

Our Besetting Sins #3: Anti-Authoritarianism ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

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Where do we come from? We come from a long line of heretical thinkers. We come from the people who, back in the early centuries of Christianity, clung to a radical monotheism even after the doctrine of the Trinity became the official creed of the Christian church. Our first name, Unitarian, refers to the belief in the unity of the divine. Unity as opposed to trinity. From that belief in the oneness of the divine comes our commitment to religious diversity. People may have different approaches to naming and worshipping the divine, but we need not, and should not, fight about whose god is bigger and better. There is only one God, known by different names. We are all loved by that God. Or, as the court preacher to King Sigismund, Francis David, said, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

Our second name, Universalist, refers to another heresy: the belief that God, benevolent and omnipotent, would not condemn any person to eternal damnation. The original theological meaning of Universalism was a belief in universal salvation. All souls, not just some souls. All souls saved. We come from people who, for close to two thousand years, have clung to their belief in a God of Love. Not judgement. Not arbitrariness and capriciousness. Just Love. From that belief in the Divine as an expression of love comes our commitment to practice radical hospitality. If all souls are saved in the afterlife, should we not, in this life, treat all souls with respect and love as well?

Those are the doctrines that, historically, make up our many-syllabled name. The original meaning of Unitarian Universalism. But of course, we come from people who evolve and change. So, add to the story that we come from people

whose doctrine of human nature was as heretical as our doctrines of God and salvation. Rejecting the notion of original sin, our people asserted that we are all born in original blessing. Each one of us is born with the capacity for good. When the American Unitarian Association was established back in the 1820s, representing the official break between Unitarian Christianity and the rest of liberal American Protestantism, it was as much a break over our doctrine of human nature as it was a disagreement over the nature of the divine. From that belief in the essential goodness of humanity comes our First Principle: the affirmation in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We also come from a long line of people who understood religion to be a choice made at the age of reason, not something imposed by King or patriarch. Our people are the people in the Radical Reformation who advocated for the heretical practice of adult baptism; they wanted the ritual of baptism to be an enactment of a person's assent to the pillars of their chosen faith. Chosen faith. Our people also argued for a flat and inclusive organizational structure for our religion, what theologian James Luther Adams calls the radical dispersion of power. No ordained hierarchy exercising undue power over the faithful. No imposition of doctrine or belief, no notion of infallibility. And eventually, a strict separation of church and state so that the power of the state could not impose religion, and the power of the church could not impose narrow beliefs.

Those radical reformers introduced the form of religious governance that today we call congregational polity. This means that the basic unit of power in our system is the local congregation – there is no hierarchy that makes decisions about the way our churches are run. The local congregation has the privilege of ordaining and calling ministers, determining its own budget, choosing its own leaders. In a little over a year, you will, together enjoy one of the most significant exercise of

congregational power when you gather to offer a call to your new settled minister. It is a profoundly moving experience. Be sure to be there.

So that is where we come from. Thousands of years of theological heretics, hundreds of years of religious radicals. The next question posed in our hymn is “Who are we?” Who are we today? For sure we are people who have continued to evolve and adapt over the years. Where once a Unitarian was a liberal Christian who believed in the unity of God and the personhood of Jesus, today we encompass a much wider diversity of beliefs about the divine. There was an old joke that a Unitarian was somebody who believed in at the most one God. A recognition that by the middle of the 20th century we had incorporated religious humanism, agnosticism and atheism into our congregations to such an extent that Unitarian Christianity was no longer close to the dominant theological stance. But the joke really doesn’t work anymore, as more recently we have incorporated so many people whose personal spiritual practice is earth based; people who believe that the divine dwells in all living things. God, rather than being a single transcendent other, is a spirit or an essence that is immanent. Our first name, Unitarian, means so much more than it did historically. The unity it affirms is the unity of all creation. Who are we? The big tent that welcomes a vast spectrum of beliefs about the divine, about the meaning of life, about our place in the universe.

The meaning of our second name, Universalist, has also evolved. Most of us today have a very different understanding of salvation than our ancestors did. We tend to think of salvation as something that happens in the here and now, as we develop and grow and are transformed, rather than something that happens in an unknowable after life. Universalism now represents an embrace of the essential unity of the human religious impulse. It is a doctrine of the spirituality of globalization.

