

Henry Lemon Sermon

Dave Richardson

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“Up From Cynicism”

I am pleased to see that so many of you stayed for the sermon. Even the Morning Risers fans are still here.

In terms of full disclosure, as Yvonne pointed out no church funds will be expended for what follows. This reminds me of a scene from a later chapter of Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* wherein Huck and Tom Sawyer are reunited at Tom’s Uncle Silas’ farm. Huck notes that Uncle Silas was also a preacher on the weekend and he observes, “Uncle Silas never charged nothing for his preachin’ – and it was worth it too.” I hope to at least meet those expectations.

I am sure that many of you have been asked by friends who upon finding out you are a Unitarian inquire of you something like this - “If you don’t have a creed and you don’t have a prescribed definition of a supreme being – what’s the point?” I think most of us could construct a pretty good response to that question, but it would likely be based on our own “narrative” of how we got here and why we stay here. I will attempt to address that oft-asked question with some observations on my own spiritual odyssey and in the process perhaps discover some connections we share.

I borrowed my titled “Up From Cynicism” from Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*. My journey was certainly not as arduous as his, but it involved some transformations that were for me emancipating in their own way.

My first exposure to organized religion was at the age of 11 and was due to the interventions of my Scotch Presbyterian grandmother who insisted that my father enroll me in confirmation classes and Sunday School after noting to my father “ George, you are raising a heathen!” my grandmother was of course absolutely correct. She had given up on saving my father from whatever eternal Calvinistic conflagrations awaited him. Thus, I was deposited on the steps of the church every Sunday. I reluctantly attended for a period of time, but soon grew weary of the Sunday routine. On one Sunday as we approached the church my father noted my particularly pouty lip saying, “You really don’t want to do this do you?” I of course said no, sensing that my Sunday sentence may be reprieved. So he said let’s not tell your grandmother, but we will let her believe that we are going to church and you and I will do something together on Sundays. So for many weeks after we would do “fun” things on Sunday mornings – working on baseball skills was my favorite. We would surreptitiously stash bats, balls and gloves under the seats of our 1948 Chevrolet. Other times we would visit local sites of interest which enhanced my appreciation and understanding of my community. I think that is where my sense of “Sunday is for humanism” was born.

As a young adult I, like many others of my generation, fell into a smug cynicism about organized religion. I was in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald “so cynical I was naïve.” A number of my college companions and I would sneer at those who espoused religious faith. With a haughty sense of superiority we were above such medieval concepts as God and faith. I recall one even coined a name for the deity. At one of those late night discussions during undergraduate days one of the group said that just calling God by that name gave him a magisterial quality and that he should have a more common

name. One of the wags in the group said he already has a name. it is Howard. You know “Our father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name?” So the name stuck, and it became a code word for anything relating to conventional faith. I often saw religion as arrogance masked as humility. When in truth it was my own arrogance masking my own uncertainty. In the words of Woody Allen, “To you I may be an atheist, but to God I am the loyal opposition.”

After the birth of my daughter and son, I joined the Second Unitarian church on what Garrison Keillor called the “atheists with children” plan. In my adolescent years I had visited First Unitarian a number of times with my friend Todd Phillips, whose father Charles was the minister at the time. I had good memories of those visits and figured that Unitarianism was probably OK for someone as religiously tentative as I.

At that time and to a certain degree even now I am a bit uncomfortable with weddings and funerals conducted under orthodox faiths featuring prescribed prayers especially petitions to a divine being to single out individuals for special favors or interventions. I hasten to add that my understanding and respect for the religious practices of others had increased considerably from days of smug denial. I still had moments of discomfort with organized coerced prayer. When my son Todd was an 11 year old I was an assistant coach on his little league team and just before they were to take the field before our first game the head coach announced that we were “going to talk to the Lord” and he asked that all take off their caps, bend a knee as the coach said a prayer. I quickly took Todd aside and said we would take a few more warm-up tosses. The moment was awkward to say the least. Some of his teammates were saying “Hey Todd come join us.” The head coach did not insist on his participation, but did seem

puzzled. He later asked me if I didn't want my son to "walk with the Lord" I said as his baseball coach I would rather see him walk with the bases loaded. So I hadn't completely parted with my sardonic ways.

As time passed I learned, largely from my affiliation with Unitarianism a number of important things. First, cynicism and skepticism are not synonyms. Healthy skepticism can be a key to personal growth and understanding and furthermore that skepticism can be the agent of reason. I learned in the words of Alfred North Whitehead that "religion is a phenomenon which begins in wonder and ends in wonder." I further learned that a free religion accepts the fact that life has ambiguities that require personal and spiritual reflection. These reflections often ask us to question dogma and orthodoxy to avoid producing dogma. We must constantly reassess the claims that we hear. Remembering that as Cornel West notes, "thinking takes courage"

That wonderful phrase from the First Amendment that secures the right of "free exercise" of religion is a powerful phrase when truly practiced. Even in what Adlai Stevenson called "disciplined disagreement" we grow. We respect the concept that dissent is not a character flaw, but is often a virtue. We learn these often from our own Unitarian history.

