

Claiming Our Values

A sermon by Seanan Holland, Intern Minister

It matters what words are spoken and what words are heard. It matters what words remain unspoken, and what words desperately need to be heard. The good news of Unitarian Universalism ought not be held too close.

When I think of my experiences in hospital chaplaincy, night ministry with the homeless in Chicago, and marches in solidarity with hotel workers – many who are immigrants – it occurs to me that seminary is largely about finding new and different perspectives – about seeing the world through someone else’s eyes. This is part of what it means to be prophetic – to be able to see the world from a variety of different perspectives. In our litany of voices, can you tell which strive to find many perspectives and which do not? To be prophetic also means to be able to fold those different perspectives into a message, and then unfold that message again so that it speaks from many voices – so that it can be heard by more than one circle of people...

Our new president, Barak Obama, has this skill, does he not? Among the things I am appreciative of about our new president is that he can see the world from a variety of perspectives. He can bring new voices to the table. And we can hear these voices now can’t we. With this catalyst of mutual support and encouragement, we can hear the voices of Van Jones, Melissa Harris Lacewell, Tavis Smiley... This is good news, but it is not all the news.

Earlier this week I attended a meeting and witnessed a dynamic that is all too common in the United States. The West End Civic Association has been working with the Montgomery Housing Partnership for the last six months on producing a compromise design in one of MHP’s affordable housing initiatives. At the two general meetings I attended, the issue of socio-economic class structure was pivotal, but went un-named – it was on the table, to be sure – but it wasn’t spoken about directly. Too often, things we

need to talk about most are passed around like a hot potato, and we lose a golden opportunity to hear the voices that desperately need to be heard.

It isn't surprising that this is the case. Issues of class, race, ethnicity, and oppression are difficult things to talk about. In any given group of people, individuals may all be in different places of readiness. As adults, our patterns of seeing the world may be ingrained by years of experience. It takes a lot of effort to risk having our view of the world, and our place in it, changed by finding someone else's perspective.

As the population density of the world increases, so too, will our need to be able to see from our neighbor's perspective, and they from ours. This is one of the essential tasks of our globalized time: to recognize who is at the table, and also to recognize who is not at the table and why. We need to listen carefully to the voices we can hear, and just as carefully to the voices that aren't as loud in our ears.

These questions of which voices are heard and which perspectives are represented is important within Unitarian Universalism. As wide as our circle may be, we too have to ask ourselves about whose voices are not present. In our litany today, which voices were not present. The history of this country has too often left out important details. And, reversing the question, whose ears did the voices of the litany not speak to? Some Americans cannot hear even the proudest voices of our history without recognizing irony and feeling shame and disappointment. In this sermon, I have named some of the voices we are glad to hear in our present religious and political arenas, but whose voices are still missing from those I named.

We owe it to ourselves to ask this question within our congregations and our association, but we also owe it to ourselves to let our voice be heard outside of our walls.

There are circles within America today that haven't heard our Unitarian Universalist voice. We UUs live out our values in real and practical ways. But even the people who see us

putting our faith in action don't know all that we stand for and why. When we think on matching up our values, our words, and our deeds, it seems to me that we can rightfully claim our identity as a people who turn our values into action – through our social justice ministries, and through our pastoral ministries... this is very clear. And I can tell you, after having been at General Assembly last week, we do a marvelous job of telling each other what we mean.

But one of the places we still have work to do is in expressing our values with words to those outside of our circle. There is room for us to claim our values with words in the public square.

The way our theology and our polity are woven together in contemporary times may be different than in our past. In a traditional sense, we may no longer think of our souls as being at stake. But salvation of a different kind is certainly at stake. This world needs our message.

But in our congregational polity, this is not something that either congregations or ministers can do well alone.

Imagine me on a soap box in one of our parks in Rockville – standing by myself and telling the world what I stand for. There may be a very few people who could get away with something like that, but I rather think that instead of drawing a crowd, those few onlookers who were present would slowly drift away. This probably isn't what you want your ministers to be doing anyway. On the other hand, imagine the experience of showing up on Sunday as a congregation and sitting quietly for an hour with no one on the chancel.

