

## Readings

The congregation that primarily looks inward for the discovery of meaning, wholeness and service, and spirituality (and does not move out beyond its walls to visibly, live its religion in the wider community) will not experience growth and depth....An inward-looking church that does not empower its ministers and laity to take their faith to the streets in service to others is a church that cannot grow in numbers, responsibility, or depth.

*Scott W. Alexander, in Salted with Fire.*

In a world with so much hatred and violence,  
*We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

In a world with so much brutality and fear,  
*We need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*

In a worlds with so many persons abused and neglected,  
*We need a religion that calls us to accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.*

In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood,  
*We need a religion that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

In a world with so much tyranny and oppression,  
*We need a religion that affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.*

In a world with so much inequality and strife,  
*We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.*

In a world with so much environmental degradation,  
*We need a religion that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

*In a world with so much uncertainty and despair,  
We need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope and our hands to serve.*

*Scott Alexander*

“We deceive ourselves if we think we can be grasped by life’s meaning, or a sense of the holy, before we find and are found by our fellow human beings. There is no sense of the sacredness of life, no sense of the holiness of sheer existence that does not come first through another person. Human encounter is common: human acceptance is rare. Religious community is people reaching through all the facades people carefully place around them—people embracing people where they live and struggle, what Henry Nelson Wieman calls ‘creative interchange.’ The most radical contribution religion can make to human living is that it enables people, to experience community as starkly as hunger.... Where life has a chance, we are in caring and in mutual need.

When we are most alive, we are in the presence of someone or something intensely with us.... Nothing is experienced except in relation. It is participation in a religious community that stabs our consciousness into this awareness in the midst of a society that knows nothing about it.”

*Raymond Baughan*

“Unitarian Universalists sometimes spend so much time and energy worrying about and praising the autonomy of the individual that we forget that individuals standing alone have about as much strength as a bunch of stones lying around on the ground. It is only when a mason picks up these stones and builds a wall that they become powerful. And that is how it is with communities. Alone, we’re not much; together we have power.”

*From Ken W. Collier in Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse.*

***“That’s Our Good News”***

We believe there is a place at God's table for each and every child of earth.

That’s our good news!

We believe the giver of life has been given many names and loves the givers of all of them.

That’s our good news!

We are more interested in getting heaven into people now than getting people into heaven later.

That’s our good news!

We believe that religious scriptures are open doors rather than sealed vaults.

That’s our good news!

We believe there is still some holy writ yet to be written.

That’s our good news!

We believe true evangelism is more preaching practiced than practiced preaching.

That’s our good news!

We believe peace and justice are not just words we form with our lips, but realities we shape with our lives.

That’s our good news!

We believe in one race - the human race.

That’s our good news!

We believe we are one with the stars and trees and tigers and rivers and all the stuff of life.

That’s our good news!

We believe our lives are all about growing hearts that love, minds that seek, and hands that serve.

That’s our good news!

Amen.

*Rev. John Corrado*

“We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past.... The things we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by the grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.”

*John Dewey*

**Don’t be stingy with your faith**

There are a whole lot of people, in your town and in mine, who have not participated in a community of faith for some time. And they miss it. Jaco ten Hove and Barbara Wells ten Hove, in *Articulating Your UU Faith*, suggest that the individuals in that group are hungry for some

unnamed something that is missing from their lives; perhaps their children have begun to ask questions that they cannot answer without the answers sticking in their throats; perhaps they went back to the religious homes of their childhood and found that they no longer belong there. Perhaps they have recently experienced a life tragedy. Consciously or unconsciously, they are searching.

Just a few short years ago, you might have been in that group. Now you *have* a religious community. But there are others, still out there, still searching for what you have found in our religious tradition.

Imagine that you're at work or at a party and you run into one of these people who is looking. You might not know that they are looking; they might not present themselves as if they are looking, but they are. They say, "Oh, you're a Unitarian Universalist. What's that?" How do you respond? Really, think about what your most likely response would be. Maybe you have tucked away a few thoughts for a moment such as this, and you share them. You talk about what Unitarian Universalism means to you. There are those who seek what we have here, and it is in our power to share it with them.

