

## **INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE**

Frank W Carpenter, D.Min.

January 11, 2009,

St. John's UU Church, Cincinnati, OH

READING: *America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century*, Anne-Marie Slaughter, **FOREIGN AFFAIRS**, Jan/Feb. 2009.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20090101faessay88107/anne-marie-slaughter/america-s-edge.html>

SERMON:

What do you believe? What do you believe?

A number of Unitarian Universalist churches have had Edwin Markham's poem inscribed on their front walls:

He drew a circle that shut me out --  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in.

We like to think we swim upstream when it comes to matters of faith. We are dissenters. We are heretics. The root of the word comes from the Greek for choice. What we believe is a choice, not an inheritance. In St. John's mission statement we say we celebrate beliefs that respect freedom of thought.

Some times people claim that UU's can believe whatever they want. We struggle against that. What I say is that as we gather in community, we hold each other accountable for our faiths. But however much we may say that we are responsible, there is always that possibility of an undercurrent, "I'll believe whatever I please."

Whenever that remark is made, I recall the time I taught the 5 and 6 grade Sunday School class. We used the UU Scouting curriculum. As one lesson the student interviewed their parents about what they believed about Jesus. One set of parents was outraged their child asked them to respond to such questions.

You might not feel you need to tell your minister what you think, but your children have reason to know what you believe. Was it laziness, avoidance of some deeper issues that kept this family from exploring their faith as a family? There are moral hazards of having dissent at the center of our belief system. It's all too easy to cop out. After all, no one gets burned at the stake these days for heresy, not here, not America.

Given that responsibility for your own beliefs is central to our liberal religious movement, one of the marks of excellence for Unitarian Universalists is attending to what you believe. Many of us have rejected most of the faith of our family of origin. Even if you grew up in

a Unitarian Universalist home, even if your faith is close to what your parents believe, the fact remains, Unitarian Universalism is not a main-stream faith. The simple fact that we do not have a creedal statement of belief makes us peculiar, marks us as heretics, proclaims our dissent.

We offer various opportunities for you to explore what you believe, deepen your spirituality. There are Chalice Groups for example. An excellent way of intentionally exploring where you are now on your religious journey is our Adult Exploration Class, Building Your Own Theology. You can sign up for this in the present round of Adult RE. I lead several sessions on successive Tuesday evenings for you to reflect on matters theological: god, good and evil, suffering, and meaning. The goal is for you to come up with your own personal statement of belief. Some of you are familiar with one of Robert Fulghum's statements, EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN.

I believe that each one of us does have her or his own faith. Even if you were to go to a strict Catholic or Fundamentalist Protestant church, and interview people there, for whatever they say about all being one the same page, they aren't. As UU's we are just honest about that.

This is very old wisdom, that each person is different and has a different take on life. The Canadian lawyer Rubert Ross has spent much of his life working with the Aboriginal people of Canada. The most profound lesson he learned was precisely this. He recounts an old Cree told him, "You cannot pass along what another person 'really' told you; you can only pass on what you heard."

I know exactly what he means. Having spent some thirty years preaching sermons, I know one thing for sure. Each one of you is hearing a different sermon than the person sitting next to you. And it is not the sermon I am preaching.

But let me continue with the lesson Ross learned from the Aboriginals. He writes

There seems to be a widespread Aboriginal understanding that thought or information must be shared in ways that leave it open to the listeners to take whatever meaning they wish to find in what they have heard. That is the premise of storytelling, where the storyteller will never say, "That's not what I *meant*." The Western preoccupation with such questions as "What did Shakespeare really mean in *Hamlet*?" is nothing more than *our* preoccupation, the pertinent question for most Aboriginal peoples seems to be something like "What did *Hamlet* cause *you* to think, feel or do?" [RETURNING TO THE TEACHINGS, Penguin Canada 1996; page *x*]

We each hear, respond to things differently. Ever play the game of telephone? What do you suppose would happen if I went over to Ted and whispered in his ear something like, "the Red Sox will win the World Series this year." He then whispers it to Martha and on it

goes though the entire congregation. What would the message be when it came out to ... Tracey Flanagan?

To be human, a human being is to be a dissenter, a heretic. You know that because you've learned to keep your mouth shut a lot of the time. Is that part of your belief system?

