

## The iChurch Revealed

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, June 11, 2017

### **Reading**

“Tapping Out of Fake Fights”

*This reading is an excerpt of the [sermon](#) delivered by Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd on Sunday morning at General Assembly 2016.*

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/tapping-out-fake-fights>

For as long as two or more have gathered in the name of the spirit, those two or more have fought some fake fights.

You remember, perhaps, the classic wedding reading from Corinthians, which says, *If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal... if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

That letter from the Apostle Paul to the early Christian community in Corinth has nothing whatsoever to do with weddings.

That's a letter from an overextended pastor with occasionally dubious judgment to a congregation whose leaders are in a constant state of fierce and unremitting conflict. The early Christians in the Corinth congregation were literally shouting their prayers like clanging cymbals overtop of one another to try and prove who was better at praying. They were making faith into a contest, and whether he was Saintly or not, Paul was having none of it.

The collective wisdom of the ages reminds us that the stakes are high and the ultimate prize we must reach out for in community is greater than the imagined divisions and trumped-up arguments that pull us apart.

Here's a segue way you won't see coming: you know in Wrestlemania, when professional wrestlers have those fake fights? Sometimes they really are at risk of getting hurt. And do you know what they do, before the muscle snaps or the bones break in that fake fight? They tap out. They bang the mat. When the fake fight gets close to having real consequences, they tap out.

I tell you what, I'm tapping out—right now—and I invite you to join me. I'm tapping out of every fake fight in our congregations and our movement about getting what I want or what you want or what we think we want, because the stakes are too high and we don't have time for fake fights anymore.

A fake fight about the bylaws in the annual meeting is most often a carefully concealed real fight about the values that undergird our history coming into relationship with the values that may undergird our future. If we can get past duking it out over the paint color in the church bathroom, we may encounter a pastoral window into the inner life of one whose voice in the world seems increasingly powerless. And All Lives Matter—yes, that one, chief among the fake fights and cover conversations that distract from the work at hand—is not about the slogan. More often than not, it's about our deep and abiding resistance to actually taking on the systemic white supremacy that eats at the heart of us and of our culture.

I know, for a fact, that the real conversations are waiting. Just beneath the surface of the fake fight is the actual encounter: soul to soul and hand to hand, in which change is possible.

So let's have that conversation—the real one, the hard one, the one that requires us to keep showing up—and let's do it with edge and forgiveness, calling out and calling in, calling forth a new kind of community both in our congregations and in the world.

The real fight beckons—the real conversation about our history, our identity, our relevance, our resistance. The world does not need another place for like-minded liberal leaning people to hang out together and fight about who's in charge. The world does not need a place where you or I or any of us is going to get what we want.

What the world needs is a movement like ours to step more fully into our higher calling; to serve as an instrument for encounter with one another, with the holy, and with the world, so that we might love more fully, and speak more truly and serve with greater efficacy.

### **Sermon Reflection**

Where do we come from?

What are we?

Where are we going?

~ Brian Tate

June is “General Assembly” month in the Unitarian Universalist tradition – the annual national gathering of UU’s in one location to do the business of the association...and to collectively worship, learn, and reflect. In that spirit, it seems an appropriate time to bring to our collective attention an important new work - a book titled *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism* edited by Fredric Muir. As our board members can attest, I have been somewhat obsessed with this book for the past year, trying every which way to get folks to read it. This book resonates with so much that I believe is essential to our future as a faith tradition – I long for us to be in dialogue about what is presented here. And as our fellowship heads this coming year into a process of intentional (intensive) visioning and strategic planning for where we see ourselves going...how we envision ourselves growing...in the next five to ten years, it seems wholly appropriate to engage with the questions of where we've come from, who are we, and where are we going?

To give us a basic overview of the premise of this book, I will share an edited version of the lead essay that sparked *Turning Point* – the following is adapted from Frederic Muir's Berry Street Essay, “From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice,” delivered June 20, 2012, during the UU Ministers Association Ministry Days in Phoenix, Arizona.

