

Changing America: Prospects and Possibilities for a Fabulous Future

Sermon First Unitarian Wilmington

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July 4, 2010

I feel honored to be here today...I visited here for Religious Education Directors meetings and UUMA meetings when I served as Interim Religious Education Director at River Road in Bethesda, and when I interned in Lancaster, PA. I am especially happy to be here because I join my congregation and Board in gratitude to you for your support in the germination of our young and vigorous congregation down in Dover. We may never become a large congregation, but rest assured we are doing our best to represent Unitarian Universalist principles in the capital of the First State.

Thank you for you hospitality and for an opportunity to lead worship for you today.

I've never preached a Fourth of July sermon...ordinarily I am with my daughter and her family in New Jersey....but this year they have gone on a trip. So I'm especially grateful not to feel alone on this, my favorite holiday.

You see, I am an unabashed and unashamed patriot. Not a conservative or Tea Party type. Far from it...I'm also an unabashed and unashamed liberal...politically and religiously. And I love my country

fiercely. I always have, but in my younger days I served alongside my husband in the Foreign Service for nine years in India, two years in Nepal, and six years in Tokyo.

I have made it a point to read the Declaration of Independence every Fourth of July since 1963, when we were in New Delhi. The Embassy sponsored a big picnic for all the Americans with hot dogs, hamburgers, beer and Coca Cola. Every year the main speech was given by the American Ambassador, and that year it was John Kenneth Galbraith. Now, he was an outstanding economist, a fine ambassador, and in my opinion, one of the dullest public speakers ever. We suffered through it, and afterward, I spoke to the Deputy Chief of Mission. Cheerfully – taking care not to criticize the Ambassador (after all, my husband worked for him) – recommended that in the future the Ambassador might inspire us by reading the Declaration of Independence at the picnic. Lo and behold, next year he did! And I began my own practice! The more years I lived abroad, the more patriotic I became...No country is perfect, and certainly we are not, but in comparison to many, this country of ours is heaven on earth. We have a long way to go in terms of providing a level playing field for all our citizens, but generally we provide opportunities for people who work hard and have been able to earn an education.

Social justice is my passion, and it is the basis for my call to ministry. I have found Rev. Richard Gilbert'sⁱ and Thomas Price's models for social action helpful...because each of us has preferred ways of trying to make a difference – direct service and feeding and providing for people, consciousness-raising, advocacy and witness, demonstrating and contacting our elected officials, trying to persuade them to vote in ways we hope will

help us to become a more fair and just society, and working to transform unjust systems from the inside out and from outside in.

Rev. Gilbert, now retired, is a beautiful person, as are his wife and son. Last year at the Meadville Lombard Alumni dinner at GA, he escorted a very, very old and feeble minister, who could hardly walk, much less, hear or even eat very comfortably, and I watched as he attended lovingly to that old man, whom I'd never heard of. Grace is not just a state of being, it is acts of love.

Gilbert wrote of The need for models for the new church.

“Neither the church generic, nor any denomination, nor any congregation can optimize its opportunities, power, and skills to persuade and influence for social change without strong organization and visionary, transformational leadership. ‘Love is not enough.’”

Gilbert cites Thomas E. Price's *Four types of Social Concern* (1973) typology as a framework for considering social responsibility:

- ◆ **Social service:** a direct rendering of service to those in need; one-on-one contact such as giving to the poor, feeding people, disaster relief, personal ministry to those in prisons, or tutoring;
- ◆ **Social education:** developing an understanding of the social, economic and moral conditions that create/permit poverty in the midst of plenty in the light of a religious tradition, such as study and reflection, consciousness raising, discussion, interpretation of data, sermons, resolutions;
- ◆ **Social witness:** the process of making public by word and/or deed the convictions of an individual or group on specific social issues, such as advocacy, demonstrations, articles, publicity, and

♦ **Social action:** Social action is distinct from other modes in that, to quote Price, “(1) It is organized (implying group support for the objectives) and (2) it attempts to influence policy makers and decision makers (implying a focus on structures rather than people).” According to Gilbert, “Social action involves concentration on the causes rather than the symptoms of injustice—going beyond the Band-Aid, e.g. identifying underlying causes and redesigning the system.”

Gilbert’s characterizations of the approaches to social concerns and his social responsibility models are excellent models for extending the new church.

I am increasingly convinced that ministers and religious educators need to make paradigm shifts and to dig out of traditional “pulpit-centered” and “caring for our own” ministries. We need to offer multiple opportunities for worship, religious education and learning, and transformation – based on the needs of the communities we serve and hope to serve. This includes conducting studies to ascertain most appropriate scheduling, topics, social justice projects in terms of audience and **potential audience**.

