

## **Beyond Sanctuary: The Advent of a New Liberal Religious Community**

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O, Change's gonna come.

If you are thinking that I'm the one with all the answers, I've got news for you: You're Unitarian Universalists and Unitarian Universalists don't believe in answers.

Concerning the future generally and this congregation in particular I have two things to say. One is that when it comes to change, this congregation says *si se peude!* Whatever the change is, you are up for it.

The other is that I'm not sure how new the change we're called to actually is.

One of the things that was so impressive about this congregation when I was considering coming here and being your interim minister, was the way you have taken on change so bravely. And you continue to impress me. This is a pioneering congregation. You have a pioneering spirit, and one that is remarkably good-humored. Members who helped found this congregation a dozen years ago are still here. You started a congregation out of a few friends and acquaintances and your own inventiveness. It became clear that it would be helpful to have a home base for the congregation, so when this building that you had been renting became available for sale, you bought it. More of that pioneering spirit! You sally forth into new territory: ownership of a building. You've tried on different worship styles -- and you're still doing that. And then, when your minister Nana' and worship leader and choir director left, you leapt into the brave new world of a full-time interim minister and an intentional, two-year interim period. You have energy and excitement and enthusiasm. You have both playfulness and passion. You know that a liberal religious voice is a gift not just to the people in this room but to central Michigan. I'm not talking about my voice. I'm talking about *your* voices, that beautiful and life-giving voice that you speak most eloquently with you hands and your feet -- with what you *do* and the ways you are active in this community.

A community and being active. As Norma has said, these are themes that your Transition Team noticed coming up repeatedly in the cottage meetings. This is a warm, welcoming, and inclusive community, and within this community there is a desire for social justice work.

This congregation does community really well. This afternoon's Holiday Tea is just one example of that. There was last month's Harvest Feast and there's also Readers' Theater and a Wednesday morning open discussion group that meets over at Max & Emily's at ten. (I don't think they'll be there Christmas Day, but who knows?)

And I dare say that this congregation does social justice work well, too. I am still impressed by the story of how this congregation worked to get an anti-discrimination ordinance passed for the city and the town. And I am thrilled about how many people have stepped up to volunteer the week of January 12 to help in providing shelter to people without it. (Where's that sign-up sheet? Is that here today?) People will be having a meal and spending the night each night at the First Methodist Church down

the street. This is such an exciting opportunity for this congregation. Not only will we be giving some dignity and respect to people who may usually feel invisible or forgotten. Not only will we be getting to know our Methodist neighbors. This is also an opportunity for you to come to a fuller understanding of who you are as a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Let me put this in a larger context and explain what I meant when I questioned how new are the changes we are facing and undertaking.

If you are involved at all with religion these days, or even just interested in it, you have no doubt been hearing that things are changing significantly on the religious landscape. More and more people can't or won't identify with any particular religious tradition or community. What we might think of as "church" or religious community is changing. There are "pub" churches and on-line congregations and athiests gathering together to sing songs and share stories. How "new" is that? So just serve beer and add some live-streaming and we're there!

From the moment I started seminary, I started hearing again and again that things are changing. How we do *church*, and whatever it is that "church" might be, is all up for grabs.

What's the traditional way of understanding what a "church", what a congregation is? It's a religious community. In the cover article of the current *UU World* the Rev. Tom Schade writes that "If your congregation defines itself as being a religious or spiritual community; it is time to think bigger."<sup>1</sup>

Tom Schade was the minister for thirteen years of First Unitarian Church of Worcester, Massachusetts. He retired last year and lives now in Ann Arbor. He has done a lot of thinking and trying out ideas around just what the future of Unitarian Universalism looks like. I have a lot of respect for him and his ideas.