Unitarian Universalism saves lives, and I mean that literally. There are people right now who are alone and hungering for a place where they will be accepted for who they are. Not letting them in on the secret is a form of stinginess.

It is so easy to take a few minutes to figure out what you are going to say the next time someone asks you what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. You might paraphrase Erica Alston, whose words appear in *Articulating Your UU Faith*, and say, "It's a free-thinking liberal religion that is guided by shared values rather than a particular dogma or creed. This lets individuals claim their personal beliefs based on conscience and experience. At its core, Unitarian Universalism places an emphasis on the worth and value of every person and the interconnectedness of all things. UUs are encouraged to give life to their values, demonstrating compassion, respect, and justice, working together to make the world a better place to pass along to our children."

It would take three minutes to get that down, or a few minutes more to write something for yourself. Not taking the time to prepare ourselves to welcome other seekers into this faith, is, in a word, stingy.

*John Gibb Millspaugh*

This is the last Yearbook of the American Unitarian Association as such. It, therefore, augurs the beginning in the next year of the new Unitarian Universalist Association (of North America), including our 405 churches and 305 fellowships of Canada, the United States and Alaska (and 1 fellowship in Saudi Arabia), plus the 345 churches and 15 fellowships of Universalist background. As the Reverend David Rhys Williams said at our last annual meeting, it is both a sad and a happy moment when a grownup child becomes married. It is an occasion of memory and of hope. The spiritual father of Unitarianism in America, William Ellery Channing, counseled us to shun the spirit of sectarianism as from hell, and I am confident would rejoice in our aspiration and expansion toward the Universal church. The most widely revered prophet among us today, John Haynes Holmes, testifies to his gratitude for having lived to see the hour of our greater inclusiveness, and urges us to banish bigotry and pride forever, and to establish brotherhood and love.

I believe we have been the greatest little denomination in the world. But we have been too little, and not great enough. We have produced leadership, in religion and letters and statesmanship and reform, way out of proportion to our numbers and have brought renown to the name of our Association for the character and the conduct of its people. But we also have been too complacent and too conservative. If the golden age of man is in the future and not in the past, then the palmy days of a rational religion and free faith were not in the early or mid-nineteenth century, but will be tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. A mature and dynamic liberal religion will hasten the coming of that golden age.

Looking back, we salute our fathers with profound respect, but looking forward, we make a pledge to our children's children, that real religion shall not die, but shall be re-born in our time, and, if possible, shall redeem our civilization.

*Dana McLean Greeley*

“The values, perspectives, and rhythms of our culture have obviated the extended family of past history and fostered social alienation. Within this context, a deep desire for community rises from individual spirits that shape human interchange. For decades, one of the primary answers to the question about what people are looking for in their religious experience has been to fulfill this quest for vital community. And the sense of community found in the healthy...congregation has made it an appealing place for satisfying this quest.

“Yet, the very success of the...congregation in bonding people together in specialized community has also been its nemesis. The depth of bonding many feels tends to produce an allegiance that blinds to all other possibilities. The oxymoronic expression of this is the enthusiastic desire to expose more people to the experience of such a community life without actually growing in membership. And many congregations live this ambivalence by an inviting/excluding posture that fulfills the need to share the good news while protecting the community from those who would respond positively.

“...by and large the membership does this unconsciously in instinctive protection of the community and actually wonders why the congregation is not growing.

“To move toward becoming an effective...congregation, consciousness must be raised.... To the possible rewards.... Acknowledgement of what will be left behind....And...exploration of what has to be done to make the transition.

“So, there will come a time when the majority of the congregation must assume the attitude that those who resist must either get on board or be left behind.... The congregation that wishes to move on with the transition in terms of fulfilling its religious mission must be willing to put the congregation's best interest above the agenda of individual members.” (pp. 27-29).

“...Those who do not wish to grow are usually those most likely to be comfortable with being nothing more than a liberal social club. A religiously mission-driven congregation...would not even think of a comfortable social club for liberals as an option to being large enough to create social impact. Mission orientation is always preoccupied with generating the power that can change the world that surrounds it. It does not view itself as an oasis, which constitutes an invitation to escape from the realities of its surrounding world. Rather, it views itself as a change agent in the world.” (pp. 71-72).

