

BUF in Relationship: Within and Beyond

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~www.buf.org
January 25, 2015
Rev. Paul Beckel

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG

I Wish I Knew How

#151

<p style="text-align: center;">CIVIC—24%</p> <p><i>We recognize our responsibility for the quality of public life. So we support local & global organizations that promote human well-being. BUF is known for its support of libraries, parks, the arts....</i></p> <p>This is a place where public concerns are discussed and debated in order to help people clarify their opinions in light of their values. The minister and members participate vigorously in public life as individuals, not representatives of the congregation.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ACTIVIST—23%</p> <p><i>Our mission is to change existing social structures in order to guarantee justice & equal rights for all people. The congregation sees itself as a collective participant in community life. The minister is expected to be a public figure.</i></p> <p>Social action efforts are supported with time and money. Adult programs lead to organized social change efforts. In extreme cases, the congregation would consider engaging in civil disobedience in the interest of justice.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">SANCTUARY—40%</p> <p>We are a safe-haven for growth, recovery, and spiritual exploration. BUF is a retreat from the trials of life, a welcoming home for all, where we join for introspection & inspiration.</p> <p><i>Here we gather our strength so that we can go back out into the world and do good work.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">EVANGELICAL—14%</p> <p>We are the voices of freedom, public watchdogs, social critics. We are committed to educating ourselves and our neighbors about religious and social freedoms.</p> <p><i>Our mission is to ensure that all have heard the message of reason and tolerance in religion.</i></p>

This model is adapted from *The Varieties of Religious Presence* (1984) by Roozen, McKinney, and Carol, which is based on the study of 177 mainline churches and synagogues.

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Spirit of Life* We learned new hand motions to go with this song.

READING

This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

William F. Schulz, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #459

SILENCE (3:00)

CHOIR *Geistliches Lied* Brahms

SERMON

In the past half hour we have been conveying a torrent of information about ourselves—about our individual identities and the identity of the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship as a whole.

Your being here says something—about you, and about us. Singing, “I Wish I Knew How” (if you did sing along) could mean a variety of things. Maybe you, like me, totally own all of the angst and aspiration within the “I” statements of that song. Or maybe that’s not you, but you just dove into that character role for a few minutes to explore how it might feel. That’s ok too.

When we lit the chalice, and when we sang and signed “Spirit of Life,” we were saying something about who we are—both individually and collectively.

And in repeating our covenant together we made an explicit “we” statement. I’m not aware that these particular words were ever approved officially as our covenant. But it’s like common law marriage: if we have stood for—and acted upon—particular commitments over time, then *that* is who we have become.

And maybe that's good enough; maybe it's ok if we *never* find just the right words—that we all agree upon—to define ourselves.

Theodore Parker was one of our earliest advocates for a liberal religion based in personal intuition of religious truths and individual interpretation of the bible. Freedom of conscience trumping dogma imposed from the outside. Ironically, though we point to Parker as a hero today, in his own time he was pushed to the fringes of the fledgling Unitarian movement for his theological heresies and for his relentless agitation against slavery.

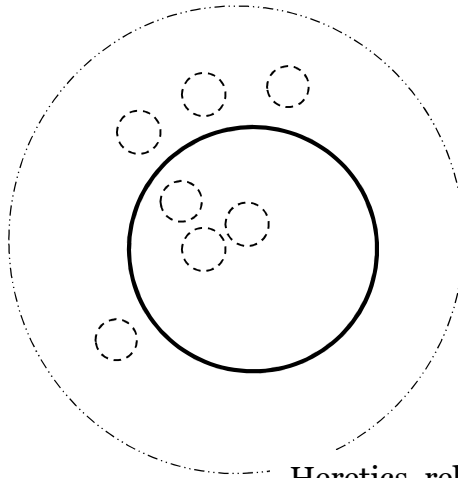
And in an even greater irony, we eventually came to institutionalize our creedlessness. I wish I knew how to explain this paradox. Freedom of conscience is what originally defined us when we split from the orthodox establishment. Freedom of conscience is one of the great gifts that liberal religion has given to society as a whole. We reserve the right to think for ourselves. We’ve established a religious tradition out of the non-establishment of religion.

We put our faith not in creeds but in people of action and goodwill. And though we love words, we don’t imagine that any one word (or small set of words) could ever capture our essence.

I’m even conflicted about the wonderful poetic words hanging above our door: “Standing on the Side of Love.” I mean, I like to sing the song from which the phrase originated. I’m pleased that, as a

catchphrase, “Standing on the Side of Love” has been resonating beyond our movement, and that the gold banners and t-shirts are becoming identifiable symbols of a UU presence at social justice rallies around the country. But theologically...it makes me uneasy. I mean, sure, I *aspire* to stand on the side of love, but I hesitate to claim that *I am there*. And I hesitate to create—even in my own mind—opposing camps of those who are for and against True Love.