If that is where we come from and who we are, then it's all good, right? Unfortunately, there is a shadow side to our faith, to our organizational structures, and to our ways of being together. Somehow, embedded in that radical dispersion of power our ancestors advocated for was a deep distrust of authority. Even as we freed ourselves from tyranny, we continued to nurture that distrust in ways that do not serve us well today. This is what Fred Muir is talking about when he points out the third in the trinity of errors that beset us. A knee-jerk anti-authoritarianism that is not based on reason or recent experience or contemporary context.

Sure, long ago kings imposed their religion on their people. But the Edict of Torda is now 450 years old. Don't you think it is time we got over some of our distrust of authority? Sure, there were religious structures designed to keep the vast majority of practitioners ignorant and indebted. But for hundreds of years we have been free of them. Don't you think it is time we got over our inherent distrust of all attempts to organize ourselves effectively?

I am not a fan of many of the standard jokes about Unitarian Universalism, but I feel outrage when I hear people repeating the trite comment that we are a 'disorganized' rather than an organized religion. Do we really want to brag about being ineffective? Do we really believe that organizational structure is an inherent evil? Structure is a tool that allows us to best deploy our resources – financial and human. I have a whole sermon ready for you on "the organization of power and the power of organization." But you'll have to wait three weeks to hear it. Tomorrow I leave for three weeks of study leave and vacation. When I return, I plan to wax poetic about power and organization.

But distrust of authority doesn't just manifest itself in the avoidance of effective organizational structure. It also gets very personal. Far too often, the individuals who step up and agree to serve in leadership roles in our congregations

and beyond pay a painful price. I have served a congregation where people told me that agreeing to a term on the board was agreeing to have a target pasted on your back for the length of your term. I have served a congregation where, when I asked about a gathering of former board chairs, looked down at their feet and admitted that most board chairs leave the church soon after the end of their term.

Sadly, our UU congregations have too often replicated the dysfunctions of the larger culture. As American democracy has devolved into an exhausting, continuous game of “gotcha” our practice of faithful democracy has also devolved. Leaders are chosen, then immediately we all seem to set to work trying to trip them up, catch them out, call them out for their imperfections, and undermine their ability to get anything done. We have totally unrealistic expectations of our leaders, and at the same time we are howling our disappointment in them, we are undermining their authority at every turn and wondering why they don’t get anything done. And I am talking about the treatment of lay leaders, peers, friends and neighbors. Don’t even get me started on how ministers are treated in congregations with an embedded mistrust of authority!

In your history you have had some long and very successful ministries. This suggests that there is some trust of authority in your congregational DNA. Most recently, you have had some difficult relationships with ministers. There is some anxiety around ministerial authority. Ironically, your form of policy governance, that darned organizational structure, has been extraordinarily helpful in allowing me to establish a positive and mutually collaborative relationship with the lay leadership here and with all of you. Clarity about boundaries and lines of communication and accountability made it possible for all of us to do our jobs even before we knew each other well enough to extend trust that was based on actual experience of trustworthiness. You might say that we faked it until we made it.

Or you might say that we imagined the church we wanted, and lived into it. You know what? Fred Muir says that the antidote to anti-authoritarianism is imagination! Imagination. That is, being able to envision and live into a way of being that you haven't yet experienced. 450 years ago, nobody had ever experienced religious pluralism. But a combination of a courageous young king and a vision court preacher led to that first official experiment. We are the fruit of that noble experiment.

Where are we going? I hope with all my heart that we are going to live into the full promise of our faith in ways yet unseen and unimagined. I hope that we are going to learn to trust each other, to nurture and support our leaders, to nurture and support our ministers. I hope that we are going to create covenants that are a true articulation of our aspirations and our intentions. I hope those covenants will profoundly shape our organizational structures and our relationships. I hope we can engage in serious and civil conversations, and disagree vigorously with each other, and then come together in love and trust and do what is best for our beloved communities. I close with a few more lines of prayer from the pen of Eric Cherry:

Help us to see our power – especially when we feel powerless.

And, guide us through uncertainty and fear into serenity and trust.