

## **SERMON: Are We Growing in Spirit?**

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Thank you for maintaining this Unitarian Universalist Church. Your gifts of time, talent, and money keep this religious community and our Association alive so it can be available for others. Here you have experienced and supported the liberal spirit of Unitarian Universalism. I also believe in that spirit, and want to help it grow, because it has nurtured me, changed me for the better. I became a Unitarian Universalist at age twenty. I loved the services at the First Universalist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin, and I loved the people because they were interesting, accepting, and challenging all at the same time.

As a new-comer approaching people at coffee hour, I introduced myself saying, "Hi, my name is Stephan Papa, and I am an atheist!" I expected them to yell at me the way my parents or former church members would, but they didn't even flinch. Generally the response would be, "Fine, you are welcome here. It is good you know what you don't believe; now tell me more about what you do believe." What I found was a community of honesty in which I was both accepted and challenged to keep growing. That is what it offers us today. As part of the Association, we covenant to affirm and promote, in the words of our second principle "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth." Are we accepting one another as partners in Growing Our Faith? Are we encouraging one another in spiritual growth?

There is an old story about one of our more traditional congregations in the Northeast. The church building and the demeanor of the members were formal. The welcome was cool, the ushers officious. Into this UU church, came a visitor. Feeling awkward, she held back, but the minister said things that made her feel more at ease. The minister spoke of the spirit of love, truth, and justice. And being moved by the minister's words she shouted out "Hallelujah!" The crowd was surprised, the minister flattered. As the minister continued to speak of religious freedom, she yelled "Amen" and "Hallelujah!" again. The ushers gathered in the back of the sanctuary and one was sent forth to speak with the lady. He approached her and asked, "Madam is there anything wrong?" "No," she said, "I just got religion!" "Well," replied the usher, "you didn't get it here, so don't go doing it here!"

Well, things have changed. You can get religion here. You could in the past, and we have returned to a clear identity that we are in the religion business that we are as Earl Holt put it, an alternative religion, and not an alternative to religion. We are once again explicitly encouraging spiritual growth.

This is a change, and it is challenging for some of us. I have heard many a UU speak disparaging of this new interest in spirituality saying, "If you can't define it, you shouldn't do it." The changes in Unitarian Universalism have been challenging for me too. For example, I once confessed in a sermon to the sin of intellectual elitism, but to do so I pretended to develop the persona of a UU revivalist, the little Reverend Stuffy R. Papa. I wasn't easily transformed; my theology has changed, and I try to practice meditation and prayer in order to manage my anxiety and uncertainty in a world where everything including my religion is changing.

I changed jobs just two years ago. The favorite part of my position as the lead organizer of Association Sunday is to visit UU congregations; they are wonderfully distinctive, yet clearly share the same values, affirm the same principles and purposes. I visit with ministers, and I am inspired seeing the pride they have in the congregations they serve. I love talking with them. We talk about church, ministry, the Association, our way in religion, and the future of our faith. Ministers are loyal; they serve their congregations, the Association, and a larger vision of who we are and should be. However, a number of them (like me and perhaps some of you) worry about the future of our faith. Some are afraid we are a dying religion. They say our heyday was in the 1850s. (There were more Unitarians and Universalists then than there are now.) Some think we have changed too much; others think we haven't changed enough. Some think spirituality is leading us astray; others worry that we are not being spiritual enough for the chaotic world of today. Some of them are desperately searching for a core message, an articulation that would unite us and lead us into the future. Others think it's impossible for us to come to such a consensus. Some say in despair that ours is a "donut-hole" religion," that there is nothing at our center.

