

From the Minister ... 2011

January, 2011

As I write, the year – and a decade – come to a close. I expect that there will be a flood of articles and books that will relate all the changes that our culture has witnessed during this first decade of the Twenty-first century, CE.

When I look back to where I was on January first, 2001 I must marvel at the many changes that I have witnessed, both in the culture at large and in my own life. I think that one of the biggest changes in the US has been the consciousness of our society as being truly diverse in terms of faith – in particular, with respect to Islam. Given the events of the past decade, stemming from 9/11/01, this issue has been frequently pushed to the fore. How we continue to discuss, and resolve, this issue will no doubt be a significant part of our story during the coming decade.

In terms of my own life, ten years ago I was leaving the relative comfort of a job at the group home for abused and neglected youth – I call it “relative comfort” because it was a job that I had mastered, to a certain degree. My career destination was ministry: a great unknown at the time, in many respects. I did not know whether I would fall on my face or thrive. Come the summer, I will have completed ten full years of ministry, eight of which have been here in Springfield. Each new day brings new challenges and surprises. This of course is a good thing.

The past ten years have seen some losses, much growth. Overall, they have been marked by a sense of adventure, tinged with joy. I wonder at times why I have been so lucky in so many ways.

Other decades in my life have been quite different. I attribute much of my joy to the privilege of being a parish minister in this community; I hope and trust that in another ten years, I will be able to look back with an equal measure of fondness.

May the new decade which begins this month bring you all a similar sense of joy and accomplishment. Let us welcome the future “with an expectant heart,” to use Tagore’s phrase.

February, 2011

In seminary, I was introduced to the concept of “paradigm shifts,” a term first used by Thomas Kuhn in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, to describe distinct breaks with past worldviews. One famous example was the Copernican Revolution, which supplanted the Ptolemaic view of the cosmos. Of course, there have been many

more such paradigm shifts over the centuries, in science, art, politics and religion – to name but a few.

Quite recently, I saw two lists that reflect a seemingly ever accelerating rate of change: professions that are becoming quickly outmoded and technologies that are becoming rapidly obsolete. Others advise that native English speakers should learn Spanish for the present decade and Chinese for the coming decades. These suggestions, coupled with my review of Beloit's College annual "Mindset List" (which details the oh-so-different life experiences of incoming freshmen) creates the strong impression that the world in which I was born has undergone a remarkable transformation. As one who was born in the final years of the post WWII baby boom, I often feel that I share much more in common with those who preceded me than those born later.

Closer to home, I am startled by the level and breadth of Celeste's homework. Here is concrete evidence of the paradigm shift I was referring to! This very week, Celeste has been wrestling with Newton's Laws of Motion, the early dynastic history of China and algebra. A pretty tall order for a Sixth Grader, not to mention her parents! Such things were not part of my education until well into high school (if then), and I must confess that many lessons were not carried very far from the doors of academia. Last year, we both watched a few episodes of "Are You Smarter than A Fifth Grader?" until it became evident that many "facts" that I had memorized decades ago have been superseded by newer discoveries and reclassifications. I must confess that I have a hard time letting go of Pluto as a planet – and that is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. What next – a change in my zodiac sign?

I also hear some people bemoan the glut of information that confronts our generation, only a few strokes away on the keyboard. Information overload! Most importantly, we must remind ourselves that not everything one reads on-line (or in journals, newspapers, etc.) is correct – in fact, I do caution Celeste (and remind myself) of this frequently. I do not go as far as a stranger whom I once met in Ireland thirty years ago who opined, "Believe half of what you hear and nothing that you read."

Still, we are left with the difficult task of sifting through the dross for "the truth." If we are indeed growing into a new paradigm, perhaps the past may yet offer some guidance. I am reminded my first lecture in college, by Dr. Pasquale Di Pasquale, who had recently been named the new President of Loras College. Dr. Pasquale welcomed us and our parents and defended the value of a liberal arts education, stating that the main purpose therein was to teach us how to think critically. I suspect that he anticipated that "facts" and their interpretations would change in our lifetime. It was a lesson I took to heart, and one I hope to encourage in my own household and this congregation. If we can think critically, we will, I trust, be able to navigate through the ever challenging and changing paradigms of information, knowledge and relationships. I will likewise continue to

commit myself to this religious movement, which encourages us to guide ourselves via constellations of values rather than creeds. In the meanwhile, though, does anyone reading this know much about Newton's Laws?

