

THE SIMPLE GIFT OF MISSION

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I am delighted to see so many familiar faces from past sojourns in the Bay Area. And I am grateful for this opportunity to share with you personal perspectives which I believe to be critical to our future as a religious movement.

'Tis a gift to be simple. That is, 'tis a gift to take the profound and translate it into simplicity without being simplistic. This morning I seek to state, in simple fashion, one possible meaning of that phrase which is the focus of the first verse of the song Simple Gifts. Here is that phrase:

“'Tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be.”

A gift is something that is unearned. And, while there may be strings attached inherent in the meaning of the gift, there is no initial cost to the recipient. It is something life places in one's lap by way of endowment.

The endowment implicit in “coming down where we ought to be” is an understanding of why we are here. It is the gift of clarity of purpose. And the word that captures purpose for the institution is mission. The English

word mission derives from the Latin word *missum*, which means to be sent, to have a specific task, to be charged with a clear purpose.

Society creates institutions to fulfill its needs. Those institutions that endure through history represent society's enduring needs. At the heart of every enduring institution is its mission and this mission is always very clear. For example, an educational institution's mission is to teach society's citizens information necessary to sustain the culture. A government institution's mission is to process society's myth in a political manner. A financial institution's mission is to administer society's economic needs. A medical institution's mission is to care for the citizenry's health. As well, there is a clear mission for the religious institution.

Over the past few months, I have been in dialogue with one of our Religious Educators. He recently sent a letter to Bill Sinkford and members of the UUA Board expressing his concern that there is a decided lack of understanding in our movement as to what our mission might be, as well as an additional confusion about the distinction between mission and ministry. He cited what he perceived to be the failure of last year's GA "Open Space Technology" process to adequately address both of these issues. The only person from whom he received a reply was our President, who expressed an essential agreement with his conclusions.

In addition, he had attended a workshop designed for small congregations to gain some clarity on mission and ministry. He felt that the facilitators of the workshop failed to define religious mission with any sense of clarity and also confused it with ministry. So, he sent a letter to those responsible indicating his concern. The reply he received acknowledged that the words mission and ministry were loaded and tricky.

Emil Brunner suggests: “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” And a careful reading of church consultants reveals a firm consensus that all powerful, growing religious institutions share three priority characteristics:

- A strong devotion to a clearly stated religious mission.
- A cadre of basic leadership committed to that mission above all else.
- An organization designed to maximize the effectiveness of this mission.

With that said, something else must be noted, namely, that nothing has been more troubling in our religious movement over the past fifty years than the notion of mission. We seem to have been confused about its definition, wondered why it was important and replaced it with less

threatening substitutes. The three most popular of these substitutes have been:

- Community...while community is focal in our religious movement, it can also easily be nothing more than an embracing haven for frustrated liberals.
- Social Action...while social action is an imperative in our movement, it can also be nothing more than an activity that temporarily relieves the guilt of theological irrelevance.
- And, Political Correctness...while being politically correct is consistent with the values of our movement, it can also be nothing more than a tactic that ignores experience and wisdom in favor of social posturing.

Here is the point I make: rather than grappling with the meaning of mission for our religious movement by looking at the history of both society and Unitarian Universalism, we have taken the easy approach of divesting the larger religious movement of any responsibility of definition. Instead, we have placed the onus on the back of individuals and the congregations made up of these individuals. In brief, we have declared that the mission of our religion is up for grabs by whomever wishes to give it definition.

This, of course, is what we have done with the ministry of the religious community as well. And the end result has been the same, namely, a reduction of purpose to that of fulfilling the whims of individuals and the congregations they comprise. That is, we have been satisfied with seeing our mission as providing a self selecting smorgasbord of potential need fulfillments for individuals rather than engaging any sense of noble purpose that might address the profound needs of the whole of culture. For example, when it comes to the canvass appeal, what is the motivation for giving we normally offer? It is a focus on the extent to which the individual member has derived personal satisfaction from the congregation's ministry.

In my judgment, we have been diligently happy with expending our energies satisfying individual concerns rather than attending to why society created the religious institution. And, in order to feel noble about this reduction, we call it honoring diversity and being tolerant.

