

In From The Margins

by Bill Sinkford

What would it take to become the most dangerous church in America? It will take our claiming our place—consistently—at the center of the conversation. On so many important issues, the religious right has, through their extraordinary level of funding and organization and zeal for their cause, tended to create the impression that theirs is the only religious voice on these issues. We must insistently offer our gentler voice, our more inclusive vision, if we would have that vision play a shaping role in our world.

I remember my own seminary experience. What a gift, in mid-life, to have the chance to wrap my head, and my heart, around religion. I had been Unchurched, Episcopalian, Baptist, Humanist, Atheist. Seminary meant visiting and revisiting all of these stops on my religious journey. And it had its challenges.

I remember the first time I was asked to offer the prayer for an interfaith clergy gathering. It was interfaith, but I knew that most of the colleagues present would be Black Baptist ministers. I spent a good deal of time at the Baptist seminary in Berkeley where I could be in relationship with Black clergy.

I was worried. At that point I didn't have a regular prayer life. I hadn't yet found a language of faith that was easy and satisfying even for me. In UU circles, I was fine. Our minimalist use of religious language saved me. But would whatever stumbling and complicated language I offered be acceptable to these colleagues who seemed to speak so easily and intimately with their God?

I agonized for days leading up to the event. But when I stood to pray... "Spirit of Life and Love, known by many names"... grace happened. The group entered with me the space of silence, of honesty, and of reverence. All I had to do was extend the invitation. The desire for prayer, and for them the habit, was far stronger than the differences of theology and language that had assumed such importance for me.

"Truth be told," one minister said to me after the event, "we're closer than you feared and more respectful than you gave us credit for." As UUs, we do not need, and cannot afford to stand so far outside the rest of the religious world.

Several days after my election in Cleveland two years ago, a satire appeared in a web magazine called "The Long Point National."¹

"God is in the details," was the headline.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, a fuzzy sorta Christian consortium of PBS donors, nonprofit staffers and other people smarter and nobler than you, elected (its first black) president on Saturday with all of the spirited resolution of drafting a pledge to condemn global hunger ...

Following his victory, Sinkford was given a biodegradable ticker tape parade down the main streets of Cleveland, leading a procession of Volvos, Toyotas and the occasional Subaru.

Now, I've edited out the really biting parts, but we were well skewered in this satire. It was just a little too true. And went right to the soft spot: "People smarter and nobler than you," and then the earnest cars!

For the past four decades, we Unitarian Universalists have been deep in conversation among ourselves, in our sanctuaries and in General Assembly plenaries, about who we are. We have hammered out resolutions detailing just how noble and well-intended we are. We have adopted a noble ethical language to describe our faith. We have congratulated ourselves about the good work that we've done on issues of gender and sexual orientation and even about our reengagement with race—and there are important ways in which we're right.

But in the meantime, I think many conversations in the culture beyond our doors have shifted—and we haven't noticed because we have been too busy talking amongst ourselves. In so doing, we have tended to reinforce our view of ourselves as way out on the margins—*way* out on the margins—while meanwhile the rest of the religious world has actually been shifting toward us.

Look at Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender issues, where we tend to think that we are way out on the cutting edge. In our affirmation of BGLT folks, in our belief in the power of love wherever it may be found, in our commitment to and welcome of BGLT ministers—we've just recently settled the first two "out" transgender ministers in the movement—we see ourselves as way out in front of the culture. But the reality is that the majority of the culture today also believes that gay and lesbian persons are fully human, not that they are sinners and condemned to hell and perdition. The majority of the culture has decided that we were right.

We need to change our understanding of where we stand in the culture and stop marginalizing ourselves. We need to stop talking only to ourselves, to come in from the margins into the center of the conversation, to become more fully engaged in the public discourse. Because while the majority of the culture has decided in our favor on any number of social justice issues, the battle is not won: the religious right in particular is fighting a very well organized, well-funded and effective rearguard action.

But because the conversation has shifted, we don't have to go far to stake out a position in the center of the public square. *American Demographics* magazine ran a fascinating article a few years ago, about a 10-year-long study which found an emerging subculture in this country, which the researchers dubbed "the Cultural Creatives."² In contrast with "traditionalists," or "heartlanders" (the sort of small-town-strong-church John Wayne-and-Jimmy Stewart image, who account for slightly less than a third of Americans) and "modernists" (the people most TV ads play to—the almost 50 percent of Americans who, the researchers note, "see the world through the same filters as *Time*

Magazine”), listen to how the researchers described the Cultural Creatives:

Cultural Creatives ... tend to reject hedonism, materialism, and cynicism. For this reason, many are disdainful of modern media, consumer, and business culture. They also reject (the) world views ... as well as the non-ecological orientation of ultra-conservatives and intolerance of the religious right ...

