

Sermon: "Now Is the Time: Association Sunday" Rev. Martha Hodges
October 14, 2007

Reading (Starhawk)

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place, half-remembered and half-envisioned, we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

"We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been..."

We are the fortunate ones. Here we have found that place. Someplace where we can be free. Free to search for our own truth, unhampered by dogma or creed. Free to be ourselves and to be accepted as we are, even as we aspire to become more. Free to receive the loving challenge and support of others who know and value us, the encouragement and the guidance of others who share our ideals. Here, we have found a home. A home for our spirits, where its wounds are tended and its triumphs celebrated.

Home... It's about those connections that hold us in their embrace without stifling our growth or hindering our exploration.

Today is all about opening wide the door to that home. We hear an awful lot about the need to grow. In this congregation, and in our congregations around the country and around the world. This imperative – to grow or die – feels like such a burden sometimes. Growth is presented to us as a test of our worthiness. I think we carry around a fear – the fear of failure. The fear that if we don't pull in those new members, not only will we cease to thrive, but we will have demonstrated some moral failing, some deficiency of collective character or imagination or good will. I know that, as a minister, I sometimes feel that way – that my value will be measured by our membership rolls. Sometimes this pressure to grow can threaten to take the joy and excitement out of being together as a community.

So let's forget for the moment about the numbers. Let's think instead about individuals – the ones whose lives would be enriched if they knew about us – and about the world – the one that seems hell-bent on self-destruction. Let's think about what finding us – this Unitarian Universalist faith – can mean to those seeking that home.

These are days of confusion and fear for many Americans. Our society is changing so rapidly. Cultural mores shift so fast we can barely keep up. Our children live in a world we can only dimly understand.

We are threatened by poorly understood and only vaguely identified enemies from abroad.

While some of us thrive, many of us find ourselves falling farther and farther behind in the quest for the American dream.

Technological innovations come at us so fast we can barely keep up and while the instruments for keeping us connected to the world become more accessible and more sophisticated, Americans find themselves more isolated, not less. As we sit on the bus or walk down the street we're surrounded by people who appear to be talking to themselves but are really speaking into their hands-free cell phones. But what are they talking about? It sounds to me like most of these conversations amount to "I'm not there yet but I'm on my way." We seem to feel the need to keep in constant communication with each other, but we're not really saying much, not really talking, not really listening.

A 2004 study found that one out of four of us Americans said that we had no one – no one – to whom we could speak intimately. No close friends, no family members, not even a spouse, in whom we could confide. Twenty years earlier, the same question was asked: "How many people do you feel close enough to that you can confide personal information to them?" At that time, the most common response was three – three people you could really open up to. The percentage of people who said they had no one in whom they could confide jumped from 10 percent in 1985 to 25 percent. Americans are a lonely people. With all our instant messaging and call waiting and internet chat rooms, this society is in trouble.

What is the normal response to this kind of isolation and confusion, frustration and fear? To look for answers. Preferably easy answers – sound-bite solutions to complex problems. To look for absolutes. Guiding rules for life that guarantee success in the next world if not in this one. Hence the appeal of fundamentalism of all stripes – religious, political and ethical.

But these answers do not solve anything. They try to hack away at the Gordian knots of our lives, when what is needed is clear vision and a delicate touch to pick them apart, to sort out the threads of this knot, to trace them back to their sources, to gently tug at the problem from many directions, to see how the threads are related.

But there are many many people who reject the pat answer, the easy solution. There are many people who would rather live with unanswered questions than embrace answers that defy reason and all available information. These are the seekers, and they come in all shapes and sizes, all colors, all socioeconomic levels and yes, in all educational levels. These are people who need Unitarian Universalism.

We can't tease these knots apart on our own. We need the perspectives of many people, the skills and insights of many people. The seekers and questioners of the world – the ones who refuse the soothing lie and the reassuring absolute – they need us. And here's the part that we UUs sometimes overlook. We need them.

Not just so that our movement can grow in solvency and influence. We need the life experience, the points of view, the questions of all those people out there that are Unitarian Universalists and don't yet know it. We need to keep the door to our spiritual home open wide, not just for the hurting people seeking loving shelter and food for their souls. We need to open that door wide because we need them to shelter and feed us, too. They need our message of love and inclusivity, our message that we are all truly one. They need our message that they and all people have inherent worth and dignity and that we are all linked together in a web of inescapable and mysterious mutuality. And we need to share that message, for the sake of our own souls. It is not only to our benefit to welcome the stranger. It is the right thing to do.

This calls us to make a radical shift in how we perceive ourselves. We UUs tend to ruefully state that we are the best kept secret in town. We bemoan our small numbers, but I fear there is too often a note of smugness in the wailing about our smallness. After all, we're not for everyone, are we? We are the elite few. Our very smallness is evidence of our specialness. Or is it? Maybe it's evidence of our indifference, of our self-satisfaction. It's true: We're not for everyone. But we're for many many more than we know.

Today is the first in what the Unitarian Universalist Association plans as a five-year series of annual appeals to strengthen this faith. The UUA will use the money collected today to get the word out. "We are here and our door is open wide." We may be the most reluctant evangelists in the world. The very idea of evangelism gives many of us the shudders. It brings up images of tent revivals, corrupt televangelists, the guy in the black suit knocking on our door while we're trying to feed the kids or read the paper, the preacher shaking his fist in the air and threatening us with hellfire. The missionary destroying the indigenous culture in order to add to the rolls of the saved. But evangelism means, literally, sharing the good news. We UUs do have good news, and we must get over ourselves and start being willing to share it.

The Reverend Scott Alexander states the problem clearly: "Unitarian Universalists are notoriously spiritually silent. Because we demand to think for ourselves, are respectful of human differences, and don't appreciate it when someone else tries to ram their own beliefs down our throats, we tend to shy away from even cautiously and respectfully sharing with others what it is we believe, and how those beliefs help us strive to be better, larger people. It is hard for some of us to talk back to fundamentalism by 'talking up' our own faith, but I passionately believe we cannot afford such a self-imposed silence in dangerous and divisive times such as these." (pp.39-40.) He continues to say, "If we are not bold and caring enough to stand up in the public square and (without arrogance or vitriol) affirm what it is *we* believe and what dreams command *our* loyalty—then by default it will be the beliefs and dreams of *others* that will influence and instruct the shape of our society...."

Not so easy to do, is it? How many of us, when confronted with a challenging or merely curious question about what it is we believe have struggled to articulate an answer? Complex realities and diverse belief systems don't lend themselves easily to the

one or two sentence answer. **We** know what we think this religion offers, but it's awfully hard to sum it up in a neat slogan or catechism that trips conveniently off the tongue.

That's why it's important to practice. At some point this year, we will be offering the class "Building Your Own Theology," and, if there is sufficient interest, "Articulating Our Unitarian Universalist Faith." Do you know the joke about what you get when you cross a Mormon with a Unitarian Universalist? Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason? Let's not be that joke.

As President Sinkford has said, "Now is the time for us to live up to the promise of our liberal religion, to let the world know we are here, and to welcome those who seek our community of peace, justice and love. Now is the time for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective because our religious values are sorely needed to help heal a wounded world."

Are all our congregations "communities of peace, justice and love?" Not hardly. But we're trying to become these beloved communities and I believe that this one – this Unitarian Universalist Community Church – is just such a community. Are our religious values needed in a wounded world? Absolutely. We are, truly, all in this together. Now is not the time to turn our backs on this confused, fearful, lonely and often hostile world.

Now is the time to open our doors wide, and wider still. Now is the time.