In my opinion, we are not just conflicted about the word "spirituality"; we are afraid of the "spirit" itself. We are acutely aware of the corruptions of the spirit, of religious and political charlatans claiming to speak for it; we are wary of anyone who claims to speak for God, to confuse the masses with misinformation, or arouse them with zealous ideological oratory. But the potential power of the spirit is too important for us to ignore. Team spirit bonds people and makes them more effective in reaching their goals. And, individually we all have times when it is necessary to trust the spirit, some spirit, any spirit, some strength to survive and go forward through crises. As Edward Frost says, we may not be able to define "the spirit with precision, but we can note its absence." We all need more of that strength, that positive attitude, that spirit called courage, and that spirit called love. The spirit may lead others blindly away, but with our rational proclivities, it is not likely to do so with us.

Bill Schulz, when he was president of the UUA, wrote of a great Native American chief who responding to a question about "the secret of his tribe's success...replied, 'We were a disorganized tribe, it's true, but we were on pretty good terms with the 'Great Spirit.' That's us, I would add. We are disorganized, but on good terms with the Great Spirit, which is calling us. We may not be able to come to consensus on a core message for our UU faith, but there is something at the center. The principles are there, and the old values of reason, freedom, and acceptance, along with the new values of spirituality, community, and service. The spirit of love was at the center for the first Universalists who believed that God was a loving spirit, and that God's love was for all people not just for those who believed as others say you have to. Our forbearers knew that religion wasn't about the letter of the law, not about the words, but about the spirit. The first Unitarians trusted the spirit; they said it was in everyone; that we are united by it, and that we should listen to it. The first Unitarians trusted the admonitions of the spirit so much that their catechism of 1665 proclaims on the front page: This is what we believe now, but it is okay to change what you believe in the future for we anticipate you will learn new truths. The spirit is speaking to us still; we are just not clear on where it is taking us, so we are reluctant to trust it. We are afraid the spirit is asking us to change, and so we resist it. Let me illustrate this with a personal story; it is about conducting my first funeral service.

In 1973 just before starting an internship, in exchange for staying in the minister's home for the summer, I was to perform any rites of passage requested. Unfortunately one day the church secretary informed me of a request for a non-member funeral.

I met with the family, but felt uneasy afterward. Not just because I didn't know what I was doing, but because the widow said: "All his life, Joe, did good things for people. Now, finally you will do good for him."

I wanted to tell her that this was my first funeral, that my internship supervisor was away, that I didn't have the Rites of Passage class yet, that I was a little uncertain about what I was doing, but knowing that wouldn't instill confidence I didn't.

I spent the next two days preparing a eulogy and selecting readings. When I arrived at the funeral home, the director informed me that this particular family was very demonstrative in their grief. He then pushed me through a doorway into a darkened room. To my left in an open casket was, I assume, Joe; his widow and the immediate family were seated straight ahead of me; and to my right sat about two hundred people. I began my readings and at a certain point in my eulogy said, "Now that he is dead..." when his widow jumped up, threw herself on the floor and yelled at me: "Don't say he's dead!"

I looked at Joe; he looked dead. Then I looked at the two hundred people and I said, as I had written: "Let us say his spirit lives on." The bereaved widow was dragged back into her chair and I continued. The problem was that I had written that line in two more times. (I thought it a good one.) Not having the experience to know to cut it, I said it again, and again. And, each time as I said, "Now that he is dead..." the stricken woman would throw herself down and scream at me not to say it. And each time I would respond--"Let us say his spirit lives on." Finally, we reached the end of my script. I was ready to go home by now, but it was not to be. The inconsolable widow wanted me to accompany them to the cemetery for the burial. At the grave side, I was going through my "dust to dust, ashes to ashes" routine when the widow interrupted me again. She had thrown herself on Joe's closed coffin and was pounding on it with her fist yelling, "Daddy! Daddy! Can you hear me, Daddy?" When suddenly she stopped, looked up at me and for the moment imagining I was a Roman Catholic, said, "Father... Father...can he hear me?"

Well I was at the end of my pastoral patience by then, and not knowing what to say I told her the truth: "I don't know." That seemed to work. The stunned widow sat back down; I finished my readings, got in the hearse and went home to recover.