“The End of iChurch”

### **To build Beloved Community, Unitarian Universalism needs a new narrative.**

- by Frederic Muir

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/end-ichurch>

For two centuries, sympathetic observers from Thomas Jefferson to Harvard scholar Diana Eck have said that Unitarian Universalism can be the religion of the future: **not that we are, but that we can be.** Yet we remain a small religious minority. In spite of being a justice-seeking faith, in spite of the ministries to which we are committed, in spite of the marketing we have done, we have not grown. No matter how you slant the data, we have remained either relatively unchanged for decades (if you use raw numbers) or we have shrunk considerably (if viewed as a percentage of the total U.S. population). Either way it does not look good; some might say it doesn't even look promising.

**A perfect storm of social changes is taking shape whose effects we are late to recognize and absorb.** The U.S. Census Bureau projected in 2009 that members of racial and ethnic minorities will make up a majority of the country's population by 2042, which means that we Unitarian Universalists with our North Atlantic look—as reflected in our demographics, theology, and epistemology—will grow more cut off from the U.S. population, unless we start reflecting our society's true diversity. Meanwhile, several national surveys have revealed the quick rise of the “Nones”—the contingent of young adults who claim no religious affiliation. “Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith,” reported the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2010. “Compared with their elders today, fewer say that religion is very important in their lives.” These changes in our society will transform Unitarian Universalism. They may push us into decline and irrelevancy, or they may force us—if it's not already too late—to step back and start afresh.

We can weather the demographic challenges and, in meeting twenty-first century needs, sustain Unitarian Universalism for generations to come. **Fundamental to our survival is a paradigm shift that goes deep into the history, character, and epistemology of Unitarian Universalism.** It goes to the essence of how we understand ourselves and relate to the world at large. First, we are being held back by a pervasive and disruptive commitment to individualism. Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news. Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future. These three organizing and corrupting narratives have shaped the dominant story we tell about Unitarian Universalism. Reorienting ourselves will be hard but profoundly rewarding. I call this change moving from iChurch to Beloved Community.

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Near the end of my junior year in college, on the afternoon of the first Earth Day, I was in a class on American Transcendentalism. We convinced Dr. Cauger to hold class outside, and we sat in the grass and listened as he read aloud Ralph Waldo Emerson's “Divinity School Address.” It was as though he was channeling the Sage of Concord, who was speaking to me.

After class, I asked what religion Emerson was. “Unitarian,” he said. I asked if it still existed. “Exist?” he replied. “Yes it exists! There's a congregation on the west side. Do you want to go Sunday?” And that was that! I cannot emphasize enough just how life-changing “The Address” and other works of “Saint” Emerson were for me; they moved me and set me in a new direction.

Prior to my Earth Day epiphany, I was religious—I had felt the pull toward ministry as a boy in my liberal Protestant church—but did not think of myself as “spiritual” because I never had the words to put to the spirituality I had known since childhood. Emerson provided what I needed to be both religious and spiritual. My story, I know from decades of conversation with UUs lay and ordained, is hardly unique.

"No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature," Emerson proclaimed. "**Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.**" Emersonian individualism has become part of the American story, of course. Think of the "i" that's placed in front of the names of Apple products. Some say the "i" means "Internet." Others explain that the "i" stands for "individual": This is your personal piece of technology, to be used for whatever purpose you want. Twenty [Fifteen] years ago, Apple appealingly exploited the theme of individualism in a commercial that sounds like Emerson channeled through Jack Kerouac: "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. They push the human race forward."

Many of us were drawn to Unitarian Universalism because it seemed to be the church of Emersonian individualism. **We are the iChurch.** I'm not sure Emerson's goal was for us to be "the crazy ones," but my thirty-seven years in the UU ministry have convinced me that historian Conrad Wright is correct: "[O]ne cannot build a church on Emerson's dicta: 'men are less together than alone,' or 'men descend to meet.'"

For all its appeal and its influence in American culture, individualism is not sustaining: Individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we Unitarian Universalists have also committed ourselves. **There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.**

The inherent worth and dignity of the individual is not just our First Principle as UUs: **often it is our defining principle.** But we frequently overlook another strand of our tradition in our Association's Principles and Purposes, another story about ourselves that can deepen and grow our future. It is not the language of individualism, not of the iChurch, but of **covenant**: "As free congregations we promise to one another our mutual trust and support."

**We cannot do both covenant and individualism;** individuality, yes, but not individualism. Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant—creating and sustaining a community by "promising to one another our mutual trust and support"—this takes extra effort.

