

Our Besetting Sins (1): Individualism ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

Sunday September 24, 2017

We want to grow! We want to share the good news of Unitarian Universalism with our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers. We want to fulfill the promise of a vital, spiritually transforming, world transforming faith. We want to grow, but we don't necessarily want to change. Like most other Unitarian Universalist congregations, and most other religious groups in this country, we have seen, at best, very modest growth lately. Last year, the Board asked me to fulfill the Annual Vision of Ministry by beginning an exploration of what it would take for this congregation to grow into your hoped for future. I talked to a lot of people and perused a lot of web sites and read a lot of books. I got a lot of good ideas about how we could tweak our systems to make them work better. I learned some new techniques. But mostly what I learned is that growth will not result from tweaks (or technical fixes). Growth happens when the system adapts to a changed context. In the language of organizational development, growth is the result of an adaptive solution – that is, a culture-busting, culture re-setting approach.

The best resource I came across in my search for real ways to move out of a plateau and into a growth stage was this book edited by Rev. Fred Muir, called *Turning point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*. It is available for purchase in the Book Corner after the service. Fred envisions our future as one marked by generosity, pluralism, and imagination. He says, “To arrive at this future we must liberate ourselves from a past that, while bright and bold for some, no longer serves Unitarian Universalism’s dream of being a vibrant twenty-first century faith. In fact, this past is replete with errors shaped by individualism,

exceptionalism, and a posture of anti-authoritarianism. These errors have become barriers preventing us from embracing our future.”

This is the first in a series of three sermons on those three errors: individualism, exceptionalism, and anti-authoritarianism. Former Unitarian Universalist Association President John Buehrens called them our besetting sins. Contemporary UU blogger Tom Schade calls them the unholy trinity.

Today we consider the first of the unholy trinity: individualism. Our First Principle calls us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That is a core tenet of our faith. We inherited it mostly from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19th century Transcendentalist who developed his philosophy of individualism in the nursery of American democracy. Fred Muir says, “The philosophy, theology, and spirituality of Emersonian individualism – that is, the uniqueness and joy of individual differences called individuality – became an ideology, a creed, and a dogma both in the United States and in Unitarian Universalism and is now corrupting both with a short-sighted and shallow vision.”

The idolization of the individual at the expense of any commitment to the common good is the shadow side of our First Principle. It is not a sustaining ideology because it separates us rather than uniting us. It encourages, yea it creates, great clumps of selfish bordering on narcissistic people who believe that they are entitled to whatever they want, with no ability to empathize with each other, listen to each other, care for and about each other, or tend to the most vulnerable. (I am talking more about our nation here than our congregation.) Both for democracy and for liberal religion individualism by itself is not a sustaining ideology. That is why many of my colleagues are in agreement that we ought to re-order our Seven Principles. If we started with a covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, we might do better at creating

congregations of people committed to the common good. We might do better at articulating and honoring our covenants; those promises we make to each other about how we will be when we are together. We might be better at welcoming guests and integrating new people into the life of the congregation. We might be better at asking each other to make a sacrificial commitment to this beloved community. Rest assured, friends, I am not advocating the elimination of our First Principle. I am just suggesting that we move it down the list a little bit. Shouldn't our First Principle be the one that moves us into loving and nurturing relationship? That reminds us of our profound connectedness?

Our reading this morning is from an essay in Fred's book written by Rev. Cheryl Walker. Cheryl happens to be the minister of the UU church in the other Wilmington (North Carolina). She and I occasionally get emails meant for the other. Cheryl is an African American who grew up in a family that was committed to the Nation of Islam. Cheryl wrote about the strength and pride and security that comes from being part of a religious community that values conformity above all. But in the end, she could not locate herself in that conformity. Her religious pilgrimage eventually brought her to Unitarian Universalism. At first, she was thrilled to find this faith that was so much the opposite of her childhood experience. Blessed freedom! Freedom to explore! Freedom to disagree! Freedom to be a skeptic, a doubter, a heretic!