March, 2011

March is on the horizon, and with it, spring. As the snow and chill (hopefully) recede into memory, I hope with equal measure that all of us will have acquired some good stories about the season just passed. Some of those tales will doubtless be about coping with the weather, but perhaps some of the stories will have a connection to events here at ALUUC.

I sometimes think of winter as a lull, when all grows still and quiet. And yet, without consulting the official calendar, I can compose the following litany of recent events and activities: a children's pageant ... flute circle ... humanist discussion group ... movie night ... Spanish club ... labyrinth walks ... pagan ritual ... pot luck ... a coffee house ... Sunday services ... conversation café ... committee meetings ... board meetings ... Buddhist sitting ... trivia night ... covenant group ... senior high meeting ... lock-in ... pancake breakfast ... I'll bet that there was more. Evidently, even during a relative "lull," one must budget one's time and energy. What might the spring bring, when "life begins anew?"

I hope that you have had an opportunity to partake of some of these activities just mentioned. The new season will certainly bring with it many more events, many more opportunities. Two key ones are immanent: the Fantasy Auction and the pledge Drive. This year's Auction promises to be a unique evening of fun and fellowship; the latter is as much an opportunity to "meet your neighbor" and to express your vision of this ever growing congregation as it is to express your financial support of the institution.

The coming flurry of events is a sure sign of a vibrant & growing community. My best advice to those who thrive on activity is simply: don't try to do everything; no one person can "do it all." At any rate, regardless of the various functions that you attend, I sincerely hope to see you on Sunday; I regard our weekly service as the cornerstone of my connection to this community. I trust that it holds some meaning for you as well. I look forward to seeing you then – and perhaps on other occasions as well.

April, 2011

I am intrigued with the "resurgence" of Universalism within American Christianity. One recent book, entitled *Love Wins*, by Rob Bell has created quite a stir with its gospel that God's love is infinite and that all people will be saved. I suppose that the publishers deliberately choose to release this book as close to Easter in order to create as much of

a stir as possible: a good stir sells more books, after all. I have not read this book, but I suspect that its argument is based on those scriptural passages and logic made famous by our Universalist forebears during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Another prominent preacher who gained media attention after embracing “the Larger Hope” is the Rev. Carlton Pearson, a former Pentecostal bishop who had once been groomed for leadership by Oral Roberts. But at one point, Rev. Pearson embraced Universalism and was obliged to leave that ministry. Since then, Rev. Pearson has affiliated with the UUA and has forged a unique relationship with the UU Congregation in Tulsa. I would be surprised if you have not heard about him.

The belief that all will be saved is of course old news in our movement. An old saying is that Universalist church bells rang out “No hell, no hell!” in stark contrast to the decidedly more bleak tones emanating from the belfries of other churches.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Universalism was a significant religious movement in America; if I remember correctly, it has been estimated that nearly 800,000 Americans were Universalist Christians before the Civil War. Once upon a time, Central Illinois boasted many small rural Universalist congregations, including the towns of Springfield, Laomi and Decatur. Many of these congregations disappeared before 1900.

In fact, the number of people affiliated with the Universalist Church plummeted following the Civil War – by the time of the Great Depression, the Universalist Church was a shadow of its former self. What happened? I suspect that their loose organization and the lack of regular clergy were key factors – but an equally decisive factor was that mainline Protestant churches began to soften their views on hell, which stole the thunder (figuratively speaking) from the Universalists.

That trend – of emphasizing hope over hell – has largely continued among mainstream Protestants during the past century. Paradoxically, it has been those who have emphasized hell who have thrived in past few decades.

With that in mind, I wonder whether this “resurgence” will have any noticeable impact on American Christianity? Will only Protestants respond, or might some Catholics also move towards Universalism? I for one hope that Universalism does flourish widely, among liberal and conservative Christians alike. And what will be the impact, if any, within UUism? It seems likely that more converts will, like Rev. Pearson, find a home here. If this does come to pass, it will be fascinating to see how Unitarian Universalism as a whole responds to an influx of Universalist Christians during its second half century.

