

Jim Key's keynote address for the UUA Southern Region's joint district assemblies on 26 April, 2014

Reading: "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters," Portia Nelson

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in
I am lost . . . I am helpless
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again
I can't believe I am in the same place but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it there.
I still fall in . . . it's a habit, my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

What's in a Name?

For those of you who came to Unitarian Universalism as an adult, do you recall the difficulty you sometimes had getting those ten syllables out fluidly and confidently? All of us have probably sat through a service when an inexperienced lay reader was a little nervous and reversed the order, e.g., Universalist Unitarianism. I remember an event where my congregation in Beaufort, SC was being recognized for some its justice work. The host was stumbling with our long name and finally burst out, "You know, they are that church that loves everybody?" Frankly, it is not a bad way to be known, but it doesn't tell the whole story.

Since the Standing on the Side of Love campaign, and the accompanying proliferation of yellow shirts and banners, we ARE known as the love people in some circles.

One of the things that James Luther Adams teaches us about liberal theology is that revelation is not sealed, that we come to understand new truths through study, prayer or meditation, or from others. Ongoing bits of revelation help us in our search for inner wisdom because of their ability to elicit "a-ha" responses in us. When we hear or read or see something and are influenced by it, it is because the event is expressing a truth that we already knew but hadn't articulated. Something was revealed; it was a revelation.

Well, I had such a revelation a few months ago when I heard the Rev. Justin Osterman preach a sermon that he titled Ten Syllables, about our denomination's name. So I credit Rev. Osterman with for the inspiration for much of this keynote address.

You know in business adopting best practices is called benchmarking. In academia and ministry is it called plagiarism. Either way it is wisdom worth sharing. I am quoting heavily from Osterman's work and choose to think of it as benchmarking.

"What's in a name?" William Shakespeare famously asked in his play Romeo and Juliet. Naming is a uniquely human undertaking. Parents name their children, people name their pets and cars, and explorers of every kind name their discoveries – whether they are species, sub-atomic particles, or stars. Names are revealing and, sometimes, quite powerful.

The names of the various world religions tell us much about them. Baha'i, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism were all named after their founding leaders. Christianity was as well... Hinduism and Judaism both derive their names from the geographic regions in which they emerged. Islam and Sikhism suggest religious attitudes, "submission" and "pupil" respectively. Taoism means "the way" and Shintoism "the way of the gods."

Within Christianity, Catholic means "universal" and Protestantism emerged as

a protest movement... The Orthodox Church means, "right thinking," as opposed to their errant Catholic cousins.

The many names of Protestant denominations are interesting too. The first Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, gave his name to Lutheranism. The Baptists and Anabaptists, derive their names from their views on the ritual of baptism. If you don't know who the Anabaptists are, they are the Mennonites (named for founder Menno Simons) and the Amish (named after Jakob Ammann). The Methodists were named such because of their "methodical approach to Christian spirituality [in their] members." The names Presbyterian and Episcopal describe church governance structures; the presbytery is governed by elders and the episcopacy is governed by bishops. The Quakers (Religious Society of Friends) got tagged with their name because they were said to quake in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Evangelical Christians "share the good news," which is what evangelize means and Pentecostal Christians speak in tongues, because that's what Jesus' followers did on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-31). The United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Assemblies of God . . . well, I think you can figure that out for yourselves.

Not one religion or denomination (that I know of) is named after its theological position . . . except one: Unitarian Universalism. Yet, today, Unitarian Universalism may be the least understood religious group in this country.

Ten syllables is a mouthful for your average adult, and much more so for children. Among contemporary American religious groups, only the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church can compete with us for the longest name. But, I suspect that if you visit one of those churches and ask the members what they believe, you'll get a clear, simple answer . . . and I suspect that you'll find broad agreement among those members about what constitutes the core of their faith. ¹

I believe that people in our congregations could benefit from theological clarity and would find it useful as they explained their faith to their family and friends. More importantly, I believe we could attract more visitors and retain more members were we to master the art of concisely articulating our beliefs. We don't want rigid dogma or harsh doctrine, but we are open for religious clarity.

Many of us turn to our 7 Principles to provide a simple statement of belief. But they are insufficient. I have shared them with many of my progressive friends and they tell me they respond positively to them all but that it doesn't tell them much about our religious views. Only the first and seventh principles contain much theology. Osterman says that the rest are statements of how we want to act in the world, which is terrific of course.

¹ Rev. Justin Osterman, March 9, 2014 at Cedar Lane UU Church

However, theology is what you believe and ethics is how you act because of what you believe. Theology is the “why” of religion – ethics is the “what” – and together they make the “who.”

If Unitarian Universalism has any hope of expanding its influence in the world, then it’s time for us to be clear about our core theology.

Someone has said that unless Unitarian Universalism soon develops a coherent message with which to spread our faith we will go the way of the Shakers and not even leave any good furniture behind.

