

We're Better Together!

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ October 14, 2007

Thank you Carol. I can vividly see Peter Pan lecturing, "I won't grow up. I won't grow up, I don't want to go to school. Just to learn to be a parrot, And recite a silly rule. I won't grow up!"

This is Association Sunday and I wanted to start this rather serious talk today with a fun image and an unlikely association, Peter Pan and, as our trailer for today's sermon suggested, James Luther Adams. But before you try to figure out how they are related, I want to throw in a connecting link as well, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Peter Pan, Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Luther Adams. Now I realize that depending on your age and background you may not recognize one or more of these names but do not despair, all will be clear as we continue. And, for those of you who like these games, I give you one final clue. This talk could be called: "We're Better Together: A Developmental Approach to the Growth of Unitarian Universalism in the United States of America."

Ah yes, now you have it.

Developmentally we all start out in complete dependence. As babies our needs are met. We are loved and held, fed and cared for, protected and challenged in safety. But it is not too very soon, before we assertively burst out of that cocoon. We learn "no!" and "me!" We assert our independence. I won't grow up. I don't want to go to school. just to learn the golden rule, to learn what other people want me to be. I want to be free to do what I want to do without rules, except my rules, without orders, except my orders. Like Peter Pan I am my own vain, egocentric person. I think in black and white. I am a child.

Like all parallels, comparing a child's emergence from dependence to independence with the birth of our faith tradition is an oversimplification. However, we might remember that the Unitarians and the Universalists in America were conceived within the safety and nurturance of the Christian tradition in the United States. Yet, there came a moment when each had to assert its independence. For example, in his famous 1819 sermon entitled "Unitarian Christianity" William Ellery Channing described the distinctive beliefs of the Unitarian movement, including the rejection of the Trinity, a belief in human goodness and the subjection of theological ideas to the light of reason. It is considered the premiere document of the Unitarian movement. And so it was. Yet, it should also be noted that this sermon, this affirmation of belief, was the culmination for years of difference between more liberal Christians and the Standing Order. For years the term "Unitarian" had been used pejoratively and by 1819 the tension between the two groups had reached a high point. It was time to move on.

Similarly, on our Universalist side, men such as George DeBonneville and John Murray were preaching about salvation for all mankind in the 1700s but without attempting to separate from the religious mainstream. However, the influx of English Universalists who were escaping persecution in the late 1700s, coupled with the persecution which followed the emergent exposition of Universalist beliefs here fostered the formation of the Universalist Church in America in 1793. Developmentally, it was time.

In an article entitled Emerson's Shadow which appeared in the UU World (March/April 2003), Forrest Church describes Ralph Waldo Emerson as the quintessential adolescent sage and he suggests that Emerson and the Unitarian movement shared the same adolescent passage. According to Church, Emerson espoused the Libertarian belief that self reliance if practiced widely would alone solve most of the world's problems. He believed that "every man alone is sincere; at the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins." Like many adolescents he was firm in his beliefs, living them to the extreme. He had an aversion to true intimacy. While he idealized friendship, his view of the ideal community was "a company of two like-minded spirits walking together — ideally in silence — through the woods."

His view on missionary work is not surprising. "Your miscellaneous popular charities;" he wrote in "Self-Reliance," "the education at college of fools; the building of meeting houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots, and the thousand-fold Relief Societies; though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold." Given his temperament and his beliefs. It is not difficult to see why Emerson left the pulpit.

Church notes that " The closest Emerson comes to a comprehensive self-critique is in "The Transcendentalist." ... Describing his fellow Transcendentalists as "exacting children," he summed up the movement's adolescent limitations more succinctly than any critic. "So many promising youths, and never a finished man," he wrote. "They are not good citizens, not good members of society. . . . They do not willingly share in the public charities, in the public religious rites, in the enterprises of education, of missions foreign and domestic, in the abolition of the slave-trade, or in the temperance society. They do not even like to vote." In defense of his followers' scruples, Emerson explains that all great causes seem "paltry matters" to them. "On the part of these children it is replied that life and their faculty seem to them gifts too rich to be squandered on such trifles."

