

Unbroken Chain: Individualism in UUs, the U.S., and the Grateful Dead

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 28 January 2007
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PRELUDE "A box of rain will ease the pain, and love will see you through..." We begin our service with a musical reminder...

{music: *Box of Rain*}

OPENING WORDS "Such a long, long time to be gone, and a short time to be there..." In our short time to be here— this morning and this lifetime— may we feel the presence of the holy, within and among us.

OPENING HYMN Much like a Grateful Dead show, the worship services of the religious movement known as the 'Shakers' were spontaneous. They would sing and dance as the spirit moved them. With the hymn written down, it is no longer spontaneous, but it can still be joyful. Please rise as you are willing and able and join us in singing hymn #16, *'Tis A Gift to Be Simple* [We'll sing it through twice]

{singing} Please be seated.

FIRST READING Stanley Kunitz was born in Massachusetts, in 1905. He was the United States' Poet Laureate in 2000; he won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and many other honors. He died last May. This is from his book, *Passing Through*:

Miss Murphy in first grade wrote its name in chalk across the board and told us it was roaring down the stormtracks of the Milky Way at frightful speed and if it wandered off its course and smashed into the earth there'd be no school tomorrow. A red-bearded preacher from the hills with a wild look in his eyes stood in the public square at the playground's edge proclaiming he was sent by God to save every one of us, even the little children. "Repent, ye sinners!" he shouted, waving his hand-lettered sign. At supper I felt sad to think that it was probably the last meal I'd share with my mother and my sisters; but I felt excited too and scarcely touched my plate. So mother scolded me and sent me early to my room. The whole family's asleep except for me. They never heard me steal into the stairwell hall and climb the ladder to the fresh night air.

Look for me, Father, on the roof of the red brick building at the foot of Green Street -- that's where we live, you know, on the top floor. I'm the boy in the white flannel gown sprawled on this coarse gravel bed searching the starry sky, waiting for the world to end.

SECOND READING Unitarian Universalists do not share one single sacred text, but Mary Oliver's poems might come as close as anything. Born in Cleveland, in 1935, she, too, has won a Pulitzer and a National Book Award.

One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice-- though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles. "Mend my life!" each voice cried. But you didn't stop. You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations, though their melancholy was terrible. It was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones. But little by little, as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do-- determined to save the only life you could save.

MUSICAL TEXT Sometimes, we can save only ourselves; sometimes, though we cannot caution all, we yet may warn a few... *Ship of Fools* is our morning's musical parable:

{*Ship of Fools*}

SERMON How many of you have ever been described as 'stubborn' or 'strong-willed'? How many took that as a compliment? How many of you attend this congregation, at least in part because of its acceptance of your individual beliefs? Me, too.

So, this minister decided to use a visual demonstration to make his point more emphatically. At the beginning of his sermon, he took four good-sized jars, and filled one of them with alcohol, one with cigarette smoke, one with chocolate syrup, and one with good, clean dirt. He then put several earthworms into each jar. Toward the end of his message, he reported the results: the worms put in alcohol...were dead; the worms put in cigarette smoke...were dead; the worms put in chocolate syrup...were dead; and the worms in the good soil were alive and thriving. He asked the congregation what lesson they could learn from this. Instantly, from the very back pew, Maxine's hand shot up, and she exclaimed, "If you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

As Unitarian Universalists, we appreciate our ability, and our right, to make our own interpretations of the events and experiences in our lives. We share this trait with many citizens of the United States, up to, and including the members of the Grateful Dead. In our prelude this morning, we heard Joel sing, "believe it if you need it; if you don't, just pass it on." That is a good example of the band's emphasis on self-reliance.

We UUs, and the Grateful Dead, and others in the U.S. are linked in this self-reliance because it all comes from the same roots. The Western Enlightenment, in the 17th and 18th centuries, championed human reason as the ultimate authority in matters of politics, and science, and even aesthetics. Compared to the traditions and superstitions of the previous age, the Enlightenment created a framework for democracy, and capitalism and liberalism in the modern world.

Our spiritual ancestors arrived in the new world and created churches with these Enlightenment ideals. They did not find bishops or popes in the New Testaments of their bibles, so they decided they didn't need any such hierarchies, either. Rather, they embraced this new concept of individual authority and allowed their congregations to elect their own leaders. Now, at the time, there was no separation of church and state, so the church meeting pretty much was the town meeting, and vice versa and that is where we got the concept of these New England-style Town Meetings that are still in vogue in presidential campaigns and in UU congregations around the country. In fact, those concepts, of democratic participation and decision-making worked so well in these town meetings, that they were incorporated into our U.S. constitution. Our liberal religious beliefs and our liberal democratic (with a small "d") political system are inextricably linked.

For the most part, I think this is a good thing. I appreciate the right to make up my own mind about things. How many of you have ever been frightened by something said by a secular or so-called religious leader, like the boy in our first reading? It pains me, when I hear our children told by other children that they are going to go to hell. I feel sorry for all the children who have ever shed tears or lost sleep fearing the bad things that adults have told them. That's why I like that poem so much. The boy was a little sad, but he was also curious, and he decided to meet his fate on his own terms: "God, you know where to find me—I'll be on the roof, watching it all come down."

