

“Dislodging the Nay-Sayers”

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Reading: from *On Being Human Religiously* by James Luther Adams

When your beloved minister Dick Drinon died suddenly last October it was a tragedy and loss beyond belief. He had come to be the face and voice of Hopedale Unitarian Parish. He was the anchor, the familiar presence when life was unsettling and challenges arose. And suddenly he was gone. How would you manage?

There were supports in place.

Dick had arranged for Rev. Kenneth Clarke to fill the pulpit for three months while he was recovering from scheduled surgery. So Rev. Clarke was there, ready to provide stability and a ministerial pulpit presence.

How did that happen? Well, certainly some was serendipity. Rev. Drinon did not know he was going to die, and when Rev. Clarke agreed to assume those three months of preaching duties he did not know he would be preaching to a congregation in shock and grief. But he was a seasoned minister, he knew what to do and he responded to the need that was here.

All of that was possible because you are part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The Unitarian Universalist Association is an association congregations that have banded together, covenanting around the seven principles and around the understanding that we need to stand together, for the health and strength of all, to do in concert, those things we cannot do alone.

Rev. Drinon was able to find a qualified and available Unitarian Universalist minister to provide three months of pulpit coverage because the UUA, as an association of congregations supports the training of ministers, determines the content of the curriculum they must cover to be able to adequately serve our congregations, interviews, tests and passes on the preparedness of our aspiring ministers to take on the Unitarian Universalist ministry. The district maintains files of ministers who are serving in capacities other than parish ministries, and who are available and willing to provide pulpit coverage. The Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, provides the UU ministers the opportunities to gather, get to know each other, support each other, and value each other's gifts. Rev. Drinon was able to draw on all of that when he knew he was going to need three months of coverage. And he did. Because he understood the value of our many associations he was able to access the resources he and you needed and put them in place. How much harder that would have been, had those associations not been in place, healthy and functioning.

The Rev. Lyn Thomas, your district executive, came out to Hopedale to meet with your board, offer condolences yes, but more importantly, providing support and advice. You were not in this alone. You had the strength and wisdom of our tradition and our institutional structure to carry you through those most difficult and uncertain times.

When you realized that Rev. Clark's presence as a pulpit supply was helpful in the immediate aftermath of your loss, but would be insufficient, you contacted the Transitions Department at the UUA. You needed a trained, experienced interim minister who could support and guide you through the unsettledness of the transition time, preparing you to be able to successfully call and settle your next minister. The Transitions Department had a list of available trained interims- you received six names for your interim search committee to interview and determine their suitability for your parish. Happily, I was one of them. The Transitions Department was able to do that because they provide some of the supports for the training, screening and credentialing of accredited interim ministers. The interim ministers guild provides support and continuing education for UU accredited interim ministers. They are one small association affiliated with the larger association of Unitarian Universalism, all dedicated to the same goal of serving and sustaining healthy, vital congregations as centers of meaning, nurturers of community and voices for social justice.

You have formed your search committee with the advice and support of many of us with experience in such things- and a fine search committee you have called together indeed. That Search Committee has met with the district's Ministerial Settlement Representative, learned how the settlement process works, and gotten advice on how to make it work for you. They have just distributed a survey that they crafted for you based on a sample survey developed by the department of Transitions out of its experience with hundreds of congregations who have searched and successfully settled ministers.

Why is it important for congregations to join together in association? To covenant and support one another in projects? To share resources? You may have asked those questions in years past. You have lived the answer in the past 12 months.

All of these are possible because you are not a single solitary church. You are not alone in nurturing people's souls in the spirit of openness, so that each one might find their own truth, tested with love in the community of faith you are for one another. You are a church that does that nurturing and provides that open and affirming space in the context of the wider association, with resources, supports and training for leaders available all along the way.

This summer the Unitarian Universalist church in Watertown had its Rainbow flag vandalized. They came in one Sunday morning to find that holes had been burned in the flag which proudly flew from the edge of the church building,

signifying their welcome to all who would come - those gay and straight, white and of color, of every stripe from every walk of life. The police were notified and met with the minister and the president of the congregation Monday morning. They were aware of the danger.

