

Pushing the Envelope and Stretching our Comfort Zones

Sermon for the 200th Anniversary
of American Unitarianism

Sunday, May 19, 2019

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reading: “Visitors in the Struggle for Racial Justice,” by Rev. Aisha Ansano
Reflection by Jed Shapiro (printed after sermon)
Hymns: Answering the Call to Love (J. Shelton); #193 Our World Is One World; #1008 When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place.

Reading: [Visitors in the Struggle for Racial Justice](#)

This is a reading from 2017, written by the Reverend Aisha Ansano, a UU minister who is a young woman of color. She is a graduate of Stanford University and Harvard Divinity School.

No matter what tactics and methods racial justice activists use, the general response of society will be a collective head-shaking and tsk-tsk-ing — because what people are actually complaining about are not the specific tactics that are being used in the struggle for racial justice, but that the struggle for racial justice exists at all.

I imagine that for most people, the immediate reaction to that statement is defensiveness. “I really don’t think that the struggle for racial justice shouldn’t exist,” some might respond. “I just think there are better ways to go about it than blocking traffic and making me late for work. I get annoyed and frustrated and it really doesn’t convince me to join your fight.”

What, exactly, is going to convince that person to join the fight? Picket signs on the side of the road? Then they’ll just think, “Look at those troublemakers disturbing the peace over there,” as they drive on their way to work. Then they’ll promptly forget about it.

It’s not the specific methods that are making people uncomfortable. It’s the fact that the struggle for racial justice is seeping into their awareness in ways that they can’t ignore.

Think about it in terms of this metaphor: You’re visiting a foreign country where the customs are very different from what you are used to, and the language is different, and some of the things they do are not only different but make you feel deeply uncomfortable. As a guest in that country, it is not for you to say that the things that people who live there are doing are wrong. Instead, your role is to learn, to pay attention and try to understand how things work, and to adapt. But if you do something that goes against their norms, it’s also your role as a guest to not insist that they let you do things however you want to do them. It is your role as a guest to pause and consider what you’re doing.

White people tend to be visitors to the struggle for racial justice, ones that aren’t forced to be there but can choose to come in and leave whenever they like. People of color reside in the struggle for racial justice by virtue of their race. As people who are constantly in the struggle, people of color have the right to make claims on what they find okay and not okay, what they see as helpful and not helpful.

Sermon: Pushing the Envelope and Stretching our Comfort Zones

I don’t like making people uncomfortable. I avoid it when I can, but sometimes I can’t. So I try to remind myself that I don’t have a lot of control over the level of discomfort another person experiences, and even less over how they process their discomfort. It’s not in my control whether they choose to be present and curious with their discomfort—or not. It’s their choice. In addition, I don’t like being uncomfortable myself. Yet key transitions in my life would not have happened if I had avoided stretching my own comfort zones. Pushing the envelope in my own life has led to new insights, growth, freedom, and blessed connections.

Discomfort, upset and upheaval are enduring themes in the history of our Unitarian Universalist religious tradition—and still are present in our thriving UU denomination.

From the beginning, some UUs have pushed the envelope. From the beginning, others have pushed back. *That's too fast, that's too radical, too demanding.* Yet many of the challenges which generated controversy and confusion in earlier times are advances now seen with pride; they are now seen as obvious ways of being Unitarian Universalist.

In March I was visiting old friends who live just outside the city of Asheville, North Carolina. Getting to their house in a rental car brings me up a hill through a few stop signs, and I pass an evangelical church, part of the Nazarene denomination. At the corner of its lot is one of those glass and plastic signs with an inspirational message that changes every week or so. On this day, the Nazarene Church sign says: "Every human bears the image of God. Act accordingly." I say to myself, *Wow! That's Unitarian theology!*

And by Unitarian, I mean the Unitarian Christianity of 200 years ago in Massachusetts. Knowing how notorious, radical and polarizing such a message was back then, it is remarkable to see a conservative church proclaiming it now. *Every human being bears the image of God. Act accordingly.*

This Unitarian idea, which caused a religious fight over 200 years ago is now mainstream, promoted as wisdom to live by.¹

Allow me to give some background. From the 1600s into the 1800s in Massachusetts, both church and government were dominated by one kind of Christianity—Puritan Calvinism. (Other faiths need not apply, or they'd be chased out of state.) The Calvinist churches were Congregational. Though each one was independent, they were connected to one another by their ministers.

