

## Proclaiming UU Values in Cincinnati

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for shared worship with First Church and St. John's

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Here are some thoughts on Unitarian Universalism

We enjoy our individualism so much that we would rather shoot ourselves in both feet than work together to create a strong institution that sustains a dynamic publishing house, that educates, credentials and counsels clergy, religious educators, administrators and musicians, that finances staff and programming work, that recruits individuals to develop mission and enact the vision of our association, and that actually has the grass roots support to change local, state, and national public policy instead of complaining about it. Only an institution can do this, not individuals.

I wrote that. I wasn't even mad at the time. My understanding of the limits of individualism comes from years of observing it up close and personal in our congregations. Maybe you have had the same experience. How freeing, how liberating, how fulfilling to follow our individual faith paths, and also how utterly limiting when we can't cooperate as a team.

In 1998 the sociologist Robert Bellah was invited to speak at General Assembly in order to help us understand the sociological impact of our independent, individualistic heritage (one thing at least that we tend to agree on is that Unitarian Universalism was and is shaped by individualistic "free thinking"). One of my favorite quotes about us is by the great Unitarian organizer, Henry Whitney Bellows, who wrote in 1859 "having achieved our freedom, we know not what to do with it; having cultivated our wills, consciences, and intellects to the utmost at present possible, they cry out for objects they do not find."<sup>1</sup>

So Bellah noted that if we Unitarian Universalists really value community and the creation of a good society we would switch our 7th Principle ("The interdependent web of all being") with our 1st Principle ("the inherent worth and dignity of all persons"). As we have it the individual is first and the community is last. Bellah goes on to explain, "I am saying that if you believe in [and here he quotes our 4th Principle] "a free and responsible search for truth," the truth is that our nature is social."<sup>2</sup> I'm not advocating changing our principles, but I am asking us to consider their order, its impact, and our choices. Perhaps our meaning here on this planet is social as well, and in this city is social as well.

The water was unexpectedly turned off four times at First Church last week. Something about bursting water pipes not being where they were supposed to be. No working toilets, no water. Construction is an adventure.

When folks at First Church first began to consider life under construction we planned to worship at First Church, to sort of be Yankees about the whole thing. To gut it out as crusty individuals in our blisteringly hot sanctuary, helping one another into outdoor portalettes. I laugh because the picture is so amusing. Commendable, but also amusing. When do you just stop and ask for help?

So we chose to ask for help. Nervously, but ask we did. And the kind people here, at St. John's, Frank, Bruce, Rachel, other lay members, responded. How glad I am that we chose to

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<sup>1</sup> quoted in Robinson, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Bellah, 7.

worship here with you this summer. How grateful I am to the many people affiliated with St. John's who have gone out of their way to plan, to share, to make us feel welcome. You have been truly hospitable. Not only to spare us portalettes and heat, but because our request and your generosity affirms my sense of community, and my hopes for a greater Unitarian Universalist community among our congregations and within Cincinnati. Having cultivated ourselves to the utmost, what other objects might we find, together?

For too long First Church and St. John's have had an unspoken, and sometimes spoken "competition," for members, ministers, musicians, education programs. What a waste of our time, and lack of awareness for what is special about our individuality. Both of our congregations thrive because we offer the same values and faith, but different cultures and interests. This is a benefit to all our members, and to the greater Cincinnati area, which needs our Unitarian Universalist voice and mission. Our congregations are stronger together, than if one or the other existed alone.

So Frank and I have a novel idea, let's forgo the individual competition and find a higher community prize, some object or work of value, a project and shared understanding that captures our purposes and principles in a more meaningful way while creating a good society. "A pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real." So does a congregation and a community.

Two weeks ago Frank and I met with Cassandra Robinson at the Urban League in Avondale. After attending several local meetings Frank became concerned with police community and race relations and suggested our congregations learn more. Ms. Robinson organizes the "Friends of the Collaborative," a volunteer group of organizations committed to support the Collaborative Agreement on Police Community Relations of 2002. The parties of the Collaborative Agreement include the City of Cincinnati, the Fraternal Order of Police, and plaintiffs represented by the ACLU. The Collaborative Agreement includes specific instructions on the contentious use of force by police, civilian review, evaluation, and community problem oriented policing (known as "CPOP").

Think back to April 2001. The riots in Cincinnati shocked a city and a nation. Whether you live in the city or suburbs or over the river in Kentucky, this matters to all of us. A vital metropolitan area depends of a vital urban core. Together we stand and divided we fall. Our history of police community relations has been one long fall, and the future of the collaborative agreement is not assured.

Few of us realize that the Collaborative expires in the summer of 2007. After five years it ends. Many of us (and I have heard this also from the Executive Director of the Cincinnati Urban League, and from Al Gerhardstein, a Collaborative lawyer) wonder about the future of Cincinnati when this agreement expires. What restraints and changes will be in place? We still have the same Chief of Police and a similar police force. What will happen in 2007 to make it different from 2001? It is no secret that the Collaborative has been contentious since its agreement, that every party has complained about it, wanted out of it at some time. When it expires what insurance do we have that the good society we have worked so hard to create here will continue?

Enter the "Friends of the Collaborative," and a way our two congregations can do more to create a good society, with our UU values, together. The Friends are always looking for new partners, like congregations. As a member of Friends we would agree to freely rent space to CPOP working groups working on community issues. We would publicize Friends and Collaborative issues. We would attend quarterly Collaborative updates to learn more. Frankly, I was surprised they asked so little of members. In addition, any interested person, whether you live in the neighborhood or not, can join an active CPOP team to work on a specific issue. I even have a telephone number you can call (559-5450).

(Explain). Wonderful model. Time consuming model. Not flashy.

Marge Piercy writes

The work of the world is common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident. Greek amphoras for wine or oil, Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums but you know they were made to be used. The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real."

Neither Frank nor I insist that we do this together. Instead we ask you to consider if one or both of our congregations have interest in this work. Does it appeal to you? It enacts the words of our mission statements, "an urban Unitarian Universalist community that works for justice, dignity and respect for the web of life," "committed to creating a safe and caring community, working for social justice." It enacts our UU purposes and principles, "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations," "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." So I ask each of you to search your minds and hearts.

For too long we have allowed ourselves to be distracted by petty concerns. What if we stand together as a voice of liberal religion and say, community oriented policing counts, it creates a good society, and we are willing to do the common work to achieve a common goal. Too often folks say we don't stand for anything. We stand for invaluable things, we are just too used to hiding our lights under a bushel. It is time to take off the camouflage and let ourselves shine.