

A MISSION BORN OF MYSTERY

Keynote Address

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Will the Futures Team please stand. You owe these people your hearty applause. You owe them not only for their time investment and succinct prose but for their religious insight. This insight recognizes the critical distinction between mission and ministry. Mission is why the congregations of this district exist. Ministry is everything they do to fulfill this mission. It is a critical distinction that is often blurred in our religious movement.

They have given focus to five imperative ministries: of the spirit, of health and vitality, of connection, of social justice and of hope and promise. This is a noble vision. Were this vision to become a reality as they have described, then the outcome they also describe would become a reality, namely, a transformation of your district of congregations and a consequential impact on your part of this nation.

But the means of fulfillment calls for a commitment of time and resources equal to the nobility of the vision. And that is the rub. What could possibly incite such a dedication? I propose to you that there is only one source of such nobility of commitment – a profound devotion to why these congregations exist – your religious mission.

With that said, something else must be noted, namely, that nothing has been more troubling in our religious movement over the past fifty years than the notion of mission. We seem to have been confused about its definition, wondered why it was important and replaced it with less noble substitutes.

Here is the point I make: rather than grappling with the meaning of mission for our religious movement by looking at the history of both society and Unitarian Universalism, we have taken the easy approach of divesting the larger religious movement of any responsibility of definition. Instead, we have placed the onus on our local congregations and their individual members. In brief, we have declared that the mission of our religious movement is up for grabs by whoever wishes to give it definition.

Reflecting this individualism, we have done the same thing with the ministry of our congregations as well. The end result has been a reduction of the purpose of ministry to that of fulfilling the whims of individuals and the congregations they comprise. That is, we have been satisfied with seeing our mission as providing a self selecting smorgasbord of need fulfillments for individuals rather than engaging any sense of noble purpose that might address the profound needs of the whole of culture. For example, when it comes to the canvass appeal, what is the motivation for giving we normally solicit? It is a focus on the extent to which the individual member has derived personal satisfaction from the congregation's ministry rather than how well the congregation has engaged the world with noble purpose.

It seems to me that we have been diligently happy with expending our energies satisfying individual concerns rather than attending to why society created the religious institution. And, in order to feel noble about this reduction, we endow it with values such as honoring diversity and being tolerant.

The question about mission is: “What happened to us?” I entered our religious movement in nineteen sixty-nine. The most apparent issue that presented itself to me following this entry was that I had become a part of a movement that had no clear understanding as to why it existed. The most visible evidence verifying this perception was the announcement by the leadership of the UUA of a contest. They were offering a \$500 dollar reward for anyone, lay person or minister, who could come up with a clear statement of our religious identity. This was a lot of money in nineteen seventy. Now, if that is not an acknowledgement of an identity crisis then I do not have the ability to recognize one. A minister by the name of Dean Starr won this reward. However, his statement seems to have made little difference and our identity crisis persists to this day. The primary reason we do not recognize it as a persisting crisis is because it has become our lifestyle.

While this crisis may have rooted further back in our history, it seems to me that its immediate background in the mid nineteen hundreds was a negative reactionism to the fundamentalist Christian right. We were deeply fearful that someone might mistake us for these people. Keeping in mind that the social identity of most religious groups is tied to their beliefs, we were afraid that if we expressed a common set of beliefs to satisfy this social need we would be pegged as having a dogma and we shuddered to think that we free liberals could possibly have a dogma and still be free. That is, we could not see the distinction between a living faith statement and a dead dogma. A living faith statement can be changed at will. A dead dogma is a faith statement frozen in some past historical drama. Because of our inability to distinguish between the two we rejected both.

But, in our zeal to be different, we went way beyond this rejection. Just to make sure that we could not in any way be viewed as dogmatists, whatever the fundamentalist Christian right professed to do or be we rejected. They had churches so we started using terms such as community, fellowship, society, congregation....anything but the word church. They used traditional religious language such as god, sin, salvation, and grace so this terminology became a part of our dirty word list. And, oh yes, they claimed to have a mission so we substituted any purpose that was not akin to their definition.

The first substitute was community. But simply gathering to have compatible fellowship did not satisfy our need to feel a part of something noble. Moreover, while community is focal in our religious movement, it can also easily be nothing more than an embracing haven for frustrated liberals.

The second substitute was social action. But this did not have an appeal to everyone in our movement. Moreover, while social action is an imperative for us, it can also be nothing more than an activity that temporarily relieves the guilt of theological irrelevance.

