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The Flash is Willing, But the Spirit's Bleak

by

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With all due respect to those among us who emblazoned "New Directions for a New Age" across this conference, it sounds, for all the world, like the title of any of a thousand commencement addresses delivered since 1892. It presumes that directions can be freely chosen and that ages can be contrived at will. But, friends, there are never new directions, just adaptations and alterations of old ones, and no new ages, just a continuation of that relentless stagger and lurch that characterizes our pilgrims progress from our paleolithic cradle to our nuclear grave, if that's our destiny.

If, as I say, there is no new road, but merely altered versions of one continuous journey, it may be good to stop, look back over our collective shoulder, and remember the road we covered.

From our Bostonian beginnings, we have regarded ourselves as radical innovators, transcending the mundane muck and mire from which lesser churches evolved. If the Episcopalians began as a property settlement out of King Henry's divorces, if Presbyterianism was theological indigestion to be expected from a people who relished haggis, and if the fundamentalists were homiletically spawned by preachers whose brains are the poor box of the church, then, in glorious contrast, Unitarians

imagined themselves immaculately conceived and sprung full-blown from the heads of intellectual saviors born in the brass beds of Beacon Hill. Unitarians, particularly, have appealed to the socially comfortable, the intellectually pedigreed, and the chauvinistically chic, who presumed that all others ate Sunday morning meatloaf, while they dined on ecclesiastical caviar. If we have had any historic delusions, they have been of grandeur. Through most of our journey, we, like the Pharisees, have prayed, "thank God, we are not as (others)", and, in recent times, form study commissions to discuss the exact meaning of the word "God."

Universalists were spared this early 19th century conceit. They were too busy trying to scrape the cultural manure off their shoes. I'll come back to them when they've managed to make themselves presentable.

What we forget is that we were spawned in the tides of the Age of Enlightenment when all sorts of religious flotsam and social jetsam were being tossed onto the shore of our society. It was a restless, stimulated epoch, that adolescents of the nineteenth century: Utopianism and communes, exotic cures and erratic causes, isms of every sort. Out of that same ferment that brought us the Women's Christian Temperance Union, bloomers, the Graham cracker and the high colonic came the Unitarian and Universalist movements.

If we can take justified pride in our origins, it is not because our beginnings were inscribed on stone tablets delivered from the heights of oratory at the ordination of Jared Sparks, but because we began thoroughly involved in the dust that

swirled up out of the road that lay across the terrain of that century. Those early Unitarians and Universalists, whose names we breathlessly invoke as though we were members of the D.A.R. or the Empire Loyalists, were men and women engulfed in the hopes and pains of their time. They did not invent their times, they were symbiotically dependent upon them. They were not so much the creators of culture as they were the respondents to its dynamics, its sickness and its health. Unitarians were the intellectual offspring fathered by Boston Brahmins and mothered by philosophical necessity. Universalism, the more radical of the two, was a country crop that grew up out of the same rugged individualism and rebellion of the Great Awakening that plowed defiant furrows around the religious bedrocks of New England.

In retrospect we like to think that society was shaped by the liberal religious message, but, in fact, the people might have bought the message had there been no Unitarian congregations catering to the carriage trade of the cities and no Universalist meeting houses hunkered down at the country crossroads. Its hard to know which came first, the ecclesiastical chickens or the egg of the era, for the movements and the culture in which they existed were inseparably entwined. In short, we were indigenous cultural phenomena. While most of the churches were European imports, perched on the surface of the land, Unitarians and Universalists grew out of the soil itself. We were dynamically more closely related to the Baptists, Methodists, and other evangelicals than we were to the transplanted churches of England, Scotland,

and Rome.

Once the social and religious revolution of the first half of the 19th century became blunted, either by neglect or acceptability, Unitarians to a great extent, and Universalists to some extent, lost their philosophical sting to respectability, though they remained predominately WASPS. As the tide of urbanization washed away the rural foundations upon which Universalists stood, Baptists and Methodists came to carry the cross roads the Universalists had left behind. As the federal aura of Philadelphia, Boston and their environs was replaced by Victorian virtuosity, Unitarians became but a little lower than the Anglicans. For a generation, at least, we sat by the side of the road and clipped our ecclesiastical coupons.

