

Looking Backwards, 2053-2013  
Rev. Dave Hunter  
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg  
May 5, 2013

“Dear ones of dignity and worth at All Souls Church, Unitarian Universalist, the Church of the Holy Quadrilateral” – that’s how the email message I received yesterday evening began. Peculiar, I thought, quite strange. What in the world is the “Church of the Holy Quadrilateral”? I’ve heard of the Holy Trinity, but not the “Holy Quadrilateral.”

The other part of the name, “All Souls,” that was familiar – a popular name among Unitarian Universalists. We reject original sin; we reject the Calvinist doctrine that God has chosen only some souls for saving. But then the start of that salutation – “dear *ones* of dignity and worth” – not “dear members” or “dear friends” or “dear people”. Perhaps, I thought to myself, this is an attempt to be more inclusive.

But then I saw the date on the email: May 4, 2053. What’s going on here? A message from the future? I don’t think so. But if it were from the future, maybe “dear ones” is their way to be more inclusive – more inclusive than just us people, than human beings. Who else do they have in mind? Animals? robots, with artificial intelligence? Aliens? I mean the kind from other planets.

Who sent it to me? Someone named Gershom. Did any of you receive this email also? But then I remembered (well, with a little help from Google), that Gershom was the son of Moses and Zipporah, and I realized that 2053 minus 2013 is 40 – the number of years that Moses and the Israelites spent in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. Indeed, 40 is the number of days and nights of rain during Noah’s flood, and the number of days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. It’s all a little strange.

In any event, I read the letter. And now I’ll share it with you – it’s a lot more interesting than what I had prepared; I’ll just toss that aside.

***toss prepared sermon aside, read from iPhone***

I’ve been a UU in Gettysburg for more than 40 years. *This letter could be from one of us, one of the younger ones among us, sent to us 40 years from now, and somehow traveling back to the past.* I’m at a time of transition in my life, so I thought it would be a good time to reflect on where we are, as a congregation, and where we’ve been.

First, about our name, our rather unwieldy name, the Church of the Holy Quadrilateral. We just call ourselves CHQ. Our congregation – your congregation – now has four campuses. There’s the one in Gettysburg, now at a new location, with a fully accessible building. Another one in Carlisle – they moved back from Boiling Springs. And the third and fourth campuses are in Hanover and Chambersburg.

How we all became one congregation is a long and complicated story, which I'll save for another day. UUs in Chambersburg and Hanover wanted their own churches, but they had trouble on their own. Chambersburg was started by UUs from the Boiling Springs, Gettysburg, and Hagerstown congregations who wanted a closer church or were unhappy with their church. They were joined by unchurched UUs and by nonUUs who got involved, and became enthusiastic and committed. The Hanover story is similar.

With the four groups combined we have the resources for a really terrific staff. Mid 21st century technology allows us to worship together from our four locations. When you see the preacher or hear the choir it's as though they were right there with you, though they might be in Carlisle. And you can actually smell the coffee brewing in Chambersburg, or Hanover.

You should be proud of who you are now. CHQ is known especially for three things: social conscience and responsibility, care for each other, and resilience. Of course, worship and religious education are terrific, too; they provide the foundation for everything else.

Consider social conscience. In Gettysburg – in the three other towns, too, and, really, throughout the whole area – CHQ members are in leadership roles. They're on the city council, the school board; they represent us in the legislature; they sit on various boards and commissions.

And it's not just in government, and it's not just in leadership roles. If you need volunteers for the annual bat census or the annual butterfly and bumble bee census, you go to the UUs. If you need volunteers to coach or referee junior ballet football – that's the concussion free form of football that has replaced what we now call old millennium football – you go to the UUs.

Or consider the care we give to each other. There are hundreds of us, but it feels like a family, or perhaps more like an uncountable number of overlapping and interlocking families. We're organized by geography, by intentional small groups, by subject groups – like the choir – by stage of life groups, by hobby groups, by theological flavor groups. New groups and new ways of sorting ourselves keep popping up. How we keep track of it all seems like magic. We take care of each other.

And then there's resilience. We seem to become more resilient with each challenge we face. [see Susan Nienaber, "Resilient Congregations," Alban Institute, Issue 453, April 1, 2013, [alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=10190](http://alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=10190)] If I were to list all that we've been through, I might scare you off. We've had clergy sexual serial predation, embezzlement by I'm not sure who it was, maybe the comptroller or the Sunday secretary, a building destroyed by a hurricane, a choir bus incident, defection by a substantial minority (including several major financial supporters) over a theological issue – do those of us who were brought up Mormon, brought up Jewish, and brought up Muslim all disbelieve in the same God?

And, most recently, there was a fight over how frequently, if at all, the smell and vibration synthesizer should be used in worship. Some even wanted us to get rid of the thing altogether, while others thought it was the best thing to happen to worship since joys and sorrows (but don't let me go there). In the end, the matter was settled amicably and we moved on.

