

*Inherent Worth and Dignity: Speaking Well of our
Congregations*

**The Josephine Gould Discourse for the Annual
Assembly of the Saint Lawrence District
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I am deeply grateful for the religion of my childhood: the people of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, Ohio nurtured in me much of what I most cherish about myself and my life. My desire to minister was born from the spiritual nurturing I experienced in that congregation. That nurturing is why I dream of the day when there are least two Unitarian Universalist congregations on every street corner.

The Director of Religious Education lit a chalice during children's worship. It was 1970, and being a typical 10-year old, I loved symbols, and the chalice especially. I still do. The symbol most of our congregations now use reminds me of all the good things that happened to me at church. But when I was ten, I was shocked to discover that our adults FORBADE lighting a chalice in their worship. I asked my Scientist Sunday School teacher why the adults forbade it. He explained to me that Unitarian Universalists had rejected dogma, so they didn't need such rituals.

I was 10. I didn't know what dogma meant. I could not figure out what DOGS had to do with lighting a chalice. My Sunday School teacher explained that dogmas were religious rules. I still didn't get it -- UUs didn't have any religious rules, so why was there a rule against lighting a chalice?

The adults who sustained that loving community knew from their own personal experiences how organized religion has a fearsome power. They were afraid of what a symbol can do, what a symbol and the language it represents can be used to do.

When I returned to the church as a young adult with an undergraduate degree, I joined the Worship Committee. The adults still did not light a chalice during worship. I had some leverage as a young adult with deep roots in that church, so I proposed at a meeting of the Worship Committee that we light a chalice as a part of worship.

One committee member, Eric, stared at me for a minute, then in outrage he burst out: “That’s a terrible idea – lighting candles in church...it’s ... it’s popery!”

“Pot-pourri?” I said, confused. I couldn’t figure out what the funny little scent jars in my mother’s bathrooms had to do with lighting a chalice. “What does a jar of scents...”

“No, no, no!” said Eric. “If we light a Chalice we might as well be Catholic.”

I was still confused. “Catholic?” I asked. “I didn’t know Catholics lit chalices.” As I tried to make sense of the connection between UU’s lighting a chalice and the Catholic Church, the rest of the Committee began to giggle. They were seeing how bizarre the conversation seemed to me -- a product of their own RE programming. They took a big breath and decided to allow me to light a chalice on a trial basis.

It was a difficult “yes” for them, a people I very much loved and still love and still cherish. Their “yes” was not for themselves at that time. Their “yes” was to me. It took me many years to understand that to light a chalice in our worship was, for me, a way to say to them what no words could truly explain. I am thankful for how this congregation still sings in my soul every day and every time I light a chalice.

Not all language is spoken – some language is expressed through the way we position our bodies, some language is expressed in ritual -- like our ritual of lighting a chalice. Language conveys meaning, and meaning is the heart of our Living Tradition – we human animals require meaning, we see meaning in our actions and shape meaning in our words.

But as much as we Unitarian Universalist love words and wordiness, it was the meaning beyond the words that fed my spirit and shaped my faith. My response to that gift of meaning and community was gratitude – a desire to live my life as an affirmation in reply to what I received from my

religious community. This spirituality of receiving and giving in return became its own cycle of life, and soon a couple of the church's well-respected elder women suggested I might make a good minister. I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I wanted more of what I had known, wanted to build more of our communities, to return to a spiritually-starved world the blessings of this Living Tradition. I come from a family with entrepreneurs and business people, so I used my business-skills and the religion I knew and loved and I helped to start two congregations. The first two congregations I served were congregations I helped to start – Mission Peak in California, then Columbine in Colorado.

But I am worried about our movement. Something hurts among us. I don't know why we hurt so much, but something hurts us enough that we routinely wound each other and wound our movement. I was talking with my colleague and friend, Rev. Peter Morales, who I first met in Denver, Colorado, when I was still serving the church in Littleton. The congregation Peter serves is the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, which has grown very well through its four decades of life. During the past eight years the Jefferson Congregation has grown so well that it has become a large church, hired a part-time membership coordinator, has had several building expansion projects, and has an accomplished and impressive program for its members.

