

## OPEN WIDE THE WINDOWS

The Reverend Victoria Safford

Address to the District Assembly  
Pacific Central District – Unitarian Universalist Association  
Saturday 26 April 2008

---

I want to share with you tonight some observations about our movement, our way of doing religion, of being religious people, mostly by way of stories, which may resonate with your experience or with your own congregation.

Robert Sapolsky is a neurobiologist who studies some aspects of how we become who we are over time. He studies personality, and how open we are to transformation, how willing or reluctant to evolve. He stumbled on this field of research accidentally, when he found himself inexplicably annoyed with a new assistant in his lab:

*The problem wasn't his work, which was superb. It was his taste in music. Shortly after his arrival... his CD player started blasting something horrendous by whatever group twenty-year olds were listening to. But that wasn't what bothered me. What bothered me was the way he kept switching what he listened to. One day it would be Sonic Youth for hours, and the next day late Beethoven. Irish folk music would give way to Gregorian chants, and then to Shostakovich, John Coltrane, big-bang hits, Yma Sumac, Puccini arias, Philip Glass and klezmer classics, Wagner highlights played on ukulele... He was spending the paychecks from his first real job on a methodical exploration of different types of music, giving them a careful listening and forming opinions- hating some of the stuff, loving the process. What was irritating was how open-minded he was- how open to novelty.*

*He was like that in every respect... He had a beard and longish hair until, one day, he came into the lab with a bald pate. "I thought it would be interesting to try out this appearance for a while- see if it changes the way people interact with me," he explained. In his time off, he would spend a weekend at a film festival of Indian musicals, just for the experience. He'd pore over Melville, then Chaucer, then contemporary Hungarian realists.*

*All this was more than irritating. It was depressing, because it made me reflect on my own narrowing. At the age of forty, I listen to music constantly, but I can't remember the last time I listened to anything except the same two symphonies of Mahler..., the same trusted tape of Bob Marley's greatest hits. How did this happen? When did it become so important to have familiar ground underfoot?*

Sapolsky went on to study not only peoples' taste in music, but their willingness to try new food, new styles of clothes, new scientific theories (both truly new and just new to the people he asked) - new ideas in general, and not surprisingly, he found that at certain ages, our windows of availability slam shut. His research found, for example, *that most of us are twenty years old or younger when we first hear the popular music we will listen to for the rest of our lives.* [Robert M. Sapolsky, "Open Season," *The New Yorker*, date unknown.]

When is it that we lock in, lock down, settle down, close the window, close our minds? I'm interested in art and culture, and even more I wonder about politics, our way of understanding and engaging this wild world -- and even more I wonder about religion, our various theologies, *our ways of understanding and engaging this wild world.*

There's an old Unitarian hymn that we've been singing since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "Light of Ages and of Nations," with stalwart, edifying verses from Samuel Longfellow, most of which sound a little, well, a little 19<sup>th</sup> century, but which include the beautiful line, "revelation is not sealed." That is the hallmark of our Unitarian tradition, the foundation of the free faith tradition, that truth is never completely finished, and even it were finished we can never completely apprehend it; truth is, and we are, always evolving. You may have seen that the United Church of Christ, a liberal and progressive Christian denomination (in fact the one from which Unitarians and Universalists parted a hundred and fifty years ago – a close cousin) has a banner now, a motto they adopted two years ago, "God is still speaking," by which they mean, among other things, that sacred wisdom remains yet to be discovered, even in our own time; the ethical imagination is still developing in us, our story is unfolding – evolution is not finished; revelation is not sealed. That's a humble, brave statement. We believe, like our comrades in the UCC, that new ways of construing and constructing the sacred, new ways of construing and constructing this world **and our own selves** are always opening. This is a source of hope for us, perhaps it is **the** source of hope.

The challenge, I think, for our movement on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is for us to stay open, to remain "unsealed," available, but also to be absolutely

grounded, clear in our convictions, our principles, our history, to know who we are and what it is we stand for, as individuals first and foremost, and also as a gathered people, bound by covenant in congregations and in our Association. “Unsealed” does not mean “unglued.”

