

## STILL I CAN DO SOMETHING

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

Presented March 21, 2004

*Two or three hundred colleges of America send forth their graduates upon the country this summer ... That little company starts at tremendous odds, if we count by numbers only, in the effort for which its members have been educated ... to maintain the Idea ... to maintain in the land the sense of Spirit ... Clearly, it is my business today to present as well as I can the moral side of the great office for which this State and your country have trained you.*

The Rev. Edward Everett Hale, minister of the South Congregational (Unitarian) Church of Boston, began with these words when speaking to the graduates of Cornell University in 1881. For all I know he said them again in speaking to the graduates here at the University of Nebraska in 1897. Lincoln's leading newspaper then, *The State Journal*, reported that "(H)is eloquence on the platform and genial presence at the annual gathering and luncheon were found to be features of the commencement week reunion." (June 5, 1898). Some in his audience, perhaps I.M. Hatfield and Samuel Tuttle, secretary and sole surviving founder respectively of the First Universalist Society of Lincoln, must have found him particularly genial.

The Universalist Society, then 27 years old, was in a hard way that year. Just five years earlier it had moved into its wonderful new red sandstone building at the corner of 12th and H streets just south of downtown. After two years, however, the economic crash of 1894 put a sudden squeeze on the congregation's capacity to carry their new mortgage, a squeeze so severe that it had forced the departure of their beloved minister Eben Chapin. The Universalist Church of America, their denominational association, had proved unable to offer financial assistance for their predicament. So, undoubtedly encouraged by Rev. Hale's geniality, church leaders approached the famous minister, perhaps at that luncheon, and asked whether there was any way that their church might gain assistance from his church's denomination, the American Unitarian Association. "Well," Rev. Hale must have said, 'perhaps so. Let me see.' The rest, as they say, is history - our history. Eleven months later, on May 20, 1898, the ninety seven members of the First Universalist Society of Lincoln met in their brand new building and voted to disband their church. The following Sunday, with the association's promise of a loan in hand, those same 97 people met again in their new building to form themselves as All Souls Unitarian Church.

Rev. Hale's presence, by then, was but a warm memory, of course. The *State Journal's* announcement of that year's University's commencement, the week following the fateful vote, welcomed speaker Dr. Edward Emerson, son of the church's newly adopted Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson. Still it did recall Rev. Hale's address as well received. So this year, at what is our annual commencement, if you will, our New Member Welcome, I would like to recall the question Rev. Hale asked as his commencement title. His "business" for the graduates," Hale said, was to ask "What Will He Do With It?"

The "It," for Hale of course, was his graduate's education. What will he or she do with it to "maintain

the sense of Spirit in the Land." The "It" for us is our membership in this church. What will we do with it to maintain our spirit in our land?

*Love is the spirit of this church,  
Our choir, this morning, has helped us sing:  
The quest for truth is its sacrament,  
And service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve each other in fellowship,  
This is our covenant ...*

The words for this covenant, as you see in your bulletin, are attributed to L. Griswold Williams, a Universalist Minister, in fact, who was just beginning his life in that faith as our church seemed to abandon it. But now, with our association since 1961 merged as Unitarians and Universalists, you can find his words as our reading #471. In many of our churches - Second Church of Omaha, the Phoenix church I served before coming here among them - a version of this covenant is said by the congregation in unison every Sunday.

One word, you notice, appears twice in it: "service is our prayer; to serve one another .. is our covenant." We do seek knowledge here, in freedom, in our quest for truth; we do dwell in peace, in the spirit of love. But my "business" today is to tell you what I think is the sine qua non - the "that without which" - we can have no claim to membership in this church. It is service. For service is what we do with our membership.

Two questions require answers for us to serve well here as members. First, Whom do we serve? Second, How do we serve?