About a year and a half ago, the Board of the congregation in Golden applied to the Unitarian Universalist Association

for a grant for an internship. The grant awards half the cost of an internship as a way of encouraging congregations to see themselves as “teaching congregations” where our congregations support one another by helping to prepare future ministers. The Jefferson Church had created an internship that exceeded all the criteria set by the UUA for receiving the grant. Yet the grant was not awarded to the Jefferson Church. The leaders of the Jefferson Church were surprised, and so they called the UUA to ask why their application was turned-down. They were told that the award would not be given to a large church – the Jefferson Congregation had, quote: “grown too much” to be eligible... even though the posted rules for the grant never specified that large churches are excluded from the grant.

The Board of the Jefferson Church in Golden, Colorado was pretty upset. The Jefferson Unitarian Church had been a “Fair Share” congregation for 40 years, and in that time had never asked for or received any financial support from the UUA. After 40 years of faithfully supporting our association and a lot of success on their own, the only grant-request the congregation had ever made was denied. The denial, not made based on any public criterion, amounted to a secret criterion applied after the fact, and the denial really stung the people at the Jefferson Church. I am sad to say that out of their hurt, their response was to deduct the value of the grant -- \$6000.00 -- from their fair-share contribution to the UUA the following year.

This isn't an isolated story in our movement today: I have heard many UUs express a surprising amount of hurt and

anger about large and small churches in our movement. Peter Morales gave me permission to share the story as one example.

One last example: A letter came to me as a Chalice-Lighter here in the Saint Lawrence District a few weeks ago. The letter came from the Saint Lawrence Growth Committee, and I was shocked just by the first sentence: “The SLD Growth Committee at its recent meeting discussed the concerns expressed by nine people about our last two Chalice Lighter grants being given to congregations that are large or mid-size.” The letter later explains that some of those who wrote in protesting the grants believe that larger churches should not be supported by Chalice Lighter grants.

I can’t find any logic in the reasons for refusing Chalice Lighter grants to large and midsize congregations. The most common reason I have heard personally and the reason the Growth Committee received as the reason to refuse grants is that larger congregations have more people and more success at raising money, thus larger congregations don’t need chalice-lighter grants. But the logic of this argument is, on the face of it, nonsense. The argument appears to be this: If a congregation is successful, it doesn’t need our support. Implied in this argument I find a belief that it should be “less successful” congregations that we support with grants.

The letter from Saint Lawrence District Growth Committee explains a clear and logical criterion for awarding Chalice-

lighter grants: “Readiness for growth and its attendant change....” Success, as judged for awarding a Chalice Lighter grant, is described simply in the committee’s letter: Success is a good chance that the grant will help us serve more Unitarian Universalists more effectively. This limited and effectively focused criterion is appropriate for a project of a “Growth” Committee. It contains no judgment about a congregation’s style, theology, size, or even its previous success or lack of success as a criterion of awarding the grant. It appears to me that the Saint Lawrence Growth Committee is doing a good job, setting a healthy and fair standard for awarding Chalice Lighter grants. It’s a criterion abiding by a healthy application of the First Principle for congregations, as I see it.

But not all of us see it this way. We are, collectively, clearly upset about something: we are a movement that prides itself on the use of logic and reason... but these concerns about large churches as unworthy or “too successful” appear to me disconnected from reason or logic. And given the conflicted feelings between different sizes of congregations, it’s shocking to me that there are no articles discussing it and there are no healthy, intellectually solid dialogues using logic and reason that appear in our theological or associational journals about it; there is no exploring the relationship of large, small, and midsize churches in our Living Tradition. Even among ministers there’s no open discussion, but instead I see ministers of different-sized congregations harboring animosity toward one another.

