

# THE FUTURE OF OUR FAITH

A Service by Fritz Hudson

December 4, 2005

## Chalice Lighting

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up  
the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.  
Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.  
Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage;  
when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with child.

Let us build memories in our children, lest they allow treasures to be lost  
because they have not been given the keys.

We live, not by things, but by the meaning of things.

It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

Antoine de Saint Exupery

## Naming Ceremony: Child of Christy Abraham and Mark Weddleton

### Sermon

Julia Christine Abraham. Talk about a name that reverberates across generations! Abraham, of course, is the name Jewish scripture gives us for the father of ancient Israel. Its first book, Genesis, goes to great pains to trace the generations from the first humans, Adam and Eve, to Abraham, and then to tell rich stories of those descended from him: Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph. In essence the Jewish scripture is simply many "passwords" "transmitted" "from generation to generation," (to use St. Exupery's words again.) The early Christians grafted onto that chain their own links, passwords from Jesus, through his disciples, transmitted by the generations which followed them. Some, like those attributed to the disciple Thomas, were later lopped off, as Elaine Pagels helped us understand in September. Looking back now, several of our subsequent mornings together could be seen simply as our links, grafted on to that same chain – the passwords from Servet, David, and Sozzini, transmitted to Arminius, Murray and Channing, and from them to Emerson, and from him to Dietrich. Those are the names that reverberate through our generations – some of the "prophetic women and men" whose words and deeds we draw on as sources for our faith. So what now is the shape of our open link? And how would Julia Christine, if she so chose, loop herself to it - perhaps even, as another Abraham, to mother a new nation? Having brought our passwords to our present two weeks ago, today I want to think with you about their future evolution – their passage from this generation to the next and beyond.

I will say a little, first, about the shape of our passwords at present, about their durability for the passage forward. As you know, their written embodiment is our current identity statement, here on the wall and on the back of your bulletin. It is today's generation, adopted in 1984 and 1993, whose ancestors can be traced back at least to 1790. While many of its principles, in the first

part, reverberate back through those ancestors, the major new dimension in this statement is its second part, its statement of sources our living tradition draws upon.

This innovation marked the institutional affirmation of our arrival as a faith drawing on "the world, our oyster" as I've put it. It is a pivotal part of our passwords for the future. I believe however, that its form is still rough, and its durability would be enhanced if reshaped in at least two ways.

- First, though it tries not to, it still hangs on, ever so lightly, to the historical primacy of Jewish and Christian teachings in our faith. These are the only two traditions given proper names in it. Other religious sources are named generically, as "world religions" or "earth-centered traditions." To give us their full power, I think at least the major world competitors to Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, have to be named as well. In similar spirit, I believe the statement would gain power if the major "earth-centered" contributors to our faith at present, "pagan" or "native" American and European teachings were also named.

- Second, and more even more importantly, I believe the accuracy and power of the statement is markedly diminished by placing the teachings of science and reason as but one, seeming, "option" among our sources. Two weeks ago, I quoted our Association's Commission on Appraisal report to the 1997 General Assembly saying: "Gone are the days when most of those who became Unitarian Universalists came to reject. Now they also come to add and enlarge. Baptists and Methodists bring a love of song. Catholic and Orthodox bring a delight in liturgy. Quakers bring their silence, Evangelicals their passionate preaching, Pentecostals their enthusiasm in worship." Afterwards, one of you expressed, not for the first time, your discomfort with this apparently wide-open celebration of diversity. "If everyone can bring whatever their past is, what's not Unitarian Universalism," you asked. My answer is that what's not UUism, from whatever religious tradition or personal experience it may arise, is what is in conflict with the tests of reason and science – they are the sieve through which all our other sources must pass. Our best statement of our current passwords would say that; it doesn't yet. As my friend James Ford, a Zen Buddhist priest as well as Unitarian minister, says, "no matter what more we are, all UUs, at least, are humanists."

I'll say only one thing more about the shape our passwords would best take for their passage into our future, at the end of these words. What I want to spend more time with this morning is the how of that passage. As a "living tradition" with faith in a "free search" and "spiritual growth" I believe that if we get the "how" of our future right, the "what" will take care of itself.

