

«A Look at the Future of Unitarian Universalism»

Sermon by Rev. Sally White, October 11, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Reading

Our congregations are surrounded by the spiritually hungry and religiously homeless. Growing our movement is the moral equivalent of feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. Growth is not something that is merely organizationally desirable, growth is a moral and religious imperative. [<http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pagePlatform.html>]

Sermon

Several months ago I went to see the movie “Angels and Demons.” Part of Dan Brown’s conspiracy-theory-thriller involves the election of a new pope by the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church, gathered in conclave at the Vatican. Setting aside the literary drama of an ancient secret society plotting to influence the outcome of the papal election, the process of selecting a pope is a solemn and elaborate ritual, conducted in absolute secrecy, behind locked doors, with scrupulous attention to protocol. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_conclave]

Three months ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (the UUA), of which our congregation is a member, elected a new president. On June 27, the Reverend Peter Morales succeeded the Reverend William Sinkford, becoming the eighth president of the UUA. Although both the pope and the UUA president serve as the public faces and voices of their respective churches, the resemblance pretty much ends there. The UUA president is elected for four years – with the option of a second term – rather than for life. A UUA election – and particularly this year’s election – is a boisterous and rowdy affair, with energetic campaigning and outspoken supporters, with thousands of delegates – both lay and ordained – voting. This year Rev. Morales and his opponent, the Reverend Laurel Hallman, campaigned in person, in print, and electronically, producing DVDs, websites, YouTube videos, My Space and Facebook pages, Tweets, and e-mail messages. This morning, I draw on some of these resources to introduce you to our new president, to his vision of and for Unitarian Universalism, and to the possible implications of that vision for your congregation and mine over the next four years and beyond.

In talking about our new president, I will refer to him as “Peter.” In the interest of full disclosure, Peter was a classmate of mine at Starr King School for the Ministry. He graduated two years before me.

In his “Platform” statement on the website “moralesforuapresident.org,” Peter introduces his platform in these words:

Unitarian Universalism should be much more than the tiny, fringe religion that it is today. The need for liberal religion has never been greater. Hundreds of thousands of Americans long for spiritual depth, religious community and a place where they can work with others to create a better world.

Sadly, we have not responded effectively to the great longing for liberal spiritual community. Our movement is about the same size that it was when the Unitarians and the Universalists merged nearly 50 years ago. In the meantime, the American population has grown by 68 percent.

The opportunity for our faith is breathtaking. We could be the religion for our time. We can touch the lives of hundreds of thousands of seekers. We can be a more powerful force for compassion, justice, peace and environmental stewardship. However, we cannot seize the opportunity before us unless we are willing to make significant changes. We are not talking about minor adjustments. We need to change our religious culture. We need to become more welcoming, more relevant in the lives of our people, and more involved in the great moral issues of our time.

If we are to seize the opportunity before us, we must focus our energies in three primary areas: growth of our movement, prophetic social action, and the creation of a new ministry for a new century.

Peter's passion for the growth of Unitarian Universalism is not new-found. A 2006 sermon titled "Feed the Spiritually Hungry, House the Religiously Homeless," Peter talked about the irony of our movement's small size and failure to grow over the past fifty years. Nationally, Unitarian Universalists number about 150,000 members, and that number has hardly changed since 1961, when the Unitarian Universalist Association was formed by the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. Nationally, Unitarian Universalist churches report about 200,000 visitors per year (and there may be more, since many churches do not tally up the number of visitors who pass through their doors each year). Let me say this a different way. Every year, in each of our churches, we welcome more visitors than members. This is happening in the context of contemporary American society. Citing published sociological research on patterns of friendship and relationship in America in the twenty-first century, Peter then says:

This study reveals a level of human isolation that is unprecedented in American life—and perhaps unprecedented in human history. Americans are lonelier than they have ever been. The close friendships that are so essential to us are being eroded at a frightening rate. One in four Americans has no close personal relationship at all. Zero.

