

**Association Sunday - May 2009**  
**Sermon by Rev. Alan Taylor**  
**Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

I hate when people ask me about my favorite movie. There are just so many movies I've seen over the years and any quick answer always feels flat. But when I start thinking about it, there's one movie, and only one movie, that I watch almost every year and I never tire of watching it. So that must be it: It's a Wonderful Life, starring James Stewart.

For those of you who aren't familiar, it is the story of George Bailey, who we learn has spent his entire life giving up his big dreams for the good of his town, Bedford Falls, with his philanthropic Baileys Building and Loan. It is Christmas Eve and George is broke and suicidal because of a misplaced loan payment and the machinations of the rich local banker who not only has secretly found the money but uses the loss against George, threatening to claim his business if he doesn't pay up. George contemplates throwing himself off a bridge feeling like his life hasn't made any difference when Clarence, an angel in the guise of an earnest affable older gentleman appears. George laments that his life has come to nothing, that it would have been better for him never to be born. Clarence takes George into the world as it would have been if he had never lived, and he watches one by one how the lives of all sorts of people, and indeed the spirit of the entire town, have suffered greatly without his presence. I won't give away the ending. If you aren't familiar with the movie, rent it. It's a wonderful movie entitled It's a Wonderful Life. Keep tissue close by.

So what does this movie have to do with Association Sunday? This morning, as I share about our Association of Unitarian Universalist congregations, as I share about the organization part of our religious tradition, my message is simply this:

It's a Wonderful Faith. It's a Wonderful Association,

but sometimes it doesn't look so wonderful. Sometimes it's hard to notice it exists at all. Sometimes it's easy to overlook all the good things our association provides and makes possible, sometimes it is easy to be frustrated with the decisions of our association's leadership, sometimes it is tempting to say that all organized religion is bad.

It is not uncommon for us human beings to reach a moment of despair and confusion and wonder whether our relationships have any value. It is a part of being human that when the strain is heaviest, we lose our bearings, our perspective suddenly contracts to see nothing but the burden of our unique struggles. If we aren't careful, we won't see past our own hurts, and our pain and suffering can lead us to spurn the lifelines all about us.

Just as good people like George Bailey can lose sight of what his life means to others, so our members of our congregations can fail to notice the many blessings we have because of our wider association.

As a faith tradition that draws individualists, we are especially prone to a limited perspective. Among our ranks there has always been a deep seated suspicion of authority, and there are good

reasons for a lot of our suspicion! This suspicion naturally gets aimed at anybody that challenges us to change and grow. These sentiments are not as strongly held here at Unity Temple, considering we are one of the most generous congregations to our Association, but I often run into lone ranger UU types: We don't want anybody telling us what to do. Why do we have to pay for the association, they should be paying to help us. If we have to cut something from the budget, our dues to the UUA should be the first to go. I must confess, at challenging times, I have had such thoughts. This type of thinking is like standing on a bridge, unable to see beyond our own struggles, ready to throw our relationships into the river.

What if our faith tradition never came into being, how would our lives be bereft?

What would the world look like if Unitarians and Universalists never organized themselves into an association or denomination?

Join me in an exploration into that dreary world. Imagine, there's no Unitarian Universalist Association.

Three sets of benefits suddenly are non-existent. First there are no tangible services that our association provides, second there's no Unitarian Universalist collective voice for prophetic change, and third there's a great emptiness, as all sorts of human hearts have now never been touched and transformed. Without the organization and the shared wisdom how to rise to challenges there are only small independent religiously liberal churches. Let me explore further the absence of these three sets of benefits.

So what tangibles would be absent within this dreary imaginary world without the Association of Unitarian Universalist congregations? First of all, there would be a lot less singing. For there would be no hymnals, no way to pass on the great songs that emerge among us religious liberals; instead only campfire songs or hymns of other traditions would be available to us, not to say that there are anything inherently wrong with them. We just wouldn't have access to the musical creativity of others within our ranks. We also would be without the choral pieces that have emerged from within our tradition.

Without the Unitarian Universalist Association, there would be no curriculums for religious education, curriculums that emerge in one congregation and get tested in many others. Our children wouldn't have the Our Whole Lives program to learn about sexuality in a healthy manner. Instead many of our young people would have nowhere else but the locker room at school to answer their questions and shape their attitudes toward sexuality. We would be without the adult curriculums that help us develop Your Own Theology, overcome the religious baggage of our past, and provide new ways of understanding the sacred.

We would have no Unitarian Universalist seminaries, no leadership schools to send our lay leaders, no district or regional gatherings to learn from one another.