The third substitute was political correctness. But it, somehow, seemed to lack depth as a reason for being. Moreover, while being politically correct is often consistent with the values of our movement, it can also be nothing more than a tactic that ignores experience and wisdom in favor of social posturing.

I suggest that the end result of this persistent identity crisis has been twofold. First, we have raised several generations of Unitarian Universalists over the past fifty years who, because identity crisis was the state of our being when they entered our religious movement, believe it to be the normal state of our being. In brief, a confused identity with no clear mission is what many of these generations perceive to be the essence of religious freedom.

The second result is that, while we may have a strong appeal to some liberal individuals and while we may have a measure of transforming impact within our own ranks, we remain a relatively impotent religious movement. Compared to the population growth of our nation, we are rapidly losing ground in membership. And that does not imply social impact.

Emil Brunner suggests: “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” And a careful reading of church consultants reveals a firm consensus that all powerful, growing religious institutions share three priority characteristics:

- A strong devotion to a clearly stated religious mission.
- A cadre of basic leadership committed to that mission above all else.
- An organization designed to maximize the effectiveness of this mission.

Two historical quotations underscore why clarity of mission is so crucial to any institution:

- Montaign observes: “No wind blows in favor of the ship without a port of destination.”
- And RF Magar avows: “If you don’t know where you are going you are liable to end up someplace else.”

Part of our problem with gaining clarity on our religious mission is our devotion to validating diversity as a grounding principle of our religious movement. I will come back to this notion of diversity later, but, for this moment I share these impressions. While diversity makes for creativity and provokes dialogue, it also points us toward chaos and gives priority to individual need. Moreover, it insists on a diffused ministry that must account for everyone’s private concern and, thus, is generally devoid of the power of commonality and too reliant on the fragilities of ego fulfillment to raise the resources necessary to create social impact.

And when we assume our diversity mode and try to create a mission statement that satisfies everyone we normally end up with a laundry list of differing facets of ministry designed to honor this diversity rather than announcing a mission that subsumes all ministry facets under its wing.

As I have already suggested, this distinction is simple but critical. Mission is why a congregation exists. Ministry is everything it does to fulfill this mission. Therefore, without knowing its mission, a congregation cannot possibly know the facets of effective ministry. Mission not only defines ministry, it also serves as the guideline for assessing ministry’s effectiveness. Thus, when there is no clearly stated mission by which to gage the effectiveness of

ministry, then such criteria, inevitably, will be imported from the secular world, further diffusing religious identity.

Here is another way of approaching the issue of mission in congregational life. If you wish to know what your congregation's real mission is, despite what it might say it is, do an energy audit. Where the highest percentage of a congregation's energy goes is its real mission focus. If the largest amount of energy is spent creating a smorgasbord for satisfying the individual needs of members, then that reflects the real mission of the congregation. If it is to satisfy the need hunger of isolated liberals for a sense of community belonging, then that is its mission. If it is processing social action concerns, howsoever ineffective this may be, then that is its mission.

On the other hand, if we wish to engage whatever society created us to do, then it seems to me there are two definitive clues that might lead us to an accurate definition of our mission.

The first clue is found in the type of institution a group represents in society. Society creates institutions to fulfill its needs. Those institutions that endure through history represent society's enduring needs. At the heart of every enduring institution is its mission and this mission is always very clear. For example, an educational institution's mission is to teach society's citizens information necessary to sustain the culture. A government institution's mission is to process society's myth with political effectiveness. A financial institution's mission is to administer society's economic needs. A medical institution's mission is to care for the citizenry's health. As well, there is a clear mission for the religious institution.

The question is: "For what purpose did society create the religious institution?" Don't you find it strange that we liberals never question the stated mission of the educational, the governmental, the financial and the medical institution but we are forever questioning the mission of the religious institution. And, as far as I know, we are the only religious movement that does so.

Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors did not question the reason for their being. They were quite clear that it was the same reason why all religious institutions existed. Such questioning is of recent vintage. The implication of this observation is that if we have a different mission than our spiritual ancestors then somewhere along the time-line of history's march we got off the road they were traveling. That being the case then we have little legitimate reason to appeal to either their sacrifice or service as a part of our heritage.

And if we do not share the same religious mission for which all other religions were created by society, then we have opted out of why society created religion in the first place. That we are confused about why we exist does not mean that society is confused about why it created our purpose. Indeed, it seems to me that society is quite clear. The problem is ours and it is a problem we have created for ourselves.