Many of us came to this religious way, or have stayed in it, because we love the open windows of the house of faith. We’ve chosen the journey over the destination and we have no intention of arriving at the place of perfect truth, absolute wisdom, sealed destiny. We love the fresh air blowing through the rooms of our own minds and souls. And we know – to *stay* open, permeable, impressionable, to practice what the Buddhists call “beginner’s mind,” to stay humble and curious and be willing to grow and even to change theologically takes *such* intention, especially if you mean to be anchored in certain values, certain principles that are fixed and will not change (not in the sense of intransigence or stodginess, but in the sense of *Like a tree that’s planted by the water, we shall not be moved.*)

To keep your mind and heart open by yourself is one thing. To do this with others, in a congregation, in such a way that every voice is heard, every voice is honored, and still a common song is sung, a bass line underneath it all, is even harder. This will be one of the great tests for us over the next few decades: can a religion defined not only by pluralism but by an evolving, open pluralism really hold together? Can it, can we, speak with relevance to a world that has traveled light-years away from the one we were born into (even if you were born only 20 years ago)? Can our religious way be relevant and reverent moving forward?

Some months ago, the *New York Times* ran a series about a young imam, Sheik Reda Shata, who since 2002 has served the Masjid Moussab, the Islamic Society of Bayridge, Brooklyn, in New York City. The imam was recruited from Egypt after his predecessor at that mosque resigned due to exhaustion in the terrible year following September 11<sup>th</sup>. The congregation is a storefront operation, home to over a thousand worshippers, several hundred families, and they are mostly immigrants – Palestinian, Egyptian, Yemeni, Moroccan, and Algerian, as well as European and also born-and-bred New Yorkers. They are conservative Muslims and progressives; they are established in business and they are unemployed, speaking no English; they are young single men without families in this country, vulnerable to radical, fanatical recruiters and even more vulnerable to racial profiling; and they are young single women eager or compelled to push the boundaries of their traditional upbringing. All of these people, these diverse peoples, find in their mosque a common home, and in their young imam not only a

spiritual leader but a cultural tour guide, as they navigate through the strange and exhilarating terrain of America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

They call him for clues, for direction, all day and all night. They e-mail him and text him and call on their cell phones with questions: *Is it halal, or lawful, to eat a Big Mac? Can a young Muslim waiter serve alcohol on his job? Is it wrong to take out a mortgage if Islam prohibits interest? How can a woman obtain a divorce from a husband who beats her? What should be the mosque's response to FBI informants and NYPD officers who circulate in the congregation searching for terrorists?* Speaking through an Arabic translator, Mr. Shata says that in four years his job has worn him down and has opened his mind. "America has transformed me," he says, "from a person of rigidity to flexibility." Questions that were easy in Egypt are very complicated here: he's a traditionalist, and a formalist, himself, and yet against everything he grew up knowing to be true and right, he counsels women and girls not to wear their headscarves if they think they'll be harassed on the street or on the job; he himself wears a western suit when he rides the subway, and then quietly changes into traditional robes when he gets to work. He's trying not to compromise, but instead to find the fulcrum of integrity, and to practice a religion that's alive, not calcified and dead. Islam is still speaking, still listening. Like many Muslims, he memorized the Koran as a young child; he knows it by heart – but he can also quote Voltaire, Kant and Shaw, and he loves to tell jokes, especially about the ironies of his own unexpected life, from illiterate village to downtown New York. His calling is to companion his people through this strange, amazing western world toward their future, and to companion them in the question, "What does it mean to be a Muslim woman or man, a Muslim teenager, not in Pakistan or Lebanon or Tehran or Cairo, but in Brooklyn, in 2008? Heading toward 2018, and 2028, and 2058, and beyond?" He tests the limits of his orthodoxy and the limits of his tolerance every day, as this world imposes itself upon his ancient religion, and as Islam imposes itself, as does religion always, on the contemporary world. [Andrea Elliott, "An Imam in America," *The New York Times*, March 5, 6, and 7, 2006]

What is it like to be a Unitarian Universalist woman or man, youth or young adult or a UU child right now? What do we bring to the interfaith, multicultural world, and what might we humbly, gracefully, gratefully receive there?

The first congregation I served was an old one in New England. It was a merged church, formed from two old congregations, one founded in 1863, the other in

1825, joined together around the time of the second world war. The older congregation was established on land once owned by John Hancock, right next door to City Hall, by citizens who were tired of the old orthodoxy, and ready (eager, longing, needing) to open the windows of the spiritual house. When they organized “The Second Congregational Society- Unitarian” in that town, they effectively established religious pluralism there, because until that moment, First Church (Trinitarian) had been the only show in town. (That church later distinguished itself by not only calling but also dismissing a brilliant young preacher named Jonathan Edwards – but that’s another story...) When you walk into the Unitarian Society now, the organizing statement from 1825, carved in bronze, is the first thing you see, although many people don’t because it’s tarnished and so old. It’s a typical old congregational covenant:

