

## THE AFFIRMATIVE POWER OF DISSENT

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

We gather here today with a burden and an opportunity of great significance. For we are inheritors of the dissenting church.

In the earliest days of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Unitarianism our faith rose from the fires of free thought and free speech. In Transylvania, in Poland, In England and in the colonies of New England...our forefathers and mothers risked their lives and fortunes to live their principles.

In challenge to the established religions, and the orthodoxy of Christian doctrine...again and again, dissenters stood on the margins and spoke their unorthodox truth. And they organized dissenting churches, congregations of people who were willing to question and to apply reason to the tenets of their faith tradition. They saw themselves as standing within their Presbyterian and Anglican traditions, but offering a dissenting view.

We are the inheritors of their courage and vision.

What will we do with this heritage?

Will we squander it in platitudes, in silent fear, in extreme caution, in cynicism, in denial of our calling? Will we settle for a comfortable sense of specialness?

What is the truth we are called to proclaim? What is the place and meaning of dissent in our lives?

Will we be dissenters of integrity?

Will we build new liberal faith communities with hope and a loving spirit... yet remain true to our dissenting origins?

There are many conversations waiting for our attention.

One philosophical and theological question at the heart of any religion ...is the question of authority. What is the source of our authority as a UU congregation in 2007. Because we do not hold to a single shared view of God, because we do not share a commitment to a singular scripture, because we do not organize ourselves with hierarchical church bodies with ancient

doctrines and creeds to guide us...we must ask...what is the source of our authority as a religion, as a congregation?

This is not an easy question to answer. But we do have guiding principles...as imperfect as they may be. They were created over several years with input from many congregations...they were voted on and accepted in 1984.

Please join me in a reading of our principles and purposes found in the responsive reading section of our hymnbook...#594.

I am proud of these statements of values and principles. I am proud to share them with those who wish to know more about who we are and what we stand for.

They are shared by most of our UU congregations around the world. Today is a day of special unity within Unitarian Universalism. Today has been declared, "Association Sunday"! UU Congregations are celebrating our unity and our power as an Association of congregations. Many churches are taking a special collection to support the UUA.

Because of our recent Miracle Sunday collection and our up-coming Bazaar-Bazaar, it seemed poor timing for the Rockville congregation...but I assured my colleagues at the UUA, that we were exercising our right of dissent, tho still standing with them in spirit. They were fine with that.

This week, the UUA has taken bold steps to speak our truth publicly and on a national scale. Have you seen the ad in the current Time magazine. The sound bite, attention getting line in the middle of the ad is "Is God keeping you from going to Church?" The paragraph of explanation below says, we are a loving, spiritual community where you can be inspired and encouraged to search for your own truth and meaning.

The ad also offers the slogan,"Nurture your spirit, help heal our world." Basically, it's a good ad...it will be interesting to see what kind of response follows.

Also this week, our UUA President, Rev. William Sinkford, along with Rev. John Thomas, the President of the United Church of Christ, presented to US congressional leaders, Petitions of Hope signed by 75,000

Liberal religious persons.

In a letter to UU congregations, Sinkford wrote:  
“So many of you have offered your support and your advice for the Association’s activism against this war. You have been heard. We are dedicated to keeping up the pressure until we see an Iraq that has come to know peace and justice.  
That work is most effective and most sustainable when done in community, so I invite you to stay in continued relationship with the Association as we put our faith into action.”

I thank Gail Owens and our Peace Study Task Force for providing the opportunity for the Rockville congregation to be part of this petition of hope.

As Rev. Sinkford says in his letter, “thank you for all the good work you are doing, and know that you are not alone.”

75,000 liberal religious people signed a petition to end the war in Iraq, how many more there must be!

In all times and places, it is dangerous to be a dissenter.

And yet, for so many of us, the freedom to dissent is precisely what drew us to this unique faith of ours. Unique because we are free to define a larger God or no God, free to speak out on the side of Love rather than on the side of hate and fear, free to see life and death with all the complicated meanings which it possesses...free to raise children who are not afraid to question authority, even ours.

I encourage you to talk with one another about why you are a UU.

I am a Unitarian Universalist because it was one of the first denominations to ordain women, Rev. Olympia Brown was ordained in Racine, Wisconsin in 1863...and because women’s rights and freedoms have always been advanced in our congregations...and because women are called to serve UU congregations in great numbers...although current statistics from the UUA settlement department still show that our congregations retain a preference for male ministers. But I’m among those trying to change that particular prejudice.