If you can name an aspect of ecology and sustainability, Creatives are leading the way. They are eager to rebuild neighborhoods and communities, committed to ecological sustainability and believe in limits to growth. They see nature as sacred, want to stop corporate polluters, are suspicious of big business, are interested in voluntary simplicity...

Three-fourths of creatives are involved in volunteer activities, compared with a national average of about six in ten adults.

Creatives buy more books and magazines than the average person. They also listen to more radio, especially classical music and public radio. They are literate and discriminating and they dislike most of what is on TV ...³

Sound like anyone you know? As a group, Cultural Creatives sound virtually indistinguishable from UUs. They’re not UUs, but they could be. Another way they sound like us is that Cultural Creatives tend to believe that few people share their values, which are rarely represented in the mainstream media. Once again, think about us. How often do we see our values represented in the media? It’s easy for us to think that we’re a tiny minority, too small to make a difference. But it may well not be true—unless we make it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We’ve been using demographic data that says that Unitarian Universalists account for eight-tenths of one percent of the religious community—very very tiny. And we have internalized that: we’re tiny. We’re radical. We’re too different to be attractive to many people in the culture.

We’ve known for some time, however, that more people than belong to our churches identify themselves as Unitarian Universalists. A highly regarded religious identity survey conducted in 1990 and again in 2001 by the City University of New York found that 625,000 Americans self-identified as UUs. This is more than four times the adult population of our churches.⁴

The *American Demographics* article tells us that almost one *quarter* of the American population are Cultural Creatives.⁵ If that’s correct, we could arguably not just double our numbers, as we’ve been thinking we might be able to do. The potential could be ten times that, *if* we were willing to offer ourselves up. Why does this matter? Why should we care whether we have ten times as many Unitarian Universalists as we do? What’s wrong with being “the best kept secret in town?”

In 1999, when we held our General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Stefan Jonasson, (now our Coordinator of Large Church Services), (Ed.: and past president of HUUMANISTS) through a series of intentional and unintentional actions, wound up meeting with the head of missionary work for the Mormons. Since we were coming to town, the Mormons had done their homework, and knew a lot about us. And this man said to Stefan, “you know, Unitarian Universalists have a remarkable ability to attract visitors—proportionately many more than the Mormons do. But,” he told Stefan, “you’re lousy at holding onto them.” After some discussion, he concluded with the observation that “if your churches were half as successful at integrating and retaining members as we Mormons are, then Unitarian Universalism would be the most dangerous religion in America.”

He is not the only conservative Christian to have worried about our potential to be deeply dangerous. Back in 1996, an article appeared in the journal of the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School warning that the time when Christians could safely ignore Unitarian Universalism had passed: that, rather than descending into “spending its force in ... random doctrinal chaos” and keeping largely to itself, “the UUA has shed its passivity and is now spreading its ‘saving message’ with a vengeance.” The tone of the article was one of real fear.

So what makes us so frightening to religious conservatives?

Theologically, we’re dangerous because our message of individual affirmation and freedom, and our commitment to the making of justice, are so appealing to so many. It was that way for the early Universalists in this country, who preached the truly radical notion of a loving God in a Puritan world where the state religion defined God as distant and punishing, and human beings as sinful and doomed to eternal damnation. The great Universalist minister Hosea Ballou was banned from preaching in many New England towns during the 1790s. He first offered the gospel of universal salvation in 1802 from his new pulpit in Heartland/Four Corners, VT (where I preached earlier this year). One congregational leader (known to us only as Captain Cheever) showed up at church with a club, lest anyone try to prevent Ballou from preaching this radical Gospel.

Universalism, with its theology of love, inclusion and hope, became one of the most popular religious faiths in the US—the sixth largest in the country during the 1840s. People welcomed the Universalist message. And even after their numbers dwindled with the demographic changes later in the 19th century that took people away from what were mostly small-town and rural Universalist churches, mainline Protestant churches stopped talking about predestination and the kind of punishing God that they had earlier. The Universalists won the theological debate.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism can win the debate today—if we offer ourselves up—and I believe the religious right thinks we are dangerous because they sense the same thing. Theirs is a vision that scapegoats the different—those who believe or look or love differently from the way they do—people of color, BGLT persons, non-Christian persons. Theirs is a theology that sees AIDS as God’s punishment for

homosexuality, and the horrors of 9/11 as retribution against those in this country who perform abortions, support the ACLU and People for the American Way, and welcome same sex couples.

