

THE WORLD, OUR OYSTER

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

Presented November 20, 2005

"To all ye pilgrims: Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, peas, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forest to abound with game, and the sea with fish and clams ...; now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at the meeting house, on the hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November the 29th, of the year of our Lord, one thousand six hundred and twenty three, and the third year since the pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to the Almighty God for all His blessings."

Thus did Governor William Bradford proclaim Thanksgiving Day celebration on this continent. A cartoon I cut out some number of years ago pictures the first English pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribespeople gathered around their roughhewn dinner table with one saying the other, "You know, we ought to do this again next year." So here we are 382 years later, gathered again between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day, in November, listening to ye pastor.

For Unitarian Universalists this Sunday has particular power. It is our one clear opportunity to sense the connection between our religious identity and our national identity - our connection with the first successful European settlers on our eastern seaboard, successful only because of their fragile initial partnership with the natives of this land. We should allow ourselves a little lift every year at this time to know that we gather in a meeting house descended in a direct line from that pilgrim meeting house, now known as the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, Plymouth Massachusetts, organized 1620, voted Unitarian, 1803.

We are not, however, the same people who gathered in 1623, or who voted themselves Unitarian in 1803, nor did we descend from them in a direct line. Is anyone here a direct descendent of the Mayflower Company? How many of us descend, at least in part, from English immigrants? (My English ancestors arrived in New York's Hudson Valley about 1700.) How many of us descend, at least in part, from European immigrants? How many descend, at least in part, from middle eastern, asian, or african immigrants? How many many of us descend, in some part, from native american peoples?

As Unitarian Universalists we are not New England anymore; we are the world. And what we share with the people who gathered in 1623 or those who first voted themselves Unitarian in 1803 is not harbored in our genes. Rather it is carried in our habits, our culture, our way of choosing the values we affirm together and the practices we cooperate to promote. It is carried in our practice of covenanting and re-covenanting as equal partners in service, in ministry.

Through several services this fall I have been working through the process of re-covenanting, of forming a new understanding of our ministry. Along the way I have been trying to deepen our appreciation for this process by strengthening our consciousness of our evolution as a community of faith, our story as a covenanted and re-covenanted people. Today I'm going to bring this story up to the present day and then I'm going to name the call and the challenge which I believe a new Unitarian

Universalist covenant must answer - I will talk about how we can find food, food for the spirit.

When you look at our covenant statement on the back side of our bulletin, I hope you might be able to see it now as not just words, but as images, faces, stories.

- When you read we "affirm and promote ... the free and responsible search for truth and meaning (and) the rights of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations," I hope you see Martin Luther stretching Roman Catholic scholasticism to the breaking point by proclaiming the authority of reason at his trial in Worms. I hope you see Miguel Servet burning at the stake rather than denying his truth in Geneva, and Fausto Sozzini nurturing the tiny democratic community of brethren in Poland.

- When you read we "affirm and promote ... acceptance of one another (and) compassion in human relations," I hope you see James Rely stretching English Methodist enthusiasm to the breaking point by proclaiming the salvation of all souls, and John Murray preaching Relyan sermons to found Universalist churches from Wilmington, Delaware to Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

- When you read we "affirm and promote ... the worth and dignity of every person (and) encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations," I hope you see Jacobus Arminius stretching Dutch Calvinist realism to the breaking point by proclaiming the human power to grow toward salvation. I hope you see William Ellery Channing transforming New England's attitude toward southern slavery from self-satisfied acquiescence to powerful outrage, and Dorothea Dix freeing countless sufferers from mental illness from the darkness of imprisonment to the light of hospital treatment? These are the images of our evolution, of our successive re-covenants born anew again and again. Our current words of covenant, if we look at them with knowing eyes, bear both the darkened stretch-marks of our past struggles and the ever-pink vitality of our future growth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, as you know, began his professional life as a Unitarian minister. In the generation following Channing, barely twenty years following the first proclamation of Unitarianism in our land, Emerson was already planting seeds for a transformation of its covenant, a transformation which sought to expand its base far beyond its Christian roots. Emerson's own path in this work was set within a few years of his entering the ministry, when he determined that he could not in good conscience continue to celebrate holy communion as his congregation desired. This disagreement led him to resign his first and only ministerial settlement. From that point on Emerson made his mark as a free-lance scholar and lecturer. He introduced American religion to the study of eastern religions, finding particular power in the words of the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita. When invited to address the graduating seniors at the Harvard Divinity School, he urged them "Acquaint thyself at first hand with deity."

Following the Civil War, when Unitarians first tried to form a National Conference of Churches, they found how influential Emerson's words had become in their midst. When the conference voted to describe itself as an organization of "Christian churches of the Unitarian faith," a disgruntled minority of ministers formed with they called the Free Religious Association. A few years later when the National Conference's secretary queried FRA members whether they wished to be listed in the conference yearbook, one minister (William Potter) replied "Unitarian, of course, I am ... but 'Christian' I do not now call myself." However when the Secretary decided that this response warranted excluding this minister from the listing, the general hue and cry was so great that he was re-listed immediately. With Emerson as their ancient sage, the Free Religious Association generation

spread their wings, letting their souls soar beyond the borders of their forebears faith in search of truth and meaning.

The next generation of Unitarians saw an even further evolution of this spirit. John Dietrich, as a Reformed (or Calvinist) Church minister began to preach Jesus' humanity rather than his divinity - (the Gospel we now know dates back to earliest Christianity as revealed in the Gospel of Thomas). For this departure, Dietrich was convicted of heresy and defrocked. When he entered the Unitarian ministry, he brought a new spirit to its quest for truth, a decidedly rejectionist, or counter-Christian note. From his pulpits, first in Spokane Washington and then in Minneapolis, Minnesota, he proclaimed "The time is passed for theism and deism. The time has come for humanism, a religion based on human strength, rather than on human weakness." In 1933, 34 individuals, mostly Unitarian ministers, issued the "Humanist Manifesto." It affirmed

- that the universe is self-existing (which is to say not created),
- that human experience is wholly a part of nature, and
- that the goal of life is the complete realization of a human personality ... in the here and now.