The question is: "What happened to us?" Davidson Loehr, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, suggests that the loss of our sense of mission really began as far back as the first half of the eighteen hundreds when we started shifting our focus away from religion to a secular perspective, started creating a gospel of civil rights and, through social action, began seeing our purpose as

rescuing those who were the victims of social oppression. He sees this as a violation of our notion of honoring the worth of all humans in that the very notion of being a victim is, within itself, a demeaning term. Whatever the truth of his assessment, I wish to point to our loss of religious mission as defined by a more recent historical moment.

I entered our religious movement in nineteen sixty-nine. The most apparent issue that presented itself to me following this entry was that I had become a part of a movement that had no clear understanding as to why it existed. The most visible evidence verifying this perception was the announcement by the leadership of the UUA of a contest. They were offering a \$500 dollar reward for anyone, lay person or minister, who could come up with a clear statement of our religious identity. If that is not an acknowledgement of an identity crisis then I do not have the ability to recognize one. A minister by the name of Dean Starr won this reward. However, his statement seemed to make little difference and our identity crisis continued and, indeed, I believe, persists to this day.

The immediate background to what provoked this crises was a negative reactionism to the fundamentalist Christian right. We were deeply fearful that someone might mistake us for this group. Keeping in mind that the social identity of most religious groups is tied to their beliefs, we were afraid that if we expressed a common set of beliefs to satisfy this

social need we would be pegged as having a dogma and we shuddered to think that we free liberals could possibly have a dogma and still be free. That is, we could not see the distinction between a living faith statement and a dead dogma so we rejected both.

But, in our zeal, we went way beyond this rejection. Just to make sure that we could not in any way be viewed as dogmatists, whatever the fundamentalist Christian right professed to do or be we rejected. They had churches so we started using terms such as community, fellowship, congregation....anything but church. They used traditional religious language such as god, sin, salvation, grace, etc. so this terminology became a part of our dirty word list. And, oh yes, they claimed to have a mission so we rejected having a mission....or, at the least, we substituted whatever seemed readily available. The first substitute was community, but simply gathering to have compatible fellowship did not satisfy our need to feel a part of something noble and transcendent. The second substitute was social action, but this did not have an appeal to everyone in our movement. The third substitute was political correctness, but it, somehow, seemed to lack depth as a reason for being.

I suggest that the end result of this persistent identity crisis has been twofold. First, we have raised several generations of new members and professional leadership over the past fifty years who, because identity

crisis was the state of our being when they entered our religious movement, believe it is the normal state of our being. In brief, a confused identity with no clear mission is what many of these generations perceive us to be and they seem comfortable with being part of what might be called a religious movement of purposeful institutional muddling.

The second component is that, while we may have a strong appeal to a few individuals and while we may have some transforming impact within our own ranks, we remain a socially impotent religious movement. Compared to the growth of our nation, we are rapidly losing ground in membership.

Two historical quotations underscore why clarity of mission is so crucial to any institution:

- Montaign observes: “No wind blows in favor of the ship without a port of destination.”
- And RF Magar avows: “If you don’t know where you are going you are liable to end up someplace else.”

Our confusion about mission is reminiscent of a Hagar The Horrible cartoon. It is of a Viking boat. Some of the oarsmen are paddling with the blade of the oar and some with the handle of the oar. Some are rowing forwards and some are rowing backwards. The boat is moving in aimless circles and zigzags. And, Hagar, standing at the helm with hands cupped around his mouth, is shouting: “Will you quit saying different strokes for different folks.”

The underlying message of the cartoon captures a principle that governs all institutional life, religious or secular, namely, that the power to move in concerted direction and to create positive social change lies in commonality and not in diversity. While diversity makes for creativity and provokes dialogue, it also points us toward chaos and gives priority to individual concerns. Moreover, it insists on a diffused ministry that must account for everyone’s private concern and is, thus, generally devoid of the power of commonality and too reliant on the fragilities of ego fulfillment to raise the resources necessary to create social impact.

And when we assume a diversity mode and try to create a mission statement that satisfies everyone we normally end up with a laundry list of differing facets of ministry designed to honor this diversity rather than announcing a mission that subsumes all ministry facets under its wing. The distinction is simple but important. Mission is why a congregation

exists. Ministry is everything it does to fulfill this mission. Without knowing its mission, a congregation cannot possibly know the facets of effective ministry. The first not only defines the second but also serves as the guideline for assessing effectiveness.

