

**Association Sunday 2009:  
Growing our Diversity**

*Rev. Don Rollins  
UU Church of Spartanburg, SC  
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*Introduction: Bob the (Character) Builder*

His name was Bob Burnside, and he was our burly, filterless Camel-smoking Scout master – a former foot soldier who had followed Patton across France, Belgium and Luxembourg and had come home to sell Chevrolets at his father's dealership in southeastern Ohio. Bob was busy with his work and a family of his own, but as he would tell me in later years, it wasn't work or family that made him leery about becoming our leader: it was us! In the thirty-plus years of our troop's existence, not a single Scout had risen above the status of First Class. (And, if memory serves, I seem to recall that the fellow who got that far was soon thereafter convicted on a shoplifting charge.) After two years with the likes of General George Patton, Bob Burnside knew crazy when he saw it. And so it was with great and genuine trepidation that he eventually caved and became our Scout Master.

Bob did many things to whip us into shape, but his best move was to tell us, over and over again, that our little troop was part of something bigger. Unlike his most recent predecessors, he didn't settle for a few pup tents and some merit badge work. He used his own money to make sure we went to District camps, spring and fall. He recruited a few parents to load us up and drive us to Jamborees, where we met Scouts from all across the state. And he even took us on a field trip to Wilmington, where we toured the *USS North Carolina* before spending the night with a troop from the area.

Looking back, I think our new Scoutmaster wanted us to know that once we took the oath and put on the uniform, we were more than Scouts; we were part of a thing called *Scouting*. A tribe of our own. We were just a gaggle of mostly poor, mostly underachieving, mostly what we would call today "at-risk" boys, but that's not what Bob Burnside saw. He saw boys that could make good Scouts, and Scouts that could make good men.

You know, life is rough without a tribe. Somebody or something to belong to. It might be a family. Circle of friends or colleagues. A club, team, branch of the military, political party or denomination. Seems that we even live longer and better if we've got some minimum matrix of relationships, so strong is the urge to find a tribe.

UUUCS friends, this is a mercifully short, but unabashed appeal to separate you from some of your dollars on behalf of the tribe with the crazy-long name, Unitarian Universalism. The program we have the opportunity to help underwrite today is unique and timely: it's about getting our own house in better order when it comes to race, culture and class. And I have a sense of urgency, personal as well as professional, about this opportunity.

This is a three-part appeal. First, you need to know how to give; I'll keep it simple. Second, I want to invoke the ghost of Bob Burnside and remind you that we're part of something, bigger. And, third, I want to talk about how programs like this one have the potential to rock our UU boat. In a good way.

### *Part One: Association Sunday 2009*

The Unitarian Universalist Association has, for the third year in a row, sent out the financial Bat Signal known as Association Sunday, and today is our opportunity to respond. Two years ago, last October, the smart folks at the UUA asked us to underwrite a *Time* magazine advertisement program titled, "Now is the Time". The ads were catchy, coherent and a tad caustic. More than 130,000 Unitarian Universalists, from more than 600 congregations, ponied up \$1.4 million to make that ad campaign happen, the first such approach in decades. That was Association Sunday, year one.

One year ago, last October, the smart folks at the UUA targeted two new areas of emphasis: lay education and excellence in professional ministry. More than 500 congregations took part in Association Sunday, year two. Half of the roughly \$406,000 was distributed to congregations, districts and seminaries; the other half went to establish a permanent, ministerial staff position aimed at developing new continuing education programs for ministers and ministerial candidates. It was a true grassroots approach to true grassroots leadership development.

Which brings us to Association Sunday, year three. What are the smart folks in Boston up to, this time? Nothing, at least on their own. *This year's focus was decided by an electronic poll of some 1,000 UUs* – a for-real shift of power from the denomination to the congregations. The result is a hands-on, monumental objective: let's find out what we need to do to become the diverse denomination we imagine. The money we raise this morning will be used to fund programs aimed at bringing us closer to the racially, economically, culturally diverse tradition we say we want to be. With me so far?

Okay, let's get the mechanics out of the way. The easiest way to give is to write a check to the UUA, with "Association Sunday 2009" in the subject line. Cash gifts will be converted to a single check and forwarded from the church. And if you'd rather give later, just visit [uua.org](http://uua.org), type "Association Sunday 2009" in the search window and you'll find out how to donate online, by phone or by check. It's easy. That's Part One.

