

“The Bonds That Connect Us”
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Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church
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Association Sunday – October 2, 2011

I have been following with great interest this week the 2-week old occupation of Wall Street in NYC by a growing group of protesters, whose main concern seems to be the increasing gap between rich and poor in this country. You may not have heard much about them unless you are a regular reader of alternative news sources, since mainstream outlets have largely ignored the uprising. Although you may have heard that 400-500 of them, including a freelance reporter for the NY Times, were arrested yesterday while marching across the Brooklyn Bridge.

One of the things that has fascinated me the most is the developing breadth of the coalition that has gathered in support of this cause. The protest was started by a relatively small group of college-aged kids from New York and New Jersey who were mostly concerned, it seems, with high unemployment and the unaffordability of college loans. But over the course of the last 15 days, they have been joined or endorsed by a number of unions - including 700 airline pilots who marched last week; by the environmental organization 350.org; by Princeton professor, Cornell West; by former Obama administration member, Van Jones; by Vermont Senator, Bernie Sanders; and by members of the CUNY faculty who have been playing a supporting and advising role to the protestors.

Solidarity events have begun to pop up around the country...from Los Angeles to Boston. And yesterday a Marine veteran announced that he and 15 of his fellow Marines were heading to NYC to offer a protective buffer between the protestors and the NYPD, who were rebuked this week for, among other things, pepper-spraying a young protestor who had already been taken into custody and posed no threat to any officers. One of the young Marines, in announcing his plans, said that he'd fought for America, not for Wall Street. He is going to NYC to stand in solidarity with “the other 99%” of Americans, as the protestors sometimes refer to themselves.

There are a lot of sermons in this story, but for now...for the purposes of this morning...what fascinates me most is that this increasingly diverse group of protestors has been able to unite – at least for now – around a common, if broadly defined, cause. It gives me hope.

For Christians, today is World Communion Sunday, an annual day of celebrating the unity of diverse Christian traditions – Protestants, Orthodox, Evangelical, Anglican, African-American. Today these churches celebrate that although they have long been divided over dogma and social principles, they are united in Christ.

The experience of such unity amidst diversity can be a powerful one. One anonymous writer who has celebrated World Communion Sunday for over 30 years says that even as a child, he...

“...was captivated by the image of men, women, and children of every language, color, and nationality gathering in fields, straw huts, brick schools, wooden shacks

and stone cathedrals and praising God and entering into both a physical and spiritual communion with one another as the planet turned under the gaze of the sun and the stars that God has placed over us all.”

This morning, we who are Unitarian Universalists celebrate Association Sunday in recognition of the bonds that connect us with Unitarian Universalists around the country and throughout the world. We are not as large as the Communion of Christian Churches, nor are we anywhere near as diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class, geography, or other demographic measures.

We are an association of approximately 1000 congregations, mostly located in the US and in Canada. We are very like one another in many, many ways. But each of our congregations is wholly autonomous, and as such we are free to define our own membership, call our own ministers, manage our own buildings, and determine our own budgets.

Some have said that trying to get Unitarian Universalists to do anything is sort of like herding cats. Although we have much in common, we are extremely proud of and attached to our autonomy, our self-governance, which we often refer to as our Congregational Polity. And so we are ambivalent about – sometimes even hostile toward – anything that appears to be centralized authority. We have been ambivalent about it for a long, long time. And so, it should be noted, while Christians have been celebrating World Communion Sunday since 1936, we only began celebrating Association Sunday in 2007.

The great 20th century Unitarian Universalist historian and Harvard professor, Conrad Wright, wrote a lot about our congregational polity and a little about our ambivalence, too, as it turns out.

In theory, [he said] we acknowledge that our particular churches are part of a larger movement; in practice we are extraordinarily parochial. We organize the UUA and form districts, but then give them inadequate support. We turn to denominational headquarters for assistance in connection with ministerial settlement, preparation of religious education materials, publication of hymn books, and for various other services; but it is the rare Unitarian Universalist who takes much interest in what happens to any UU church but his or her own.” (*Walking Together*, 21)

Wright would often point out to his students and colleagues that autonomy alone does not define congregationalism. He would have us look to the Cambridge Platform, the critical document from 1648 that spelled out the doctrine and structure of the Puritan churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut, our earliest religious ancestors in this country.

