

Newsletter Articles from the Minister . . .

August 2003

I once heard a story about a new minister who, after starting at her first church, began to feel that things were not quite going as well as they might be – too many things up were up in the air, unsettled. So she contacted the district representative and expressed a growing sense of frustration. Finally, the representative reminded her, “that why it’s called settlement.”

Settlement is an imprecise process, for both minister and congregation. Any minister, any congregation. Being ALUUC’s first full-time settled minister is a distinct privilege – and an equally unique challenge. There are no sure-fire scripts to follow; rather, it’s more like setting out on a journey armed with map with compass. My theory of ministry is that it’s ultimately about weaving honest and meaningful relationships. Within that context, there will be defining of roles, assigning responsibilities. And above all else, developing trust.

As long as we keep good faith with one another, I trust that all will work out well. I subscribe to the sentiment expressed by Hosea Ballou, who noted, “If we agree in love, no disagreement can do us harm. If we do not agree in love, no agreement can do us good.”

Meanwhile, the process of settlement has already begun. Beginning this month, I will be keeping office hours and will take advantage of most every opportunity to interact with you, as individuals and in groups. I look forward to getting to know each person better, and vice versa. May we prove good companions – encouraging one another, supporting one another, and even challenging one another.

September 2003

Earlier this year, UUA President William Sinkford proposed that UUs ought to consider adopting a “language of reverence.” This suggestion unleashed a whirlwind of debate among religious liberals across the continent.

Those opposed to the suggestion generally do so on the grounds that a language of reverence will lead to a denominational recognition of God, in the traditional theistic sense, as the object of our reverence.

It has been my experience that when someone is pressed to describe what he or she mean by the word “God,” their reply will be individualized. This is all the more true among UUs.

On the other hand, I find that I often use “traditional religious language.” This was not always so – there was a time, when I was in open revolt against organized religion, that I disdained such vocabulary to describe my beliefs and practices. Yet now, I will cheerfully speak of salvation, the Divine, blessings, transformation, communion, etc. But when I do so, I generally will deliberately explain how and why I use such words -- especially when speaking with someone from a different faith tradition.

UUs typically are people who seek precision in language. This is a noble effort, I do believe. We also seek to live an “authentic life,” which is to say that we strive to express our faith with openness, honesty and graciousness – and to live in accordance with what we have asserted.

I for one welcome the challenge offered by Rev. Sinkford’s remarks. As one who understands himself as a religious humanist, I welcome the opportunity to re-examine my faith and to choose, once again, what I consider relevant and reverent. Such a process is unavoidable for religious liberals. The legacy in which we share demands that ours be “an examined faith,” to use the words of James Luther Adams. If we shun such opportunities, we risk embracing a faith that loses touch with the real world and modern interpretations of nature. We would do well to remember William Ellery Channing’s admonishment, nearly several centuries ago, that “the unorthodoxy of our youth becomes the orthodoxy of our old age.” A liberal faith is, by definition, one that is open to new revelations. Such revelations necessarily include our language. In the discussions to come, may we all exercise openness, honesty – and above all, graciousness.

October 2003

The other day I was searching the radio for music when I came across a station broadcasting a religious message. The speaker was apparently a preacher; and though it was immediately evident that he was not of the liberal persuasion, I decided to listen anyway -- perhaps, out of morbid curiosity. Several utterances were especially memorable: "God did not give man a bouquet of flowers," the voice gushed. He then continued, "The judgment of God is a judgment of death." The gist of the message was that unless the listener accepted a particular interpretation of the gospel, one was going to face an extremely unpleasant afterlife. Needless to say, I was more than a little surprised by his harsh depiction of God.

I was reminded of the "classic" sermon "Sinners in the Hand of An Angry God" delivered by Jonathan Edwards (1703-57) which promised that the Supreme Being was enormously angry to the point that He despised humanity as one might loathe a spider. As one might well imagine, those who heard Edwards were often gripped by a feeling of dread.

My thoughts then turned to William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), who as a youth heard much the same kind of sermon one Sunday. After the service, Channing's father pronounced the sermon "sound." Channing rode home with his father, filled with terror for the coming judgment day -- until he noticed his father whistling a tune. The boy was bewildered and began to watch his father's behavior intently. By day's end, it had dawned on the younger Channing that his father didn't actually believe the message that they had recently heard. This realization changed his direction in life, and led him to eventually embrace the notion that God was not only benevolent but the exemplar of virtue. Thus began the first stirrings of Unitarianism on this continent.

It is good to be reminded from time to time that not all religious people share an optimistic view of either the Divine or of human nature. It reminds one that UUs do have a gospel of hope worth sharing, one that others might find a welcome alternative.