They shared a stern theology. In brief: Because we inherited sin from Adam and Eve, human beings are inherently depraved. *No damn good!* And damned to hell. Only the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus can save us, *yet* most of us are going to hell anyway. No good deeds could save you. Not even accepting Jesus as your personal savior could give you a change of address for eternity. Every soul's fate was predestined, or determined before birth. Somehow the Calvinists knew they'd all won that lottery.

This was the religion into which William Ellery Channing was born, in 1780. He grew up in

Newport, Rhode Island. His family was privileged--white, wealthy and educated. His grandfather was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the family owned slaves. Channing lost his father when he was young. He became a devout and serious young man. His spiritual practice of asceticism, or self-denial, left him with lifelong health problems. At the age of 15, he left Newport and went up to Cambridge to attend Harvard College.ⁱⁱ After he graduated, he became a Congregationalist minister, serving the Federal Street Church in Boston. Channing gathered around him a growing circle of liberal ministers. These men were drawn to new forms of Biblical scholarship, which generated liberal ideas about human nature and the nature of God. They were anti-Calvinist, rejecting the view that human beings were inherently worthless. They affirmed the human freedom to choose between good or evil ways. As they saw it, the life of Jesus showed it was possible for us to grow in likeness to God, because everyone bears the divine image. Just as the sign says at the Nazarene Church.



William Ellery Channing

As liberal theology spread more openly among more ministers, there was a reaction against it. Conservative ministers accused the liberals of being *Unitarian*. In the early 1800s this was a swear word, an epithet, an insult. Over in England there were people called Unitarians, and they were known to be radical and scary. Openly non-conformist, they made aggressive anti-Trinitarian arguments. They were heretics! The Boston liberals didn't want to be seen as radical and scary heretics. "No, we're not Unitarian," they said to their conservative attackers. "We are just like you, dear brothers, but we want you to see that humans are worthy of love. We want you to see that God is more loving than you have been saying."

Perhaps William Ellery Channing didn't like making folks uncomfortable. He wanted all the Congregationalist ministers to remain friends. Because the liberals felt that God's love was the purpose of Jesus' ministry, a theological fine point like the doctrine of the Trinity didn't seem to them worth fighting over. However, in the words of historian Gary Dorrien, the conservatives "brought the fight to them."ⁱⁱⁱ Conservative ministers denounced the liberals from pulpits and in printed pamphlets—the social media tools of the day. Their attacks prodded William Ellery Channing to take that Unitarian label and make it a badge of honor. In early May of 1819, Channing and other Massachusetts ministers rode by stagecoach to Baltimore where he preached the sermon for the ordination of a new minister there by the name of Jared Sparks. UU historians refer to it as the Baltimore Sermon. Channing's title was "Unitarian Christianity."

In preaching for an hour and a half, Channing laid out his Unitarian manifesto. Since we have a meeting today after church, I'll summarize it in a minute and a half. First, human beings bear the image of the divine, and we can grow in likeness to God. Second, the Bible was not written by God. It was written by people, for people. We should read it with reason and humility, which are gifts of God. Reason is the friend of faith, not its enemy. Third, Channing said, a careful study of the New Testament shows us that Jesus was the son of God, but that does not mean he *was* God. He was not. Jesus came not as a sacrifice, but to bring more people to God by his teachings and the spiritual example of his life.

All of this was a stunning declaration. That founding moment of Unitarianism in America was two hundred years and two weeks ago. Pushing the envelope, indeed. To many of the Christians I know today, none of it is a shocking perspective—it's quite common. In 1819, however, it caused a firestorm.

The printed form of the Baltimore sermon was widely circulated and read—and popular. It "inspired a critical mass" of liberal pastors to claim their faith and feel a sense of togetherness.^{iv} About 100 Congregational churches in Massachusetts converted to Unitarian theology, with another 35 new churches founded as Unitarian ones. Gary Dorrien says: "pamphlet wars [about this] ... raged

throughout the next two decades."^v Congregations broke apart, and often it was the conservatives who lost the church property and the Unitarians who kept it. (That's why so many Massachusetts congregations known as First Parish are Unitarian churches today.) For the next century, some Congregationalists would make this joke about the Unitarians: "They kept the furniture; we kept the faith."^{vi}

Today, we see this founding story as one of proud success. American Unitarianism's founding split from Calvinism was probably inevitable, but it was also traumatic. Imagine the pain involved with friends divided over faith, leaving their churches or losing them. Perhaps they no longer spoke to friends they had sat with and prayed with for years. It's understandable that Channing resisted going to the edge of his comfort zone.