The second clue to an institution's mission is the circumstance that provoked its birth. It seems obvious that the first institution society created was the family and the second was the community that families constituted. It was out of the social needs perceived by these two original and grounding institutions that all other institutions emerged.

And, it is possible that the next significant institutional need addressed was what we, of the modern world, call religion. Back when we lived in caves, there was little to ponder except survival in a savage and terrifying environment. But then emerged art and language, howsoever primitive, and meaning making was born. Critical to making meaning was giving answers to the compelling questions inherent in the mystery of their environment. So there arose an institution in the midst of the cave clan community which function was to enter this mystery and return with answers that gave meaning to human existence and direction to human community. Thus, the meaning institution was born.

At first, this institution seems to have been a single person that was called by many names...shaman, witch doctor, priest, etcetera. Maybe it happened this way. One morning the most senior of the cave clan said: "Hey Joe, you seem to do a lot of thinking, so while the rest of us go out to hunt and gather you sit on that rock over there and ponder what this whole big mess we are in is all about." And so, Joe sat on the rock and pondered and sought to answer this question. And the community wanted to know what Joe's pondering led to and they, in turn, pondered his conclusions. Given the passage of time, this pondering enterprise grew in both importance and power and was finally called religion, which means to bind together, because that is precisely what its answers did for the community. The reason is that these questions have to do with the life and death issues of human existence. So, religion, and its answers to life's compelling questions about mystery became the holy enterprise, the sacred pursuit that infused community with a sense of meaning and purpose upon the earth.

However, as population grew and communities proliferated, so did various religions. But one thing remained the same, the purpose for which society created religion. Thus, whether it is a Jewish Temple, an Islamic Mosque, a Southern Baptist Church or a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, they all have the same mission. They all exist for the same reason, a reason designed by society itself – to create a sense of purpose and direction for community and, ultimately, for the culture in which communities are housed.

What, then, distinguishes between all of these religions? Is it their purpose? No! Their distinctions are that they all answer life's compelling questions about mystery differently, thus, giving different meaning and direction to community living. And these answers are so different that they become critical to the destiny of the human enterprise. The Islamic fundamentalism that has driven the world drama over the past almost ten years underscores this truth.

So, while religion will give community its meaning and direction, it is for the sake of defining the why of existence and not to satisfy the human need for community, which already existed and was responsible for creating religion in the first place.

Nor, was the purpose of religion to initiate social action programs. There was no need for social action programs when society created religion. This need only came about with the proliferation of both societies and religions and their consequent competitions.

Nor is the purpose of religion to model political correctness. Whatever political correctness was important when religion was created was already structured into community life.

Social action and political correctness are symptoms of the religious community behaving its beliefs in the same way that religious community is a bonding symptom of these expressed beliefs.

What religion does is define for community what issues of social action and political correctness might best serve the community's reason for being. In essence, rather than being the mission of religion, social action and political correctness are the imperative arms of the religious community serving its mission. That is, they are important to the social expression of the religious community's life but are not its reason for being.

Here is a digested form of some of the most vital of those questions which answers make up the religious institution's message to the world:

- WHO AM I?... which is the question about the nature of my being.
- HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I KNOW?... which is the question about the source of my authority.
- WHO OR WHAT IS IN CHARGE?... which is the question about my ultimate value.
- WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?... which is the question about that which informs and sustains my sense of self-worth.
- WHAT DOES MY DEATH MEAN?... which is the question about the boundaries of time in my existence.

The answers to these compelling questions create the core of a view of reality. And out of this view of reality emerge values that translate into individual and community conscience that give direction to living.

A religious community is a group that shares a common view of reality. It is this view of reality that transcends differences and bonds the community in mutual allegiance. It is also from these answers that a religious community extracts its message to the world - a message that claims if either individuals or society live accordingly, they will be transformed. This transformation evolves from living a life that accords with the community's answers to the compelling questions about mystery, its view of reality.

Now if a religion dominates a culture, as Christianity has in America, then its values and language will provide foundational meanings and directions for that culture and serve as some major part of its social conscience, depending on what political myth drives the culture's existence. It will transform the culture in some significant measure into its own image of reality.

This is the ultimate end of all social action and political correctness, a consciousness raising that provokes the acceptance of an altered view of reality with a concurrent correction of social behavior.

So, again, here is the mission of the religious community. It is to transform the society in which it exists into the shape of its own view of reality and values conscience. And it does this by transforming enough of the individuals in that society into the image of its own answers to the compelling questions with the end result that its own conscience prevails. And this is exactly what your Futures Team vision suggests is the purpose of engaging its proposed ministries: "...to transform individuals, congregations and our larger world...".