But again, the movement of culture cracked us out of our calcification. The social gospel movement of the Liberal Baptists, the higher biblical criticism of the modernist Presbyterians, the excitement of secular socio-political planners, and the fall of isolationistic ramparts under the bloody bludgeoning of European politics without and the collapse of economic conceit within granted us new visions of ourselves.

But, as always, our vitality depended upon our genius for adoption and appropriate response. We invented nothing. Instead we took the existing movements and made them an integral part of the life of our churches. While, for example, Presbyterian and Congregational clergy learned, as we did, the lessons of archeology, biblical criticism, psychology and science in

the university and seminary, they never mentioned them on Sunday. But Unitarian and Universalist ministers flew those new ideas like kites. Passionate preachers in our pulpits made liberal love to world religions and introduced the star of David, and yin and yang, and Islamic calligraphy to congregations that had only known the cross. While others either ignored or made uneasy peace with the physical sciences, we hailed them as chapters in our new book of Genesis. Whether in philosophical depth or in flashy faddiness, clearly we were trying our wings beyond the branch of Christianity from which we had grown.

By the end of World War II and the end of our culture's innocence, Saints Channing and Emerson had long since been left a molderin' in their graves. The old icons from New England were duly filed and forgotten in the archives of ancestor worship. We were ready to trigger new canonizations, and where a people search for saints, saints will be found. Subsequently scientists and Social scientists ascended to fill the niches of our need. Of these none was holier than Saint Sigmund and none more devoutly followed than his apostle, John -- Dewey, that is. It's no surprise that soon the pitter-patter of the little feet of child-centeredness was heard in our land. The new Beacon Series in Religious Education led our Sunday Schools out of the Holy Land and into the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant. Nature replaced supernature, wonder replaced prayer, and the field trip became our Exodus. Miracles Abounded, Christ came again as The Carpenter's Son, The Family Found Out, and

Martin and Judy moved in next door. Clearly, now naturalism was our theology and psychology our guide, while beans in soggy blotters sprouted on every window sill. We rediscovered the ancient maxim, "and a little child shall lead them." Again we found ourselves to be rooted in the movements of society, not as its inventors, but as its adaptors.

The nineteen sixties were, as always, beyond our control. The offspring of that decade ran rampant. Adolescence and activism called the cadence for a dozen different and simultaneous parades, and try as some Unitarian Universalists did, we could not run fast enough to get out in front to pretend that we were leading it. Yet being, by our nature, children of our culture, neither could we disassociate ourselves from the hopeful and hopeless harangues of those carnivals of caring that characterized that period. We picketed, petitioned, and polarized; stood up and sat in, and defended causes and offended constituents. Some of the most militant of our humanist clergy even donned Roman collars and knelt in fervent prayer in public places, though I am not sure to whom.

As always the road moved on, and the sixties ended with the gnawing knowledge that good is neither easy nor unmixed. Again it was not Unitarian Universalists alone who felt the dull brown lethargy as the sixties ended with a disenchanting whimper and sagged into the seventies. All of organized religion did, except the fundamentalists.

The exhilaration of the self-righteousness sixties was replaced by inwardness. Where, the movements of the hyper-

thyroid had thrived now only isolated mushrooms of self-centeredness quietly shouldered their way through the dry soil of the seventies. The Jesus movement, once compensation for those of low status and comparable intellect, came to the suburbs and the college campus. Eastern messianism prospered preaching irrationality with a smile and Jesus in neo-Hindu garb. Encounter groups groped for self-actualization. The green dreams of Thoreau and Huckelberry Finn back-packed back to nature, nurtured on herb tea and Danan yogurt. Our headlong sprint toward social salvation changed to a simple saunter in search of the self. Those among us who had erroneously equated Unitarian Universalism with social action suffered the same disillusionment as did our Catholic counterparts when the Vatican announced that some saints had gone marching out.