Someone asked me one time if we were a protestant faith and I assured them that we definitely were in that tradition. The Protestant Reformation began when Luther and Calvin broke with Rome and we Unitarians merely continued the tradition by breaking with Luther and Calvin. We learned from Emerson that ideas are on the edge of consciousness and that the real turning points in our lives are not always events but the moments of illumination out there on that edge.

One of the key transformations for me was the increasing awareness of our spiritual side. I will no longer see theism in the same light after the interactions I have had with what it means to many people for whom theism is an essential part of their spiritual life. My definition was greatly changed by reading Karen Armstrong's book *The Case for God*. She points out that a sense of common feeling and mythos can be God. Her concepts made me not only more respectful of theism, but closer to the feelings generated by her broader definitions of God. Karen Armstrong also makes the case for inquiry about these matters and that dialogue about God leads to greater understanding among people rather than division. Does that dialog thing sound familiar to U-Us?

In addition to enhancing us spiritually, the two important attributes of religion that have affected me the most are what I will call the "two C's" - Compassion and Community.

All religions are in the compassion business. We may have doctrinal differences and theological divergence with many of the more orthodox faiths, but we all share in the important mission of providing a place and a vehicle for practicing as well as preaching compassion. Several years ago I attended a meeting about Midtown Development that was also attended by a number of clergy people from this area and as the discussion developed it occurred to me how little our doctrinal differences mattered as we pursued answers to mutual concerns about the neighborhood. The ministers all were putting that compassion thing into practice when we discussed concerns such as affordable housing in a "gentrifying" area such as we now see around us.

It is easy to pick on the abuses done in the name of religion. When one of the many "Avatars of Hate" we hear on the media condemn others because their faith,

cultural practices, or sexual orientation is not like theirs we are angered. It is easy to be irked when a person of professed faith claims they love mankind when they really mean they just want others to be more like them. But these are aberrations not the general rule and we are part of that religious community that is in the compassion business noted earlier.

I had one of those moments of clarity during a difficult period when my mother was in hospice care and a wonderfully helpful woman from the Visiting Nurses' Association asked if my brother and I had discussed plans for the inevitable funeral. Since neither my brother nor mother were members of a church I suggested that we could use the services of my church. The minister at that time was Rev Benner and I said when the time came I would contact with him. The nurse asked if I wanted her to contact Rev Benner and I was puzzled since quite bluntly she is not dead yet. The nurse looked at me kindly and said "No I meant for you" I suddenly realized in one of those moments of Emersonian epiphany that, of course, that is what churches do! They comfort us in times of need. Speaking of matters of loss of loved ones I think we Unitarians deal with loss very honestly and with dignity. We don't look at death as just a major change of address.

The second C is the one that I cherish most that is community. Once again words from Emerson come to mind when he observed, "Man is evidently intended for society as the eye is for seeing." He further noted that "things are finer in composition than alone." The engagement and trust that generate from involvement are mutually re-enforcing. When we commit to active membership we are no longer alienated we are engaged and with that engagement comes the reciprocity that continues that mutual re-enforcement. Nor are we enclaves of exclusivity, but aggregations of acceptance. We are not a gated

community. Church membership like citizenship is not a spectator sport, but a participant sport.

The need for community has never been more important. Our electronic networks and TV are pseudo connections. They are fine tools, but there is no substitute for face-to-face contact. Church membership and yes attendance can be the alternative to media and the commercialization of our culture. The cyber world has brought us in touch with much that was not accessible before, but in other ways has taken us further away from those critical connections of spirituality and community that make us human.

The spiritual and community needs of younger generations are increasingly more complex than those of us of older generations. Gen X and other younger demographic groups were shaped by uncertainty without the great collective successes that the “greatest generation” saw in overcoming the hardships of the depression and WW II. The baby boomers or those of us in the in-between age that John Updike called “too young to be warriors and too old to be rebels” witnessed in the civil rights movement, the gains in women’s rights and the seismic shifts in consciousness that took place through the ‘60s and ‘70s. Religion, particularly ours must continue to provide spiritual and community needs in new ways that serve younger people.

Our recent Holland Lecturer, Jacob Hacker, spoke eloquently of the shift from collective support and security for those at economic risk to what we are now seeing the insecurity that results by placing that risk onto individuals. It occurred to me that we can see this phenomenon in terms of personal and spiritual needs as well as economic needs. Our church is uniquely suited to providing the security in a collective and empathetic way

to all of us. For we are all at constant risk of personal loss and struggles that we cannot anticipate or bear by ourselves.

Ultimately, my rise up from cynicism has taught me that religion is not an end but a means. It is a means for personal fulfillment and for sustaining a sense of compassion and of building and nurturing a community that gives to each member and receives from each member. I would like to close with the words of

Leif Seligman

“May we encounter patience along our growing edges and compassion in our most tender spots. Here may we find the inspiration and encouragement we need to face our challenges and nurture ourselves. And in the presence of suffering across the globe may we redouble our efforts to practice kindness where we are, with the hope that the light of our actions travels like the light of faraway stars. May our gestures of compassion and generosity seed possibility.”