The reason why the radical religious right has been able to capture the Republican Party and influence the nation's destiny is because they not only understand this mission, they are committed to it without

reservation. So, rather than railing against them for being effective we should be offering an alternative with the same power of commitment.

Here, then, is another governing truth about social living. No society is ever transformed by any social action or political correctness that is only designed to change its laws. Laws are only kept by a nation's people if their conscience subscribes to these laws. This, I believe, to be the singular most important lesson of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was not focused on simply getting laws changed so that blacks could eat with whites at dime store lunch counters. He was committed to changing the heart of the culture so that the mingling of blacks and whites in the same eating establishment would be an irrelevant issue.

And his primary message was that if we wish to change a culture's behavior in any sustainable manner, we first must change the culture's heart that produces sustained behavior. In other words, we have to change the culture's answers to the compelling questions that are at odds with the behavior of racial respect and acceptance. We have to change its view of reality.

This assertion is affirmed by American history. The civil rights of the black population were constitutionally guaranteed at the conclusion of the Civil War in the last half of the eighteenth hundreds. However, these rights did not begin to become a social reality until the cultural heart was brought into accord during the civil rights movement of the mid nineteenth hundreds. It is not the law but the heart that dictates behavior.

This means that the ultimate value of social action and political correctness is that they raise a society's consciousness of the need to change its behavior. But unless society is, at the same time, offered a message of transformation that changes society's heart, such social action and political correctness will, in finality, be futile finger in the dike activity, doomed to a failed process of unceasing repetition. It is to engage the same issue over and over and over and over and over and over—without success.

Does this imply that there is anything wrong with social action? Absolutely not! Acting in ways that announce the need for social change is imperative. What is wrong is holding up social action as the mission of our religious movement. What is false is not social action, rather, making it our reason for being. Social action can raise the conscious need for change but it does not have the power within itself to offer the change it proclaims as a necessity.

And this is the distinction between a secular mission and a religious mission. Secular missions focus on changing social structures. Religious missions focus on changing social hearts. To change structures is to alter laws and freedoms. To change hearts is to alter attitudes and actions. To change a structure is to establish a guideline for acceptable behavior. To change a heart is to establish a motive for acceptable behavior. A change of structure cannot guarantee a change of behavior. Only a change of heart evokes such a guarantee. The lesson is undeniably clear: if you wish to change society with any measure of permanency, you must change its heart and heart change is belief change. And that is the transformative business of religion.

The most profound and critical agent of human transformation possessed by the religious community is its answers to life's compelling questions of mystery, its view of reality. And the clearer and more committed in commonality a religion is to this message the more powerful a tool of social change it

becomes. The opposite, of course, is equally true – the more diversified a religion’s answers to the compelling questions, the greater will be its social impotence.

So, yet again, our mission as a religious institution is individual and social transformation, a transformation that brings society into greater accord with our answers to the compelling questions that make up our view of reality. And, as a community of faith, it is to model this message so that the social order can see its transforming power at work in our relationships and actually perceive its truth embodied.

To become this kind of transformative religious community, we must overcome our fear of what seems to me to be our primal nemeses, namely, that if we hold a common answer to anything profound we will have created a dogma and, thus, will have become like, you know, Them.

Our confusion about commonality and diversity is reminiscent of a Hagar The Horrible cartoon. It is of a Viking boat. Some of the oarsmen are paddling with the blade of the oar and some with the handle of the oar. Some are rowing forwards and some are rowing backwards. The boat is moving in aimless circles and zigzags. And, Hagar, standing at the helm with hands cupped around his mouth, us shouting: “Will you quit saying different strokes for different folks.”

The underlying message of the cartoon captures a principle that governs all institutional life, religious or secular, namely, that the power to move in concerted direction and to create positive social change lies in commonality and not in diversity.

We may adore the notion of unity in diversity. However, in respect to religious mission, only social impotence lies in this notion. Moreover, I assert that the notion itself is false. Unity does not lie in diversity. Rather, unity lies in commonality. If we wish social power to transform the social order then we must become enamored of the notion that diversity resides in unity. That is, unity is the singular source of both the capacity to embrace diversity and to simultaneously express social power.

Unity is the sine qua non of all constructive social change, that without which it does not exist. So, if we wish real power to transform society, then we must accept and embody this essential truth of history. Thus, the key to a powerful liberalism is not in the focus of unity in diversity, rather, it is in the focus of diversity in unity.

