

Response to Gould Lecture May 1,1992
By Rev. Helena Chapin, First Unitarian, Rochester

When you get old enough and you've been around churches for quite a number of years, you begin to make second rounds. Eighteen years ago, in the spring of 1974, the Parish Minister - the only kind of minister we had then - the Parish Minister here, a Reverend Nicholas Cardell, asked me to preach. I was a **Director** of Religious Education. It was the first or second sermon I had ever preached in my life and all I can remember, through my terror, is that Al Weishard tried to help me with a glass of water half way through the service!

It is an honor to be here to respond to Jack's Gould discourse. When I read it, I smiled (sort of) because it is just like Jack Taylor to invite a teaching minister like myself, a minister of religious education, to respond to his preaching minister's claim that the stimulation ... inspiration of a sermon raises it to be CHIEF among Unitarian Universalist educational vehicles. THE SERMON, CHIEF among Unitarian Universalist educational vehicles.

Jack, dear Jack, how I wish it were late at night in one of our discussions during our Cazenovia ministerial retreats (not here - its so public). Actually, I agree with everything Jack has to say - I just have a few things to add. I'll take on the easiest first and this must not be obvious. Your claim that the "skinny, wiggly little thing bearing on the legacy of a preacher and poised for the environment of the hearer - is education. It is not only education, it is Unitarian Universalist education. And it is not only Unitarian Universalist education, it is Unitarian Universalist education at its best" -> leaves out our teachers, children and youth - and the kind of educational experiences they are having in our church schools on Sunday mornings. I'd like to consider theirs as potentially Unitarian Universalist education at its best, ALSO.

It is true that sermons "are still the criteria by which ministers are assessed" - but only Parish Ministers. Ministers of Religious Education have to be assessed by their ability to stimulate inspiration in atmospheres altogether different from that of the Sunday morning service and sermon. And with our newly formed category of ministry, the Community Ministry, we have yet another set of criteria for assessment. Sermons have little meaning, I would think, in half way houses or abortion clinics or neighborhood Y's.

In considering sermons as adult learning tools, I don't think everyone can learn from them, from one way communication. Jack says, "We, the preachers of inspiring sermons, expected some bolt of lightning punctuating the eloquent conclusion. We got better. We expected the congregation to burst into applause. We got better. We got the woman who, upon seeing us waiting for the bus, one afternoon, came up and said, because of a sermon two years ago, she now understands her mother. And we say, 'Thanks, I'm truly glad that you were helped.' All the time wondering, 'Who is she and what the hell is she talking about?'"

If I had been that woman and your sermon had helped me understand my mother, you would know me, because I would have had to come in to talk with you, long before two years had gone by. I don't think all of us can be inspired without conversation, without discussion. The sermon can't ever be enough for some of us. It may have something to do with being a woman, I'm not sure.

An illustration of that comes from Deborah Tanner's very popular book, You Just Don't Understand, which is about the differences between men's and women's styles of communication. She is a linguist and describes men as using words to REPORT to others; while women use words to establish a relationship with others, as RAPPORT. REPORT TALK and RAPPORT TALK. Men's primary use of language, Tannen says, is to explain or show their positions to the other. Women's primary use of language is to try to connect with the other. A sermon is report talk, more often. A conversation is rapport talk, more often. In using this theory with groups of men and women in our church, I have found it to ring true.

Yes, sermons are education and can be education at its best. And they are a central part of what our adult congregations have agreed they want to be doing together on Sunday mornings. BUT, no one way of education, I think, is ever the best way for everyone. We are all different in how we remember, in how we become inspired, in where we are in our lives. No one way of communicating can possibly reach our different styles of interacting with one another.

Here's to sermons! Here's to church school! Here's to three forms of Unitarian Universalist ministry! Here's to many, many styles of being a Unitarian Universalist! Here's to all of us and all learning being best!