These feelings, for me, say something about a sadness and anger that I experience in our movement. It's a depth of feeling that reminds me of the soul-sapping hostilities that erupted between Unitarian Humanists and Unitarian Christians in the 1930's. We still harbor the hurt and sorrow of those days.ⁱ

The animosity between our congregations is illogical. But even if I could preach you all senseless with impeccable logic and reason, logic and reason inform me that it wouldn't help: I can't change our thinking with logic and reason. If I tried, I'd just make you feel bad. I say this because this issue of large church versus small church feels to me like an huge emotional disconnect... the emotional content in this conflict between our churches does not feel appropriate to the actual issue. And our conflict is so illogical that I can only conclude our passions have deranged us. To me, our irrational behavior has an unhealthy feeling to it. Our behavior feels to me like the behavior of a deeply troubled member of a church who is resigning in fury because the church dared to paint the kitchen pink instead of green.

Most of us have seen this happen – a member of our congregation who invests an irrational amount of emotional energy in a trivial issue. The psychic truth about a member enraged about pink paint is, I suspect, also true for our movement: the issue isn't really the issue. If it were, someone else would already have written a beautifully-reasoned argument for or against a policy of supporting growth in large congregations. But no one has tried: it's

like trying to argue the resigning member out of his rage about the pink paint – we could paint the kitchen green for him, but it really won't help anything: the green paint isn't why the member is enraged.

And I don't think that the different sizes of our congregations really matters, either. Our over-blown conflict over the size of congregations reveals something deeper about us.

I've been giving extra attention to my spiritual practice this past year. I identify as a Unitarian Universalist, with two primary subsets of Theism and Humanism. So, using science and reason to get myself off to a good start, the most logical start I could think of was speaking to myself and to others in affirmation. The first word of my spiritual practice is gratitude.

A thankful spirituality comes naturally to me. Gratitude infuses my memories of being a member in Columbus, Ohio. When I was active there, First UU of Columbus was a medium-sized church, and so naturally it was impossible for anyone to know everyone. But I can tell you that the conventional wisdom is wrong about big churches: that larger congregation was an intensely intimate experience for me. I met the woman who became my wife, Wendy, at that church: she was chair of the Religious Education Committee and I was chair of the Worship Committee. When we married, we invited the church – literally. We had

well over 300 people at our wedding! And while we didn't know them all, we were surrounded by a community that loved us – that community that gave me so much of what I cherish in my life. Even so, it wasn't possible for anyone to know everyone there... yet it would not have been the church it was for me if any single one of those people had been missing from our lives – no matter if they were known to us or not.

Then there's the two congregations I helped start, Mission Peak and Columbine: I can tell you that those congregations are precious, wonderful gatherings of people, and those two, smaller congregations have very literally saved people's lives. And the large congregation I now serve in Buffalo sings beautifully and has a proud history of spiritual leadership in its community. All four of these congregations are dear souls, just like any individual one of us – each community has a personality, a style, and its sacred work. Each community is saving this world by practicing this faith that our web of shared existence is blessed by a diversity of spirit, a diversity of culture, of belief, and, yes, a diversity of size. Each is a success in its own way.

So I have two proposals for you. First I propose to you that our First Principle, the principle that calls us to affirm an “inherent worth and dignity of every person” has a deficit: the principle must include more than us individuals. An affirmation of worth and dignity should apply to congregations. It should even apply to our Living Tradition, too.

But the extension of our principles is not enough. We are missing something even more essential than a principle. We don't even have a way to talk to each other in affirmation. We are possessed by the limitations of our present language and its spirit of loss and deficit. Deficit and deficiency is inherent in the religious language we speak. Speaking about one another and speaking about our congregations out of something as basic as gratitude is not easy for us.