“An interesting phenomenon in our religious movement is the simultaneous and contradictory love affair we have with smallness and the desire to be socially transforming... When we look

around us it is obvious that the institutions that impact society are large enough to have the resources to draw attention to their values.

“...The obvious message of our religious movement’s behavior is that we would prefer to have small sized institutions in which to feel comfortable than to impact the world around us.... Small may be beautiful but it can also be impotent... What...will maximize our capacity to be a transforming agent in the world...?” (pp. 130-131).

*Selections from Moving on From Folly Lane by Robert Latham*

“Congregational growth is of deep concern to all of us committed to the future of our free faith. We have found something of great spiritual value, and we wish to share it with others. Traditionally the best way of accomplishing this has been through institutional growth. In a sense, if we do not grow, we are passing a terrible judgment on ourselves and the choices we have made. If our faith is truly wonderful, then this should be more widely recognized.

It is my belief that our hitherto lackluster growth record has been primarily the result of a dangerous institutional mythology. Perhaps the most dangerous of all myths is the belief that we want to grow. From personal observation I can attest that growth is the farthest thing from the minds of some liberal religionists. Many of our societies operate as private clubs open to members only. After all, if you have discovered "Truth," "Beauty," and "Right" and know that only a small elite can possibly attain that goal, then surely *you* do not want to be sullied by the intellectually, spiritually, or culturally unwashed.

We smugly congratulate ourselves on our rejection of proselytizing, grandly affirming a gracious tolerance of differing points of view. We then sit content with our small numbers, knowing that our way can only appeal to people who are truly superior, which is to say people just like us. After all, if small is beautiful, then tiny must be terrific.

Let us explode the growth myth once and for all. Let us recognize that there are many UU societies that do not wish to grow. This does not mean that members of such congregations are traitors to the cause. It simply means they are choosing a different way to live out their faith. Indeed, their way has been the norm for decades. Ministries of maintenance are enthusiastically embraced by many of our churches.”

*William Burnside Miller in Salted With Fire, pp. 150-151.*

“Because we are individualist, we tend to distrust our institutions. Because we are Congregationalists, we tend to support associative action reluctantly. Because we are non-conformists, we tend to resist the lessons of the past, many of which warn us of mistaking rhetoric for substance and embracing an arrogant, if not excessive, individualism which can be destructive of the common good.

“Unitarian Universalism is an idea, a faith, an international movement, an historical institution whose expression is more than congregational, but other than hierarchical. The key word is *associative*. We work and worship in association with one another, which is to say, in partnership with one another. The Association represents our best effort to walk together in trust and respect with all who value a free but organized religion.” (p. 195).

“The longer I am a part of this movement, the more convinced I become that the values and ideals of liberal religion can be effective only if they have a solid institutional base, and that

means strong congregations and a strong Association. I know that we as a religious movement have traditionally been suspicious of a strong Association. We have been fearful that strength would mean power, rigidity, and control. But I am convinced that our Association can be both strong and flexible, an institution of which we can be critical while still being committed to it.

“We tend to be a contentious group of people. We are often harder on ourselves than are our fundamentalist critics. It is so easy to be cynical and mistrustful. But the UUA is what binds us together. It is a vehicle of our hope.

“Those years as president made me deeply aware of how much we need one another. It is only as we recognize our mutuality, honor our diversity, and reconcile our differences with respectful honesty that we can build a strong and vital religious community. Being part of and nurturing such a religious community is what ministry is to me....

“I have found that I need *you* in order to be *me*, that we need *them* in order to be *us*, that only *together* do we have a future. Could we but accept and act on this simple but basic insight, prejudices would be undermined, injustices denounced, and exploitation of nature and people condemned. The world would become *ours* and all women and men *us*.”