It is really important that this congregation be a warm, welcoming community. It is important for us to be a safe and supportive space. So many of us have been wounded by oppressive and abusive actions, told in so many ways that we don't matter because of the gender we happen to be attracted to or because we don't conform to rigid ideas about gender, or told we're going to hell because we don't believe in a particular version of God. Being such a safe space has been an important mission of UU for a long time. But this can be an inward focus and we need to look outward, too. Rev. Tom argues that "To take the next step we must build liberal religious communities, not as refuges, but in service to a larger goal: humanizing our culture and transforming the world."<sup>2</sup>

Yep. We are out to change the world. Rev. Tom says that, "Unitarian Universalists, like members of every other religion, are trying to change the world by encouraging people to live a different way."<sup>3</sup> Just to be clear about this change we want to make, Rev. Schade writes:

"I am not talking about what the elders used to call 'social action' but is now called 'social justice work,' although that is important. Our purpose is bigger than changing

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Schade. "Religious Community Is Not Enough." *UU World*. Winter 2013. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Schade. "Religious Community Is Not Enough." *UU World*. Winter 2013. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Schade. "Religious Community Is Not Enough." *UU World*. Winter 2013. 30.

some laws, or ushering in a much-needed social reform. Rather, our purpose is to develop people who would care about an issue and feel the strength to act."<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Schade is talking about changing attitudes and changing what people care about and inspiring them to act. He's talking about changing society.

This sounds like a tall order. However, if this is part of what the new change is that we need to make happen... Well, I think we Unitarian Universalists have achieved this kind of change before.

And what I'm talking about is Christmas. The way most of us understand Christmas? It's our fault. The way we understand Christmas is because of the liberal religious community, but especially because of Unitarians. As my colleague, the Rev. Tracy Springberry says:

"It was Unitarians who wove together Santa Claus, Christmas trees, gift giving around the tree, a focus on charity, and peace and goodwill toward all to create the Christmas that the majority of Americans celebrate today. And while the story of the baby Jesus was not left out, what was central to this holiday was not the coming of God in a human form for the atonement of human sins, as it was for conservative Christians, but Unitarian values and theology."<sup>5</sup>

I've already told you about Charles Follen and the Christmas tree and Samuel Coleridge and gift-giving around that tree. And maybe you don't want to take too much pride in the Unitarians who invented -- are there kids here? -- Santa. Clement Moore, a Unitarian, wrote "A Visit from St. Nicholas" -- "'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house..." "Later it was another Unitarian, Thomas Nast, a cartoonist, who placed Santa on the North Pole as a message that he existed for all the children of the world."

But let me bring this sermon home by spending just a little time with another Unitarian: Charles Dickens who, of course, gave us his little novel, "A Christmas Carol" with the unforgettable character, Scrooge. At the start of the story, Scrooge is a mean old humbug. He doesn't treat his employee well. He doesn't even really treat himself well. He tries to live a life that is separate from all other people, denying any ties of emotion or care or compassion for anyone. We could use traditional Christian language here and call Scrooge a sinner. The story is about his salvation. And how is his salvation achieved? He starts thinking about other people. He starts being generous with others. He starts to offer compassion for himself, even. He starts to acknowledge ties of compassion and emotion and well-being with others. He begins to understand himself as part of an interconnected web of life. Scrooge's nephew describes Christmas as a time when people look at others as "fellow-passengers" rather than "another race of creatures." Scrooge's nephew believes that understanding fellow-feeling as the meaning of Christmas has, he says, "done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Schade. "Religious Community Is Not Enough." *UU World*. Winter 2013. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Tracy Springberry. "A Unitarian Christmas." *Quest* vol. LXVIII, no. 11, December 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens. *A Christmas Carol*.

Bless it indeed. If changing the culture is our mission, changing people's hearts--our own hearts as well as others--we Unitarian Universalists have an impressive ground of accomplishment to inspire us: Christmas! Well versed in entering into change, this Fellowship's sense of fellow-feeling is calling this congregation to act in the larger community and calling you to a larger sense of identity and mission. May we be transformed by a love beyond belief, inspired to work for justice and healing, understanding and peace. I can't wait to see what will happen next!

Amen and Blessed Be.