Our language and practice of deficit results, in part, because of the great and life-saving project of science. Science and its methods have been so important to us, have obviously saved millions or even billions of human lives over the last two centuries. And, yet, Science, if it's done well, is also the ultimate expression of the spirit of doubt and deficit. I am, in part, a humanist, so I am by definition grateful for what science does for us... but as one of the leading philosophers of Humanism in our Unitarian Universalist movement, David Bumbaugh, suggested, the full potential of our shared faith needs the foundation of a language of reverence – a way of speaking that is inherently seeks to affirm rather than seeks deficit and deficiencyⁱⁱ.

Well... in just a few years we've wrung a thousand lifetimes of hand-wringing over the infamous controversy that we create a "Language of Reverence." It started off very quietly when David Bumbaugh first proposed the language of reverence about 6 years ago. Then a Texas

newspaper misquoted a sermon by UUA President Bill Sinkford, announcing that we Unitarian Universalists would once again worship the One-True God. An issue most UUs would have ignored became instead a collective cry of loss and fear, and here again is that pattern I'm pointing out to you: we UUs are quick to feel hurt and anger from our quietly harbored resentments, and our built-up emotions erupt unpredictably and with a shocking lack of logic, reason, or even basic common sense.

Lost in the eruption of fear and hurt among UU Humanists at the "Language of Reverence" controversy was a stunning and essential fact: the proposal for a Language of Reverence was the idea of a leading Humanist, the Rev. Dr. David Bumbaugh. If simple reason had prevailed, we would never have had a controversy.

In spite of our diversity, I think our movement struggles with resentment, with sadness and fear because we cannot speak well to one another. We Unitarian Universalists are highly skilled doubters, and we have an effective language for it. But without a counterbalance of a Humanistic language of affirmation or reverence, we have no way to fill the psychic gaps that doubt carves in our souls. We become trapped in our language of deficits, and it is only human of us to fill the void in our souls with anger and grief over our loss.

We talk a lot about our First Principle – but in my experience we use it less as an affirmation and more like a bludgeon for our individual goals. Our language of deficit

spins us into unending empty conflicts. If we want to shape the future of this world by our principles, we need a compelling way to describe it. As two scholars whose work is meant to affirm worth and dignity explain, “the theories we hold [and] our beliefs about social systems, have a powerful effect on the nature of social 'reality.' Not only do we see what we believe, but the very act of believing creates” what we believe in.ⁱⁱⁱ The very act of speaking shapes what we see.

This my second proposal: that the language of Faith we should have and the language of Science we now use would mirror and compliment each other. So, for example, the role of language, in the practice of science, is the practice of “pre-diction,” pre-diction in the literal sense of “speaking before” something happens. Scientific prediction is an extension of imagination into the future – but while practicing science, that extension is explicitly denies a value like the First Principle – the scientific method calls us to speak of the future without controlling it, without projecting ourselves into the future of what we observe. Science speaks to the future without shaping it; true Science makes pre-dictions without pre-determinations.^{iv}

But to speak with a language of reverence, to fling into the future our First Principle dream of a world where all are cherished, we must do the opposite of Science: we speak to shape and change the future, but NOT to predict it. Religion, when it predicts, is mere orthodoxy with its arrogant habit of predicting the future, a habit of symbolic and linguistic domination intended to strip us of our

freedom. In orthodoxy, the future, fully planned, requires we be compliant with prediction's plans. That was the spiritual violence my elders feared when they would not light a chalice in worship 40 years ago.

But what we know now is that good religion is obliged to pre-determine, not predict; good religion lives with the mystery that is the next moment, but at the same time good religion calls us to act in ways that determine a future that is blessed, a future in which the inherent worth and dignity of people, places, communities, and all of life has grown more true and more real than before.

It is in search of good religious practices that we need that Language of Reverence; we must nurture among ourselves a way of speaking in affirmation of each other, of our congregations, and of our faith. And there is a well-tested and practiced method of speaking and action just waiting for us: it's the process of Appreciative Inquiry.

