

**UUMA/CSW Worship Service
General Assembly, Long Beach, California
Saturday, June 23, 2007**

"Standing at the Precipice"

by Dawn Cooley

Background: This sermon won the 2007 UUMA/CSW SAI Sermon Contest. The winner of this contest is awarded a cash prize and has the opportunity to deliver his or her sermon at General Assembly. Dawn Cooley delivered her sermon at General Assembly on Saturday, June 23, 2007.

Reading

A segment from the Colbert Report called "The De-Deification of the American Faithscape."

This multimedia piece can be found online at:

www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=59606

Sermon

There we were, 10 Unitarian Universalists, sitting around the table, content from a wonderful lunch and feeling confident in the direction of the meeting thus far. The sun was high, the room was comfortably warm, and we were in good company. We were talking about ways to fund our faith in such a way that would enable it to grow. Finally, someone asked the inevitable question in such a gathering: But why do we want to grow?

In such a faith as ours, with no fear of hell or damnation in the afterlife, with no urgent dictum to save as many souls as possible, this question seems to get asked a lot. I have heard many compelling oratories on why it is important that we spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism, followed by arguments about the rightness or wrongness of conversion, what "gospel" means, what "witness" means, and even folks saying people *need* to stumble across us, just as they did.

I thought I had heard it all. I was unprepared for what happening in *this* meeting.

One of the members (an exceedingly well respected member) stated simply, clearly, eloquently, with no room for argument: We want to grow because the world would be a better place if there were more Unitarian Universalists in it.

Suddenly, I was jolted out of my warm, satiated peace. My attention was tuned to high. Never before had I heard it put so simply. So succinctly. No hemming and hawing about what our good news might actually be. No caveats, no apologies. Strident, strong: Because the world would be a better place if there were more Unitarian Universalists in it.

I thought about the implications of her statement. **WOULD** the world be a better place if there were more UUs? I think it would be. I am not saying we should go out and try to force people to convert -- that would be useless. And I am not saying that the world would be better if **EVERYONE** were a UU, that could be boring. But at my core, I believe strongly, **FIERCLY**, that if more people held values similar to mine, if more people actively engaged in a search for truth and meaning, then **YES!!** The world **WOULD INDEED** be a better place!

But why did this statement almost knock me off my chair? Why do we spend so much time hemming and hawing about these issues? Perhaps it is because, as we gather in community with one another, we understand the conscious clause at the bottom of the UUA Purpose and Principles, where it says, "Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages." Or perhaps I was surprised because we often confuse "sharing our message" with "trying to convert."

But this confusion is costing us: by shying away from these issues, we, religious liberals, are losing ground. Religious conservatives don't have these moral qualms – they are out to save everyone, by hook or by crook – and it must be THEIR definition of salvation.

“Throughout the 1980s, religious conservatives gained credibility in politics by asserting that their religious values should be incorporated into public policy development to the exclusion of other faith traditions. The religious conservative vision for the United States—indeed the world—is one that results in oppression, discrimination, and domination, reserving power for a small number of government and business elites. As the gap between rich and poor expands in the United States and the ill effects of globalization intensify, the exclusion of religious liberals from this civic dialogue, such as, but not exclusively Unitarian Universalists, is dangerous.”¹

One agenda item pushed strongly by religious conservatives is something that the political left calls “Dominionism”. For, well, political reasons, the religious conservatives don't use this term, but more on that in a few minutes.

Wikipedia defines “Dominionism” as “The trend in Protestant Christian evangelicalism and fundamentalism that encourages political participation in civic society by Christians explicitly in terms of their religious beliefs. It ranges from engagement in the political process to attempts to dominate or take over the political system.”

The goal of Dominionism is aptly summarized by the words of Dr. D. James Kennedy, Pastor of Coral Ridge Ministries: “Our job is to reclaim America for Christ, whatever the cost. As the vice regents of God, we are to exercise godly dominion and influence over our neighborhoods, our schools, our government, our literature and arts, our sports arenas, our entertainment media, our news media, our scientific endeavors—in short, over every aspect and institution of human society.”²

UC Berkeley Linguistics Professor-turned-political-advisor George Lakoff says that the goals described by Dominionism stem from a “Strict Father Figure” worldview, a worldview Lakoff claims many (if not most) religious conservatives come from. According to Lakoff, in this worldview,

The father's job is to protect and support the family. Children are to respect and obey him. The father's moral duty is to teach his children right from wrong, with punishment that is typically physical and can be painful when they do wrong. It is assumed that parental discipline in childhood is required to develop the internal discipline that adults will need in order to be moral and to succeed. Morality and success are linked through discipline. This focus on discipline is seen as a form of love—“tough love.”