Our theology is more big-hearted. We see divinity—however we define its source—as present in every human being and in the earth itself. Our liberal religious theology grounds our commitment to social justice and our work for environmental justice. And when we act from this grounded place, we can be extraordinarily effective: we have often been out in front on major social justice issues: the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage and gay rights, for example. One religion professor in Illinois noted in a *Washington Post* article (about our 2002 GA’s Statement of Conscience on drugs) last fall, “History tends to be on their side.”⁶ No wonder religious conservatives think we’re dangerous.

So what would it take to become the most dangerous church in America? It will take our claiming our place—consistently—at the center of the conversation. On so many important issues, the religious right has, through their extraordinary level of funding and organization and zeal for their cause, tended to create the impression that theirs is the only religious voice on these issues. We must insistently offer our gentler voice, our more inclusive vision, if we would have that vision play a shaping role in our world.

And we are doing that. More and more reporters now have us in their Rolodex; more and more of them check our website for our views on particular issues. We are indeed becoming a credible liberal religious voice in the public square. Last week we held a press conference at 25 Beacon Street supporting gay marriage. We gathered religious leaders from several Protestant denominations to add their voices of support. The reporter for the Boston Herald in his article opined: “The declining mainline denominations are following the UUs.”

What will it take to become the most dangerous church in America? It will take doing a better job of keeping our visitors. It will take offering newcomers a religious community that will serve as an antidote to the fear and isolation, that will meet the longing for community and intimacy, that brought them through our doors in the first place. It will take a community that will feed their spirits and help them grow, that will help them get through the week whether they are eight, twenty-eight or eighty-eight.

What will it take to become the most dangerous church in America? It will take doing a better job of sharing our faith. It will take being clear about what commands our love and our loyalty, and able to articulate what we believe to others. This is a tall order for many of us: we Unitarian Universalists have thrown out so much traditional religious language that a lot of us have lost the vocabulary we may need to express our faith.

What will it take to become the most dangerous church in America? It will take leadership. Leadership, both lay and ordained. It will take leadership that is willing to claim the good news of this faith, leadership that is willing to be present, leadership that

is willing to speak and act consistently out of our values and our vision.

It will take leaders who can be builders of bridges and crafters of coalitions, collaborative relationships that can help us achieve what we otherwise could not. It will take leaders who are willing to risk genuine engagement with others, in our congregations in the public square. Real engagement means that we understand that we ourselves may be changed, in the encounter. It is a risk we have often shied away from, preferring to remain on the margins, the best kept secret in town, smart and noble, talking only amongst ourselves.

It will take Parish Ministers who know that they serve in the community. It will take Community Ministers, grounded in our history and our faith, who are nurtured by and in their turn nurture congregational life. It will take Ministers of Religious Education who can help us all develop and sustain and deepen our faith.

When Stefan Jonasson told the story of his encounter with the Mormon missionary he concluded by saying:

In a world where the most vulgar forms of exploitation infect economics, where racism continues to poison human relations, where the drums of war drown out the songs of peace, and where the dignity of persons is trampled upon by the almost unrestrained march of the powerful and privileged, then those who call for economic equity and racial justice, and those who strive for world community and affirm the dignity of persons, will inevitably be viewed as dangerous. A relevant religion is best embodied in a dangerous denomination.⁷

Let us be relevant and dangerous. Let us offer ourselves up and share the Good News of this liberal faith we love.

What will it take to become truly dangerous?

It will take your commitment, your faith, your ministry.

What will it take? It will take you.

Blessings on your ministry among us.

Notes

1. The Long Point National is no longer an active web site.
2. "The Emerging Culture," *American Demographics*, New York, Primedia, Feb.1997
3. Ibid.

4. Barry Kosmin and Egon Mayer, *American Religious Identification Survey*, New York, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2001
www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_index.htm
5. “The Emerging Culture,” *ibid.*
6. “ “ *The Washington Post*,
7. Stefan Jonasson, “The Most Dangerous Church in America,” unpublished.

These remarks were delivered as various speeches in several settings during the first eight months of 2003; this article is adapted from the version given at the Meadville Lombard (UU) Seminary Commencement, Chicago, June 8, 2003.