So as always, like ministerial bag-ladies, we scrounged through the seventies to find some relevant remnants for liberal religious survival. The Women's movement helped. Anti-fundamentalism was a windfall well suited to our needs. The human potential movement came in handy. Meditation was marketable. The environment was good to have around. But, in truth, we had nothing unique to say for Indians, about abortion, on behalf of women, for gays, or about pollution that could not be said by everyone from American Baptists to Zen Buddhists. Wine and cheese in church was an insipid suburban substitute when the biggest religious movements in town were serving the body and blood of God. Not even the amplified guitar proved to be the rock of our salvation. While

"About Your Sexuality" aroused some sense of relevance, we could hardly claim sex as a Unitarian Universalist first.

So, the seventies, like the sixties, was a count down in the congregational numbers game.

Standing just beyond the crest of this decade, I sometimes sense that we are like Eliot's aging Anglican, lamenting,

"...I have known them all already, known them all;
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons..."

(T. S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock)

Some of us, I sense, find nothing much to take to church except cut-and-paste sermons snipped from last Sunday's Times or this week's issue of MacLeans, as if relevance was a predictably liberal tussel with each week's headlines or the elevation of some passing celebrity to sermonic sainthood. If all we have to offer is a book review or a homiletic rehash of the news, our name is Mudd.

Some, I sense, believe they are on the cutting edge of liberal religion, if they succeed in filling their hours chairing the local chapters of the Committee for Classical Drama in Retirement Housing and the Citizens for the Protection of Poindexter Persimmons.

Some, I sense, find the greatest meaning to the ministry in those annual pilgrimages to the U.U.A.'s equivalent of Lourdes, where in a five-day-frenzy of delusionary self-importance, they indulge themselves in the notion that we are an international movement with central power. Surely, the flash is thrilling, but the

spirit's bleak as they gather to worry the dry bones of theological semantics, agonize over our relations with "the opposite race", or congratulate themselves on the passage of motions that are as binding on local congregations as are the directives of the College of Cardinals. However Time-ly reporters or delegates find these campus capers, the center of our ministries are on Riverside Drive, Elmwood Avenue, East Genesee Street, Simpson Street, Cleary and St. Clair Avenues, and all the others I can ignore as easily as I do Beacon Street. The only one that really counts, the only place where Unitarian Universalism lives or dies is East Main Street, Canton.

There, for what sometimes seems like half our common history, I have been taking my turn in a church, which has stood along the road since Clara Barton was three years old and Mary Livermore and Susan B. Anthony were five, and Henry David Thoreau was eight and Oliver Wendell Holmes was a Harvard freshman and Ralph Waldo Emerson entered theological school.

And sometimes when I'm not "the very model of a busy modern minister", knee-jerking to the never-ending stream of social issues, genuflecting before the mimeograph machine, and administering our socio-psychological community center with a steeple, I sneak away to that big, empty room, stand behind the pulpit, put my hands on either side of its old, smooth oak, look out across the emptiness to the fullness, and think, like a Moses of the moment, "this is the place! Here is where they stood -- my colleagues in time. Here's where they stood rewording the emotions of Murray, the logic of Ballou, the eloquence of

Channing and the poetry of Emerson. Here at this spot they fought for abolition, prison reform, and women's suffrage, but here is where they mostly denied the doctrines of despair and kept the faith -- the faith greater than the passing parade."

Where are they now? As Masters said, "All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill." (Edgar Lee Masters, "Spoon River Anthology") Only I am left to speak.

From the back of the church: very slow and faint applause, and sitting there I say, "Good, Max, good, but what in hell does that mean?"

It means, you sarcastic bastard, I am what there is here, and I have got to immerse my ministry in the people of this place in the time that is mine. And when they ask me what they can believe, I won't tell them what I don't believe. If they should speak of God by name or by any other name, I won't fear the word and give them semantics or anthropology. And when they come to grieve or die, I will speak of death, its fears, release and loss and hope, and will not preach on reforming funeral practices. That's what it means, and more.

Whatever else I do, I will give them our heritage: the emotions of Murray, the logic of Ballou, the eloquence of Channing, the poetry of Emerson, and all the rest filtered and altered through me, but in essence quite unchanged, because I see a time that is crying for belief, for roots, for confidence, religiousness and sustenance that touches but transcends this evening's editorial and tomorrows fashion -- at least I see it that way, where I stand at the center of Unitarian Universalist religion.