What do I believe? It varies. Mostly, what I believe is that we are one, and we are many. Sometimes we think we are one, when we are many. And most wondrously, is when I think we are many, fractured, broken and we turn out to be one. To be human is to be isolated, alone. To be human is to know love and connection. To be human is to be both alone and connected, and that is the mystery. We are one; we are many. That's what I believe

What do you believe? Excellence among UU's is working on that, at least from time to time. If you don't, it will catch up with you. When does it catch up with you?

One of the spaces it might catch up with you is when someone asks you at a boring moment in a dinner party, what do you believe? You have no idea why they are asking. Maybe they are bored, maybe they are in deep spiritual crisis and been moved by something about you. It doesn't matter. They ask. It might catch up with you.

The First Principle of our Unitarian Universalism, it's in our hymnal, on St. John's website, on the denominations website, is the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." We see the divine in each person: "Namaste!" It's a spiritual principle.

Is it also a political principle?

It's there in the UN Charter: the "dignity and worth of the human person." There are some who believe that we must choose, choose between being citizens of the United States and being citizens of the globe. What do you believe?

Our faith calls us to see the worth of all people. What does that mean when push comes to shove? America first? An interesting thing that comes up in discussions about peace is whether the United States should act unilaterally when engaging in armed conflict. The incoming American ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, has suggested the US should relieve the humanitarian crisis in Darfur unilaterally if need be. For me, my responsibilities as a global citizen, recognizing the inherent worth of all people, urges that its not just Americans who get to decide who invades whom.

Following the unfolding tragedy in the Middle East, I fear the American response is based on a small circle of the truth. Last month the United Nations human rights chief Navi Pillay accused Israel of "unprecedented and deeply regrettable" treatment of UN human rights investigator Richard Falk. Falk, a retired Princeton professor, was deported from Israel. He was appointed the special rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories earlier this year. [

[http://www.democracynow.org/2008/12/17/days\\_after\\_calling\\_israeli\\_blockade\\_of](http://www.democracynow.org/2008/12/17/days_after_calling_israeli_blockade_of)] How

long has the humanitarian crisis in Gaza been developing? Next Sunday Howard Tolley will lead a forum on the Middle East crisis. When the international community and the United States are at odds, there is tension between our American identity, and our global identity. Is dissent patriotic?

As dissenters, we cannot afford to be lazy about our faith. What do you believe?

Markham's poem

He drew a circle that shut me out --  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in.

Moves our discussion forward. As heretic, as dissenters, we do not stay within the old circles, we draw larger circles. Probably that's what drives the orthodox and the literalist to make their circle walls higher. We keep trying out new and bigger and more wondrous circles.

How these circles are every enlarging! They are not exclusive. Some believe that a person can be in only one circle. As people of a liberal faith, we live in many circles, have multiple identities. We are men and women; live alone, with partners; work, retired; of varied ethnicities, support different sports teams, prefer different forms of entertainment. Some are Buddhist UU, some Jewish UUs, some Muslim UUs, some Wiccan UUs and Christian UUs. We are American, Indian, German, Brazilian, and we are global. Many circles; many identities. Dissenters? We go against somebody's grain most of the time.

From our reading we heard about the incredible enlarging circles of the upcoming generation, perhaps to be called the Obama generation as it reflects the global character of Barack Obama's upbringing.

the United States can ...depend on a new generation to forge connections around the world. John Zogby, the influential pollster, calls Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 "the First Globals," a group he describes as "more networked and globally engaged than members of any similar age cohort in American history." More than half of the respondents aged 18 to 29 in a poll conducted in the United States in June 2007 ... said that they had friends or family living outside the United States, vastly more than any other U.S. age group.... A quarter of this group, according to Zogby's data, believes that they will "end up living for some significant period in a country other than America."

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20090101faessay88107/anne-marie-slaughter/america-s-edge.html>

Inclusive excellence is an ever enlarging circle; better, ever enlarging circles of circles within circles as in our dissent we seek to find the connections, meanings of our lives.

The story of the Good Samaritan recounts a dissenter enlarging a circle, for he does what others will not, reaching out when others will not. And he enlarges the circle, for he has traveled from his homeland of Samaria. He took the road less traveled.. And in her poem, Mary Oliver asks us what will we do in the excellence of our lives:

### **The Summer Day**

#### **Mary Oliver**

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

What do you believe; what do you choose in your uniqueness?