*Selections from O. Eugene Pickett quoted in O. Eugene Pickett-Borne on a Wintry Wind by Tom Owen-Towle (p. 207-208).*

“Unitarian Universalists are proud of themselves for doing nothing to seek converts to their faith. A person's religion is a private inward thing, it is said, and we should in no way seek to influence another person to choose our way in religion. The underlying principle here is respect for the privacy and the integrity of the other, and such respect is certainly an admirable quality.

The problem with this stand we take is found in that premise about religion being a private, inward, solitary phenomenon. I submit that this idea is out-of-date. Rather, systems-theory holds...that there is no such thing as utter personal isolation. Not even in our inwardness is any one of us an island. Our personal spiritual orientation arises in a social context. The question, then, is: Shall the Unitarian Universalist way in religion be offered as part of others' social context? My answer is an unequivocal "Yes".

I don't intend to try to talk anybody into being a Unitarian Universalist. But I do want UU-talk going on in our community - a good deal of it, if possible. My reasoning for this is that on *any* given day there will be a number of people out there verging on a point of view very like the stance we Unitarian Universalists take. Left to themselves on their given day, they may well evaluate their dawning point of view as unacceptably eccentric and unworthy; or, worse perhaps, they may accept the mainline evaluation of their new outlook as sinful and may suppose there is something fundamentally amiss within them since they are coming to look at things this new way....

There are those out there who need to know there is a way in religion such as ours, that it has a long and noble tradition and that it is represented in our day by a lively community of faithful adherents.

For this reason...I am talking a good deal about our way in religion and I hope you are doing that, too. You never know who out there this very moment is in need of hearing about what we have discovered in religion. I say: Don't keep it for yourself and for a few others alone. Share the wealth!”

*Roy D. Phillips*

This being human is a guest-house, every morning is a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
Who violently sweep your house, empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

*Rumi*

When we hear the term “spiritual practice,” most of us think of something radically different and more exotic than our everyday lives and actions. But I believe the Sufi poet Hafiz points to the heart of the matter when he says, “Everything is sacred.” In other words, spiritual practice is what we do here and now with the intention of moving closer to what is most true and alive for us.

I want to suggest an approach to the ongoing question of how we welcome people into our communities that I call “the spiritual practice of hospitality.” Practicing hospitality is not something we can appoint people to do, nor is it a set of techniques or behaviors we “use” on new people. Rather, it is an individual work of intentional action, action that creates the quality of relationships in our churches that will nourish newcomers and longtime members alike.

Practicing hospitality expresses our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Through our actions of hospitality we move towards creating a world in which we are all treated with justice, equality, and compassion.

It is easy to imagine that the spiritual journey is about something other than our daily life. But in fact, the spiritual journey is our everyday life. How do we choose to meet and live each moment? We are always practicing something. Everything we do has some consequence to our spirit, and as the existentialists tell us, what we do repeatedly becomes who we are. When our actions spring from our deepest truth, we become more alive and aligned. When our actions are out of step with what is most true in our core, we are left feeling disconnected and diminished.

Feeling the lack of something essential, we begin to look outside ourselves for something to grab hold of. But most religious traditions teach that what we are seeking is right here. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is within you.” Kabir writes, “He is the breath within the breath.” Zen Buddhists say that we are already enlightened. So, too, does the spiritual practice of hospitality suggest that what we are looking for—the mystery of aliveness—can be found as we encounter each other. Rather than pursuing paths that lead us away from this moment, we can use our practice of hospitality to encounter ourselves and our world in all their vividness and particularity: right here, right now, with this person in front of me.

In a true encounter with another human being, we come face to face with the mystery of life. In some way, every other person, no matter how well we know them, will remain as mysterious to us as a country across the ocean we only read about in books. When we judge other people or other countries by our native standards, we miss the richness and texture of their life and wisdom. We need to learn to be good tourists—to be curious and respectful. We need to appreciate both what is the same and what is different.

Too often we get stuck in the trap of believing we already know who someone else is. But whenever we encounter another human being with respect for this essential unknown, we create the possibility for something genuinely new to emerge. In *every* interaction, whether it is with a

stranger or our longtime partner, we can be surprised by what we have not yet seen or even imagined.