Like Emerson, Unitarian Universalists have a reputation for being solid anti-institutionalists. In some of our congregations there continues to be a large concentration of friends. The friends pledge financial support and tithe their time and talent to the congregation, but they refuse to sign the membership book. Their total freedom from someone else's perceived or potential authority is of utmost importance to them. In return for this privilege of "friend" status, they give up the right and responsibility to vote on the direction of the congregation.

Like Emerson, Unitarian Universalist congregations have had the reputation for being aloof and arrogant in their personal belief system. Some Unitarian Universalist congregations have been classified as cold, completely in the head, without a sense of intimacy, without a heart. While this type of rationality may have been developmentally necessary to solidify the importance of reason to our faith tradition, in this current milieu, if we wish to live out our principles, it is important to move forward into the next growth stage, that of interdependence. If we want to establish the bonds necessary for growth and influence in our current time, we must readjust our attitudes and our actions.

To do so requires a leap into a new belief structure. James Luther Adams, eminent theological scholar, beloved Unitarian Universalist teacher and revered social ethicist, brings us this structure in his most well delineated social construct, voluntary associations.

Adams explains that socially relevant decisions necessarily involve engagement in groups which seek to influence community, national and global life. A voluntary association "is a means of

dispersing power, in the sense that power is the capacity to participate in making social decisions. It is the training ground of the skills that are required for viable social existence in a democracy."

For Adams "Voluntaryism distinguishes the democratic society from any other." It involves more than an attitude in favor of freedom of choice. As he says, "Many people entertain *attitudes* in favor of freedom, but socially effective freedom requires participation in associations that define or redefine freedom and that attempt to articulate or implement that freedom in a specific social milieu. Voluntaryism is an associational, institutional concept. It refers to a principal way in which the individual through association with others "gets a piece of the action,"

This process, particularly when it affects public policy, requires struggle. It demands a special commitment and an expenditure of directed energy, for in some fashion it generally entails a reshaping, and perhaps even a redistribution, of power.

Adams also believes that the development of and participation in voluntary associations depends for their health and integrity upon the inwardness and independence of individual existence. He appreciates Emerson's efforts and suggests that one must go through adolescence; one must turn inward to find one's moral code. I quote, "Only from the subsoil of privacy do the deeper motivations of human existence emerge and from this subsoil the formal associations receive much of their vitalizing, integrating energy. Pp174-75. However, he adds that the disciplines of the inner life may be further defined and nurtured by associations, forming a reciprocal network.

Let us turn now to the history of voluntary religious associations in order to understand their status in today's world. The early Christian churches were voluntary associations. They appealed to individuals to make the decision to join. However, with membership came the responsibilities of membership such as missionary work. As a voluntary organization, it promoted new attitudes but it also had to develop new skills of communication and organization so that it could impart its message to the world. However, with time they became a part of the unified church state structure. This is the way Christianity came to the United States. In the northeast the English civil and religious standards were transplanted to American soil. Here each town had one church and taxes were paid to that church. One had to belong to a church in order to have a vote. However, over time the intention grew to do away with direct state control of the church and also to remove official, ecclesiastical influence from the political realm. Since ecclesiastical oversight from England was erratic, religious communities changed in their structure. They became more gathered, groups of folks who covenanted to be together, thus moving toward a voluntary church. Some of us will remember that in the 1780s it was John Murray's congregation in Gloucester Massachusetts that refused to pay the tax to support the Congregational Church. After much hardship and a long court battle, they finally won the right of freedom from this taxation. This was the first test case of religious freedom in America.

The emergence of the voluntary church ushered in a new era. The "free" church was no longer supported by taxation. It had to be self sustaining and it had to manage its own affairs. Yet, "So strong was the spirit of independence that for well over a century these churches held out against any strong centralized organization." P. 180

With time however, there came a diminishment of zeal. The number of unchurched grew and the problem of maintaining church commitment grew. Faced with this change, the churches in all regions found it necessary to employ the techniques of persuasion "in order to win support and gain recruits by voluntary means." (p 181) They found that by forming new alliances, more

specialized associations and cooperative associations across denominations, they were able to increase energy and involvement.