Griswold Williams' covenant suggests that we serve each other. If you take that to mean we serve each other as members of the church, I will enthusiastically agree that this is true. Among our rites of spring is the opening of opportunities for church service in the coming year. It began last week, when Aura Lea announced the Nominating Committee's quest for Trustee candidates. It will continue through our Council Chairs quest for committee members and RGL teachers in April and May, and crescendo with our organizers quest for coffee hosts, greeters and ushers in June. Such service is a constant, life-long yet ever-changing, part of what all of us do with our membership, but it is only its beginning.

Rev. Williams was a Universalist, remember. To serve "each other" to him could only mean service to all humanity. For me, as member and minister, a touchstone is the story of a rabbi in a European ghetto, of perpetually dour countenance, who mystifies the members of his synagogue during Yom Kippur services every year by leaving at the beginning of the long chants, with his usual frown, and then returning at the chants' end, perhaps an hour later, with face warm, glowing, and words full of fire. They wonder if he rises to heaven to meet with Moses or God. One of them is finally chosen to risk following the Rabbi. Waiting in the alley, she sees him leave the synagogue now wearing

peasants' clothes. She follows him to an invalid widow's house, where through the window she can see him make the widow tea, clean her room, and start her dinner. As the Rabbi works and talks with the widow, the follower can see the familiar warmth rise in his face and hear that growing brightness in his voice. When she rushes back at the synagogue, just ahead of the Rabbi, the members ask her, "Well, where did he go? Did he go to heaven?" She can only respond, "If not higher; if not higher."

Whether anything I do ever warms my ministerial countenance or brightens my preaching only you can say. What I can say is that my church membership feels fulfilled only as I serve some beyond our walls - like the immigrants my lawyer's skills now serve through the Equity in Nebraska clinic. Even William Ellery Channing, whose ministry inspired our faith's founding, might have better served us through such service beyond us. When I was studying his congregant Dorothea Dix's work with prisons, for my sermon two weeks ago, I found she had once written a friend, 'Dr. Channing is, I think, from his little intercourse with society, not always the best judge ... Wrapt in his own heavenly thoughts he is not sensible of the graduations of others.' ... "We were not sent into this world merely to enjoy the loveliness therein," Dix goes on. "No, we were sent here for action -- for constant action." (1928) Dorothea Dix: (Thomas Brown. *Dorothea Dix: New England Reformer*. p.32,41)

Whom do we serve, then, to re-ask my first question?. Our heritage, I think, calls us to a universalist service. My own words for it are that I serve "the continuing adventure of conscious life." But what makes this experience we share here together on Sundays, I think, a "service," to us all, is its insistence that each of us find our own answer to this question.

My second question, then, is "How do we serve." Each of us, of course, has differing gifts, differing talents, so I can't even begin to suggest what form your individual service might take. What I can suggest, however, that applies to us all, is its spirit.

In this Lenten season, as we reconnect with our sources in Christianity, we can surely lift up James' letter, preserved in the New Testament, written to "the twelve tribes in Dispersion." "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." he says, "... He who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing. ... Religion that is pure and undefiled ... is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." (1:22-27) But we need to be cautious of a tendency, one I find perhaps stronger in Christianity than in other traditions, of seeing service as a one-way relationship.

The Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, made clearer the reason for this caution to me. In her *Start Where You Are*, Chodron wrote, "If you have this ideal of yourself as a hero or helper or doctor and everyone else as the victim, the patient, the deprived, the underdog, you are continuing to create the notion of separateness. Someone might end up getting more food or better housing, and that's a big help; those things are necessary. But the fundamental problems of isolation, hatred, and aggression are not addressed.

... The notion 'I am the help and you are the one who needs help' might work in a temporary way, but fundamentally nothing changes, because there's still one who has it and one who doesn't. That dualistic notion is not really speaking to the heart." (p.103,106)

Service, in our spirit of Love, must speak to the heart. It must break down our isolation from one another. It must strengthen our ties to our "single garment of destiny," in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words. I was grateful, yesterday's *Lincoln Journal Star* article on "Sharing Our Faith", to have the chance to describe our faith's approach to evangelism as an invitation to engage in dialogue. In trying to encapsulate that approach for the reporter, I'd said "If the only smart person in this dialogue is you, then I've got no interest in continuing it." She didn't print that. Still, in the same way, I'd like to say now that our approach to service must evince the same spirit of interdependence. If I only hope to help, or to serve you, but I am not hoping or even wanting to be helped or be served by you, by our interaction, then my service is not yet true to our spirit.