*We disciples of Jesus Christ, having a firm belief in his religion, do covenant to walk together in the faith and order of the gospel...*

On the interior of that same wall, facing inward to the sanctuary and carved in marble, is the organizing statement from the other congregation, the one founded 50 years later. That church, dating from the Civil War, had a very different story. They’d come out of a utopian community, their homes were stations on the Underground Railroad, they were Transcendentalists, and hosted radical speakers like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Emerson, and Garrison. Their original building, the one they sold to merge with the Unitarians in town, had been named Cosmian Hall, in celebration of the very Cosmos. When they left, they brought their marble plaque, on which were carved these words:

*Respecting in each other, and in all, the right of intellect and conscience to be free, and holding it to be the duty of everyone to keep mind and heart at all times open to receive the truth and follow its guidance, we set up no theological condition of membership, and neither demand or expect uniformity of doctrinal belief; asking only unity of purpose to seek and accept the right and true, and an honest aim and effort to make these the rule of life. And recognizing the brotherhood of the human race and the equality of human rights, we make no distinction as to the conditions and rights of membership in this society, on account of sex, or color, or nationality.*

So in the current building now hang these two documents in bronze and marble, separated by about an inch of very old plaster - and neither statement is a creed, each one speaking to how the community coheres: the mind and heart and conscience of each member will be absolutely, and they will covenant to walk

together in some kind of order. When I was there, I ran my hand over the marble and the bronze many, many times, and they did not wear away. I did have the sense though, that if anyone were to take down those plaques, or even take down one of the, the whole wall would probably collapse, the whole building might collapse, the entire enterprise of free faith in western new England might collapse, the spirit might go out of the place, without its original convictions, the principles that held it up. When I say “open wide the windows,” I’m assuming there’s a solid frame around them, something holding them in place, a worthy house, a good container, a boundary. I’m assuming we are so secure in our faith and our identity, so clear about our history and our shared tradition that we can afford to open the windows, unafraid of what all might come in, not at all defensive, and proud of what might seep out, or shout out, or sing out, into a waiting world.

Our movement has a story to tell, and every congregation has its story to tell.

Not too long ago I was telling someone the story of the chalice, and how lighting a candle, and calling it that, came to be part of Unitarian Universalist services, and the chalice itself a symbol for us of freedom of belief, the light of truth, and radical hospitality. This is a story you know by heart. It comes from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when a Catholic priest in Czechoslovakia began quietly to change the traditional mass. Centuries before his time, he decided to make the cathedral in Prague a people’s church, not the pope’s church, and not a priest’s church. Against the practice of that time, he began to conduct the mass not with his back to the congregation, but facing them, and standing on their level on the floor with no rail or table in the way. The tradition then was that only priests were given wine, the blood of Christ, during the Eucharist, but Jan Hus poured wine for everyone- even if they were not confessed Catholics. Worst of all, he gave the mass in Czech, not Latin, so the people could hear it in their language, and apprehend it, puzzle it out and challenge it, even – love it as their own. He filled that cathedral – but was soon brought to trial, excommunicated as a heretic, and burned at the stake in the city square. They bound his hands in such a way that he was forced to hold an empty chalice, with no wine in it, and after he died his church was razed to the ground.

The person I was talking to said, “That’s not even a Unitarian story! Why did we take that symbol? That’s a Catholic story!” But I say, any story of religious freedom and inclusion and tolerance, tenderness, courage and love is a chapter in the great, sacred human story, and we’re part of it, and the chalice is a fitting

symbol for us, no matter where it came from. There is a legend beyond this history, that after the Prague church was destroyed, people gathered bits of brick and rubble and put them in the cornerstones of Unitarian churches all over eastern Europe as a tribute – this may be true, but it doesn't even matter. It was already a story we can hold, the chalice already a symbol we can hold. We bring that to the table.

I remember another time, many years ago, in the hospital, with an old man who was dying – a lifelong Unitarian, an atheist-geologist-empirical-humanist Unitarian, brilliant and cranky and deeply kind, underneath. (He was a beautiful singer, I remember, a tenor in the choir, and he used to say, “As long as it's in Latin, as long as it's in German, I don't care what God Bach thought he was talking to!”) In the hospital, to my complete surprise, he asked to hear the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. He smiled very weakly, and said, “I'll bet you never knew I was a Christian after all.” It was a joke -- and instead of resting in it, letting the moment simply be, I barged on into it, little literalist that I was (and hope I am no longer), and said, “Well, you know John, it's really not a Christian verse. It comes from the Hebrew Bible, before the birth of Jesus. It's a Jewish text, actually... blah, blah, blah...” He breathed a deep sigh – the sigh of someone who has no time to waste on foolish arguments and theological details, the sigh of someone who is thinking, “I wish I weren't dying now, but at least I take consolation in the knowledge that when I'm dead I won't have to suffer the ministrations of earnest young puppies like this one...” He sighed patiently, impatiently, and said softly, “I know where it comes from and I don't care where it comes from. It comes from where I come from, and from where I'm going. I'd like to hear it please, if you know it.” And then, chastened and wiser for it, I began to pray with that atheist, humanist, geologist Unitarian: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me...*