As you know, we are entering into a transitional period in our Religious education leadership. Many of you will remember that the transition in our ministerial leadership 8 years ago involved a two year period of interim ministries which allowed us to reshape and strengthen our lay leadership and assess our directions and desires for a new open-ended ministerial partnership. When I became that partner, we benefited greatly from our confirmed clarity in member and ministerial roles and sharp definition for our steps ahead.

Our current financial investment in our religious education position presents a challenge for undertaking a similar broad assessment. Unlike our comparable neighboring UU churches in Omaha, Des Moines, Iowa City, we haven't yet funded this position to a full-time level. This creates hurdles for contemplating an interim placement, as well as for attracting a new permanent

director with training and experience as a UU religious educator. Nevertheless, because Kim Beyer-Nelson is able to give us three more months service before moving on, we are going to make every effort to undergo as much of the kind of re-assessment and re-organization which I benefited from to give her successor as full a chance for creative partnership as I've enjoyed.

In our newsletter a few weeks ago, when we announced Kim's departure plans, I reprinted William Ellery Channing's words about "the great end in religious education," reading 652 in our service book. That "great end" he said is

- not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly with their own;
- not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision;

I said then that current UU ministers often find this statement somewhat wanting. Rev. Daniel O'Connell, minister in St. Louis, Missouri, has written:

"Yes, we promote our children's need to look inquiringly and steadily with their own eyes. But they look to us as models also. To avoid figuring out our common beliefs -- is to fail as a religion: it is to squander our heritage, and it is to punish our children for our own spiritual torpor." And -

"Of course we should 'not bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions.' -- But we should ask our children & youth to explore in depth our particular sect and our peculiar notions. -- Our religion doesn't mean much if we are unwilling to let it be taught to and then examined by some of our most insightful, loving critics: our children."

He concludes, "When UUs occasionally point to Channing's reading as a way of saying, 'we're not going to give our children anything definite to believe about UU-ism,' then they essentially abandon our kids to economic market forces, religious fundamentalists, and anyone with a strong opinion. They throw up their hands saying 'it is too difficult' or 'not our place,' and thereby abdicate their responsibility, and our children come to learn we are not a real religion." ("Channing Was Wrong: Our Task IS to Impress Our Minds Upon the Young." [UU Society of Northern Fairfield County](#). 9/7/01)

To my mind, the goal of our religious growth & learning program should not be to make each of our children "card-carrying UUs." We can hope for that, but Channing is right – it would be false to our heritage to expect or demand it. However O'Connell is right as well. To be true to our heritage is to transmit to our children

- the ability to draw well on all the sources we honor for religious life, and
- a profound understanding of the principles we proclaim and skill and experience at practicing them.

Later this week, if you are a recipient of our church newsletter, you will receive our religious growth and learning program assessment survey. It is shaped by our Trustees' policy statement of our ends in religious education:

- We will promote a model of lifelong religious growth and learning.
- We will promote understanding and articulation of a U.U. identity.

In separate sections, the survey will ask you to rate how effectively our program is helping, first children and then adults, to draw on each of:

- Experiences of wonder and life-upholding forces
- Prophets and exemplars of justice, compassion and love
- Buddhist and Islamic teachings & practices
- Jewish and Christian teachings & practices
- Native American and pagan teachings & practices
- Teachings & practices of science and reason.

Then it will ask you to rate how effectively our program is helping, first children and then adults, to develop skills for, and experience in, affirming and promoting each of:

- The worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity & compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another
- A free and responsible search for truth & meaning
- Rights of conscience and use of democratic processes
- A world community with peace, liberty & justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence

For those sources and principles our program is drawing on and promoting fairly effectively, in your opinion, the survey will ask what we should continue doing to maintain our effectiveness. For those sources and principles our program is drawing on and promoting less effectively, in your opinion, it will ask what we should stop or start doing to improve our effectiveness.