While Channing and his Unitarian colleagues seemed radical to other Christians, they were quickly seen as old-fashioned by the next generation of Unitarians. Less than 20 years after the Baltimore Sermon, leaders of the Transcendentalist movement began to challenge the tradition. They questioned the primary status of the Holy Bible, when other faiths have holy books which also can provide insight and wisdom. The Unitarian Transcendentalists blew open traditional expectations about where you can find religion and how you can grow, spiritually. They said your own personal experience and your own intuition can be sources of spiritual knowledge. The Bible was not necessary to be religious, they said. Furthermore, you didn't even have to go to church to find God! In these times, we know plenty of people who experience the holy by hiking in the mountains or kayaking on the river. Many of us deepen our sense of the sacred by engaging with music and art, serving the community, or sitting in solitude. We encourage those practices. In the 1830s, however, to promote such things was to push the envelope of what it means to be religious.

Ideas and attitudes that we now accept as obvious, good and sensible were not easily accepted at the start. This religious movement of ours has always been pushing the envelope, causing some dismay, stretching comfort zones. This is our heritage and our calling. This is what it means to deepen our understanding, expand our embrace of compassion, answer the call of love.

These days, for example, women ministers make up more than half our UU clergy. Many ministers are out of the closet as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. A growing number of UU leaders are clergy of color. It seems obvious that an inclusive and open faith would be like this. In hindsight it seems obvious. But every step required stretching our comfort zones and enlarging our sense what we can do and be as a religious movement.

A recurrent challenge for us is the work of racial justice. In spite of our idealism, the UU movement has persistently reflected the cultural dominance of whiteness. Our movement has reflected the culture of white supremacy, the culture by which this continent was colonized, and the culture by which people of color have been harmed, excluded and marginalized. In our denomination, patterns and attitudes of exclusion have been painfully evident to UUs of color for decades, while many of us in privileged identities have naively or conveniently overlooked those patterns and attitudes. Things have begun to open up, thanks in large part to loving and brave leaders of color.

Frank discussions of racist patterns and inequities in our lives and in our institutions can make many of us uncomfortable. But as with all movements for equality and equity, let's remember the longer histories of discomfort and pain and harm which have caused people of color to speak out and call for change. Those of us with a white identity can choose to keep our distance from the work of addressing racist patterns and behaviors. We can choose to engage or to withdraw.

The Reverend Aisha Ansaro is a new young UU minister in Massachusetts. She pursued the ministry at Harvard, as Channing had. Of course, Channing had no classmates or clergy colleagues other than white males—anything else was a distant idea. In an essay, Reverend Ansaro has coined the term “visitors in the struggle for racial justice.” She says people of color who resist injustice are pushing the envelope; and it's making some white folks uncomfortable, even defensive. She says: “No matter what tactics and methods racial justice activists use, the general response ... will be a collective head-shaking and tsk-tsk-ing.”

She says: “It's not the specific methods that are making people uncomfortable. It's the fact that

the struggle for racial justice is seeping into their awareness in ways that they can't ignore.”

I find this a challenging push. How much does my desire to guard my comfort keep me from engaging in causes or supporting them, even though my values indicate I would want to be involved? How much does a challenge to my ideas of *how things ought* to be done result in avoidance? These are good questions for the practice of reflection about stretching my comfort zones.

[Most aspects of life that we see as mainstream and ordinary now are the result of hard work, big changes, pushing the envelope. Nobody was comfortable, even those who led the changes.]

Historically, nothing changes without discomfort. It's messy and unclear. In times of challenge, discomfort and change, the spiritual work is to enter the messiness and engage with it. Few of us are likely to enjoy the messiness; yet we can be grateful for the insights we gain going through it. We can be mindful of our experience. We can choose how to respond—whether to react or whether to respond with curiosity.

As Unitarian Universalists have always done, we can move forward in faith. We can go forward without knowing exactly where we'll go or what we'll experience along the way. We can't be sure what we'll be learning—or what we'll be letting go of. That is the nature of growth—messy and unclear.

As both participants in a religious movement and congregation and as individual people, I think it's important to recognize our feelings of discomfort and challenge as we go through our days. [We can notice when we're being stretched. We can be curious about the lessons we might be able to learn.]

I'm starting a spiritual practice about this and invite you to consider doing it with me. I will try to sit still and reflect on the moments of a day, or the moments of the past week. When did I feel my comfort zone being stretched? When did you? Perhaps it was a new concept or perspective to consider, a challenging conversation you had, or a new task to engage with. For you or for me, the stretch could be an unfamiliar place to visit or a food or flavor to taste for the first time. It could be the loss of a valued possession or the absence of a loved one that stretches us. It could be looking for a job or ending one or going in for a medical

procedure. In reflecting on our days, I hope we can have the grace and patience to look at places where we feel stretched or uncomfortable. May we have the grace to be present for our own experience, and to be intentional about how we respond.