May, 2011

The liturgical year is winding down fast. As years go, it’s a brief cycle, beginning in late August and wrapping up in the middle of June. Still, it has been a full one. In a short

while, I will begin composing my end-of-year report to the congregation, which will be delivered at the annual meeting. This leads me to think about some of our shared milestones.

I am mindful that there have been significant losses during this year, including Katie, Demi and Ginger. We have had two charming dedication ceremonies, for Antonea and Talia, respectively. There have been several weddings (congratulations Amy & Jason, Amanda & George) and more are on the horizon (congratulations, Chelsea & Ricky); soon, we will be able to celebrate legal union ceremonies in our sanctuary -- a noteworthy milestone not only for this congregation but also in our religious movement.

I have attended various UU minister gatherings, both in Bloomington and in the St. Louis area, as well as the Prairie Group and District Assembly. I attended the General Assembly last year in Minneapolis and am registered for the next one in Charlotte. I don't believe that I've ever before attended two GA's in a row – last year, I missed many events since I was selling posters and CDs; this year I hope to go and immerse myself in workshops.

Speaking of growth, this year we saw Susan Solon begin her service as our Membership Coordinator. I am so impressed with her gifts and I think that our corresponding growth in actual numbers during this past year – we are above 200 (something that long ago the UUA doubted we would accomplish) – is due in no small part to her work. We should also thank Megan Renner for her role in making this happen. The choir truly blossomed under Kathy McGuire's leadership. Anyone who has had a role in fundraising will appreciate the commitment made by Delinda and the Kluges who led the Trash & Treasure Sale and the Fantasy Auction, respectively. We should likewise be grateful towards Randy Pratt and Pat Goller, who created and coordinated so many fabulous fellowship activities – ranging from circle suppers to pot lucks – not to mention, cleaning up after many activities (more of us really do need to pitch in more with cleaning). And words cannot fully express how much we all owe Bonnie.

Another milestone has been the unexpected opportunity to begin a teaching pastor/student minister relationship with a Meadville/Lombard student. It has been an honor and a gift to have Lynnda White join with us. Many of you have already met her; you will see much more of her once she finishes her unit of Clinical Pastoral Education this summer. This congregation will play a significant role in her ministerial formation. She does not yet know how lucky she is – and we do not yet know how lucky we are!

There is much more that could be said; I will save that for my report. I look forward to the summer, knowing that many seeds have been planted this year and that there are many wonderful gardeners of the spirit close at hand.

June, 2011

Well, the end of the world did not end on May 21st, as predicted by Harold Camping. So, like dozens of previous failed seers, he has gone back to the drawing board and revised his prediction. As you may have heard, he has now designated October 21st as the Day of Doom. When that date comes and passes without incident, perhaps Mr. Camping will retire from the limelight. At any rate, I hope that those who earnestly believed in him, to the point of ruining themselves financially, will have learned a thing or two about the hazards of following a false prophet. Charisma has always been a powerful draw, but it is no substitute for a responsible search for the truth.

Mr. Camping has thrust himself onto the world stage several times in his lifetime – so too have the likes of Fred Phelps and Terry Gilliam. All three claim to be religious, use the title “reverend” and are quick to invoke its protections and privileges. But the proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Consider the case of Terry Gilliam, the pastor who infamously burned a Quran; the effects included the deaths of several UN workers. I know that we read so much of death and even see photos on a constant basis, so much so that we are immunized to the horror – but if we think about those people, that they had families, and that their loss is still felt long after they have left our consciousness.

Those on the religious fringe exert an influence far out of proportion to their numbers. One might add that there have been many other voices that have similarly wormed their way onto the world stage during recent decades, e.g., associated with radical branches of Islam or radical Christian sects. Evidently, someone or something abhors a vacuum – or at least a gap during a 24-7 news cycle. In short, I believe that the media is largely to blame for granting them an artificially inflated visibility before the public’s eye.

Mark Twain is often credited with the saying that “a lie can travel half way around the world while truth is still putting her shoes on.” Whether or not Mr. Twain actually did craft that particular aphorism, it rings even more true today than when it was newly minted.