Remember how the Unitarian Controversy of the early nineteenth century played out among the Massachusetts Standing Order churches during William Ellery Channing's time. Each church was forced by its members eventually to vote to determine whether it would be Trinitarian or Unitarian. In a similar manner, in the Humanist Controversy of the early twentieth century time, Unitarian churches now struggled to decide whether they were "Christian", in Channing's mode, or "Theist" in Emerson's mode, or "Humanist" in Dietrich's mode. Our Church, though founded by Universalist Christians – moved into the "Theist" camp when it became Unitarian in 1898, as expressed by our first Unitarian minister, Lewis Marsh. Then, a two decades later, as led by Arthur Weatherly, we moved into the Humanist camp. You could say there we have remained, more or less, ever since. Perhaps.

As the midpoint of the twentieth century, however, the Unitarian covenant vis-a-vis theological diversity was a covenant of tolerance only. In reality, it was a covenant of tolerance for diversity between different churches in the movement, without even much tolerance for theological diversity within each congregation. In general, most of our eastern congregations understood themselves as Christian or Theist, most of our mid-western congregations understood themselves as Theist or Humanist, and almost all of our western and southern congregations flew the flag of Humanism.

Yet even as this covenant of inter-church tolerance was solidifying, new influences began to gnaw at its foundation - influences from without and influences from within. Up to the middle of the century, most of the evolution which gave birth to religious humanism occurred with Unitarianism, not within Universalism. Universalists however were moving into striking confluence with the liberal and theist wings of Unitarianism, a movement which eventually brought the two denominations to merge in 1961. With the Universalists came a spirit of acceptance and inclusiveness which started to undercut the Unitarian penchant for self-distinction and separation. At the same time, some of the founding spirits of Humanism began to feel the limits of their own excesses. John Dietrich, 20 years after the Humanist Manifesto's publication, confessed that he found "the document too dogmatic and arrogant" that it put too much reliance upon science and reason and had too much contempt "for any intuitive insights and intangible values." As a protest movement, humanism had served a purpose, he

thought. Its positive side, affirming the "enrichment of life in its every form," was good, but its negative side was "short-sighted, cutting itself off from all cosmic relationship, and denying or ignoring every influence outside humanity itself." Though the effect of these two influences has been retarded and muted by the rejectionist enthusiasm of many of the '50's '60s and '70s converts to Unitarian Universalism, it has made its way ever more deeply into our consciousness.

In 1997, the year before we united in this ministry, our UUA Commission on Appraisal reported, "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."

Gone too, I will add, are the days when secularists came to us to have their secularism affirmed. Can I ask how many of you have heard of Margot Adler, New York bureau chief of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered?" Some years ago our UUA's Beacon Press published Margot's memoir of her experience in the 1960s, entitled Heretic's Heart. There Margot describes her rearing in a communist household, and her search for meaning as a radical student activist in the Berkeley Free Speech movement and the Mississippi civil rights movement. Imagine her surprise in discovering in modern paganism the power of religious ritual, and then almost 20 years ago discovering a church home within which her pagan practices could be woven creatively into a broad tapestry of spirituality, at the All Souls Unitarian Church of New York City.

Over the past decade or so our entire Unitarian Universalist Association has been struggling toward a new covenant in ministry. As an entire movement, we've been struggling to move from the mid-century covenant of tolerance for diversity between congregations to a new covenant of celebration for diversity within each congregation. We, here are the world, not just ethnically. We are the world spiritually as well. We are Christians, Theists, Humanists, and Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Naturalists, Mystics, Pagans, all here together. We are struggling to move beyond rejecting what is past us and outside us, toward empowering what is present in us and toward connecting what is inside us with what is beyond us.

Now when you see we "affirm and promote ... the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all (and) respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," I hope you will see Ralph Waldo Emerson stretching Unitarian and Universalist Christian liberalism to the breaking point by celebrating the human capacities for a direct relationship with transcendence, and see John Dietrich celebrating the beauty and power of human self-sufficiency but then stretching the rigid limits of anthropocentrism to open humanism to the unfathomable mystery of cosmic diversity, and see Margot Adler transported through secularist fasting to find spirit in ritual and religious community.

In our work to create a vision for our ministry eight years ago, in my first year here we said we learn to "celebrate our differences as much as we savor our commonalities." We are a multiplicity of minorities and idiosyncracies, struggling to feel our way into our covenant's claim that we are "grateful for our diversity."

When you think about it, my cartoon picture of the Pilgrims and the Wapanoag's first thanksgiving surely masks the real character and spirit of that gathering. If a pilgrim had said "You know we ought to do this again next year," (as I understand who was there) only one of the Wapanoag, Squanto, could even have understood the words, let alone nodded in assent. Even while they ate, the new diseases brought by the English were beginning to take their toll on the health of the Wapanoag. Short decades later, the very peace which Chief Massasoit and William Bradford had created was shattered in the war named for Massasoit's son, King Philip's War.

Still in that one place, on that one day, amidst all those clams, these people, in many ways our people, found at least one oyster and were able to give its pearl to all the world, for all of eternity. Those people created there an indelible image, an image of one people using their talents to extend their gifts across a chasm of unimaginable difference to reach, to feed, to save another people from starvation. As an image from our own particular past, it is an especially powerful image for our particular future.