I have the same trouble with the words of Edwin Markham on the cover of today’s order of service—even though I’ve tinkered with them, and attempted to convey their meaning graphically. Markham’s poem has been popular in UU circles for decades because it promotes the ideal of inclusion. But if you read it too literally it could suggest that it’s ok to draw people into our circle against their will.



So I don’t read Markham literally. And I try not to sing “Standing on the Side of Love” as if Love and I are best buds—as if I know love like nobody else knows love.

These are poetic expressions, and sometimes that’s enough. In fact, maybe we would be better acknowledging that all of our ideas are, at best, poetry. And surely none of our ethical principles are absolute. For example, our determination to honor the dignity of every individual person. I feel strongly about this. But since it’s a broad principle, I’ll only know what it means to me when I *apply* it—especially when I attempt to apply it along with a countervailing principle. For example: when I want to honor the sacredness of individual conscience, and at the same time I want to honor the interdependent web of all creation.

Heretics, rebels, just things to flout
They drew a circle to shut us out;
But love inspired the wit to win;
We drew a circle to take them in.

Edwin Markham, adapted

And now let’s throw in still another key UU principle: use of the democratic process. It’s an intangible principle that we attempt again to make real among ourselves as we consider a proposed congregational resolution—a statement that might be made in the name of BUF as a whole. Even though some of us will object.

The resolution, which we will vote on three weeks from today, is essentially a request: *from* BUF as a congregation, *to* the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Pacific Northwest District. Should the resolution pass, we will have effectively requested, as a congregation, that the District Board sign on to a public declaration in support of the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest, specifically in regard to the protection of their sacred sites and fishing rights as these are threatened by the transportation of fossil fuels.

The statement in question has been endorsed by denominational leaders in the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, and the United Methodist, American Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, and Episcopal churches. Because of our insistence upon congregational primacy (rather than a hierarchy

speaking for us), our UU denominational leaders cannot sign on to such statements unless the process is initiated at the congregational level. We have an extraordinarily careful process around collective statements because we're hesitant to have the group speak for everyone in the group. On the down side, these processes can feel convoluted and difficult.

As our discussions about the resolution progress, I urge you to speak your mind. There will be two more open discussion periods—a week from this Tuesday at noon, and two weeks from Tuesday in the evening.

So I encourage you to speak your mind on this, but first, I encourage you to change your mind. At least for a time. If you already have a position on the issue, take a few days to sit with and genuinely affirm the principles of those who will disagree with you.

I say this because I believe that there are strong principled arguments to be made for voting yes, or no, on this. In brief, voting yes being a legitimate affirmation of our interdependence with the earth and our native neighbors. And voting no being a legitimate affirmation of the rights of conscience, and thus reluctance to have BUF make collective statements.

People holding both positions, I believe, stand on the side of love, and on the side of freedom of conscience, and on the side of the environment. People holding both positions stand on the side of BUF. It's just that, confoundingly, love and freedom and conscience and BUF and the environment are each multifaceted (many sided) abstractions.

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Not wanting to feel so confounded, part of me wishes that questions like this would just go away. But when I spoke to you for the first time last fall, I pledged to get into the fray with you. I also urged you to prioritize. That is, to choose relevant conflicts. Engage with one another intelligently and with kindness and do not allow your energies to be absorbed by trivia.

So I won't wish this question away. Because it's about the application of two key principles that exist in tension with one another. Principles that, standing apart, frame us in a nice fuzzy glow...but when applied to actual conditions, provide much greater clarity about who we are.

Still, is this particular conundrum important enough to trouble ourselves over? I guess that will depend upon how much trouble it becomes.

Last Sunday we talked about four ways that congregations tend to engage with, and minister to, the communities beyond their walls. One of these ways is to create a supportive environment *within* the walls so as to empower one another to go out and do good work. We called this the Sanctuary orientation, and in the surveys you turned in after the service this was commended most as what BUF wants to be.

Another style, the Evangelical congregation (in the context of liberal religion) is one whose major emphasis is broadcasting—sharing the good news of a free, tolerant, rational approach to religion. This one received the fewest votes.

In between were the Civic and the Activist orientations. In both of these we would act together for tangible social change, with the Civic emphasis being working within established systems, and the Activist trying to change the system itself.