Four and a half centuries ago, Protestant Reformers were quick to use the new technology of the printing press to their great advantage, mass producing and circulating inflammatory wood cut illustrations and highly polemical tracts. It was a very, very successful tactic – and directly led to much bloodshed. After more than a century of strife, moderation and toleration in religion took seed. Now, of course, we have methods of transmitting opinions and deceit which are vastly more efficient; meanwhile, the religious divisions of yesteryear remain just as deep and loathsome for some. In many respects, the mindsets of many living today are not all that different from our Medieval forebears – this fact alone should spur us to spread our gospel of freedom, reason, tolerance and love. There really is a lot at stake, and we are the responsible agents of the current age: let us use our voices wisely, and the available technology well.

July, 2011

Several days ago, I returned from the UUA's General Assembly. This year, more than 4,000 UUs gathered in Charlotte, NC to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists. Besides the plenary sessions, workshops and public witnesses, the GA experience invariably includes walking through a huge hall brimming with booths promoting every possible interest, as well as vendors selling their wares. Among those wares are, as one might expect, books. This year, I brought a few books from home with me, in a futile attempt to ward off any urge to buy more volumes. Alas, I wandered into the area featuring the latest morsels by Beacon Press, Skinner House Books, as well as other publishing companies. I could not resist bringing back several weighty sacks, filled with books whose topics range from "Missed Opportunities in UU History" to "Explaining the Seven Principles to Children." I may have increased my carbon footprint in the process of transporting them home. On the other hand, I'm happy to report that I've already begun to read some of these new acquisitions.

Fortunately for me, one of the expectations for a 21st Century UU minister is that she/he will continue to seek opportunities for self-enrichment via continuing education. Which means that I am supposed to read and reflect. Equally fortunate is that neither the denomination nor the UU ministers Association dictates the forms or substance that that continuing education should take.

Each year, I choose my own sermon topics, which is an opportunity to research in more detail something in which I already have some interest. What better topics exist than those? From time to time, there is a more formal paper to prepare: for example, this fall, I will be presenting a paper on the subject of the Apocalypse to the Prairie Group, an annual gathering of UU ministers. (Rapture/End of World adherents, please take note that this paper is scheduled to be delivered after October 21st but before the arrival of 2012). The experience of writing such a paper and then delivering it to my colleagues has its own rewards, e.g., increasing my natural compassion for those pursuing a degree program -- as well as reminding me why I ought never to pursue a doctorate degree.

As the summer progresses, I will bite the bullet and begin that research, but I look forward to those hours when I will find a comfortable chair and delve into some of these new books. To make room for them, though, I have been clearing older books from the shelves in my office -- perhaps one or more of you could provide a good new home for them? Let me know. Unlike kittens, they will not require regular food or water; they will however require proper care & exercise on your part. Are there any takers?

August, 2011

In a few weeks, I will resume my preaching duties – I will offer a seven-part sermon series on the current UU Principles. The first will focus on the —inherent worth and dignity of every person. I think that the importance of this for me is pressing, as I wrestle with the real life application of these principles, especially in the wake of another mass murder.

One of the stories that has emerged this week is that several people whose lives were scarred by the Oklahoma City bombing have reached out to the victims' families in Oslo, Norway. I marvel at those whose lives have been touched by senseless violence, and yet find the strength to offer comfort to those now in pain.

Given the reports and images of the latest outrage, it is easy to feel anger. Such events rouse a strong sense of horror. Naturally, such events readily awakens one's sense of compassion for the victims and their families and friends. Sometimes, not always, there is a desire for justice. At other moments, the desire I feel has more in common with a thirst for vengeance -- especially since so many of the victims in Oslo were teenagers, murdered in cold blood. How difficult it is to feel compassion for those who create carnage in the world, let alone to believe that they still have "inherent worth and dignity."

Intellectually, I know that if we lived in a purely mechanistic universe, one solely of cause and consequence, and if the consequence was merely to return harm for harm, we would live in a desperate continuum of pain. Clearly, there are people who despite having endured terrible pain, have achieved a powerful level of compassion and forgiveness. I am humbled by such people.