If that reference is lost on you, then know that the Shakers (United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing) are an off-shoot of the Quakers. The Shakers were known primarily for their music and exquisite craftsmanship. They prospered in religious communes through the 19th century, only to dwindle to near extinction in the 20th century. The last remaining Shaker community, located at Sabbathday Lake in New Gloucester, Maine, had eight members in 2001; in 2010 there were only three. The Shakers relied almost exclusively on adult converts to increase their numbers. They hoped that the world would find them and made little effort to spread the message of their faith. Does that sound familiar to you?²

My own story of finding Unitarian Universalism is instructive. I am committed to my core, to finding those people, like me, who are seekers, but having trouble finding us, or worse, not quite understanding what we are all about when they do encounter us.

You may know some of my history from the campaign for Moderator but I will try to summarize for you.

I grew up poor in the Jim Crow South influenced by my radical grandfather who was a Social Gospel Methodist. Under his tutelage, he and I took timid positions of solidarity with those oppressed and spoke out against the evils of segregation.

Fast forward: I married a woman I met in Junior High School and raised two sons and a daughter.

We enjoyed a privileged life, and I had a career with IBM for over 30 years, living and working all over the US and Asia, always seeking and joining the most liberal and progressive protestant congregation we could find.

I was a restless and questioning soul, having many doubts about my own evolving theology and the relevance of organized religion...spiritual but not religious you might say.

² ibid

I was always a little uncomfortable, but like the frog in the increasingly hot oil, tolerated the orthodoxy well enough as we moved about.

Our children had to be home schooled on the world's religions, inclusion, fighting oppression, multi-culturalism, and other progressive ideas. My wife Liz, then as now, was the OWL instructor (but only recently certified I should add).

As our family moved about and sought a liberal religious community, we never encountered a Unitarian Universalist in Morris County NJ, or Tulsa OK, or St. Louis MO, or Kansas City MO, or Atlanta GA, or Minato-ku, Tokyo, or Westport CT. I am pretty sure UUs were around, but no one invited us into this saving faith. We never passed a UU facility. We never noticed a UU ad. We were never greeted by a UU at an NAACP, Urban League, National Organization for Women, or Planned Parenthood event.

Methodists, Baptists, Jews, Episcopalians, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon's, Shintoists, Buddhists, Secular Humanists, Atheists, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Baha'is: individuals from those belief systems, in about that order of frequency, introduced themselves to us and invited us to know more about their beliefs, but we never met anyone who identified as a Unitarian Universalist in all of those years. Not one.

I like to think we have done a better job in recent years of promoting who we are with our Standing on the Side of Love campaign. Of course technology helps with Belief Net and web sites available for folks to pre-qualify themselves before a visit to a UU congregation, but we still face the problem of articulating our theology succinctly and uniformly, either in person, in our congregations, or on our own Association web site.

That is why I am excited about our new branding initiative which when fully rolled out will better communicate **who we are, what we do, and why it matters**. It will help people like me find us much earlier in their search for a liberal and liberating faith. And it will help us all to find ways to communicate individually who we are, what we do, and why it matters.

"The aim of religion," wrote Rev. Ulysses G.B. Pierce, "is not to get us into Heaven, but to get Heaven into us." That's still a pretty good one-line way to explain our faith to people. Rev. Pierce was a Unitarian minister and chaplain of the United States Senate from 1909-1913. He was appointed to that post by then US President William Howard Taft, who was also a Unitarian (and our fourth and last Unitarian US President). Taft was also a Republican... (And I need to add, Moderator of the American Unitarian Association). I wonder just how welcome Taft would feel in most of our congregations today. The likelihood of a Unitarian Universalist getting elected president today – much as I wish it were otherwise – is vanishingly small. Most Americans have never heard of us, and many of those who have dismiss us as irreligious and

theologically incoherent.³

I believe to my core that Unitarian Universalism can be the religion of the 21st century, because we have a broad, progressive theology that relies on reason, accepts science, respects the individual, celebrates community, seeks wisdom in all the world's religions, and honors the Holy mystery of this magnificent creation of which we are a part. Every social justice stance we take can be justified by our theology, but too many of us don't know our history, heritage, and theology well enough to make that case. It's difficult to grow a religious movement without a coherent, unifying theological identity.

It is long past time for us, as Unitarian Universalists, to bravely move beyond our superficial differences and discomfort in talking about our beliefs and do the challenging, but important, work of identifying and deepening the core of our faith. Having done so, we will see that there are many more people who share our beliefs than we ever imagined . . . people hungry for a meaningful faith in these challenging, uncertain days of a young century. Let us finally resolve to truly become the religious beacon that our heritage has equipped us to be. The time is now, the world is ready, and the hour is late.⁴

We can begin this work in our congregations and in clusters with leadership development that focuses on our theology in addition to our training on history and heritage, stewardship and development, and polity and governance. Those subjects are important, but they must be grounded in our theology.

So my call to you today is to assess your web sites and assess whether it conveys who we are, what we do, and why it matters? What about your order of service? And your adult lifespan faith development: are you using the Tapestry of Faith Curricula? If you use lay leaders for some or all of your Sunday services, have they been trained to deliver excellence in their services?

There is much we can do to begin to better communicate who we are, what we do, and why it matters.

May it be so.

May it be so.

³ ibid

⁴ Ibid