The mother is in the background, not strong enough to protect and support the family or fully discipline the children on her own. Her job is to uphold the authority of the father and to care for and comfort the children. As a “mommy,” she tends to be overly soft-hearted and might well coddle or spoil the child. The father must make sure this does not happen, lest the children become weak and dependent.

Competition is necessary for discipline. Children are to become self-reliant through discipline and the pursuit of self-interest. Those who succeed as adults are the good (moral) people and parents are not to “meddle” in their lives. Those children who remain dependent—who were spoiled, overly willful, or recalcitrant—undergo further discipline or are turned out to face the discipline of the outside world.

*When everyone is acting morally and responsibly, seeking their own self-interest in a self-disciplined fashion, everyone benefits. Thus, instilling morality and discipline in your children is also acting for the good of society as a whole.*³

Where the Strict Father Figure Worldview is about maximizing self-interest in a competitive world, the contrast, the Nurturant Parent Worldview, is more about empathy and responsibility – seeing our connectedness to one another:

¹ “Background and Reasons for Study” from the *Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society* Study Action Item.

² From the *Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society* Resource Guide

³ <http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/nationasfamily/sfworldview>

In the Nurturant Parent family, it is assumed that the world is basically good. And, however dangerous and difficult the world may be at present, it can be made better, and it is your responsibility to help make it better. Correspondingly, children are born good, and parents can make them better, and it is their responsibility to do so. Both parents (if there are two) are responsible for running the household and raising the children, although they may divide their activities.

The parents' job is to be responsive to their children, nurture them, and raise their children to nurture others. Nurturance requires empathy and responsibility.

In the Nurturant Parent family, the highest moral values are Empathy and Responsibility. Effective nurturing requires empathy, which is feeling what someone else feels—parents have to figure out what all their baby's cries mean in order to take care of him or her. Responsibility is critical, since being a good nurturer means being responsible not only for looking after the well-being of others, but also being responsible to ourselves so that we can take care of others. Nurturant parents raise children to be empathetic toward others, responsible to themselves, and responsible to others who are or will be in their care. Empathy connects us to other people in our families, our neighborhoods, and in the larger world. Being responsible to others and oneself requires cooperation. In society, nurturant morality is expressed as social responsibility. This requires cooperation rather than competition, and a recognition of interdependence.

Nurturant morality is based on a fundamental ethic of care that says: Help, Don't Harm⁴.

Of course, these worldviews are a simplification, but they are useful for they extend far beyond the literal realm of family, and into the national realm as well. While we all have aspects of both worldviews in our families and in our interactions with society, one of these worldviews is most likely prevalent in your understanding of how the world functions.

I have this vision of us, religious liberals in general and UUs in particular, standing atop a precipice, at the brink of an extremely dangerous situation with disastrous potential. The wind is blowing, swirling all around. We have let Dominionism, the Strict Father Figure Worldview, and Religious conservatives create a stronghold in our society, and now we must decide what to do. “Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide...The brave one chooses, while the coward stands aside.”⁵

This is the message of the Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society Study/Action Issue that was voted on at the 2005 General Assembly. This Study/Action Issue asks questions – it leads us to learn more about the world around us and what a Unitarian Universalist response to the issues facing the world might be. This Study/Action Issue is calling us to EMBODY our faith in new and challenging ways. As we do so, it reminds us to bear in mind that religious liberalism is not the same as political liberalism, and that many political conservatives ardently reject the Dominionist approach. Moreover, we must remember that Unitarian Universalism is first and foremost a religious community-not a political one. As such, our congregations should be welcoming places for anyone who shares our **religious values**, not just those with particular political views.

Welcoming places for anyone who shares our LIBERAL RELIGIOUS values...values that are a tonic against the Dominionist approach of religious conservatism. But what are these religious values? Unitarian Minister and Theologian James Luther Adams posited that there are “five smooth stones of religious liberalism”. While each of these deserve a service of their own, I think they bear mentioning here if only to give you an idea of what our liberal religious values can look like – it is a very exciting and hopeful vision!

1. Revelation is continuous
2. Relations among persons should rest on consent, not coercion.

⁴ <http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/nationasfamily/sfworldview>

⁵ From Hymn 119 *Once to Every Soul and Nation*

3. Religious people have a moral obligation to establish a just and loving community.
4. Good things don't just happen, people make them happen.
5. The resources available for change justify an ultimate optimism.