### *Part Two: Something Bigger*

Now, we've got to keep it real, this tribal. Belonging to something bigger than yourself means not getting your way on everything, all the time. It just does. That's tribal life – giving up some measure of autonomy and power on behalf of some measure of tribal identity and well-being.

Over the course of my nearly twenty-five years as a Unitarian Universalist, I've not gotten my way lots of times. I've yet to vote for a winner when it comes to picking a new

President for this outfit; our system of settling ministers was evidently designed by the same person who invented water boarding, so arcane is its proscribed process; and if I were King of the UUA, I'd sell those expensive Beacon Hill mausoleums, load up the whole shooting match and move it to, say, Kansas City! Can you imagine the nest egg and annual savings? But, I digress...The point is that every UU who takes seriously our greater movement has at least one lover's quarrel going. Sometimes, it's even funny.

But sometimes, it's not. I don't find our antiauthority syndrome so funny anymore: too many good programs come out of "Boston", only to be submarined for lack of funding; staff get eliminated because, in tough economic times, congregations cut back or eliminate denominational commitments; bad experiences with the UUA, some as far back as the 1970s, get told and retold, signaling to youth and newcomers that our denominational leadership can't be trusted; and it's not unusual to hear criticism heaped upon "Headquarters" by folks with no interest in connecting the dots between services and programs and congregational health.

I grieve that so many of our people choose not to explore and enter into their own lover's quarrel with our Association. When asked why I find so much value in the UUA, I tell our folks that it's because my denomination can do things that I cannot:

- I can't call a press conference on behalf of equal marriage, but my denomination can;
- I can't assemble lifespan curricula that will stretch minds and nurture spirits, but my denomination can;
- I can't nurture our way of religion by way of an amazing website, but my denomination can;
- I can't counsel our congregations on everything from conflict to stewardship to leadership, but my denomination can;
- I can't publish a first-rate magazine about liberal religion, but my denomination can;
- I can't nurture, support and monitor quality professional ministry, but my denomination can;
- I can't reach a national (and to a lesser degree, international) audience on behalf of radical religious freedom, but my denomination can.

There's more, but you get the idea. I support and solicit on behalf of my denomination, not because it's an extension of my every idea, but because it's an extension of what I *imagine*: a world rooted in radical religious freedom, blessed with compassionate community and engaged in the principled transformation of societies everywhere.

Sorry for all the denominational soap-boxing, folks, but my experience is that it's hard to raise money for UUA programs without talking about the UUA, itself. Just remember, we're part of something bigger. And that's Part Two.

*Part Three: Growing Our Diversity*

As you can tell, I'm excited about where this money's going. Life in the UUA, my tribe, has altered nearly every facet of my life, resulting in an unexpected sense of *institutional* pride. I'm proud to be part of a tradition bold enough to ask itself the tough questions about race, culture and class. We've spent decades trying to increase our diversity by reaching out, and now it's time to reach within. This year's *Growing Our Diversity* focus came from the ground-up, and that's all the more reason to be proud.

Let me get personal before I close. When I think of our denomination's deep and ongoing quest for greater diversity, I think in terms of class. I'll be a student when it comes to greater racial and cultural diversity – I'm as Caucasian and Eurocentric as they come – but I know, firsthand, what it is to feel out of place because you've never read the classics, have a tendency to drop your g's and can't say for sure, come formal dinners, why there's a second fork by your plate. And I'm not the only one. We ghetto at high-end UU meetings, cuss and talk football. We try to introduce more rootsy music and writers, only to take flak for "dumbing down" Sunday services. We fret over how best to welcome newcomers from the less affluent zip codes.

The point is that the barriers are real, if not always obvious. Sometimes it takes a face and a story for us to recognize them, and sometimes it takes a clarion, *denominational* call for us to roll up our sleeves and begin the holy work necessary of dismantling those barriers. We're fortunate to be part of a tribe undaunted by its own shadow. We're fortunate to have the opportunity to support that effort.

I think that UU minister, Andy Backus, wrote the following excerpt as a set of opening words, but as I prepared this sermon, its invitation toward wholeness and holiness took on new meaning:

*Come in from the cold:  
Make yourself a religious home...  
Make this a family.  
Treat us as your own...  
Come on in.  
Sing and love life.*

Please give what you can to this promising campaign. Unitarian Universalism, our beloved tribe, will be the better for your generosity.

That's Part Three.