Emerson said famously, “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” We want to be consistent, theologically, we want to be constant and steadfast and clear. We want our religion rooted in integrity and honesty. For Emerson, as perhaps for us, the key word is “foolish,” and the watchword is “little minds.” We seek the large, open heart and large, open (not empty) mind.

The liberal religious spirit keeps the windows of its house wide open – not to any crazy fad that comes along, but to the wild winds which carry whispers of wisdom, sometimes from the past, sometimes from the present moment. This is different from the kind of designer spirituality of which Unitarian Universalists are often

accused (and justifiably) – a spiritualism that would have us believe that with a few scented candles, a few feathers, some drumming, and maybe a Lakota chant, a translated mantra from the internet and a spiritual to sing, you can establish a religious foundation under your life. But you can't. Keeping the windows of your soul and mind wide open is not the same as inappropriate appropriation of other people's faith or scripture or sacred tradition.

And yet - at some point the story of religious freedom in Prague is not just a Catholic story; at some point the words of Jesus are not just Christian words, the teachings of Buddha not only for Buddhists; the pillars of Islam might stand among the many other pillars that sustain your house of hope. And this particular poem, written by a Lutheran, and this practice of atonement, which comes out of Judaism, and this beautiful idea, this possible way of looking, given to you by an astrophysicist, or by the twenty-year old leaking music from her iPod – all become a part of you as you go forth in the morning. Sometimes the truth spoken in one tradition cannot be completely translated to another, and so you hold it like a gift, grateful for whatever glimpse of understanding you might glean as you look in from the outside, respectfully.

We live in this amazing, dangerous, tragic, hopeful time. Our species is both much more smart, and apparently less wise, than at any other time in its development. Like my friend John so many years ago, none of us has time to waste on foolish questions or thin arguments, and none of us can afford to be a fundamentalist.

What else do we bring to the table?

Recently I attended a gathering of UU ministers convened by the UUA's Growth Team, ostensibly to talk about congregational growth, and how and why and under what circumstances our churches and our movement might grow *larger* – but really we talked about how our movement and our faith might grow *deeper*. In the opening worship service, we were asked, 12 of us, to step into the circle and answer a beautiful, strange question:

*What is the saving message that your congregation means to proclaim to the world?*

(“*Saving*” I take to mean “healing,” and hopeful, explicitly loving and brave, spiritually urgent – that kind of “saving,” that kind of salvation, and not any other kind.)

They were not asking us to tell how many members we have, how many children in Religious Education, how many in attendance, what kinds of classes, projects and activities we offer. They were not asking us to say whether our congregations are primarily humanist or theist, pagan or liberal Christian, nor to talk about theology at all; nor to discuss policy governance, our long range plans, the reporting relationships of staff and volunteers, our politics or our internal politics, our physical plants, square footage, budget bottom lines or pledge data. They wanted to know what’s underneath, and around, and infusing all of that. They wanted us to tell them what we know *by heart*.

Each person spoke powerfully, and with great care, tenderly. They spoke authentically, sometimes with cracking voices. And so I took a breath, stepped forward, and stood there for what seemed like an eternity of blank mind, trying to conjure my congregation, what we’re trying to do, what they’re trying to be. I wanted to be faithful to those adults and children and youth, and all the people who orbit the perimeter. I conjured their faces, their voices, in my mind, and said (to them),

*You are beloved of god.*

*The universe is glad to see you.*

*Everyone has a place at the table. Everyone is welcome. Everyone belongs.*

*Everyone is accountable.*

*It is so easy to forget this. It is so easy to be reminded.*

I’m not sure that all of them, or any of them, would choose to use this language. I’m not sure that *I* would choose to use this language if I’d taken any time at all to think about it. I don’t know if any of you would recognize it as coherent speech, or pertinent to what you think your own congregation is about. But when I am asked why I think our church has grown in recent years, I know it’s because this intention, whether whispered or proclaimed, is heard in the services on Sundays, it’s spoken in the ways we hold our children and our teens, in our work for peace and justice, the kinds of work we’re called to and we choose. It buzzes through the coffee hour and it sings everywhere, in every note of music, and in between the notes of all the music, and all the art. It echoes through every memorial, and every baby dedication, and in our Call to Worship:

*The universe is glad to see you, and as living, human representatives of the universe, we are here to tell you that. We will make a point of it. Everyone is welcome, everyone belongs, not just in this house, but in this world. You are beloved of god, you yourself a living fragment of the sacred, and we're all accountable to that. You also are accountable to that.*

That is not a mission statement or an organizing statement. It would not be useful in a sound-bite or on a billboard. It's not even exactly an elevator speech. It's really the back-story, the pillars of intention and practice that hold up the walls of the house. A certain, simple old-line Universalism is one thing we bring to the table, and it is a radical and urgent contribution. I want to return to this question later, and place it in the center of our circle here – so you can be preparing almost as thoroughly as I did.

Last June, about a year ago, a man called because he saw on the evening news a story about congregations that have refused to sign marriage licenses for heterosexual couples until same sex couples can be legally married also. A UCC church in Minneapolis had just made that decision, only the second church in Minnesota to do so. Our congregation was the first (in 2002) - and we must have been mentioned in the news article, because George and Helen (I'm changing their names here) called that night and left a message, asking if it were true that they could get married here without a license from the state. It took me a little while to figure out why they'd want to do that: I learned that they are both in their sixties, they've been together 12 years, and George is dying. He's been sick a long time with a rare and vicious cancer, with no medical benefits, and he didn't want the astronomical costs of his care and his indebtedness to impoverish Helen after his death. So they never got married, but they always wanted to; they're old-fashioned people, and it meant a lot to them to have a "church wedding," to be married in what they called "the eyes of God." Suddenly, here was a way. We planned through the summer, and they came in September, with their children and grandchildren from their previous marriages, about 30 people. A member of our choir agreed to come and sing all their favorite love songs from the 70's, and I read one of the most traditional wedding services I've given in a long time. Above my protestations they paid for the wedding (because it mattered to them to do it) in ten five-dollar bills and fifty singles - they were so quietly grateful to us, to you, that we would open the church to them. Right before it began, George asked me if I liked his suit. He was wearing a tuxedo, and it hung loosely on him because he was so gaunt. I said I did, and he said, "I bought this for my funeral. I never

thought I'd get to wear it twice. I didn't really think we'd find a church to welcome us."

They said they'd come back, and I don't know if they will. But I think about them, and when I think about the congregation, beyond the membership records and the R.E. registrations and all the formal, numbered ways we keep track of "growth," when I think about who is really part of the congregation, I know these two are standing in our circle.

William Ellery Channing, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian, said once (in a sermon about slavery), "I am a living member of the great family of all souls," and sometimes I think the church has no greater purpose than to convince us all of that, and to proclaim it to anyone who needs to hear it, which is everyone. *Whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever your story, you are a living member, and your baby is a living member, of the great family of all souls.* It is so easy in this life to forget or never know at all that you absolutely belong. *By definition as a person, as a creature, you belong. Despite what you may have been told, despite your own darkest doubts and suspicions, you have a place at the table, the universe is glad to see you.* In our congregations we mean to be for each other (as wide as "each other" extends), the ears and eyes, the welcoming voice, the incarnate, embodied, real live embrace of the universe, or God. I'm not sure that God has any other way of showing up, except through us. That is universalism. That is radical hospitality and it extends to all of us and it extends to everyone. It is a theological idea, not unique to our tradition, by any means, but it is central to us. Radical means, literally, not wild, not crazy, but *to the very root.*

The purpose of the church is to be a place where the soul, where all souls, may come in and be at home.

That is one thing, one thing among some other beautiful, true, things, that we bring with humility and with pride as people of faith to the interfaith table.

The question I would leave you with is this:

*What would you say if someone asked you what blessing, what benediction, what good word or what good news – what simple gift – your own faith offers to the world?*

In closing, I offer you the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs:

*We pause in reverence before all intangible things-  
that eyes see not, nor ears can detect –  
that hands can never touch-  
that space cannot hold-  
and time cannot measure.*

*There is never an end to our yearning to know the unknown-  
after all our labor at learning.  
There is never an end to our trying the untried –  
after all our failures in striving.*

*Fling wide the windows, O my soul!  
The bright beams of morning are warm.*