We need a chain saw to cut through the irony here. We have cell phones and internet connections and instant messaging and call waiting. Connecting to others electronically has never been easier. Yet we have fewer people we can really talk to than ever before. [<http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pdf/PCDKeynoteaddress.pdf>]

And then comes the part that relates to my congregation in Morehead City, and to your congregation here in Hillsborough, no less than to our Unitarian Universalist brothers and sisters in Denver, in Boston, in California, in Kansas City, in Sitka, Alaska. Peter says:

Who are these people who come to our churches by the thousands? They are disconnected people who seek connection. They are looking for relationships with people who share their values. They are starving for true community—for religious community. They are people who are seeking to transcend the soul-destroying banality of consumer society. They want the depth and meaning that comes from being faithful to a vision that transcends their lives. They want to sing together and worship together. They want to join with others to work for change and to bear witness to an image of human life that involves compassion and stewardship of the web of life.

Many of our visitors have children. They are searching for a place where kindness, understanding and acceptance are taught—a place to join with others in raising their kids. They know it takes a village to raise a child. They come to us hoping we will be that village.

The seekers who come to our doors every Sunday do not come to debate theology or politics. And they do not even come to find out whether or not they agree with us. We live in an age of the internet. Visitors have already checked us out. Most visitors come already knowing they are in basic agreement with our principles and ideals. I find that many of them have already read sermons on our web site.

The seekers who come to us by the thousands come to see how our church feels to them. The key question is emotional and spiritual, not intellectual. The real question, often not completely articulated in their minds, is: Are these my people? Do I truly belong here? [<http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pdf/PCDKeynoteaddress.pdf>]

These are the words of our new president, words that look to the human meaning behind numbers and statistics, words that look to the spiritual imperative that is embodied in being, and being part of, a religious community. Having framed the issue of growth as an emotional and spiritual problem, Peter goes on, in the same sermon, to point to a theological and a moral response, which he calls religious hospitality:

This is not a matter of good manners. I am not talking about being polite. I am talking about true religious hospitality. I am talking about being truly, honestly, welcoming. I am talking about realizing that each visitor is a vulnerable human being who is reaching out. True hospitality is a spiritual practice. It comes from deep inside. Religious hospitality is more than being superficially friendly. Religious hospitality involves being open to the dreams and the pain of each visitor. Religious hospitality means offering the newcomer the real human connection he or she is seeking.

For you and me to ignore a visitor is the moral equivalent of not feeding the hungry and not housing the homeless. Every Sunday hundreds and thousands come to us seeking a spiritual home. If we do not offer them deep hospitality we have acted immorally. It is wrong. It is sinful.

[<http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pdf/PCDKeynoteaddress.pdf>]

In matters of religious hospitality, as in matters of social action and public witness, matters of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism, in matters of governance, and spirituality, and professional ministry, Peter's vision is an active and interactive one; it is a call to responsiveness and to responsibility. Religious hospitality, he tells us, is not the responsibility of

some task force or department at the UUA in Boston; it is the responsibility of each one of our congregations (that's us!) and each and every person in each congregation (that's you and me!) – and this is for three reasons. First, genuine hospitality comes from the heart, and not from an edict or a mandate or a policy initiative. Second, religious hospitality is not really a social but rather a genuine religious practice. In Peter's words, "Genuine religious hospitality is not a means to some end. We are not hospitable in order to grow. Genuine openness to others is the practice of our religion just the way seeking social justice is. Ultimately, we grow because we are hospitable. And we are hospitable because we care about all the lonely people who come to us seeking liberal religious community." And third, because religious hospitality is a genuine spiritual practice, and as such, it has an effect on the practitioner and on her community. Speaking of the experience of Jefferson Unitarian Church, which grew during Peter's ministry there from 400 to 760 members, Peter says, "A good spiritual practice transforms the people who engage in it. Just as the practice of meditation makes us more aware and more at peace, so too the practice of hospitality makes us more open and compassionate. The practice of hospitality has made us more caring, more aware, less self centered."