I survived, but did not inspire or serve as a conduit for the spirit. I was not listening to the spirit. The spirit was trying to tell me to say something else, but no, I stuck to the same old script. It is hard to change, but everything does. Our Unitarian Universalist religion has changed in some ways, but it is still animated by that liberal spirit of love and truth that lead the early Unitarians and Universalists to share their faith with us. Unitarian Universalism is not dead, nor dying. The spirit of love and truth lives on.

The spirit is there; we can't definitively define it; it's a spirit; it defies definition. But, it is there at the center of our faith, and I believe it can be trusted; the spirit of love and truth, the spirit some call God, some humanness with its inherent worth and dignity, and some leave nameless; that spirit has been calling us, leading us, and is waiting for us to come together to help create a more loving religious community and world.

I know we will because I believe in that spirit of goodness that is inside each of us; I have seen that spirit, and so have you. We see it in the famous UUs, but we also see it in the multitude of individual UUs who courageously face despair, disease, death, and injustice such as the members of our congregation in Knoxville. We've see it in UUs who come to church not to be served, but to serve, to build a beloved community, and transform the world with our love. Are we growing in spirit? Yes!

We see it in the 626 congregations who participated in Association Sunday last year. We see it in the increasing number of congregations whose members in challenging economic times are giving more generously to their own budgets, and to special collections. Are we growing in spirit? Yes!

There is a more positive spirit, and increasing collaboration among congregations and within the Association. For example, instead of having separate services six UU congregations in central Pennsylvania have organized a joint revival service for their Association Sunday. We see it in congregations who bravely act to transcend our personal and institutional limitations, and develop a greater sense of mission to serve others to grow our faith in numbers, diversity, witness, leadership, and spirit.

For example, it was my privilege to represent President Sinkford at the All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK at their services on September 7. He couldn't make it, but wanted to be there to witness and bless an experiment they are undertaking. A local African-American United Church of Christ congregation is leaving that fold and starting to meet with All Souls on Sunday mornings. They are Pentecostal in worship, meaning they really sing, wave their hands, and feel the spirit, and they are Universalist in theology (meaning God loves everyone.) As MLK said, Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. According to the Latin root of the word, religion means to bring together for greater strength. They are trying to do that. They've got religion in that church. Yes, white people raised their hands and shouted "Hallelujah!" in a Unitarian Church that Sunday. Whether they succeed in creating a multi-cultural congregation, you have to admire their courage, how far they are willing to go to "grow in spirit." They are experimenting, bravely following the "admonitions of the Spirit." Are you?

However, we define spirituality, we need to slow down, develop our inner strength, the courage to help create a better world. We may not have a consensus on what spirituality means, but we agree that we need to be clear, centered, and effective in our faith. We need to grow our faith in one another, in Unitarian Universalism, and in the good we can do for others.

That spirit is calling us to get organized, be positive, and committed to working together to help heal a wounded world. I hear it now. So when one of our ministers asked me

specifically what spirit we were trying to grow, “Was it the Holy Spirit?” to my surprise as the now re-born little Reverend Stuffy R. Papa, I was able to say, “Yes!” I happily, reverently now use that word, but whatever we call it; I am certain that the same spirit that is calling him is calling me and you. Whether it is our group, our human, or the Holy Spirit, we are called to grow it. The spirit is calling us to be honest, gracious, and generous. It is a liberal spirit, a loving spirit, a spirit that helps us find more truth; I trust it; I trust our ministers will help us grow it, and I trust that you will too.

We are growing our group spirit; we are growing in spiritual depth; we are trying to grow our faith. And that is why today in celebrating Association Sunday I am asking you to give generously for the development of new programs for lay theological education and for developing the excellence of our shared ministry. We are asking congregations to contribute an average of \$50 dollars per member, and because I know not everyone can afford to give that amount but that some of us can give more, I have here a personal check for \$250 to help you reach your goal. The spirit is calling us to grow. It’s a liberal spirit. My favorite dictionary definition of the word “liberal” is one who is “generous of spirit.” May it be so. Amen.