There are other similar stories that come to mind. One of the most poignant stories told by the Dali Lama involves his conversation with a monk who had been held and tortured for years by the Chinese. If I remember the story correctly, the Dali Lama asked the monk what he was most afraid of during that ordeal. The monk told the Dali Lama that his greatest fear was that he would lose his compassion for his tormentors. Similarly, I am reminded me of the response offered Amish families of the girls murdered by a deranged gunman in October, 2006. You may recall that they offered consolation to the parents of the gunman who had taken his own life after the rampage. I regard these as moving examples of a very deep spirituality.

During his ministry, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about "soul force." So too did Gandhi. Soul force is the deep spiritual well of an individual that allows him or her to move beyond undeserved suffering and to strive for compassion and forgiveness. King and Gandhi staunchly believed that this was our greatest asset if we were to break the cycle of pain and suffering. They regarded it not just as a tactic to counter violence, but as a means to transform undeserved suffering into a higher spiritual response, which would

move all humanity towards a better world. As I reflect on the principles heralded by our tradition, and as we approach the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11th, 2001, I reckon that I, and perhaps others, could use a strong dose of such "soul force" Maybe this will remind us of "the better angels of our nature," and to act accordingly.

September, 2011

Ten years ago, I began my formal ministry at UUCC in Park Forest, Illinois. 9/11 occurred less than one month into that ministry, changing the direction of my preaching and writing. I am submitting the following article, which was published in the UUCC newsletter one decade ago, as much still seems relevant today.

On Politics & Religion

I for one am wary when politicians begin implicating God in their causes. In fairness, I suppose politicians must be irked when ministers discuss politics from the pulpit.

When politics co-opts religion or vice versa, slogans mix with scripture and secular symbols are interwoven with sacred ones, producing a peculiar hybrid. It is no secret that a nation's resolve is steeled when political rhetoric invokes the name of God. Such practice is as ancient as it is common: one example that comes to mind is the battle cry, —Deus vult! (God wills it) that launched the crusades.

It is true that Thomas Jefferson wrote that he hoped that this Republic would erect a wall of separation between church and state. On the other hand, I think that it was John Adams who suggested that any such separation was more akin to a shifting line. Both men, mind you, had Unitarian sympathies. Both held deep religious and political convictions and were, in effect, incarnations of the tensions inherent in church/state relations.

Keeping the complexities of these matters in mind, I offer a few suggestions and questions. I ask you to be charitable and accept that these arise from an essentially religious concern.

When war becomes the prime national focus, our attention is apt to be diverted from the ills that plague our society; I hope that our national zeal does not sacrifice the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised, the innocent.

People in high places are drawing lines that define friend and foe; I wonder what criteria will be used to define terrorism. No doubt, politics will influence whether one group is regarded as terrorists or —freedom fighters. I further wonder what concessions we will make with governments that terrorize their own citizens. And what of honest to goodness agitators? Were not Jesus, Gandhi & Mandela – to name but a few – branded and punished as agitators dangerous to their respective states? Is it not probable that

those in power throughout the world will seize on this as an excellent time to silence all those who agitate for change?

Most of all, I find myself wondering whether we will address the basic political, religious, social and economic ills that pro-mote deep hatred and ignorance that spawns terrorism. Otherwise, will we not, like the Hercules of myth, merely be fighting a hydra that gains two new heads for every one chopped off?

This is, as our political leaders say, a dangerous and difficult time. I will say a prayer for them, and for us all. I hope you will do the same.

October, 2011

During the past few months, a controversy has been simmering between the State of Illinois and Catholic Charities. At the heart of the issue is whether Catholic Charities may receive state funds yet continue to deny accepting same-sex couples that have had a civil union and want to adopt. A number of prominent Catholic leaders have weighed in on the issue, both on the radio and in the newspaper. I wrote the following letter as a response to several letters to the editor. As my letter was not printed, I am submitting it here.

** Before becoming a parish minister, I worked for an affiliate of Catholic Charities for more than seven years and am acquainted with its mission and parameters. It is a fine organization overall, and it provides many valuable services on behalf of the poor, victims of abuse, immigrants, etc., as well as on behalf of children.