Here is another way of approaching the issue of mission in congregational life. If you wish to know what the group's real mission is, despite what it might say it is, do an energy audit. Where the highest percentage of a congregation's energy goes is its real mission. If the largest amount of energy is spent creating a smorgasbord for satisfying the individual needs of members, then that reflects the real mission of the congregation. If it is to satisfy the need hunger of isolated liberals for a sense of community belonging, then that is its mission. If it is processing social action concerns, howsoever ineffective this may be, then that is its mission.

However, if we wish to engage whatever society created us to do, then it seems to me there are two definitive clues that might lead us to an accurate definition of religious mission.

The first clue is found in the type of institution for which a congregation is created. The question is: "For what purpose did society create the religious institution?" Don't you find it strange that we liberals never

question the mission of the educational, the governmental, the financial and the medical institution's mission but we are forever questioning the mission of the religious institution. The implication is that we accept society's reason for creating these other types of institutions but question the religious institution's reason for being as applicable to Unitarian Universalism. And, as far as I know, we are the only religious institution that raises this question.

Our ancestors did not question the reason for their being. They were quite clear that it was the same reason why all religious institutions existed. Such questioning is of recent vintage. The implication of this observation is that if we have a different mission than our ancestors then somewhere along the time-line of history's march we got off the road they were traveling. That being the case then we have little legitimate reason to appeal to either their sacrifice or service as a part of our heritage.

And if we do not share the same religious mission for which all other religions were created by society, then we have opted out of why society created religion in the first place. That we are confused about why we exist does not mean that society is confused about why it created our purpose. Indeed, it seems to me that society is quite clear. The problem is ours and it is a problem we have created for ourselves.

The second clue to an institution's mission is the circumstance that provoked its birth. It seems obvious that the first institution society created was the family and the second was the community that families constituted. It was out of the social needs perceived by these two original and grounding institutions that all other institutions emerged.

And, it is possible that the next significant institutional need addressed was what we, of the modern world, call religion. Back when we lived in caves, there was little to ponder except survival in a savage and terrifying environment. But then emerged art and language, howsoever primitive, and meaning making was born.

Critical to making meaning was giving answers to the compelling questions inherent in the mystery of their environment. So there arose an institution in the midst of community which function was to enter this mystery and return with answers that gave meaning to human existence and direction to human community. Thus, the meaning institution was born.

At first, this institution seems to have been a single person that was called by many names...shaman, priest, whatever. Maybe it happened this way. One morning the most senior of the cave clan said: "Hey Joe, you seem to do a lot of thinking, so while the rest of us go out to hunt and gather you sit on that

rock over there and ponder what this whole big mess we are in is all about.” And so, Joe sat on the rock and pondered and sought to create meaning. However, given the passage of time, this pondering enterprise grew in both importance and power and was finally called religion, which means to bind together, because that is precisely what its answers did for the community. The reason is that these questions have to do with the life and death issues of human existence. So, religion, and its answers to life’s compelling questions about mystery became the holy enterprise, the sacred pursuit that infused community with a sense of meaning and purpose upon the earth.

However, as population grew and communities proliferated, so did various religions. But one thing remained the same, the purpose for which society created religion. Thus, whether it is a Jewish Temple, an Islamic Mosque or a Catholic or Southern Baptist Church or a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, they all have the same mission. They all exist for the same reason, a reason designed by society, itself, to create a sense of purpose and direction for community and, ultimately, for the culture in which community is housed.

What, then, distinguishes between all of these religions? Is it their purpose? No! Their distinctions are that they all answer life’s compelling questions about mystery differently, thus, giving different meaning and direction to community living. And these answers have been so different that they become critical to the destiny of the human drama.

So, while religion will give community its meaning and direction, it is for the sake of defining the meaning and purpose of existence and not to satisfy the human need for community, which already existed and was responsible for creating religion in the first place. Nor, was the purpose of religion to initiate social action programs. There was no need for social action programs when society created religion. This need only came about with the proliferation of both societies and religions and their consequent competitions. Nor is the purpose of religion to model political correctness. Whatever political correctness was important when religion was created was already structured into community life.

Social action and political correctness are symptoms of the religious community behaving its beliefs in the same way that religious community is a bonding symptom of these expressed beliefs.