The free pulpit needs the free pew. What message can a preacher offer if it is heard by no one. The free pulpit needs a free congregation who will rise up and testify, who will say, "I am your witness." "Preach it, brother; preach it, sister!" We revere speaking truth to power, but do we have the habit of strengthening our foundation in the public square?

In our democratic process, sometimes so many voices rise up that none can be heard. All of our voices matter, and sometimes in order to best hear the many, an ambassador must be chosen, someone who can claim the values of the many in one voice. The free pew needs the free pulpit.

Alone we are not yet prophets. But when we are many who have witnessed from different perspectives, then we are truth. And our truth is too important to keep to ourselves.

It is easy enough for us to discover what the American Families Association or similar groups mean – they have made it explicit in words and promulgated it throughout American politics. What we need to imagine is ourselves, taking it to the streets. Not only through our social justice actions, but through our words. We need to imagine a Sunday in the park – and not just for an hour. But a Sunday in the park – all day, long enough to speak our truth. A day when our ministers, religious educators and lay leaders take the charge you give them and communicate our values, where all present, passers by included, can hear the words and witness the affirmation of our congregations.

Don't tell Rev. Strauss I'm setting her up like this.

The political landscape has changed in the last year. Which voices will be heard in this new arena? The UUA and our districts have led a major advertising campaign to invite visitors to our congregations. But it can take a year or more of Sundays for a visitor to figure out what we stand for. Can we wait that long, or should we do as our theological ancestors did, and let our truth “be submitted to a candid world.”

This Sunday, closest to the Fourth of July, we celebrate Independence day. A day given to us by a legacy of struggle, courage, and the art of carefully crafted words. A day given to us in no small measure through the oppression of people both native of,, and forced to be,, part of this land.

We should think on our comforts, our privileges, and our hard won rights. It is good for us also to think on our responsibilities.

The story of Unitarian Universalism is inextricably bound to the story of this country. The Cambridge Platform is the founding document of our congregational polity. And were it not for the fact that it prevailed in 1648, it is possible that democracy as we understand it would have had to wait for another revolution.

As it was, our forebears stood on an already solid foundation and ratified the Cambridge platform, which put in words, the religious value of democracy. It was not their intention that this religious principle would in turn become the foundation of our national government. But another forbearer of Unitarian persuasion picked up that principle and put in words the foundation for a government that derives its just power from the consent of the people.

If we do not name the prophetic truth we consent to, eventually we will consent to a truth claim that is too narrow.

In the 80s and 90s Unitarian Universalist congregations put their faith in action. We took bold steps in the religious community to become welcoming congregations – to expand the circle of which voices would be heard and honored.

At the 2008 General Assembly, the Ware Lecturer, Van Jones, asked us, he told us that we must become ready to govern.

This Fourth of July weekend, let us consider that one of our civic responsibilities is to proclaim what we stand for. So, as Unitarians and Universalists before us have done, it is time for us to take the values that we have passed through the fire of thought and declare them in the public square. It is time for us to gently rise up above the cacophony of

argumentative voices and sing a song, perhaps more than one, that would strive to unite us rather than divide us.

Most of you know that I will be leaving Rockville soon. So I won't be able to stand on a soapbox in a city park – at least not in Rockville. But Rev. Strauss and I talk occasionally. And we agree that it would be good to know what is important to you.

If there is an important issue to you here in Rockville, that the free pulpit and the free pew can mutually support each other in addressing, as you leave the sanctuary today, would you please write that issue down on a card and drop it in the basket. Or maybe you would like to circulate a few ideas through a cup of coffee at social hour. The basket, cards and pencils are available at the back of the sanctuary and in Fellowship Hall.

In closing, there is no way to sugar-coat the news that we are in difficult times. But let us think on all that is good and uplifting in this country. Let us think on our responsibilities to preserve and develop that goodness, for us and for our posterity. And may we also consider the things we might do locally toward that end.