In a similar way, we are called to work and to witness for peace and justice, equity and opportunity. In his platform, Peter says,

We have always been a people who believe that true spirituality bears fruit in acts of compassion and action to combat oppression and injustice. We point with pride to our forebears who were in the vanguard in the struggle against slavery, rights for women and the civil rights movement. Today our compassion and love for justice lead us to confront the great moral issues of our time: racism, human rights, immigration, economic justice, rights for GLBTQ people, and preservation of life on our planet. Today we are called to resist forces of ignorance and fear that give rise to militarism, nativism, and fundamentalism. [<http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pagePlatform.html>]

In a sermon on immigration titled "Southern Exposure," Peter parses the distinction between what is legal and what is moral, and ethical:

As a religious people who affirm human compassion, who advocate for human rights, who seek justice, we must never, never make the mistake of confusing a legal right with a moral right. The forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was legal. The importation and sale of African slaves was legal. Later on, in my lifetime, we had laws across the south designed to prevent African American citizens from voting. Apartheid was legal in South Africa. The confiscation of the property of Jews at the beginning of the Nazi regime was legal. The Spanish Inquisition was legal. Crucifying Jesus was legal. Burning Michael Servetus at the stake for his unitarian theology was legal. The fact that something is legal does not cut much ethical ice. The powerful have always used the legal system to oppress the powerless.

Yes, as citizens we should respect the rule of law. But more importantly, our duty is to create laws that are founded on our highest sense of justice, equity and compassion. [<http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pdf/SouthernExposure.pdf>]

As people of faith, as religious people, we must hold ourselves to a standard even higher than the law of the land. But we need not struggle alone. In his words, [“There is a better way. It is way that is urged upon us by every major religious tradition. We must choose the path of compassion and hope. We must choose a path that is founded on the recognition that we are connected, that we are all in this together. This is the teaching of every great tradition.”](http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pdf/SouthernExposure.pdf) [http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pdf/SouthernExposure.pdf]

Peter brings a special perspective to anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism in our society and in Unitarian Universalism. He is one among very few Latino ministers serving our movement, and, at the time of his election, the only one serving a large congregation. He is the first Latino leader of the UUA. He was born in San Antonio’s West Side barrio. He spoke Spanish before he spoke English. The first sermon he delivered was in Spanish. He has lived in Canada, in Spain and in Peru. He states, [“Multiculturalism is at the center of my experience. I understand the potential our faith has to attract progressive people from all backgrounds.”](http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pagePlatform.html) [http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pagePlatform.html]

Peter’s theology, like my own theology, is grounded in both experience of and faith in connection – connection to one another, connection to the holy within us and between us and beyond us. Those are my words; here are Peter’s: [“We humans are relational beings. We become fully human through enduring loving relationships. We transcend the prison of our own egos in community. It is through our relationships that we touch what is sacred.”](#) [repeat] It is through our relationships that we touch what is sacred.

And, regarding spiritual practice, [All of the great religious traditions upon which we draw place great emphasis on practices that help us connect to the deepest part of our selves, to one another, and to ultimate reality.](#)

[They teach us that spirituality is ultimately about connection-connection with self, with other humans, with life, with the vast and powerful mystery of the cosmos. They also teach us the value of reflection. We need to take time for whatever spiritual practice helps us reconnect.](http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pageFAQ.php) [http://www.moralesforuapresident.org/pageFAQ.php]

There is more to be said – the conversation is just beginning. As this new church year, and this new administration, begin, we Unitarian Universalists are presented with challenges and opportunities: for hospitality, for justice work, for spiritual growth, for connection. We are invited into conversation with one another and with Peter, who writes, [“As president, I will continue to listen. I plan to travel, to meet again or for the first time as many of you as I can. I also want to use 21st century technology to make this a democratic, interactive presidency.”](#)

The election of Peter Morales to the presidency of the UUA differed in many aspects from the election of a pope to lead the Catholic Church. But perhaps the biggest difference is the one that comes after the election, and is ongoing. As UUA president Peter offers us not edicts, but invitations; not encyclicals but challenges. The response is up to us – to you, and you, and me, and to your congregation and mine. How will you and I– individually and collectively – how will we

respond to the moral and religious imperative to feed the spiritually hungry and house the religiously homeless? Where, indeed, (to echo our special music this morning) will we choose to go, and how will we get there? At stake is not our immortal souls – but rather our own humanity.

In the meantime, there must also be time and space for us to rest in what our opening hymn called “the mystery of this hour.” Let us take a minute, now, in silence, to gather our spirits, to reconnect with the holy within, and between, and beyond us. The bell will lead us into silence, and music will lead us out.

Bell – Silence - Music

Amen and blessed be.