

## *A Religion For Our Time?*

Sermon by Deane Perkins

In the early 1800s many of the New England Congregational churches were struggling to determine how theologically orthodox or liberal they would become.

There were debates about the trinity, the nature of God, the divinity of Jesus, the nature of humankind, the means by which the divine is revealed, and the meaning of salvation.

A young Boston minister by the name of William Ellery Channing became the spokesperson for liberal thought, which would eventually be known as Unitarianism.

At the ordination of Jared Sparks in 1819 in Baltimore, Channing gave the sermon--an hour and a half long-- entitled, "Unitarian Christianity." Later known as the "Baltimore Sermon," thousands of copies were sold,

and it became a defining hallmark within American Unitarianism. It is one of the most brilliant sermons I have ever read—one that I will refer to again in the future. And if you wish to see the pulpit from which William Ellery Channing preached for nearly twenty years at Federal Street Church in Boston, you can find it at the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association. (see “Baltimore Sermon” online from the UUA).

A few years ago Rev. Peter Morales, our Unitarian Universalist Association President, gave his own Baltimore sermon where he talked eloquently about eight specific areas necessary for a faith community to be "a religion for our time." A “religion for our time” is also the platform he used in his campaign as he sought to become the president of our Association.

I would like briefly to go over his eight points. And while I agree with Peter, I am not sure he goes far enough. And so over the course of a few Sundays, I would like to preach on the theme: Are we, as Unitarian Universalists, a religion for our time?

"First," says Peter, "I do not believe that a religion for our time can ask people to reject the religious traditions they grew up with. We can, however, create a religion that draws wisdom and strength from our religious pasts even while we transcend them."

Perhaps similar to my leaving the Baptist church of my childhood, many of you have also left the church of your upbringing, or a church that had some meaning to you at one time. I do not regret—or fully reject—that background, however. It gave me a solid foundation for

understanding Christianity and my place—or not my place—in it.

I imagine that for some people, their religious background might actually have been traumatic and painful, especially if there were some kind of physical or emotional abuse involved. I cannot condone religious authorities or theologies that are abusive or violent in nature. The doctrine of the atonement, for example—where it is claimed that Jesus died for our sins—is to me a doctrine that is both violent within itself, and that also perpetuates violence.

Nevertheless, I do not want to make a blanket judgment, or condemn Christianity as a whole. I will judge theologies, power systems, and behaviours resulting from those theologies, but I do not want to judge people or their

spirituality. After all, it would be a bit ironic to judge the Christian god for being judgmental of people if we are doing the same thing.

Second, Peter Morales says that, "A religion for our time must see science and human learning as a partner, not an enemy. We must move beyond treating myths and poetry as if they were history or science."

I am encouraged by the young evangelical writer who I quoted a couple of weeks ago when she notes that her generation of evangelicals does not want to have to choose between "intellectual integrity and faith, between science and Christianity." She says, "We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against." (*Why millennials are leaving the church* by Rachel Evans, CNN online)

If this is truly to occur, then the mythologies that people live by need to be scrutinized. We all live by myths—these are essential to our sanity, our well-being, and our healing. But not all mythologies are healthy or speak adequately to the human condition. What is disconcerting is peoples' tendency to flock to self-destructive, irrational, violent mythologies—or, if you prefer—theologies that are spiritually bereft and have lost all soul. How is it that ministers, for example, can claim that Islam and the Qu'ran are of the devil? What is loving and open about burning or desecrating other peoples' sacred works? A Religion For Our Time must look critically at all mythologies that do not meet, in a healthy, loving way, peoples' needs.

Third, says Rev. Morales, "just as a religion for our time respects humanity's diverse traditions, so too must it

respect human diversity. It must begin with the premise that each one of us matters."

I would go even further. I want to see the god in every person. This does not mean that I have to be tolerant of dysfunctional behaviour, but it does mean that I acknowledge the sacredness of all humanity. As such, it is difficult to think that the killing of others—whether by the state or by an individual—can be sanctioned when I see in each person the holy.