I have to warn you of an emotional landmine lurking in my proposal: the practice of appreciative Inquiry was developed in the context of business and Organizational Development studies. Appreciative Inquiry is a business thing. I know from experience that many of us feel anger and fear about things having to do with business.

If it will help with our feelings, I can tell you that Professor Bumbaugh spoke at the General Assembly of the UUA a few years after his proposal on a Language of Reverence

was published. During his GA presentation, Professor Bumbaugh explained that:

...religion is [now] a part of the entertainment industry," he said. "In the process, it has been stripped of its power to stand in opposition" to a world that is filled with injustice. Instead of religious communities standing in judgment on secular political power, religion has become a tool of political power.^v

Professor Bumbaugh calls for us to create a new language of reverence. "The old language," he explained, "has been captured and enslaved."

Let's take back what is rightfully ours: let's take the well-tested tools of Appreciative Inquiry, and use their power to heal ourselves and heal this world. And the power of Appreciative Inquiry is a powerful speaking, and speaking in a very specific way – it means to shape the future out of the power of words and relationships in the present moment – it is the opposite of as well as the compliment of science. Appreciative Inquiry is pre-determination without prediction (thus its balance is the scientific method, which calls us to predict without predetermining)

This is a description of Appreciative Inquiry from an article by two of its scholar/practitioners:

Appreciative inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, the organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a

system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. [It] involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capability... [asking] an "unconditional positive question...." In Appreciative Inquiry, intervention gives way to imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis there is discovery, dream and design. Appreciative Inquiry assumes that every living system has untapped, rich, and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link this "positive change core" directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.^{vi}

So in Appreciative Inquiry, the questions we have to ask one another require reverence. The conversations we need between our congregations sound like this: "What is going well for you?" "When do you feel gratitude for your congregation?" And "How can your congregation do that good work more often and for more people?" The language of loss and deficit sounds like this: "Why is it bad to support congregation 'X?'"

I am not an expert in Appreciative Inquiry, but I know we need it. And we need one another – more than words can say. I urge us to practice our faith more fully; to extend our principles in affirmation of our congregations as well as ourselves, and I urge us to use a well-tested and proven method as we put our faith into life-affirming action.

I'm being thankful lately, but very little in my life has changed at the same time. My experience is utterly different because of how I think and speak about the world around me: I've been practicing gratitude, and its this spiritual practice that is changing how I feel and how I think. My life is filled with blessings: my family is healthy and lives a life filled with learning and meaningful work; I serve a historic church filled with activity and a longing for justice; I am here, with you, part of a small movement that continues to have a profoundly good effect on the world.

The world needs this faith nurtured in our congregations and our Living Tradition. Our congregations and this shared faith of ours, if they will thrive, must express this faith in emotionally healthy terms and words. Anything less is simply unreasonable and irrational.

ⁱ I am indebted to Rev. Scott Tayler for this insight.

ⁱⁱ TOWARD A HUMANIST VOCABULARY OF REVERENCE by David Bumbaugh at the Boulder International Humanist Institute's Fourth Annual Symposium in Boulder, Colorado on February 22, 2003 as found at <http://archive.uua.org/news/2003/vocabulary/bumbaugh.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Lancaster, Cynthia M; Egan, Toby Marshall, Comparing Appreciative Inquiry to Action Research: OD Practitioner Perspectives from the *Organization Development Journal*, July 1, 2005

^{iv} Barnhart, Joe, Karl Popper: philosopher of critical realism, from *The Humanist*, July 1, 1996

^v as reported on the UUA website on the GA presentation Toward a Humanist Language of Reverence, 2004 General Assembly of Congregations by Dan Harper. Presenters: Rev. David Bumbaugh, Rev. Kendyl Gibbons, url: <http://archive.uua.org/ga/ga04/4016.html>

^{vi} Lancaster, Cynthia M; Egan, Toby Marshall, Comparing Appreciative Inquiry to Action Research: OD Practitioner Perspectives from the *Organization Development Journal*, July 1, 2005