**Two related obstacles prevent the promise of covenant.** One is Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism. We hear the inflection of UU exceptionalism from the pulpit, in newcomers' classes, from Sunday greeters, from those who are earnestly trying to explain our way of religion to the uninformed. We may experience Unitarian Universalism as unique and even saving, but it is not the only way. We must stay conscious of how we explain, defend, and share our perspective lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, even humiliating of others. The iChurch's exceptionalism is a barrier to sharing Unitarian Universalism's good news.

**Another obstacle is the iChurch's allergy to power and authority,** which often results in their misuse and abuse. Our personal and institutional pasts give some insight into this issue. Our histories have found us under the heel of systems of authority; many of us left faith communities that made no room for different views or disagreements. Our institutional and personal pasts explain why we take inspiration from Emerson's powerful words on the sanctity of the individual: "Whoso would be a man (woman) must be a nonconformist...Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind...Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world."

**When I was a college junior, these words were radical and empowering**—I was at an age and place when I needed Emerson’s counsel. Now I see that what was good for me would not have been healthy for institutional growth and stability, then or now. **Conflating the narrow path of individualism with the promise of institutional health is a misleading and destructive formula we have been using in our congregations for too long.**

[...]

If individualism led us to the iChurch, **covenant can open the way to the Beloved Community**, where the promise of individuality and justice inspire, empower, broaden, and deepen all. “Beloved Community” was popularized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who learned it from students of the philosopher Josiah Royce. Columbia University’s Gary Dorrien, author of a three-part history of American liberal theology, writes that for Royce and his disciples, Beloved Community expressed the ethical meaning of the kingdom of God. King taught that the foundation of the Beloved Community is the divine indwelling that equally graces all people: “There is no graded scale of essential worth [wrote King]; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the creator.”

The Rev. Shirley Strong, dean of students at the California Institute of Integral Studies, elaborates on King’s vision: **“I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power and a respect for all people, places, and things—a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions.”**

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We Unitarian Universalists have arrived at a **breakthrough moment** where we must write a new narrative. We have an urgent need for telling, writing, and living the story of who we will be, who we are becoming. **We must speak and live the Unitarian Universalist story we want others to know.**

The vision of a deep covenantal community life, as it is already named in our Principles, is bold. Many of us proudly recite our Principles as we testify, march, and talk with newcomers. What is vital is committing to this expression of our faith not as iChurch—not from the narrow goal of individualism—but as the promise of covenant and Beloved Community. Our Justice General Assembly in Phoenix, for example, demonstrated the vision named in our Principles, a vision that expresses the sacred value of individuals (no matter their legal status), of diversity, of each strand in the web of life. In Phoenix we challenged the nation by witnessing Dr. King’s dream of Beloved Community as embraced in our Principles. We were not there to implement Emerson’s iChurch.

The UU story for the twenty-first century begins not only with our historical commitment to social justice outreach, but with congregational justice *inreach*. It begins with your congregation. Your congregation is the Beloved Community.

[...]

For most of UU history, we have lived the story of the iChurch. **But knowing ourselves as beloved communities is a story the world awaits**—and if not the world, then at the very least those who ache and yearn for what we can be. Many people are seeking a faith home in congregations that are living as or into the Beloved Community. This is a point overlooked: In most of the commentary on the recent studies about religious identification, those who are reported as rejecting religion, especially

the “Nones,” have not necessarily rejected faith. Instead, most have rejected the traditional institutions that claim ownership of faith—that is, congregations.

Diana Butler Bass, a historian and consultant to Protestant churches, notes that while 30 percent of Americans identify as “spiritual but not religious,” 48 percent say they are “spiritual and religious.” She says that, “while ‘religion’ means institutional religion, ‘spiritual’ means an experience of faith,” and concludes: **“Large numbers of Americans are hankering for experiential faith whereby they can connect with God, the divine, or wonder as well as with their neighbors and that lead to a more profound sense of meaning in the world.”**

Seventeen [Twelve] years into a new century, knowing that a storm of social transformation is coming, we are in danger if we continue with the story of iChurch. But that story is over; it won’t take us where we must go. What we need for a healthy future is the Beloved Community, a community of justice inside and beyond our congregations.