Fredrick May Eliot, wise leader of our past, during another period of identity crisis in our religious movement, admonished: “It is better to be misunderstood than to be overlooked.” And any religion without a transforming faith statement backed by the power of common commitment will be overlooked.

A few years ago, at the National Gallery of Canada, in Ottawa, I sat in the La Chappell Rideau Chapel and listened to the forty part Motet, composed in 1575 by Thomas Tallis, surrounded by forty audio speakers, eight sets of soprano, alto, tenor, baritone and base - each vocal part and each set chanting a different part, yet, every set harmonizing with all the other sets.

The power that captured one’s attention was not that of eight sets devoted to a disparate cacophony of difference, rather, it was the engaging harmony of eight varied sets devoted to a blended commonality.

Again, I assert that the power to engage and transform society is found in a commonality that unifies difference into synergistic wholeness.

The most recent example of this power in our religious movement displayed itself in the nineteen thirties during that debate over the validity of the Christian anthropomorphic god. Some in our movement participated in this debate with reactive postures that distilled in theological terms such as atheism, deism and agnosticism. However, a smaller group of our movement responded in a far more profound manner. They created Humanism and lifted it up as an alternative theology and in a brief span of years this message brought about consequential social transformation in our entire culture.

This happened for two reasons. One is that we addressed the needs of the culture with a new vision of reality. The other is that we spoke with the social power of common commitment, a common commitment that was not a totality of our membership but was eventually a majority.

It is important to point out that the dominance of our commitment to the Humanist perspective in the mid-twentieth century did not violate our member freedom to disagree or differ or to offer other theological perspectives. Quite the opposite was and remains true. It has always been out of this maintained freedom to see and believe differently that the new has arisen in our midst. Indeed, if there is hope that we might yet create a new vision of reality that addresses today's desperate need for a saving paradigm it lies in this maintained posture.

We are on a downward spiral toward human genocide. This spiral is fueled by a self-centeredness and greed that elevates the whims of the individual above the needs of community. While this path of destruction involves our abuse of the planet, the planet will survive us. However, if we are to survive as humans we must engage a view of reality that empowers us to live within the planet's rhythms.

Only a commonly empowered view of reality that demands the diminishment of such greed orientations and that insists on honoring the worth of both humans and creation can overcome this persistent force of destruction. And only a changed social heart can sustain the insistence of such a view of reality. This is precisely what society created the religious institution to do, to provide a view of reality that informs the cultural conscience and dictates a social behavior that is in the nation's most noble moral and relational interests.

It is more than apparent that Christianity and other western myths have dismally failed in addressing the destruction spawned by human greed. There must be a new myth that radically alters not only how we view each other but how we relate to our planet. Such a view of reality has been struggling to emerge in our midst for forty years but we have been too preoccupied with our mission substitutes and self interests to engage it and develop it.

How transforming it would be were our congregations and our district meetings and our national general assemblies to devote their programming to our religious reason for being – the articulation of a message of redemption for a world bent on self-destruction. How refreshing it would be to open a copy of the UU World that had devoted its space to the creation of a new redeeming view of reality. However, if any of these things are to actually happen then it will be because we have decided to engage the mission for which society created us rather than to play safely around its edges lest we step on a dangerous commonality.

I was walking down the crowded hall of a hotel at a General Assembly when a woman suddenly stepped in front of me, stuck out her hand, smiled, introduced herself, and said: “You have no reason to remember me. But ten years ago I visited a Sunday service at your church. I was in a major life crisis and your sermon helped me make a decision that transformed my life. I just wanted to thank you.” And with that said, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Had I not been momentarily stunned by her words, I would have suggested that she write the church I was serving at that time and thank them because they had made that service possible. I was only their representative in the pulpit that day. As I later pondered her words I was, again, struck by the paradoxical nature of this business called religion. It is both an immense heaviness and an exhilarating lightness. It is both an awesome responsibility and a wonderful privilege - this mission of being the spiritual guide to the culture’s heart and conscience - this opportunity to alter cultural destiny by offering the transformation of its very being.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have two options. We can remain as we are at this present moment, a small, relatively impotent community of liberals gradually headed toward cultural oblivion, or, we can pick up the mantel of our mission and speak and model a message of transformation to a spiritually bankrupt and degenerating society. This is our challenge and it is the only one worthy of our commitment.

Here is my verbal benediction from *Alice In Wonderland*:

“Cheshire Puss”, Alice began...

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to”, said the cat.

“I don’t much care where....” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go”, said the cat.

AMEN