Fourth, "A religion for our time must be about wholeness, integrity, and engagement. It must promote the spiritual practices that give us depth and insight: meditation, prayer, small groups, and music. It must touch our hearts as well as our heads."

As we consider our mission as well as our space needs, it is important that we find ways to engage further in spiritual practices through meditation, prayer, small groups, and music.

But this also points to the symbolic nature of our merger as Universalists and Unitarians, of the coming together of the heart and mind. Liberal thinkers reacted against the emotionalism of the Great Awakening in the 1700s, many of whom became Unitarians. That, along with the humanism of the last century made Unitarianism a formidable intellectual power within this country.

Universalism opposed the myth that a loving god would condemn people eternally to some kind of hell. It spoke of a different story, a way in which love itself became the norm, not judgment. Universalism, particularly

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would find itself to be one of the most prominent denominations in northern New England and New York. The merger of the two Associations in 1961 expresses eloquently the need for reason and the heart to come together in one strong body.

Fifth, Peter warned that, "Our new religion must promote deep reflection, but it must never, never, become an escape from life or descend into navel gazing narcissism."

I think we UUs have a tendency to feel that we are a little better than other faith communities or even some people. Just observe the number of Priuses at General Assembly or Annual District Meetings. We are prone to being elitist and snobbish. Why? The Greek tragedy playwrights knew well that hubris, unlike humility, was

self-destructive. Before we dismiss my warning as ridiculous, I would ask why it is that we are, as a denomination, so white and middle-class? And do we really welcome everyone into our sanctuaries?

Moreover, while spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer are significant, we also need to engage with and in the world, for we and the world need healing.

Sixth, proclaims Peter, is that, "A religion for our time must be prophetic.... It must raise a powerful voice against violence, injustice, racism, economic exploitation, and the destruction of life on our planet."

All those mythologies which undermine life must themselves be undermined. It is not ours to tolerate everything and anything. There are limits. We can be compassionate, but we cannot tolerate the destruction of

people, life, and the world. We are stewards, not destroyers. Moreover, we need to counter the incivility, inhumanity, and irrationality propagated by violent ideologies.

Seventh, "A religion for our time must strive to transform the world."

As suggested before, it is not enough that healthy changes occur within ourselves as we strive for a deeper inner life, nor is it enough that healthy cultural changes occur within our immediate community. Our mission, our task is no less that fostering transformation in the world.

Peter's final and eighth assertion is that, "our new religion must have a vision of a multiracial and multicultural future. It must invite people to come together in love to help create a new world—a world of peace,

justice, equity, compassion and stewardship of the environment." (see Peter Morales' Baltimore sermon, May, 2009)

The Standing On The Side of Love movement exemplifies our desire to be more inclusive, and to promote compassion and love in the world.

I am reminded of Leo Buscaglia, the “love psychologist,” of the 1980s, when he notes that love is an act of will. “I love,” he says, “because I must, because I will it....I love for the joy it gives me.” But it is not easy to live in love. He continues: “To learn to love is to be in constant change. The process is endless, for humanity’s potential to love is endless.” (*LOVE*, by Leo Buscaglia, pg. 117)

And so we choose to love, we will it. We choose to look at our own prejudices, assumptions, biases, and

mythologies so that we see the god in all people, and the sacredness of our world.

I recently heard a minister put it this way: “our task is to increase the sum of love and justice in the world.” (Sue

Phillips, UUMA NNED Retreat, Fall, 2013)

I am presumptuous enough to think that we are all here because we want a faith community that is willing to search for its own soul, while allowing us to do the same as individuals. But are we A Religion For Our Time? If so, why are we a relatively small denomination? Why are we sometimes called the tourist church, where people simply come and go? Does it have healthy mythologies by which we can live, and which, ultimately, are salvific?

I love the questions! I love the journey! So I invite you to join with me this fall as we look at our Unitarian Universalist Movement, as we look at some of our history,

some intriguing characters and much, much controversy.

And I also invite you to tell me in person or email of any other points that you think we need to add to the eight that

Rev. Peter Morales spoke of in Baltimore. For this is our story, and the narrative is recreated as we seek to be A

Religion For Our Time.      Blessed Be. Amen