What religion does is define for community what issues of social action and political correctness might best serve the community's reason for being. In essence, rather than being the mission of religion, social action and political correctness are the imperative arms of the religious community serving its mission. That is, they are important to the social expression of the religious community's life but are not its reason for being.

Here is a digested form of some of the most vital of those questions which answers make up the religious institution's message to the world:

- WHO AM I?.. which is the question about the nature of my being.
- HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I KNOW?... which is the question about the source of my authority.
- WHO OR WHAT IS IN CHARGE?... which is the question about my ultimate value.
- WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?... which is the question about that which informs and sustains my sense of self-worth.
- WHAT DOES MY DEATH MEAN?... which is the question about the boundaries of time in my existence.

The answers to these compelling questions create the core of a view of reality. And out of this view of reality emerge values that translate into individual and community conscience that gives direction to living.

A religious community is a group sharing a common view of reality. It is this view of reality that transcends differences and bonds the community in mutual allegiance. It is also from these answers that a religious community extracts its message to the world - a message that claims if either individuals or society lives accordingly, they will be transformed. This transformation evolves from

living of a life that accords with the community's view of reality, that is, its answers to the compelling questions about mystery.

Now if a religion dominates a culture, as Christianity has in America, then its values and language will provide foundational meanings and directions for that culture and serve as some major part of its social conscience, depending on what political myth drives the culture's existence. It will transform the culture in some significant measure into its own image of reality.

This is the ultimate end of all social action and political correctness, a consciousness raising that provokes the acceptance of an altered view of reality with a concurrent correction of social behavior.

So, again, here is the mission of the religious community. It is to transform the society in which it exists into the shape of its own view of reality and values conscience. And it does this by transforming enough of the individuals in that society into the image of its own answers to the compelling questions with the end result that its own conscience prevails.

Here, then, is another governing truth about social living. No society is ever transformed by any social action or political correctness that is only designed to change its laws. Laws are only kept by a nation's people if their conscience subscribes to these laws. This, I believe, to be the singular most important

lesson of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was not focused on simply getting laws changed so that blacks could eat with whites at dime store lunch counters. He was committed to changing the heart of the culture so that the mingling of blacks and whites in the same eating establishment would be an irrelevant issue.

And his primary message was that if we wish to change a culture's behavior in any sustainable manner, we first must change the culture's heart that produces sustained behavior. In other words, we have to change the culture's answers to the compelling questions that are at odds with the behavior of racial respect and acceptance. We have to change its view of reality.

This means that the ultimate value of social action and political correctness is that they raise a society's consciousness of the need to change its behavior. But unless society is, at the same time, offered a message of transformation the society can use to change its heart, such social action and political correctness will, in finality, be futile finger in the dike activity.

So, the most profound and critical agent of human transformation possessed by the religious community is its answers to life's compelling questions of mystery, its view of reality. And the clearer and more committed in commonality a religion is to this message the more powerful a tool of social change it becomes. The opposite, of course, is equally true....the more

diversified a religion's answers to the compelling questions, the greater will be its social impotence.

So, yet again, our mission as a religious institution is individual and social transformation, a transformation that brings society into greater accord with our answers to the compelling questions that make up our view of reality. And, as a community of faith, it is to model this message so that the social order can actually see its transforming power at work in our relationships and know its truth.

To become this kind of transformative religious community, we must overcome our fear of what seems to me to be our primal nemeses, namely, that if we hold a common answer to anything profound we will have created a dogma and, thus, will have become like, you know, Them.

We may adore the notion of unity in diversity, however, in respect to religious mission, only social impotence lies in this notion. Moreover, I assert that the notion itself is false. Unity does not lie in diversity. Rather, unity lies in commonality. If we wish social power to transform the social order then we must become enamored of the notion that diversity resides in unity. That is, unity is the singular source of both the capacity to embrace diversity and to simultaneously express social power. Unity is the sine qua non of all constructive social power, that without which it does not exist. So, if we wish

real power to transform society, then we must accept and embody this essential truth of history. Thus, the key to a powerful liberalism is not in the focus of unity in diversity, rather, it is in the focus of diversity in unity.

Fredrick May Eliot, wise leader of our past, during another period of identity crisis in our religious movement, admonished: “It is better to be misunderstood than to be overlooked.” One definition of power is increments of attention. Being overlooked is to be bereft of social power.