The descriptions of these four styles of social ministry are printed again today inside your order of service, along with the voting tallies. The categories and tallies are imprecise. But with nearly 100 responses I think they have some significance. I had asked people to draw a circle on the page to indicate *proportionately* how much emphasis they'd like to see on each orientation at BUF. The biggest vote getter, with almost one in five votes, was *all four styles in equal proportions*—a recognition that we not only need balance in ourselves, but we need one another to keep BUF in balance.

Then there were squiggly loops indicating a little of this and a little of that in every possible combination. It was encouraging to see the thoughtfulness in your scribbles, and to hear the enthusiasm with which you discussed this, in our group dialogues and one-on-one. You did not hesitate to claim your preferences for yourselves and for BUF as a whole, even though, in the sermon last week I had made a lot of wisecracks about how over the top, ineffective, and even hypocritical each of these styles can become when they are blinded by their passions...even after I noted how any of the styles can be criticized for being naïve and unrealistic.

But what I've seen and heard from you—whose idealism comes in all of these forms, and more—is that you all seem to hold out hope that humanity is worth saving.

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And you see a role in this for BUF. In part as a sanctuary, where it will be safe for our souls to grow and evolve because there is no set doctrine that we have to confess from the beginning and hold to forever.

But how will we implement our ideals of inclusive sanctuary? There was an attempt last spring to make this a more welcoming sanctuary for our Native American neighbors. But if I had been here, I would have voted no, when the proposal was put forth that we recite together one Sunday a month a statement recognizing this land as the traditional homeland of the native people.

I will make similar statements once in a while from the pulpit. And I will invite you to say or to sing out this truth. I will support placing a boulder out front with similar words. But I think it would be a mistake to create a mandated recitation.

I'm wary of congregational resolutions in general (and denominational resolutions at a national level) because the process—in order to be thoughtful and fair—always ends up being very complex. And with each complication there's room for misunderstanding.

This does not mean, however, that I think we can, or should try to, eliminate all such controversies. What I do hope is that we'll gradually learn—from trial and error—about what types of resolutions are important enough to be worth the risk. More than this I hope, and I believe, that the risk and the drama and the unwieldiness of this process will be much reduced, over time, as we learn to be trustworthy with one another.

Still, I'm often skeptical of congregational resolutions because they can be sources of cheap grace. Like New Year's resolutions, they can sound good without doing any good. But that is not always the case, which is why we have to assess them on a case by case basis.

This week marks the 15th anniversary of the interfaith “Declaration on Sexual Morality Justice and Healing.” Initiated by a Unitarian Universalist sexuality educator, this is a profoundly anti-oppressive statement that inverts conventional wisdom about how religious Americans think about sexuality. It was signed by 800 clergy and denominational leaders and published in the *New York Times*. The online version has now collected 4,600 signatures from representatives of a wide range of religious traditions.

Does it matter that the American public has a pre-existing concept of what religion says about sexuality? And does it matter that we counter this awful perception? I think it does.

And in general, I think it is useful—necessary even—to consciously choose our work, name our priorities, and tell our neighbors and our children what matters to us.

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I know there has been disenchantment with the resolution process in the past. I suspect that the disenchantment has been about the process itself and the perceived lack of respect experienced on all sides. I do not believe the tension has been out of lack of respect for our tribal neighbors.

So if, in this case, we collectively say yes to this resolution, I believe that we will be speaking in support of an authentic relationship. Our relationships with our tribal neighbors have not be recent or superficial. These relationship are not built on guilt or fantasies of tribal innocence or superficially wanting to be like the Indians.

Our growing relationships have been built over years of meetings and meals, study and action— not with imaginary Indians but with real people, our neighbors. This fall I attended several collaborative events held here involving BUF members and BUF leaders, Lummi members and Lummi leaders. These events were also well attended by members of our wider community who are just beginning to grasp what we're about here.

Because of the work of the BUF Native American Connections Committee, there will be a significant Lummi presence at our national General Assembly this summer. We'll also host a national teach-in about building relationships with native people. It is still early, but we have begun to develop a relationship with the Lummi people that could be a model for UU congregations.

If the congregation affirms it, I believe that this resolution will be authentic, because it rises out of the ideals that shape us—within and beyond these walls—even though we have trouble putting these ideals into words.

Still we must not say yes unless we are willing and able to stand together in tangible action, and over the long haul: against environmental destruction, in partnership with our neighbors, and in recognition of our common fate.

But the success or failure of this resolution, in my mind, will not be in how we vote: yea or nay. Our common fate rests more profoundly upon the trustworthiness we demonstrate to one another along the way.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Common Ground, by Ellen Hansen-Ellis

Speak, listen, learn and grow. If your heart's
open truth you'll know. Won't you
be with me, think with me, build with me, share with me? Talk with me, feel with me,
work with me care with me?
We can find common ground
We can find common ground