Two days later, Wednesday night the flag was torched. It was made of plastic fiber that curled and bubbled and twisted up. Thursday morning when Rev. Mark Harris came in he saw the burned and curled up flag. This was beyond vandalism. It was a deliberate hate crime, one which could have easily burned down their historical building.

On Thursday evening a call went out to the wider Massachusetts UU community via e-mail. On Saturday the Watertown UU church was sponsoring a vigil on the Watertown town common. The body would then walk the few blocks to the church and witness the installation of a new rainbow flag.

It was as I said, mid-summer. Most UU congregations were on vacation or on skeleton staff and hours. They had no idea if anyone would come. Nearly 300 people gathered that hot Saturday afternoon, Unitarian Universalists from all over Massachusetts. Tim House and I proudly represented Hopedale as we stood in support of the Watertown church, traumatized by this hate crime and the violation of their sacred space. They could pick up and go on, knowing that they were not in this alone.

What do we need an association for? For times when we are frightened, in danger, or have a challenge that appears too difficult to attempt alone.

Some of those needs and dangers are easy to grasp and understand. Their relevance to our lives together are obvious. The experience here with Rev. Drinon's death, and of the Watertown UU church are two such examples. Others seem more distant, vague, or not so clearly about us.

Previous years' Association Sunday special appeals went for things like ministerial education and lay leadership training. Easy to understand, easy to know why they might matter to you. This year's appeal invites you to dream into the future, to imagine that ours is a religion that will live beyond the decade, maybe even beyond our own lifetimes. It calls us to imagine what it is that Unitarian Universalism will need to be, to be able to be relevant, important and vital in years to come. It pushes us to do the deep committing that is necessary for us to imagine a Unitarian Universalism in which all people can come as they are and not only be welcomed, but be nurtured and find a religious home, people who are not American born, people who are not middle class, people who are not white, people who have so much to give but whose cultures are different from the one we have forged out of our early American roots. It is a dream about a Unitarian Universalism with a future.

This year's campaign will fund programs that develop relationships between our

congregations and the youth of color in their midst. They will nurture leadership development within the youth of color, and will nurture young adults of color who can mentor them.

The UUA will provide materials for congregations that want to become more multi-culturally competent and welcoming. They will provide emotional, spiritual and sometimes financial support to congregations that are choosing to call ministers of color, making it more likely that these new ministries will succeed.

I think it is exciting. Some of these dreams may seem far fetched- imagining a Unitarian Universalism that is really diverse in terms of class, culture and color, and imagining leadership that reflects that diversity. But I need to make my testimony here.

When I went into the UU ministry there were very few women in the ministry. At most UU clergy gatherings I was the only woman, or one of two. At interfaith clergy gatherings I was usually the only woman.

But the Unitarian Universalist Association formed a Women and Religion committee under pressure from the UU Women's Federation (of which your Woman's Alliance was a member) to make a more meaningful place for women in our faith and in our leadership. Today, as I am approaching my 30th anniversary as an ordained UU minister, fully half of our ministry is female. "They" said it couldn't be done. That women did not have what it takes to be ministers. They, the proverbial "they" who are our alter egos, and speak the negativities we'd rather not own for ourselves. But they were wrong. And those same nay saying voices who nag at us that we will never become multiracial or multicultural as a denomination, who say that ministers of color will never find a true home here are just as wrong as were those who said women could never successfully fill our pulpits.

So my friends, come dream a dream with me and support this effort to move Unitarian Universalism into this new century with vitality, relevance and promise.

Come dislodge the nay sayers and be clear speakers of faith and hope.

Relinquish your fear and renew your courage.

Adin Ballou built this place, this town, this faith on the premise that people need to not only stand for something more and better than what already is, they need to become it. They need to invest their own lives, their hearts and their resources to make it so.

His way continues to ring true. His challenge is ours today. His dream of peaceful living together in the face of diversity is as compelling as ever. And our association wants to help us make it real.

Please, give what you can, and then... a little more. We want more than a dream. We want life- all of it - here in our towns, our homes, our church. Only together can we make it happen.

Thank-you.

Amen and Blessed be.