Non church related associations, addressing specific social and political problems also sprang up. These multi denominational coalitions were the root of several cultural changes. Voluntary churches have learned that they must cooperate with each other and with non members as well. The rhetoric of absolute religious claims has been toned down. They have learned that to effect change you may have to work with others even if you do not agree with them in other areas. In coalition they are more diverse increasing their familiarity with larger social and ethnic groups.

Economic expansion and the rise of the middle class were concurrent with these changes. Adams postulates that “It is therefore reasonably fair to say that, whereas historically the voluntary churches revolted against the establishment of centralized ecclesiastical-political power, today, particularly in the middle and upper-middle classes, they represent the establishment. This observation becomes all the more pertinent if we take into account the fact that the views that obtain in the business community are almost normative for the churches.” P. 197

Developmentally, we see the transition from a nonconformist position to one of entrenchment in the establishment.

Unfortunately, the voluntary principle can serve as a sleeping pill as well as a stimulant. Tocqueville once suggested that a perennial temptation in a democracy, where liberty may be sought to the neglect of equality, is “lethargic somnolence.” Pp198-99

If we want to return to William Ellery Channing’s (“Remarks on Associations” (1830) premise: “The value of associations is to be measured by the energy, the freedom, the activity, the moral power, which they encourage and diffuse. In truth, the great object of all benevolence is to give power, activity, and freedom to others.” P. 190 ...then we have a challenging task ahead of us.

If we value voluntary associations we must approach them with a new zeal. We must match enthusiasm with action. It requires deep inner conviction, critical judgment and the sacrifices which accompany the pursuit of worthy goals.

Today is Association Sunday.

As Unitarian Universalists we do value voluntary associations. We are a religious voluntary association. UU congregations are self governing entities whose connections with each other are sometimes tenuous. We want to strengthen the bonds of common purpose among our congregations. We want to combine our resources in order to make our collective voice heard, the voice of liberal religious values in the world. We want to increase our powers of persuasion, to grow stronger, enabling us to have more influence on our country.

Today we join thousands of Unitarian Universalists in affirming our common bonds and purposes on the first annual Association Sunday. Association Sunday is a request from the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. The UUA, our umbrella organization asks all congregations to recognize and support both in spirit and financially the work of our collective body.

The Pacific Central District, known affectionately as PCD has stepped up to the plate. 92% (35 of 38) of our congregations will be participating in Association Sunday, representing 95.5% of the membership of the district.

Now is the Time is a unique fundraising effort “that boldly asks UUs what they need to thrive, what they want to support, and how projects and programs should be shaped.” It is a now campaign; the money raised will be spent within the next 2 to 5 years. The campaign focuses on five interrelated areas for growth: growth in numbers, diversity, witness, leadership and spirit. Funds raised are not for the UUA operating budget. This year they will support national marketing, and growth outreach projects as well as funding of congregational growth projects. In the following four years one Sunday per year will be dubbed Association Sunday and will be devoted to the themes of growth in spirit, growth in diversity, growth in witness and growth in leadership.

This year we intend to raise \$1 million dollars. 50% of the money raised will go to the national marketing campaign in Time magazine. 25% will go to support congregations and the ministers they call; 25% will go to congregations as grants for their growth outreach projects. The grants will be allocated according to how much the district raised and they will be distributed by the District Boards.

We have the opportunity to shape the future of our faith.

Church, Forrest “Emerson’s Shadow” UU World, March/April 2003

Engel, J. Ronald, Ed. *James Luther Adams: Voluntary Associations* Chicago: Exploration Press, 1986.

OFFERTORY:

James Luther Adams informs us that with the new conception of religious freedom and responsibility one must view the collection plate in the church service on Sunday as a symbol of the meaning of disestablishment and of voluntaryism. The collection plate symbolizes—indeed it in part also actualizes and institutionalizes—the view that the church as a corporate body is a self-determinative group and that in giving financial support to the church the members affirm responsibility to participate in the shaping of the policies of the church. Thus the voluntary principle amounts to the principle of consent. P. 177