Without the Unitarian Universalist Association, we would not be consistently challenged to live up to our best selves, to be in right relationship with one another, our lay leadership, and our professional staff. There would be no system that fosters communication between religiously

liberal congregations in search of a minister and those religiously liberal ministers in search of a congregation. There would be no vetting system to affirm qualified candidates for the ministry and prevent from fellowship those not competent or ready to serve our churches. There would be no services to help congregations with the process of searching for a minister, no services to help congregations and ministers address issues of shared responsibility, appropriate authority, congregational polity, and conflict mediation.

Without our faith tradition, there would have been no publishing house courageous enough to disseminate the Pentagon Papers. The Pentagon Papers were a damning report revealing the history about how our country got mired down in the Viet Nam War and how longstanding lies were perpetuated within the Nixon administration. Upon reading it, Senator Mike Gravel, sought to have the report published. No major publishing house in the country would touch it for fear of reprisals from the Nixon administration. Senator Gravel was one of two Unitarian Universalists in the Senate, and he turned to Beacon Press, owned by the Unitarian Universalist Association. Beacon Press published the Pentagon Papers and faced criminal charges that were dropped only when President Nixon resigned. Without the Unitarian Universalist Association, without Beacon Press, the free press this country enjoys would be compromised.

There would have been no voice in the media educating and advocating for issues based on justice and reason and compassion. Our wider society would have been without a longstanding and unflagging voice affirming the worth and dignity of our gay and lesbian and transgender brothers and sisters, a collective voice that was largely made possible among our congregations through the Welcoming Congregation curriculum and initiative by the Association. Without the UUA, there would have been no strong religious voice thirty years ago advocating for gay and lesbians to serve in the ministry thirty years ago, no support fifteen years ago from religious organizations for civil marriage for same sex partners.

On the issue of race, without our association, the moral arc of the universe may have bent even more slowly towards justice, to play on a phrase originally coined by Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. There would have been no organized response among Unitarians to Martin Luther King's call to join him in Selma for his civil rights march, making Unitarians by far the largest predominantly white clergy group to join King. However, it must be noted our association has had a checkered history on race ever since as dissension and frustration has followed conversations about race. Without our association, we would be without these important if as of yet unsatisfying conversations.

Without our faith tradition, there would have been far less advocacy for the teaching of evolution in our schools and preventing creationism to be taught in science class. Our association has long provided the resources for resisting religious intolerance and affirming pluralism. In the wake of the widespread and profound civil liberties abuses towards Muslims, our association currently is providing opportunities to build bridges between religious liberals and Muslims. Thanks to our association and resources, on June 6<sup>th</sup> here at Unity Temple will be just such an opportunity.

Finally, without the Unitarian Universalist Association, a whole lot of thoughtful people would be adrift, alone, and without a community with which to pursue spiritual growth, personal transformation, and be a part of the change they want to see in the world. Many scientists would

be without a religious home, many religiously mixed marriages without a spiritual community they can share, many free spirits and artists without a community of faith, many wandering people for whom the traditional notions of God and belief simply are unsatisfying but who long for connection, spiritual growth, and community.

Nearly a third of all our congregations were created in the last fifty years thanks to the organization supported by our association. Our churches are so much more stronger and healthier because we are in association with others. We are not alone. We don't have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to religious education, music, conflict management, leadership training, governance, and the list goes on. It's a wonderful faith. It's a wonderful Association.

Now, I can't say that I'm happy with everything the Unitarian Universalist Association does. I am not fond of the current marketing initiative. Some of the sound byte messages, to my ears, smack of condescension, self-satisfaction, maybe even arrogance, but I will leave that for another sermon. Even though I disagree with some of the decisions of our association's leaders, I believe in staying in relationship, building upon what we have, and recognizing the many gifts of congregations being in association with one another.

It's not all that unlike being a part of a congregation.

Our association, for all its human faults and shortcomings, makes a difference. Without it, our world today and so many lives within it would be bereft of so much. When we forgot our connections and begin to think that we are fully independent, a lone ranger of sorts, a life struggle can send us to a perspective that is all too narrow. We can resemble George Bailey in his weakest moment. It's at such times, we need to consider how this world would be different without our associations.

Several generations hence may our descendents continue to sing the Unitarian hymn we sang today:

*Though the path be hard and long, still we strive in expectation,  
join we now their ageless song, one with them in aspiration.  
One in name, in honor one, guard we well the crown they won,  
what they dreamed be ours to do, hope their hopes and seal them true.*

It's a wonderful faith. It's a wonderful association.

Blessed be. Amen.