I am a Unitarian Universalist because our religious education curricula, draw from science and world religions and emphasize the responsibility of individual conscience...because we trust our children to make their own choices.

I am a Unitarian Universalist because, even though we don't always get it right, especially on issues of race and cultural diversity...we continue the dialogue and take seriously the call to anti-racist ways of living and institution building. Although current statistics from the UUA show that ministers of color are not easily welcomed or called by our congregations.

I am a Unitarian Universalist because we care and work for peace and justice, and when I offered a workshop to UU religious professionals on issues of classism within Uuism, I was invited to more ministerial study groups than I could fit on my calendar.

Being part of a dissenting church tradition is a powerful thing.  
A responsibility to be taken seriously.

I believe it is how we are known in the larger community. Other faiths and other liberal people know this about us. That we will stand up for the oppressed, that we will speak truth to power, that we will be there at the demonstrations and protests for peace and against torture.

Everyone knows that we truly welcome gay, lesbian, trans-gendered, people- that we officiate gay unions and marriages and that we have many "out" gay, lesbian and trans-gendered ministers. Others know that we are still a dissenting church.

We just need to talk more among ourselves about what that means... what we are called to do in the name of affirming dissent.

For it is not dissent for dissent's sake, but for the purpose of being more life affirming...more inclusive, more committed to acting on our principles and purposes.

The UU church of Rockville is part of the Joseph Priestly district of the UUA. So let me tell you a little about Joseph Priestly. Born in England in 1733, he died in Pennsylvania in 1804. The Reverend Doctor Priestly was a chemist, a philosopher, and a founder, along with Rev. Theopolis Lindsey, of British Unitarianism.

Following thirty years under the boot of the Act of Religious Uniformity passed in 1662 in by the Church of England, The 1692 Act of Toleration of William and Mary allowed for the existence of dissenting churches in England.

As part of that dissenting tradition, Priestly helped to found the first Unitarian Chapel in Leeds in April 1774.

Priestly was a well known scientist, who had received much recognition for his experiments and publications on different kinds of air, as well as studies relating to vision, light and color. He brought his scientific understandings of matter to bear on his religious thought and challenged the dualistic nature of matter and spirit along with other Christian doctrine, in his book, "The History of the Corruption of Christianity."

He continued publishing, speaking and preaching throughout the 1780s and 1790's. He was vilified by some, as he called for the abolishment of the church of England as necessary for the separation of church and state. He had moved to Birmingham, England, which was a center for enlightenment thought and also of reactivity.

There were riots in 1791, riots aimed at the dissenters who were commemorating the French Revolution...after three days of rioting, 4 dissenting churches and 27 homes of scientists and clergy were burned to the ground. They became known as the Priestly Riots.

Priestly fled with his family to London and then to America...where he settled in Pennsylvania. He was welcomed by those who also supported Benjamin Franklin, and he received a warm welcome from Thomas Jefferson. These were men of the Enlightenment who engaged science and its methods as a way toward progress and happiness for the common man.

Priestly, like other religious dissenters of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was optimistic about the possibilities of reason and knowledge. He believed that science would open the doors of the human mind and heart. As Priestly put it, science is like “the morning opening upon us; and we cannot doubt but that, the light will increase and extend itself more and more unto the perfect day.”

Standing on the other side of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s industrial age and the 20<sup>th</sup> century holocaust, we are less optimistic, perhaps, regarding the power of both dissent and science.

And yet- Al Gore and the United Nations shared the Nobel Peace Prize this week! So miracles still happen.

And dissent still has its place.

I hope that we, as a congregation and as individuals, will keep alive the flame of our dissenting tradition...that we will reflect on its meaning and discern its most creative and affirming path.

I am a Unitarian Universalist committed to the power and promise of institutional religion...as necessary as personal spiritual practice and compassionate acts of human kindness are...when they are embodied in community- they grow exponentially...when we act together, it is possible to imagine the end of war, the beginning of peace, the true potential of diversity and the prophetic voice of Universal Love spoken through our minds and hearts...spoken in community.

So may we keep the flame of dissent alive and use it well.

Amen/Blessed Be