A few years ago, at the National Gallery of Canada, in Ottawa, I sat in the La Chappell Rideau Chapel and listened to the forty part Motet, composed in 1575 by Thomas Tavis, surrounded by forty audio speakers, eight sets of soprano, alto, tenor, baritone and base - each vocal part and each set chanting a different part, yet, every set harmonizing with all the other sets.

The power that captured one’s attention was not that of eight sets devoted to a disparate cacophony of difference, rather, it was the engaging harmony of eight varied sets devoted to a blended commonality. Again, I assert that the power to engage and transform society is found in a commonality that unifies difference into synergistic wholeness.

The most recent example of this power in our religious movement displayed itself in the nineteen thirties during that debate over the validity of the

Christian anthropomorphic god. Some in our movement participated in this debate with reactive postures that distilled in theological terms such as atheism, deism and agnosticism. However, a smaller group of our movement responded in a far more profound manner. They creatively lifted up Humanism as an alternative theology and in a brief span of years this message brought about consequential social transformation in our entire culture.

This happened for two reasons. One is that we addressed the needs of the culture with a new vision of reality. The other is that we spoke with the social power of common commitment, a common commitment that was not a totality of our membership but was eventually a majority.

It is important to point out that the dominance of our commitment to the Humanist perspective in the mid-twentieth century did not violate our member freedom to disagree or differ or to offer other theological perspectives. Quite the opposite was and remains true. It has always been out of this maintained freedom to see and believe differently that the new has arisen in our midst. Indeed, if there is hope that we might yet create a new vision of reality that addresses today's desperate need for a saving paradigm it lies in this maintained posture.

Last night this annual meeting began with a moving service that celebrated the actual and potential impact of individuals working in concert to create social

change. It was an acknowledgment that social power derives from common views and common commitments. And, I thought to myself, what could Unitarian Universalists accomplish in terms of lasting social change if we rose to the same devotion of commonality to a message designed to transform the cultural heart. What if we created a view of reality that insists on altering how we relate to ourselves, others and the universe? What if we shifted our entire religious focus from the celebration of diversity to empower this view of reality with the commitment of commonality?

Let me say this a different way. Views of reality drive the world that are exemplified by the unmitigated and unapologetic greed of the oil companies, the financial industry and the large corporations, in general, whose goal is to control government for the sake of their own self-interests. The end result is a trail of social and environmental destruction that continuously depletes the capacity of the womb of our existence to sustain us.

Only a commonly empowered view of reality that demands the diminishment of such greed orientations and that insists on honoring the worth of both humans and creation can overcome this persistent force of destruction. And only a changed social heart can sustain the insistence of such a view of reality. This is precisely what society created the religious institution to do, to provide a view of reality that informs the national conscience and dictates a social behavior that is in the nation's best moral and relational interests.

How exciting it would be were our annual district and national general assemblies to devote their programming to our religious reason for being - the articulation of a message of redemption for a world bent on self-destruction. How refreshing it would be to open a copy of the UU World that had devoted its space to the creation of a new view of reality. However, if any of these things were to actually happen then it will be because we have decided to engage the mission for which society created us rather than to play safely around its edges.

I was walking down the crowded hall of a hotel at a General Assembly when a woman suddenly stepped in front of me, stuck out her hand, smiled, introduced herself, and said: “You have no reason to remember me. But ten years ago I visited a Sunday service at your church. I was in a major life crisis and your sermon helped me make a decision that transformed my life. I just wanted to thank you.” And with that said, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Had I not been momentarily stunned by her words, I would have suggested that she write the church I was serving at that time and thank them because they had made that service possible. I was only their representative in the pulpit that day. As I later pondered her words I was, again, struck by the paradoxical nature of this business called religion. It is both an immense

heaviness and an exhilarating lightness. It is both an awesome responsibility and a wonderful privilege - this mission of being the spiritual guide to the culture's heart and conscience - this opportunity to alter cultural destiny by offering the transformation of its very being.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have two options. We can remain as we are at this present moment, an inert, socially impotent community of liberals, or, we can pick up the mantel of our mission and speak and model a message of transformation.

All other decisions we need to make as a religious movement pale in comparison. The third verse of Simple Gifts says it all:

“Tis the gift to think of others not to only think of me.”

Oh, my, how profound is this simple gift of religious mission.

AMEN