The authors of the Cambridge Platform...included in their text a chapter on ‘the communion of Churches with one another,’ which outlines six ways by which the churches were related in a seamless web with neither center nor circumference. The six are mutual care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief and succor. So congregationalism meant, as it should still mean, not the autonomy of the local church, but the community of autonomous churches. (*Walking Together*, 21)

So this idea of a community of churches has been part of our tradition from the beginning, and yet, to this day, we remain largely parochial, isolated, and hard to herd. Why is that?

In answer to that question, Wright wrote somewhat extensively about two famous 19th century Unitarians who both died in 1882. One you've certainly heard of, the other you probably have not. The first was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous transcendentalist whose father William Emerson was the fifth minister of this church. Waldo was himself a Unitarian minister for a time.

The other was Henry Whitney Bellows, another Unitarian minister who served for over 40 years at what is now All Souls Church in New York City. Bellows was also the organizer and President of the United States Sanitary Commission (a precursor of the International Red Cross) during the Civil War, and the primary organizer of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches, an early precursor of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Both Emerson and Bellows were equally well-known, equally popular in their own ways during their lifetimes, equally successful, equally charismatic and appealing to their respective crowds. But we tend to remember only Emerson.

It must be said of course that as a Transcendentalist, Emerson valued above all else, the individual and his or her capacity to commune with the divine directly. He was not an institutionalist. He was not a church man. He served the church professionally for only a few short years before leaving the ministry.

According to Wright,

“Only a special kind of social relationship appeals to Emerson – one that provides the occasion for stimulating conversation. ...If we may extrapolate a concept of religious association from that, a church would be a talking club of individualists mutually stimulating each other to be individualisms, or at least to talk like individualists.

“There have been and are religious groups of that kind, [Wright goes on to say,] and there have been and are people who think that such groups represent the exalted ideal towards which we should be striving in our corporate religious life. But the problems with that model loom ominously large... It provides no adequate basis for continuing labor towards the transformation of the social order, which requires organization, some measure of discipline, and a lot of compromise. And at the most elementary level, it gives no assurance of institutional survival.” (*Walking Together*, 155)

It was Bellows, the institutionalist, through his push to organize Unitarian Churches into a National Conference during a time when Unitarianism was in decline, who might be said to have saved Unitarianism as a viable religion for another era.

And so, as Wright points out, it is ironic that...

“We have not named churches for Bellows, who believed that churches are important; we have named them for Emerson, who thought them superfluous.” (*Walking Together*, 165)

“Emerson’s extreme spiritualization of religion left him with no doctrine of the church; small wonder that the so-called ‘free churches’ he inspired quickly petered out and left no trace behind.” (*Walking Together*, 128)

Just think of it, Wright is suggesting. Without Bellows and others like him, we might not be sitting here today. We might have gone the way of the Swedenborgians or the Shakers. In his words, we might have become a museum piece. And then just what would we have done? Where would we have found religious community? For even though we still value our individualism, our autonomy, most of us would not be here this morning if we weren’t looking for religious community.

“...while we vest basic authority in the local church, [says Wright,] we know full well that under present circumstances the church that tries to live wholly to itself is not likely to survive. There are so many things which a single church may theoretically have the authority to do, and which it may find it must sometimes do for itself, which it ordinarily cannot do effectively except in cooperation with others. The training of the ministry is one of them: how many churches would be able to secure the ministerial leadership they need if they had to rely solely on their own resources? How many of our churches would be able to survive, simply in terms of membership, in a mobile society like ours, if those who move to other communities were not replaced in some measure by Unitarians and Universalists moving in, whose loyalties are already fixed and strong? How many churches have the resources to produce all the religious education materials they need, or to edit and publish their own hymnbooks? Whether the results of such common endeavor are satisfactory to everyone in all respects is not the issue here. One may properly ask whether the survival itself of the autonomous local church does not depend to a significant degree on its sense of responsibility to the larger fellowship of churches.” (*Walking Together*, 67)