November 2003

During the past fifty years, many things have come and gone at ALUUC: ministers, members, buildings, programs - to name but a few. But, as the French say, the more things change, the more they stay the same. In particular, one can point to the recurring theme of stewardship. As it was in the beginning, so it remains. Over the years, stewardship has typically been expressed in terms of dollars and/or helping hands needed. The concept may have been referred to by that exact word, or perhaps in terms of "shared ministry" or "taking ownership." The fact that ALUUC has endured for half a century says much about how people have time and again risen to meet the continuing needs.

As you may be aware, ALUUC's membership requirements are quite liberal - any person who is at least 17 years of age "who is in sympathy with the purpose and affiliation" of this congregation may become a voting member. The bylaws also stipulate that each member should tender "an identifiable financial contribution" or a contribution in kind or even by contributing in terms of activities. And, of course, sign the book.

Each year, some new faces arrive while others, more familiar, become absent. One of the ongoing challenges of any church is to welcome the new and to initiate them with the lessons of stewardship. In the past, new UUs were typically drawn from our more orthodox neighbors; as such, they came primed and ready to do their share. From time to time, I have received a call from such a person who asks what percentage of their income they are expected to tithe. When I explain the actual conditions of membership, such persons are taken aback at first and then, upon further reflection, pleased. Of course, many who arrive these days would be better described as being "unchurched" - these are people who were not raised in any tradition and for whom the concept of stewardship is unfamiliar. Part of our work together is to graciously extend these lessons by our own example.

One of the ways that I seek to model stewardship is to make a pledge - and to make my contributions during the Sunday collection. I started this practice at my previous congregation - the first time I did so, I muttered the familiar phrase about "practicing what one preaches" - and, to my surprise, many members there applauded. Afterwards, several people remarked that they had never seen a minister put money in the collection plate before. That was a powerful lesson in itself.

For fifty years, members and friends of ALUUC have pitched in. Whether money was needed for a leadership fund or property; whether volunteers were needed to run a pot luck or to teach religious education classes; whether leadership was needed on a committee or the board - members and friends have risen to the occasion. True, the actual word "stewardship" may not have been on people's lips at all such moments, but it was certainly a decisive part of their practice. One might think that people who have contributed much over the years would not want to be bothered any more - and yet, I find that some, when asked, are grateful for the opportunity to continue to contribute their time and talents. That is another powerful lesson to keep in mind.

Much yet remains to be done; ALUUC's 50th anniversary is a threshold for a new era of growth and outreach. To translate those dreams into reality, gifts of time, talent and money

will be needed. I invite each person to ask him/her self whether there is some way for you to assist with the mission of this congregation. I thank those that already do so much, and I welcome any that will step forward.

December 2003

It is customary, each December, to take inventory of the major events of the current year, now drawing to its close. No prophet is needed to anticipate that a media avalanche of lists and photo compilations is imminent. Much of what I typically see this season of the year is along the lines of "best/worst dressed celebrity," best/worst film," etc. Ah well – I hold few illusions about the media; it is a business, after all, with the unabashed goal of separating as much money from the consumer as possible ... and they have learned well the dictums of P. T. Barnum, a Universalist. Still, I find myself yearning for a more substantive analysis of our civilization, something that smacks of "experience passed through the fire of thought." This yearning is all the more heightened by the fact that there is a war raging. An American war. Yet how remote it seems. Here, in the "Homeland," cards & carols will cheerfully proclaim "Peace on earth - good will to all." Excellent words. As are many of the speeches delivered over the past year. But why am I reminded of Mark Twain's "War Prayer" again and again when I hear them?

Looking ahead, I do not doubt that the coming year will be a tempestuous one – it is, after all, an election year. I'll be particularly interested to see how the general public reacts to the continuing war in Iraq and the issue of gay marriages. Will there ever be a consensus or only a bitter divide? I suppose we will all wait & see.

As far as the milestones in my own life, there have been several profound ones this past year. One year ago, I was embarked on a grueling search process that eventually opened the doors of this community to me and my family. Hard to believe that when we arrived, the corn stood tall; now the fields are bare. The graciousness with which we were received made our move here a fairly easy transition. Then came the summer when Angela & I were obliged to navigate our way through the Homeland Security maze, trying to bring her and Celeste back home.

Much can and often does happen within the span of six months. Some members have weathered serious illnesses. Some members have endured the loss of their jobs, while others have made new starts. The Memorial Garden was dedicated. ALUUC celebrated its 50th anniversary. My own job description has been a work in progress: now, in addition to my pastoral duties, I am handling the phones and the office duties. New members have joined while others have either moved away or kept a low profile. And, as always everywhere, there have been tears of joy and tears of grief

I look forward to the coming year - tempests, tears and all - and the journey that we will share together.