Zen teacher Uchiyama once observed, “Everything you encounter is yourself.” Because we believe other people exist only outside of us, we forget that our experience of them is always a personal experience. We see them through the filters of our idiosyncratic experience, beliefs, and senses. The resulting picture becomes a combination of who they are and of who we are. In that sense, we are part of everything that we encounter. So this journey of hospitality is simultaneously outward and inward; we are always meeting ourselves in the form of the other.

It is possible to view hospitality as a duty, as something that imposes a claim on our attention from the outside. But I believe that as spiritual practice, hospitality becomes something quite different, an act of mutual beneficence undertaken in a spirit of self-discovery.

As I approach welcoming as an expression of who I am, I realize that as I greet you, I also greet myself. I am not doing this act for your sake only. In fact I should be grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to move deeper into my life, to align my actions with my deepest values, and to encounter the mystery of life in *this* moment. In true hospitality, we are both giving and receiving at the same time. The traditional hierarchy dissolves into something more equalitarian, and the “duty” becomes an opportunity.

The spiritual practice of hospitality is a radical act that requires a new way of being for those of us who wish to practice it. It requires that we go beyond being nice and polite. It requires that we break unwritten rules governing polite social interaction: “Smile but don’t get too close.” “Don’t ask questions that might make you or the other person uncomfortable.” “Don’t name what is really going on.” “Don’t ask for what you really want.” None of us really believes these unwritten rules, yet they govern most of our interactions and keep us from creating the deeper and nourishing connections we all seek.

Breaking the rules is never easy. Let me suggest three important things to do as a church if you are serious about becoming more welcoming to outsiders and to yourselves.

- The spiritual practice of hospitality cannot be “just another program” or it will fail. Only if you discover and articulate the relevance of this practice to your central purposes as a faith community will you be able to begin to break out of the gravitational field of “the way things have always been.”
- If you decide that this practice of hospitality is at the heart of who you are called to be, you must acknowledge the gap between the aspiration of being welcoming and the reality of your practices. At First Unitarian Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, we realized that despite our best intentions we were practicing what we came to call the ‘New England welcome.’ It goes like this: “We sincerely welcome you into our church as long as you know how to get here and know what to do and know your way around. We’ll be happy to talk to you if you initiate and will promise not to bother you.” We were sincere, but we realized that if we really wanted to practice our values to include and invite everyone, we would have to learn some new ways of being.
- We must stop trying to figure out how to get other people to change and begin instead to look at our own actions. It’s easy for members to believe that the church governing board or the minister or the welcome committee or someone else should be the ones to change how we do things, that “it’s not my job.” But each of us needs to begin to accept responsibility for creating the kind of church we want to be a member of. In other words, hospitality and welcoming becomes a personal choice, rather than an institutional issue.

In choosing this spiritual practice of hospitality, I live out the longing of my heart—creating a new reality for myself and the people around me. I reclaim my power to create the kind of world I want to live in. Gandhi was speaking of this kind of radical act when he said, “We must be the change we seek.”

We may have little control over conflicts in another part of the world, but we can practice truly honoring the preciousness of all human life by how we enter into relationship with each other. If we are serious about creating a more just, equitable, and compassionate world, we have to start with the room we are in.

*David Rynick*

“We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.”

*Starhawk*

“The precious life that is in you and me is the same in all. Rich and poor, wise and simple, strong and feeble, we are joined together by a mystic oneness whose source we may never know, but whose reality we can never doubt. When one suffers, we all suffer.

When one hungers for bread, we all hunger.

When one tramps the streets in search of work, we all tramp the streets.

When one defrauds another, we are all implicated.

When one destroys a human life, we all share the guilt.

When one attains their heart’s desire, we are all partners of their joy. This mystic identity of the one with the many was divined by Hosea, Buddha, Jesus and has been glimpsed by nearly all the great seers and prophets of humanity.

We are our neighbor’s keeper, because that neighbor is but our larger self. Let a sense of our vital unity with all people everywhere possess our minds and hearts.

Behold, thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself, because thy neighbor is thyself.”

*David Rhys Williams*

.....