That said, I was surprised by the rhetoric employed by several religious leaders in recent articles and radio interviews, assertions that recent changes constitute a —war against the Catholic community. Likewise, their appeal to —toleration is quite curious; they suggest that any religious group is entitled to receive public funds while reserving the right to discriminate against certain citizens. We are not talking about criminals. The crux of the matter is that they regard some citizens as inherently sinful because of their sexual orientation. Such is unequivocally a religious designation, which incidentally is not shared by every faith tradition.

I would contend that a proper proponent of toleration would agitate for the rights and dignity of those neighbors who have been historically marginalized, in this case, on behalf of eligible gay & lesbian couples who wish to adopt.

No serious person has, to the best of my knowledge, suggested that Catholic Charities or its parent organization must adopt dictums that contravene their particular traditions. The issue is, rather, whether any religious organization may use public funds to subsidize a mission whose actions in effect marginalize fellow citizens of this Republic. Spokesmen for Catholic Charities and the Catholic community have asserted that they should have that right. It must not be so, not when the public is footing the bill.

If the dictates of tradition prevent Catholic Charities from adopting more inclusive practices, may its leaders choose a new course for their energies without any state interference. That is their protected right.

I would expect that other agencies will fill the temporary vacuum and that the interests of the children will be well looked after. Catholic Charities will certainly continue, albeit redirecting its resources to-wards other goals. Based on my past association with Catholic Charities, I sincerely wish them well in those endeavors.

November, 2011

In early November, I will be presenting a paper at the Prairie Group, an annual conference of UU ministers at Pere Marquette. Each year, papers and responses on a particular topic are presented after which we discuss those themes in detail. The theme for this year's gathering is "The Apocalypse" and will feature essays on how apocalyptic thinking came to be and how it has evolved. My paper will be a reflective essay, presenting "a personal testimonial of (my) own responses to the reality of the decomposition of the world and (my) struggle to find a way to preach and practice hope in the apocalyptic times in which we presently live"

Apocalyptic predictions are not new. A recent famous example would be that of Harold Camping, who announced that the Rapture was imminent six months ago but then amended his forecast when nothing happened on the date in question. Nor did anything occur on the revised date, October 21st. I marvel at the mindset of those who persist in making such predictions not to mention those who stubbornly believe in them.

The notion that the world – and humanity in particular – will have a definite end, when a supernatural force will intervene in history separating the elect from the damned has a certain appeal to those who are frustrated with the present. That belief absolves such people of committing to the grueling task of creating justice and compassion in the world. Why bother, especially if a Divine Being will descend, like some magnificent *deus e machina*, and clean up all our troubles?

I believe that apocalyptic thinking is foreign to modern Unitarian Universalism because we tend to focus both on the present realities of human suffering, and our attendant responsibility – both as individuals and as a covenanted community – to engage in the work of justice and peace, to heal what one poet called "this bruised and hurting world" As Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed reminded us at the last District Assembly, we are perhaps prone to imagine that our labors will yield noticeable results in our lifetime – but that is no more than an exaggerated hope. Whether we see tangible results or not, may we be

committed to the great work of redemptive service. As Dorothy Day (one of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement) said, “No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.”

December , 2011

December heralds the seasons of lights (at least, in our hemisphere), a time that reminds us of the needs and aspirations that lie at the center of our being. As the shadows stretch further upon the exterior landscape, so too do they stretch across our imaginations. Wisdom whispers hope, in the form of a candle or hearth flame.

It is natural to connect the symbolism of that light to the religious notion that a spark of the divine resides within each living creature, that we are all interconnected to the Sacred.

There have been times, as a young adult, when I balked at that thought, when it was difficult to perceive *anything* that was holy about humanity or the universe. In my mid twenties, I was repulsed by the crass commercialism of the season. With the passing of a few more years, though, my perception has been tempered and even transformed – I no longer lay the blame for that aspect on the season itself. Such commercialization might be likened to the storms that strike during this season; it is inevitable, but we can take precautions against the chill. Partly we can cultivate a richer inner spirituality – one that figuratively provides light in the darkness; but moreso, we can practice a living spirituality, one that touches other living creatures in practical ways. I am reminded of the observation that come winter, it is not the lack of light that kills but the lack of warmth. I dare to imagine that the various sparks of light that reside within us all may be fanned by hope, courage and compassion – together, may these dispel whatever shadows fall across our paths, and provide genuine warmth.