I am reminded reading these words of a picture that was circulating on Facebook this week. It was a picture of another group of protestors, a small group, protesting on a street corner against taxation. One woman is sitting in a folding camp chair on the sidewalk holding up a sign that reads: Zero Taxes. Superimposed on the picture are a series of orange arrows flagging certain items in the scene – streetlights, traffic signs, phone lines, the road and the sidewalk – which have all been paid for with tax money.

I started imagining a similar picture of the inside of our church. As Wright goes on to say...

“For us there exists, as there did not exist for our ancestors, a regularly constituted agency for common action. We call it the Unitarian Universalist Association. Sometimes, perhaps when we are tired and exasperated, we think of it as a distant bureaucracy, and we berate it as though it were something alien that has somehow been saddled upon us. Sometimes, in a more reasonable mood, we recognize that it is there to serve us, not merely with things like hymnbooks and religious education materials, but also with established and responsible agencies for the very same consultation among the churches that the Cambridge Platform insisted was a necessary aspect of the fellowship of the churches.” (*Walking Together*, 68)

This is not just about hymnals and curriculum, in other words. It is also about consultants, workshops, leadership training, grants for accessibility projects, tornado relief funds to help repair steeples, and other less visible, less tangible things than hymnbooks. For it is the UUA – both directly and through its districts – that facilitates the kind of lateral relationships with other UU’s that our Puritan ancestors used to experience more directly for “mutual care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief and succor.”

You may not know that every year, from our operating budget, we allocate money to support the work of our Association, which in turn works to serve us. We are what is known as a “fair share” congregation, paying a certain amount – this year it is \$58 per member to the UUA and \$19 per member to our District. We have been paying at “fair share” level for over a decade, which makes us an “honor society.”

The leaders of this congregation have taken this responsibility seriously, but have not talked about it very much. We have not done a very good job of explaining to the rest of the congregation that of the money you pledge every year in our Stewardship campaign, which will kick off in early November, nearly \$80 of it is sent off to the UUA to fulfill our financial obligations on your behalf. In total, this amounts to a contribution of close to \$10,000.

Your Board and those members in attendance at the Congregational Meeting in May would like to continue to be fair share, but are also committed to the financial health of this congregation and to a balanced budget. So, this year, when the Stewardship Campaign starts next month, you will see that we are handling things a bit differently. On your pledge card you will be asked what amount you’d like to pledge to the operating budget of the congregation in the coming year. And, in addition to that, you’ll be asked on a second line, to make an additional, separate pledge toward your portion of our contribution to the Association and our District. In this way we hope to raise both awareness and funds.

As I said, your Board is committed to a balance budget, but that means we may have to make a decision later this year to fall out of right relationship with the UUA, financially. We don’t want to have to do that if we can help it. That relationship with our sister congregations, facilitated through the Association, is too important to us. We are not asking you to do anything now, but we do ask you to be mindful and prayerful in making your decision later this fall.

In a world with so much hatred and violence, so much brutality and fear...
In a world with so many people abused and neglected...
In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood, so much tyranny and oppression...
In a world with so much inequality and strife, so much environmental degradation, so much uncertainty and despair...*(Scott Alexander)*

We need Unitarian Universalism – alive and thriving and sharing its particular brand of good news. That cannot happen over the long haul without the support of Unitarian Universalists like you and like me.

Our Association is by no means flawless. But as Gene Pickett, former President of the UUA, has written, “the longer [he is] part of this movement, the more convinced [he becomes] that the values and ideals of liberal religion can be effective only if they have a solid institutional base, and that means strong congregations and a strong Association.” As he has said, we can be both critical of it and committed to it.

So, this year, let us commit ourselves again to our common ideals and to our shared future.

Amen and Blessed be.