This is a powerful message of salvation – not in some other life, but in this life, in this world. Right here, right now! We have a message! This is a message, not of “us-versus-them”, not of a Strict Father figure, not of domination. Rather, it is a message that understands that there are different paths to Truth. It is a message of inclusion and connectedness. It is a message of building bridges in such a way that reduces polarization rather than feeding into it.

This is a mighty vision, and can be overwhelming. The Study/Action Issue Study Guide has a plethora of resources to help us on our journey of manifesting this vision, but there are a few important points I want to bring up now.

First and, perhaps, most difficult, we must speak our values, and not dwell on policies and programs. Policies and programs don't inspire people. People don't vote for policies and programs. Besides, we usually can't AGREE on them. I did a study on Political Minorities at a {City/Town} UU congregation a couple of years ago. What I found is that people who belonged to political minorities (yes, there were even a few Republicans!) shared the SAME VALUES that the rest of the congregation did, but that their journeys and life experiences had led them to a different place on what programs might work best to manifest their values. Let us speak from what connects us and what inspires us: values, not policies and programs.

Second, Lakoff says that progressives of all stripes must become better at “framing” our issues, in our language, on our terms, rather than using the frames provided by religious conservatives. Lakoff discusses the concept of framing extensively in his book, *Moral Politics*, but for a quick primer you can start by reading “Don't Think of an Elephant”. Basically, it's all about the language you use and the images you invoke with your language. For example, when the government uses terms like “tax relief”, they invoke a frame that understands that taxes are BAD, an affliction from which people need relief. When progressives use this terminology, we are invoking the conservative frame AND REINFORCING IT!!! However, if we were to use a term like “Tax investment”, think of the different elements this term evokes – that taxes make the country better not only for YOU, but others as well! It is an investment in the country's future...Religious liberals must create our own frames, and use them extensively, rather than get drawn into using the frames of religious conservatives.

Third, we have to be clear. There has been a push within Unitarian Universalism to have our “elevator speeches” ready to describe our faith. The concept is that you have 30 seconds in an elevator to explain to people what we are about. We must be clear, for we never know when we might be called upon to share our values, our faith, with someone else. Though Bobby from the Colbert Report was certainly scripted, we laugh when we watch it because we recognize truth when we see it. But this truth is so desperately sad! If we want to put our saving message out there, we must be clear – we must have language AT THE READY that we can use in case we ever are in a REAL situation similar to poor Bobby.

Finally, we must remember that we support the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. When it comes to taking a stand on justice issues, UUs seem to be stuck thinking that we are Quakers who need consensus in order to move forward with a position. Rev. Lindi Ramsden, Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry, California says that she sometimes thinks we suffer from an idolatry of community. She asks how it is that this standard of 100% agreement applies to the realm of justice, but not to other areas of church life? “We don't expect our congregations to always make decisions that are 100% in accordance with our wishes, be it the color of the sanctuary, the time of the Sunday service, whether to move to larger quarters or two services, whether to call a minister, so why apply this criteria to WHETHER or not to take a position on a social issue?”⁶

⁶ June 2005 Newsletter Column

“Unitarian Universalists exhibit a high degree of theological and philosophical diversity. Despite our differences, we have developed congregational communities and have covenanted to respecting and affirming our differences of belief.”⁷ We understand that it is our shared moral values that bind us together. But how do we ensure that these values are heard in the square of public opinion and in the halls of government?

The Reverend William Sinkford reminds us that “Moral values grow out of our calling as religious people to work to create the Beloved Community ... Moral values instruct us to 'love our neighbors as ourselves' and always to ask the question, 'Who is my neighbor?' They are fundamentally inclusive rather than exclusive, and they call on generosity of spirit rather than mean spiritedness.”⁸

“The world would be a better place if there were more UUs”. Such an innocuous statement, with such earth-changing possibility. We have a message of hope that says we can make a difference in this world: that we are connected, that we can make justice. We MUST find a way to make our voices heard in the greater society. We must speak our values, not to simply oppose the language used by religious conservatives, but rather to be proactive in invoking own metaphors. When we do this, we must be clear!!!! And we must remember that in our congregations, we may not all agree – and that while we can not let this stop us from taking a stand on an issue, we must make certain that those in a minority are held in love and care and respect.

Let us remember the words of William Schulz, with which we lit our chalice this morning:

This is the mission of our faith:

To teach the fragile art of hospitality;

To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;

To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;

And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

May it be so. May we *make* it so.

⁷ “Significance to Unitarian Universalism” in the *Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society* Study Action Item.

⁸ Ibid.