Your answers to this survey will prepare us for the second part of our assessing and directing – a week of organized face-to-face focus groups in January involving as many members as possible. We will report your written responses to the groups and push deeper our discussion of what we need to maintain and what we need to change to fulfill our programs ends. Only then, will we ask the two big "how" questions:

- How, (or under what circumstances, or in what way(s)), would you be willing to serve as a leader/teacher of a children's, youth or adult class/program/group? And only then
- How (through what skills and characteristics) could your leadership be best facilitated by a Religious Growth and Learning Director?

As we go through this process I will be thinking about my role in our program. The partnership we forged eight years ago has involved me directly in training adult open circle group leaders. My involvement in the children's and youth program, however, has been more indirect. I've worked with our Directors behind the scenes to define the measures of success for our program and chose or create our curricula. More recently, I've begun to work on an articulated description of the competencies and experiences that go with being a well-formed adult in our faith, to be shared here from the pulpit. This work has me wondering if my knowledge of our heritage, our sources and our principles should call me to a more direct role in our coming of age program and in our children's teachers' training and support. I'll be thinking about these questions as I imagine what shape my partnership should take with a new Director.

A religious growth and learning program, however, is necessarily based on small group experiences where each participant may risk, experiment and receive responses to evaluate. This is even more true of children and youth than of adults. And the direct leadership of our program, for both financial and pedagogical reasons, will always come from you, as church members. My contribution, and the primary contribution of whoever joins us our work as our RGL Director, will always be mediated through the small group leadership only you can provide. So as I rethink my role, I invite you to re-think yours as well. What is our covenant for shared leadership in our program?

In 1870 when the founders of this church looked around at the nine churches already established in Lincoln, they saw none that affirmed and promoted the worth of every person. They felt called to meet that need by covenanting to form a Universalist church. In 1898, when the next generation of that church's members was faced with bankruptcy in the national depression, they looked around at the other surviving churches. They saw none that affirmed the "free search for truth and meaning." So they met that need by re-covenanting to be a Unitarian church. We are now perhaps four generations removed from these decisions. We are not, in any sense I can see threatened with extinction. Still, any time that raises questions about our future, I see as a call to look around once again to see if we need, and Lincoln needs, an approach to religious life that no one else offers. To my eyes:

- In a world of global commerce and communication, I need, Lincoln needs, a religious institution which actively draws together the contributions of all humanity's religious heritage, its trans-cultural religions, like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, its ethnically rooted traditions like Judaism, Paganism, and Native American spirituality. We need the cross-correction of this diversity to play our part in forming a globally healthy culture

- In a world threatened by the violent fanaticism of fundamentalism, and numbed by the "wishy-washy-ness" of "main-lineism" I need, Lincoln needs, a religious institution which honors the truth-discerning power of science and reason and passes both religious tradition and personal experience through them to channel their emotional power into "life-upholding" culture.

As a vibrant religious congregation now, we are meeting that need for ourselves today. The only way we can be a culture-building institution to meet that need for tomorrow, however, is to re-covenant to pass this way of being religious across the generations.

So now I'll say that one more thing about the shape our passwords would best take for their passage into our future. I've said nothing yet about any evolution in the first part of our identity statement, in principles we affirm and promote. There will be evolution there, I am sure. While universal personal worth, relational justice, acceptance, compassion, free truth-seeking, social democracy and world peace have all become our call through the history we've relived this fall - first within and then beyond Christianity – the shape in which we've understood them has changed from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's new call, to "respect for interdependence" will undoubtedly evolve as well, but I believe it will carry us well into the future. All of them still need a whole lot of affirming and promoting – they have yet to be embraced or embodied on our larger world. Indeed, we must admit, I think, that however much they may be affirmed and promoted even within our walls, they are not fully embodied here. If I were to hope for some near term change in our covenanted

principles, it wouldn't be to add any, nor more selectively specify nor to prioritize any as I would our sources. What I would urge as our most needed evolution is to add just one verb to what we covenant to do with these principles. More than to affirm or promote them, I believe our heritage calls us to "practice" them, and publicly hold ourselves to that action. And the one I'd look to practice first would be encouragement of spiritual growth, by and for all of us, of every age, "mother & father" a new nation.