Those are the features that we feel are the big three – social responsibility, care for one another, and resilience, but, still, I shouldn't leave out campus ministry. We consider that an important investment in the future of Unitarian Universalism and – this may strike you as too big a claim – an important investment in the future of our nation. We have a visible, substantial presence at Dickinson College, in Carlisle; of course, at Gettysburg College; at the Gettysburg campus of the Harrisburg Area Community College; and at the Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania [and others]. (We don't publicize this, but we're also active at the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg.)

Another challenge of merging four congregations into one was agreeing on our mission, and coming up with an acceptable statement of that mission. The Gettysburg statement, as I'm sure you know, was:

The Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg join together as a religious community that inspires the mind and spirit, honors religious freedom, and embraces diversity. Its members minister to each other with love, and work for a just society. [from the website]

The Cumberland Valley mission statement was placed each week on the back of their order of service (this was back when paper orders of service were still in use):

Our mission, as an enduring liberal religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, is to transform lives and care for the world.

Here's the Hanover statement:

Our mission is to create an open, nurturing community for ourselves and our children which–

*encourages* us to explore our values, both intellectually and spiritually;

*inspires* us to live our Unitarian Universalist principles within our congregation, community, nation, and the world;

and *beckons* others to join us on this journey. [This is actually adapted from the Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church, as of March 2004]

And, last but not least, the Chambersburg mission statement:

We inspire lives of passion, compassion, and community.

We nourish spirituality, intellectual growth, and our ties to one another.

We do this for ourselves and the larger world. [adapted from the former mission statement of the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation, as of March 2004]

After much discussion here's what we agreed on, for CHQ, by a narrow majority:

Our mission is to do what God would have us do, if God existed and were benevolent but not omnipotent.

Clearly, it was a compromise, with some supporting it just to get it done, others amused by the ironical theology implicit in it, and a third group saying that if it was good enough for Socrates, it's good enough for me. [see Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991), ch. 6, "Socratic Piety"]

But I think that this statement recognizes that UU views of God have loosened up some in the last 40 years. The problem back around a hundred years ago was that Unitarians, in their Humanist phase, set in concrete their view of God, and rejected that God. But others, who didn't reject God, evolved with their God, if that makes any sense.

Here's what one anthropologist wrote, 40 years ago:

I saw that the evangelical church implicitly invited people to treat God like an actual therapist. In many evangelical churches, prayer is understood as a back-and-forth conversation with God – a daydream in which you talk with a wise, good, fatherly friend. The churches I studied resisted turning to God for an explanation of tragedy. They asked only that people turn to God for help in dealing with the pain. It can seem puzzling that evangelical Christians sidestep the apparent contradiction of why bad things happen to good people. But for them, God is a relationship, not an explanation. [excerpts from T.M. Luhrman, N.Y. Times, 4/14/13, Review p. 4. Luhrman, a Stanford professor, is the author of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God.*]

As I recall, back 40 years ago, there was concern in religious circles over the growth of *nones*, that is, those who answer "none" when asked of their religious affiliation. And there was concern over those who claimed to be spiritual but not religious, whatever that meant. There was concern about the future of the congregation. Would religious life be focused on a geographical religious community, or would it be a category in the Facebook universe? UUs were concerned about all those folks who identified themselves as Unitarians or as Unitarian Universalists on surveys but who could not be found in their congregations.

UUs used to be concerned about two other groups, if I remember correctly, beyond those who were members of UU congregations and those who identified with UUs without darkening our doors. The others were, first, the subset of nones who appeared to share our values – theological or ethical or both – but had never heard of or had no interest in Unitarian Universalism. The second group that concerned us were those who shared our values but belonged to liberal Protestant congregations and were quite content where they were. I feel that our success at CHQ – and we have now a much larger share of the area’s population than we did 40 years ago – is attributable not only to our doing better at holding onto our own children but also to our becoming known to, and attractive to, these other groups.

We’ve also, quite gradually, become more diverse – diverse socio-economically, in racial and ethnic diversity, in religion of origin. We realize that we’re changed by each new person who walks through our doors, but we don’t feel threatened by that. Are we simply more diverse because Adams County generally has become more diverse? Or because Unitarian Universalism is quite naturally appealing to couples of mixed backgrounds? And, of course, couples of mixed backgrounds are a whole lot more common now than they were forty years ago. (Actually, some now would say – and I don’t think they’re entirely joking – that the only marriage that counts as a mixed one today is the marriage between a man and a woman.) Or have we done something extra? I don’t know.

One thing that might surprise you – or maybe it won’t – but we became bored by our UU principles. You probably know them better than I do. They start with an aspirational statement proclaiming the worth and dignity of every person, and they conclude with a pledge of commitment to the interdependent web of all existence. In between were four other statements that appear to be secondary – about how we treat each other, our spiritual and intellectual leanings, and our commitment to the values of the ACLU. Their beauty was that just about every right-minded person could accept them. And their drawback was that just about every right-minded person could accept them. Boring.