And then Cheryl discovered the shadow side. "There was no discipline of faith. It required little of me. This group of people had no cohesion beyond a single congregation, and even within congregations there was little or no cohesion. Everyone had come thinking this religion was made just for them. Therefore everyone thought everything should be for them. This wasn't individuality, it was individualism, worship of the individual."

What is the antidote to worship of the individual? All of us need to look up and look around and focus on something greater than ourselves. Centering our faith on our covenants is part of the solution. Really practicing covenantal faith means not just making promises, but keeping those promises. And breaking those promises. And holding ourselves and each other accountable for the breaks and leading ourselves and each other back into right relationship.

You know what another antidote to the worship of the individual is? Themed ministry. When the entire congregation agrees to focus on a core idea rather than everybody thinking about and talking about whatever is on their minds, community happens. That is why Soul Matters is so very important to our growth as a congregation. As individuals with inherent worth and dignity, you will grow and be transformed if you follow the monthly spiritual discipline, and listen as much to the ideas and experiences of others as you do to your own internal voice. And as a community of faith we will grow together in our capacity to practice genuine hospitality.

Cheryl Walker concludes, “True community doesn’t happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group.” Soul Matters helps confer a group identity. She goes on, “It doesn’t mean we go to the extremes of everyone wearing the same clothing, everyone praying the same way, if at all, or everyone believing the same things. If we were to do that, we would give up what makes us unique on the religious landscape. However, it does mean that we move individualism from the center of our focus and replace it with a new concept of shared community, in which everyone gives up a little so that we can gain a lot. In true community we gain a lot.”

Think about the ways you might take yourself out of the center, and center the needs of others instead. Last week we considered what it means to be a people

of welcome. We reflected on the surprising idea that it might not be a bigger welcome table that is needed, but each of us already at the table making ourselves smaller to make room for others. It is all about each of us giving up a little so that all of us might gain a lot.

If Fred Muir is right, we have been, despite our best intentions, practicing a religion replete with errors. Can we accept that notion, come to terms with the need to change? To repent? To reframe things in the light of new understanding? To move forward we might want to take a page from the spiritual discipline of our Jewish neighbors, who are currently in the midst of the Days of Awe, the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A time for self-reflection, repentance, and atonement. Remember that Judaism is a religion of the communal rather than the individual. Here's what UU minister Lynn Ungar says about the Days of Awe. "The litany of atonement that a Jewish congregation recites on Yom Kippur is a long list of things that we have done, and thus apologize for all together. And it doesn't matter whether you, personally, have done any particular piece of the long list of errors. The whole community atones as one. You take care of your own business before Yom Kippur arrives, but when it comes to apologizing to God, the community takes responsibility as a whole. It might seem a bit unfair to be asked to apologize for things that you haven't done, but I have to say that this notion of a whole community ritual of atonement feels deeply right to me. Think about it. Racism, for instance, is a grave wrong that belongs to a community as a whole. You can't really blame any given white person for the unearned privileges that their race grants them. No single white person asked to live in a system that gives them unfair advantages in education, employment, housing, the justice system and much more. And no single white person can really choose to give those unfair advantages back. It takes the community, the whole system, recognizing the long

history and continuing practice of injustice in order to make reparations and move toward lasting change. And no one of us can take the blame for the terrible human cost to our environment. We are all just going about our business, doing what we need to do, shaping the world to our comfort and convenience as best we can. I certainly hope that each of us is making conscious choices to minimize the damage to the planet caused by our living on it, but each life carries a cost, and all of us together are doing tremendous damage to the Earth and its creatures. We need to find a way to atone as a community, as neighborhoods and countries, and as the human race, to make reparations so that there is room for all beings to flourish. Each of us needs to take responsibility for our own actions, to atone for the things that we have broken, the damage that we have done. But something more is also required. Together, as human communities, we need to hold up the ways we participate in large systems of brokenness that privilege a few at the cost of many, so that we can begin to find ways to atone, to make reparations, to make things whole once again. Yom Kippur calls us to the difficult, ongoing work of recognizing that if we are all one—one human family, one precious planet—then we must all take responsibility for rebuilding the whole. May we embrace that work with courage, so that all may be inscribed in the Book of Life.”

In that spirit, I invite you to turn to *Responsive Reading #637*. Your response is in italics.