, and while we are being spiritual but not religious – which can mean "not dogmatic" but can also mean "not well-organized" – while this is going on, the religious right is committing *planned, organized, cooperative, well-funded* acts, some of which are truly kind – such as fighting AIDS in Africa, far more than liberal churches are doing – and some of which are not so kind, and you know well that list. With their greater commitment, the religious right continues to define "religion" in this country to such an extent that many decent, ethical, truth-telling people, like Lennon and Hitchens, have come to see religion as poison.

It's not only the fault of the religious right. The responsibility for this state of affairs also rests with us, members of liberal religion, who want personal spiritual experience but collectively don't seem to care if something like this is not available to most of the people in our country, let alone most of the world. Too often, we choose the feeling of moral superiority in being fringe critics, clustering together in a like-minded cocoon, rather than truly living our call to justice and taking the steps necessary to become a center-stage player, where we will be publicly challenged, our shortcomings and contradictions laid before others to see.

So, *I* have a dream to share this Sunday morning. I dream of the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association working together to lift up our liberal faith, cooperate with other liberal religious movements, and redefine religion. I dream of the meaning of the word religion returning to its roots: to bind together. How very different from its current meanings, to separate the world, true believers from the damned. I dream of people in all walks of life knowing about us, and having the choice to be with us. I dream of public exposure leading us to re-examine and improve ourselves. I dream of us living up to the promise of our Seven Principles and honoring our ancestors who fought and won the war of ideas for our religious freedom.

I am not alone in this dream! We are not alone, if you share a dream like this. This very morning, there are hundreds of UU congregations exploring their dreams for our movement, just about as TIME magazine hits the stands with a special spirituality section sponsored by the UUA, the Unitarian Universalist Association. This day is called "Association Sunday," and our offering will go to outreach projects I'll tell you about momentarily.

Amid the materials I received for this Sunday, one quote stood out. It came from a colleague I respected in seminary, who in his congregational and denominational ministry has shown a rare combination of courage and truth-telling about our challenges, along with deep loyalty and passion. I recently learned he was a member of this church. This is from the Reverend Peter Morales:

We UUs are fond of saying that ours is a faith with the power to transform lives and change the world. The reality, alas, is that we have done a poor job of sharing our faith with a culture hungry for liberal religion. Association Sunday is a modest, but important, step. If we are going to make a difference in the lives of the spiritually hungry and religiously homeless, and if we are going to be a force for compassion and justice for the world, we must do so together. We must learn to work as a true association, hand in hand, mano en mano. I and Jefferson Unitarian Church are supporting Association Sunday because we believe that the need is huge. Together, together, we can make a difference.

I agree with Peter that this is a small but important step. The funds raised from this collection will be used for these purposes:

- * 50% will support innovative marketing programs to help grow Unitarian Universalism and its influence, such as the partnership with TIME magazine and advertisements on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.
- * 25% will support congregations who commit to calling ministers of color, and it will support those ministers, in an effort to improve our retention of ministers of color, thereby improving the odds on racial diversity in our congregations.
- * 25% will go directly to districts for grants in support of individual congregations' growth and outreach projects.

This is not “the answer” for our liberal faith tradition. All of these efforts may be seen as experiments. But I believe these are worthy experiments in enacting our vision to be a force of peace and justice in our society, by making ourselves more available to a wider variety of people, more visible, and someday I hope in my lifetime, a religious voice that cannot be ignored.

There are many ways of helping us to live this vision, supporting your own congregation, through volunteer and/or financial contributions, being the most important for most of us. If you are not in a place to contribute financially today, you are just as welcome here as anyone else. This is an extra contribution to the UUA, on top of our Fair Share contributions, focused on outreach and making a home for ministers of color. And what good timing, since this congregation has received extra district and association support during its ministerial transition.

At General Assembly two years ago, I came across youth wearing t-shirts with words I recognized. They were from the sermon I told you about, preached by my friend Laila. I confess that I am recalling these from memory, imperfectly but fairly close. This is her version of our message:

*It was a blessing that you were born.
We each have a piece of the truth about God.
It matters what you do.
You don't have to go it alone.*

What would the world be like, if, each year or two, twice as many people carried a message like this in their hearts? I hope they are not all Unitarian Universalists: we need many perspectives, many ways of living, religious and secular, spiritual and scientific, many people and groups allied in our commitment to honor our connections, our unity, our being one human family among many families on this miraculous earth. I want to see Unitarian

Universalism let its light shine. I want to see our light mingle with those of other life-affirming movements and traditions.

I close with the words of W.E.B. Dubois, quoted by our Association President, the Reverend Bill Sinkford:

*Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient time...
It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.*

Blessed Be and Amen.

The offering, to support special outreach efforts of our religious association, will not be given and received. Please make your checks payable to the UUA. Pledge payments to the church will also be received.