

RESPONSE TO MAX COOT'S PAPER
"The Flash is Willing But The Spirit's Bleak"
at
The Josephine Gould Memorial Discourse
St. Lawrence District Conference
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by: Chris Raible

According to the New York Times, the glowworms of Great Britain are dying out. The lights of human civilization are affecting the sex life of the glowworm population. Male worms, mistaking the glow of electric lamps for the mating signals of females, are chasing the wrong kind of light. "They are not doing what nature intended them to do," laments glowworm authority Anthony Wooton.

Max is, it seems to me, cautioning us to remember our true nature. The danger is that like the male glowworms, we are constantly dazzled by bright lights, distracted from engaging in our essential (dare I use the word in its old sense?) intercourse. The glamour of current events (forgive me) outshines the glimmer of our church chalices.

He is, of course, correct. Sudden surges of brilliance are not the same as genuine enlightenments. We do not do very well at distinguishing long lasting lights from those easily extinguished. Weak filaments burn with blinding brightness but briefly, their gleam lasts not enough for us to follow to fulfillment. That which "turns on" quickly, burns out early.

But Max is no more fully fair than I am. He suggests that we will continue to stumble along incapable of new direction. Yet, if I understand

him, he sees our direction already set by our habitual historical ways of journeying. If that be true, and I think it probably is, we can still take a fresh look back if not a new look forward.

Clever as it is, Max's backward glance is too focused. I would use a wider angle lens.

Unitarians, at least those who sustained churches, did not see themselves as brand new, but instead as contemporary expressions of what is permanent rather than transient in Christianity. Indeed, in Boston, it is the churches which were rooted in an earlier age which survive today - virtually every Unitarian church and all the Universalist churches founded in that city in the 19th century have died out.

Both Unitarians and Universalists were - and today we UU's are - always minority faiths. Despite Jefferson's trust that all young men then living would become Unitarians (Jefferson never gave a cent to support a Unitarian church), few if any Unitarians thought that they would convert the world, or wanted to. Universalists were more active missionaries to be sure - and in their first century highly effective ones - but their basic message of "universal salvation" taught that one didn't have to be a Universalist to be saved.

In other words, both bodies, in different ways, identified themselves with the whole of humanity. They did not see themselves as having any exclusive possession of the truth.

Further, their social activism which Max wonders about, was always seeking the good of all - hence public education, mental health reform, women's rights, peace, the Red Cross, and all the rest.

Of course we were not alone; never were these issues exclusively or particularly ours. But our ancestors were central to the leadership of such social movements because they were expressions of our faith in human nature.

The religious education movement which Max teases about, was important. As someone who thought of himself as the Martin of "Martin and Judy," I believe that Sophia Fahs was our most important theologian in this century. She taught that the human soul, even dubbed "the wonder part" is nevertheless our concern as a community.

Our ancestors may not have imported UU institutions when they immigrated to this continent, but their ideas were formed in reaction to those faiths that were brought over on the boats. Both Unitarianism and Universalism emerged in response to Calvinism. They opposed its views of both the human and divine nature, but they co-opted almost all the rest of Puritanism: reliance on congregational polity, distrust of icons and liturgy, faith in the spoken word. Conrad Wright reminded us that our real religious ancestor was not Servetus; it was the man who burned him.

Calvin, like Max, like all of us here, believe in the church as an elemental community. Free men together could best know the truth - better than monarchs or bishops. Max does well to remind us as ministers that our primary vocation is to serve those by whom we are called. We, as clergy, need congregations to exist. (Did you know that the first suicide jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, was a recently fired Unitarian minister!) Without parishes and parishioners there would be no one with whom to work, to whom

to preach. As clergy, we dare to reveal ourselves
- our flesh we make word. To our members we
"measure out" our lives "with coffee spoons"
(before coffee hour) hoping to stir others to
better living - not only so we can have a better
living, but so we together can make a better world
- or at least, cling to the world we have.

We annually assemble generally not for miracles
like Lourdes, but nevertheless for healing
ourselves. Our resolutions cause no revolutions
because our primary purpose is the business of
associating to strengthen each other.

We are here at this St. Lawrence District
gathering because we know that our individual
congregations could not long exist as isolated
autonomous entities in Canton, London, Toronto, or
anywhere.

A fellowshop or church, which calls itself
Unitarian Universalist - or either word alone -
has no right to continue to do so unless it pays
its dues to the denomination (the name), the
association it constantly uses - that it daily
depends upon (knowingly or not) for its continued
existence. Max treads dangerously close, in his
deep love for his own pulpit, to a liberal
isolationism which ever weakens us and may yet
doom us. We as ministers in particular ought to
know that supporting our churches is simply not
enough.

I worry as much about the world as anyone. But I
believe we have more time at our disposal than we
often seem to think. To quote the same T.S. Eliot
poem:

"And indeed there will be time
for the yellow smoke that slides along the

street,
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you
meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time for a hundred indecisions,
And time for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea....

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"....
Yet it need not be a desperate or despairing time.
We need not lonesomely long for some lost beacon.
A flickering flame collectively tended can offer
enough light to lead us kindly forward.

Thank you, Max, for well reminding us of our
ministerial task to tend our local lamps, to keep
our home fires burning. I simply emphasize that
power is generated by our association. It can
renew us when our spirits are willing, but our
flesh is weak!