So, of course, we’ve tried to do better. Here’s one attempt, picked at random among many such efforts:

- Humanity is OK. We could be better, but we’re OK. If we need to be saved, we need to be saved by ourselves, and from ourselves.
- Second, we’re not sure who, what, or whether God is, but we’re pretty sure that God does not intervene in human affairs, setting aside the laws of nature.
- Third, the Bible may be *a* good book or *the* good book, it may be *a* source for our values, but the Bible is *not* the foundation for our values. It is the inspired, the amazing, some would say the miraculous, product of a multitude of people, over many centuries, pondering their place in the world.

- Fourth, religious authority for us lies primarily in human reason and human conscience. We respect our history, our heritage, and our leaders, but we are not bound by them.
- Fifth, our lives are precious, and we, individually and collectively, must decide how to live them, and how to live in peace and justice with others and with the world we have been given, and which it is our duty to preserve for future generations.
- Finally, we don't really know what happens to us when we die, but we are confident that eternal hellfire is not in our future, or anyone else's. Our morality is not based on the threat of divine punishment.

I've heard two objections to this proposed set of principles. First, they're too closely tied to Christianity, to Christian doctrines, and, second, they're too negative. What the outcome of this principle revision process will be, I don't know.

Another approach to defining ourselves you might call trinitarian, though I wouldn't. It's based on three polarities or complementarities. Let me explain.

Our history demonstrates the importance we attach to the *individual* – we stress the “worth and dignity” of every person. In our history we have the denial of original sin, and we have Emersonian individualism.

But, on the other hand, we are committed to *community* – in our religious communities, in our moral and political view that we are all in this together, in our realization that we share one planet, one small, temperamental planet.

We rely on *reason*; we pay homage to science and empiricism.

But, on the other hand, we recognize the enduring mysteries, we are moved by Bach, Beethoven, babies, and butterflies, we approach life, and death, with *reverence*.

We proclaim *love* as the doctrine of our church, we stand on the side of love.

But, on the other hand, love without *law* is empty. We feel more comfortable with the prodigal son's older brother. [Luke 15:11-32] We preach and teach and work for standards, discipline, justice, and responsibility.

Thus, we have individual and community, reason and reverence, and love and law – our trinity of dualities.

*The letter ends there, perhaps a little abruptly. It's signed–*

yours in UU faith,

Gershom

\* \* \*

So what is in our future, say, 40 years from now? Some are concerned that the United States will follow the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe, and institutional religion will gradually fade away, with the growth of the “nones” and the “spiritual but not religious.” Fred Muir is concerned that our own traits will do us in – our radical individualism, our distrust of power, our feeling of superiority. [“From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice” (edited), 192nd Berry Street Essay, delivered at the Ministerial Conference, June 20, 2012, Phoenix, AZ] Peter Morales is concerned that our historic ties to congregations as our basic units will hold us back, in a world seemingly liberated from considerations of place. [see “Congregations and Beyond,” on the UUA website]

Some are concerned that we are too tied to Christianity, that having our identity dependent on being at the left wing of Christianity or as being Christian heretics or parasites won’t enable us to endure as Christianity loses its hold on our society. Others are concerned that without holding on to our Christian identity we will be adrift with no real identity at all, that we will lose our core, and thus lose our reason for being.

Some are concerned that as our nation in the years ahead becomes majority minority – that terminology will become quaint, I’m sure – an overwhelmingly Euro-American denomination will be forgotten.

The Universalist Church of America, before its consolidation a half century ago with the American Unitarian Association, had been in decline for decades. Its foundation principle was universal salvation – everyone is ultimately reconciled to God, there is no hell. But as the more liberal Protestant denominations gradually forgot about hell – I certainly didn’t feel threatened by it growing up in a Presbyterian family – the Universalists lost the franchise. Attempts to rebrand themselves as the universal religion – an arrogant claim – were doomed to failure.

What is in store for Unitarian Universalism? What if Roman Catholics purge themselves of sexism and authoritarianism? What if evangelicals rediscover the Social Gospel and redefine God as the intimate and ultimate therapist in the sky? What if mainline Protestants are liberated by the discovery of metaphorical theology and by worship as performance? In 40 years, will we be looking for a merger partner? Ethical Culture? Quakers? Reconstructionist Jews? Humanist Muslims?

Whatever our situation will be in 40 years, right now and right here, in 2013 Gettysburg, we are needed. Unitarian Universalism is needed. We are a force for good in society. There are people out there who need us – they haven’t found us yet, they may not yet know that we exist,

but they need to be here with us. And there are people in here – all of us – who need to be here, who need the love and support of this congregation. Let us work together to support this congregation, to enable it to grow and thrive, to meet the needs of those of us here, and the needs of the next person to walk through our doors. Amen.