I am also convinced that it is important to invest in lifespan religious education, and in the kinds of young adult “programs” and activities that encourage learning, fellowship, community-building, and active compassion. To truly belong, we all must transform our own being from egocentric, self-centered priorities to community-centered, congregation-centered human beings, to guide one another in a scarily changing world. Belonging is more than membership. Belonging is mutual caring, mutual love and mutual work to ensure our safety, our community, and our very Being in the world.

In college, I learned about the Enlightenment and that we are rational

human beings, with the power to use our minds to plan and execute plans, and to steer systems and organizations toward progressively more thoughtfully driven societies. I often wondered, if we are so smart, why don't we do a better job of governing ourselves? Without getting into the variables of greed and the lust for power, we have been learning that our emotions interact powerfully with our rationalities. And that's part of the problem. We have answered the question of the cold war..."Can a free society win out over authoritarianism?" The answer is "yes," but it takes patience, long-term vision, hard work, and willingness to persevere when we fail.

The next question is whether an interdependent global society can sustain life on the planet or whether we will destroy it. And part of that challenge comes back to us here in the United States, as the opportunity to model social justice and sustainability for the rest of the world.

I firmly believe that we must do everything we can to persuade our elected officials to work for justice, and to feel confident that they can do the right thing and still get elected. It is difficult to make a dent....I write to our senators and congressmen and some of our state legislators frequently. It is my duty as an American citizen. That is the least I can do. I get weary of signing petitions, making calls, sending letters, but we all must do that, as a minimum effort.

With organization, citizens of this country can do wonders and get policy makers to listen and take heed. The challenge is how to use our energies most effectively. One of the ways to do that is to join with others, other congregations, other faith groups, other organizations who advocate to change systems and laws to support the smallest among us, and those least able to help themselves.

There are many interfaith groups that do wonderful work, and I invite you to consider partnering with them in a formal way...the Interfaith Alliance, the Industrial Areas Foundation, Saul Alinski's community organizing group; Americans United for the Separation of Church and State; the ACLU; the Southern Poverty Law Center; the National Religious Campaign Against Torture; support our UUA-sponsored advocacy campaigns, and if you need more ideas, just Google National Campaign Against (anything) and you will find plenty to consider.

This approach, cooperating and collaborating with like-minded organizations, can leverage our efforts. Politicians attend to two things--- money and numbers of constituents that plead for their votes. It is more efficient financially and more effective persuasively to join with others. Can individuals make a difference? Yes. But we can become more powerful by joining with others.

In Shreveport, Louisiana, the local busses used to stop running between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m. Workers without cars, late shift workers at hospitals, had no way to get to work. Our local interfaith organization, a branch of the Industrial Areas Foundation, persuaded the local transportation administration to experiment with running busses all night. They were making a profit on those runs in less that six months, and the City Council honored our organization with an award. Aside: At that city council meeting, one of the city councilors approached me (wearing his big white Stetson) and asked if I would give the invocation. I paused for a moment, then replied, "Well, I need to tell you straight out that I am a firm believer in the separation of Church and State. But for you, Charlie, I'll do it."

That interfaith group of ministers and lay people vetted every person

who ran for public office, and in a respectful way that favored no particular faith...we had different beliefs but we combined forces for common social justice goals. One Unitarian minister can certainly make a difference, but politicians really listen to a room full of ministers and lay people representing many faiths. Because together, we represent a large constituency, most of whom vote.

We have a lot to do to become a better democracy, and to save our planet for our children and grandchildren. What we do and what we don't do to transform the United States into a revitalized model for the world, makes a difference. What we do and don't do makes a BIG difference. Edmund Burke reminds us that, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." And Dr. Seuss reminds us that, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."ⁱⁱ

May we all become activists and community leaders and partners with organizations that share goals – not necessarily all goals, just some goals, with us. Let us use our minds and our emotions both to become stronger. Our country needs us now more than ever. Whatever your political preferences, there are ways we can find common goals and work together to make the American Dream come true for all our citizens.

I love this country. And I am optimistic. It is simply a matter of will. Nehru said, "Life is like a game of cards. The hand that is dealt you is determinism. The way you play is free will." I am optimistic that we can gather the will and strength to make our country better and better. But it's not going to happen without will and work and more work. Our country needs us. America needs every one of us. In each of our own ways, let us

restore the honor of our country in the eyes of the world, and walk with love, pride and a quick step as we go about our lives and our work. Your country needs you. Don't let her down. Amen

ⁱ Gilbert, Richard. The Prophetic Imperative.

ⁱⁱ Geiser, Theodore Seuss. The Lorax.