As Unitarian Universalists have always done, we can move forward in faith. *This* is our faith: Every human being bears the image of the divine. Each one of us has the capacity to think for ourselves, and reason with one another, and learn from one another.

We have the gift of compassion. We have the ability to love. We have the freedom to choose how to act. We have the choice to act with courage. So may we strive to live. Amen.



Personal Reflection—

Jed Shapiro, Worship Associate

I was not going to rush to join this congregation when I attended my first service. Not because of anything that was or wasn't going on here. It's just that I'd always felt out of place – out of my comfort zone – in most every house of worship I'd visited.

A few years after college – twenty, thirty, ok over forty years ago – I met an amazing woman at a service club lunch meeting. Both of us had studied architecture but ended up pursuing different degrees. We had many other things in common. In hindsight, I realize that both of us had reached

that biological age where we were subconsciously driven to marry and start a family. In any case, I was smitten, and we were soon inseparable.

In those days I visited my parents regularly because I had an open invitation for dinner and I could bring my laundry. I told my parents that I had met this very bright, attractive young woman – Sabrina – who shared my keen interest in architecture.

I also told them she wanted to go on a mission. I thought this had something to do with living in a mission, which in my mind had her planning to become a padre, or a nun.

My courtship of Sabrina continued, but there was a problem. She was a “born again” Christian, I was culturally Jewish and religiously... unaligned. As the relationship became more serious, she made it clear that I would have to accept Jesus as my personal savior for us to go forward. If I was uninterested or unwilling, that was fine, but there would be no point in continuing to see each other.

I wasn't sure which made me more uncomfortable: saying goodbye to Sabrina or hello to Jesus.

I began to learn about nondenominational Christianity and what having Jesus as my savior might entail. I accompanied Sabrina to worship services. This was definitely not my grandfather's Shabbat. A soft rock band sang songs of praise. Many in the congregation outstretched both hands skyward, endeavoring to make a holy connection with God himself... or Jesus... or the holy spirit. It was all more than a little confusing, unlike anything I'd experienced, and way, way out of my comfort zone.

I met some of Sabrina's friends from Church, who could see our strong connection, and encouraged me to pray and pray hard about it. My only frame of reference was hearing a Rabbi recite prayer from the Torah during a worship service. I had no firsthand experience with personal prayer.

In the end, Jesus and I came to a sort of mutual understanding. I said, “If you are who the Christian denominations claim you are, then I would be foolish not to believe in you and accept you... as... my... savior.” I had no idea if I’d done it right.

When I told my parents we were talking marriage, they were understandably surprised, concerned, and a bit confused. My Dad took me aside and said, “Marriage is challenging in the best of circumstances, where you share fundamental values and ideology. It’s obvious that Sabrina is very religious and you – are not. I don’t recommend that you pursue this.”

I was furious. Until he said, “But... if the two of you do decide to marry, then your mother and I will love her and accept her as a member of our family, and you will never hear anything about this again.”

We did marry, my Dad made my Mom keep his word, and Dad was right. It was difficult. Religion wasn’t the only area where our frames of reference were different. Our marriage of 14 years left us with momentous memories, two great kids, and our still separate religious views and values. And I never did get completely comfortable with evangelical worship services.

It took five years for me to get serious about anyone else, and another five years living with Terrie before I was able to commit to marrying her – even though she knew we we’d marry shortly after we met.

At our first worship service here at UUSS, Terrie and I both cried and felt the same thing: we’d found our people. While I was simply here to observe, gather data, and then endlessly process it, Terrie – in touch with her feelings – came prepared to act on them

I’m glad Terrie encouraged me to commit – to our marriage – and to UUSS. Life’s too short to stand on the sidelines watching and waiting.

ⁱ It’s important to note that Judaism and Islam affirm the same idea, as they both embrace the Hebrew Scriptures (the “Old Testament” for Christians); in the Book of Genesis it says that God made human beings in the divine image.

ⁱⁱ For more about William Ellery Channing, see the entry on him in the [Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, 2001: Westminster John Knox Press), 26.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} American Universalism was a parallel religious movement with separate origins from Unitarianism, though they had overlapping religious views and both started in New England. The two faith traditions merged officially in 1961. Our congregation in Sacramento was founded as a Unitarian Church in 1868, but now has the name Unitarian Universalist.