There is no special place we have to be in order to help out," says the American Hindu Ram Dass. "Right where we are, in whatever we're already doing, the opportunity to be of service is almost always present. We need only stay conscious and aware, and then give whatever we can to whoever is right there. ..." (*How Can I Help* p.236)

Every time we leave this Sanctuary, and go out into our Fireplace Room, where we pass around our petitions, and talk to each other about our activities, suggest to each other opportunities to enrich our membership, my spirit is renewed. I can't do it all. Neither can any one of you. Your service and my service will not be the same in form, indeed I rely upon and celebrate its diversity. That all of us are doing very different things but all in the same spirit is the only way we really can do something with our membership.

By the time Edward Everett Hale spoke here in Lincoln he was 75 years old. He had done quite a lot. His collected works, which I found in here Love Library, fill 10 volumes. Yet he is remembered now, by educated people, almost solely for one story. How many know his "The Man Without a Country?" In 1897, another story was perhaps even better known - his "Ten Times One is Ten." In it, ten people are stuck at the station, awaiting an overdue train, following the funeral of their friend Harry Wadsworth. With little else in common, they talk of what Harry had given them, how his spirit of service had enriched their lives. After listening to their stories they agree that they should form a "Harry Wadsworth" society to keep his spirit alive, but are still struggling with an organizational plan when the train arrives. All they can agree to then is to write to one of their number, the Rev. Frederic Ingham, whom Hale once called "my double." Over the next three years, Rev. Ingham does in fact hear from each of the other 9, each letter having been stimulated by some challenge they'd shared with others and met by telling the others of Harry Wadsworth example and drawing on its strength. Rev. Ingham's daughter, Polly, was just learning her multiplication tables as the last of these letters arrived, so they became her example for seeing that "ten times one is ten." Over the next three years, however, Ingham began receiving letters from people he'd never met. The people would introduce themselves to him as having heard of Harry Wadsworth from one of the original nine, and then themselves overcome a later challenge which they'd shared with still others by drawing on what they'd been told of Harry's spirit. At the sixth anniversary of Wadsworth's memorial, Polly decided to count up all these letters. She found them to total 103. Recalling how'd the earlier letters had grounded her mathematical education, she mused: "ten times one is ten; ten times ten is 100." Scraps from more letters as they arrive over the years then carry the story through 8 more 3-year cycles, each punctuated by Polly's math: "10 x 100 is 1,000, 10 times 1,000 is 10,000",

until at the end the letters number "One Thousand Million," as Hale writes it - a billion. That was almost the entire population of Hale's world, in 1871, when he published the story. It had taken only 27 years from Harry's death. In its course a motto for Harry's spirit emerges:

*Look up not down.*

*Look forward not back.*

*Look outward not inward.*

*Lend a Hand.*

After the publication of "Ten Times One is Ten", Edward Everett Hale began receiving real letters reporting the formation of "Harry Wadsworth" clubs in an ever widening arc of his world. By the mid 1880s, he was persuaded to launch a magazine to support the clubs. It was called *Lend a Hand* and it remained in publication until it was merged into the magazine *Charities Review* in the very year Hale spoke here, in 1897.

"Ten times One is Ten" is no longer read; The author himself said that it was not very well written. "Man Without a Country" is thus, perhaps justifiably, Edward Everett Hale's one literary legacy in our culture. Similarly, among all the short poems and oratorical flourishes left his record, only one is preserved in our association's service book. It first appeared in the magazine *Lend a Hand*. You'll find it now as reading number 457. But I think of it as our faith's reading number one:

*I am only one*

*But still I am one.*

*I cannot do everything,*

*But still I can do something.*

*And because I cannot do everything*

*I will not refuse to do*

*the something that I can do.*