In the song we heard as the offertory, Robert M. Petersen wrote about "listening for the secret, searching for the sound, but only hearing the preacher, and the baying of his hounds." According to David Dodd, anthologist of the Grateful Dead's lyrics, the unbroken chain in that song's title often refers to the succession of authority—especially religious authority—down through the ages, Petersen's song criticizes religious hypocrisy, and notes how difficult it is to live up to our spiritual ideals, before finally reframing the chain of authority as our own individual consciences and the love we find together: the "unbroken chain of you and me."

So, self-reliance is not just a convenient philosophy to justify getting what we want, it is a fundamental principle aiming to remedy and prevent the abuses of institutional power.

The person in our second reading escapes, not from a rigid theological structure, but from an oppressive family environment. Sometimes, we have to save ourselves before we can do anybody else any good. Like the airline personnel always say: "put your own oxygen mask on, first, then help those around you."

This process, of becoming more self-reliant, is natural but not automatic. Even in the most non-oppressive and healthy families, teenagers and parents both may find it difficult. Parents may really want to help their children become more independent, but it can still be hard to let go and say good-bye. And youth may crave autonomy and fear it with approximately equal intensity. That tension can result in dramatic gestures of rebellion as we try to cope with those competing desires.

How many of us ever ran away from home, at least for a few hours? How many ever said, “don’t trust anybody over 30”? Self-reliance carries with it an almost implicit feeling of distrust for external authority. Especially when we are not yet comfortable with the demands of our own autonomy, we can reject any claim of authority by somebody outside of our own skin.

This is true of some of our fellow citizens, who distrust the United Nations and absolutely refuse to accept the creation of a world court.

It is true of some of our fellow UUs— if you want to see something interesting, at coffee hour, after the service, announce in a loud voice that “the UUA says we must do...” and follow it up with almost any action you want. The knee-jerk response to the phrase “we must” can be really amusing, if it isn’t also sometimes tragic.

The Grateful Dead placed such a value on self-reliance, and they had such distrust for other leaders—who were mostly over 30, after all— that they were reluctant to be seen as leaders themselves. In our prelude, Joel sang, “what do you want me to do, to watch for you while you’re sleeping?” That seems a reasonable request, but the song continues, “well please don’t be surprised when you find me dreaming, too.” At least they’re honest and up-front about it. And in their song, *Ripple*, which we heard last week, they sang, “you who choose to lead must follow.”

As the band aged, and, dare I say it, matured, their stance shifted a bit. They still believed in individual freedoms, but they became more and more vocal about the requirement of personal responsibility. And they didn’t just sing about it— they lived it. They did a great deal of work to save the rainforests. A lot of our ecological justice work now was popularized by the Grateful Dead in the late ‘80s and ‘90s. At their press conference to kick off their campaign to call attention to the devastation of our rainforests, they said, “we’re as surprised by this as you are, we have never tried to be leaders, but something has to be done about this.”

The band still valued their independence, but they also saw that they lived in a communal context. They recognized their inter-dependence.

Self-reliance is only a virtue as long as it is healthy. When it begins to work against the health of the larger group, perhaps it is time to reconsider. Yes, we as a nation have the right to defend ourselves, and to some extent, at least, our interests. But when virtually the rest of the world has a differing opinion, we should at least consider the possibility of changing our approach. Yes, we are free to act as we choose, but this is not an absolute. To paraphrase a friend of the Grateful Dead, absolute freedom “is just another word for nothing left to lose.”

Independence, in most cases, is better than dependence. But inter-dependence is usually better than independence. There are many other people, and many other beings on this planet. We have to learn to play well with others. Fortunately, there is a historical precedent for this, within our UU tradition. Back when we were first establishing our free congregations, we were also starving and ravaged by disease and occasionally ill-served by incompetent or unethical leaders. Our spiritual ancestors recognized that we have to support and challenge each other. Even as we are all free congregations, we should maintain good relations with our neighboring churches, and seek or offer help as appropriate.

The “Cambridge Platform” of 1648, which details the “New England” style of church governance, besides insisting on the right of congregations to choose their own leadership, explicitly includes the need for councils between local communities to support each other AND to admonish each other when appropriate.

As you might guess, we’re not so excited about the “admonish” piece, but we are, as a movement, rediscovering the “local connections” part of the platform. More and more often, our UU congregations are working with other UU churches near them, to share best practices for finance and government and religious education. The idea to sing a song or two before each service, which we call “morning song” came from other people, who found it worked well in their congregations.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association now sponsors a “UU University” before each General Assembly, and works to train and support the lay leadership of our member congregations.

In just a few months, our district assembly will be held in Grand Rapids. There will be all kinds of trainings offered, and resources available, and opportunities for networking (and, of course, shopping). These assemblies are lots of fun, and they are a great way of strengthening our congregations and our movement. Whether you call it an “interdependent web” or an “unbroken chain” it’s still a metaphor for interconnected, self-reliant beings working together to improve their lives and their world.

Henry Nelson Wieman was a 20th-century theologian who eventually identified as a Unitarian Universalist, found ultimate value in creative interchange— in other words, he found god in the conversations and interactions between and among human beings. We may each of us have a spark of the divine within us— the spirit of life pulses in each individual— but it is what we do together, how we engage one another, that demonstrates our holiness.

There are people from whom it is important to be independent. You can probably think of several— maybe a parent or other relative, maybe a boss or landlord, maybe a religious leader from some other place— who tried to force you into being less than you really are, who tried to keep you from flourishing into the independent soul you are today.

There are also people with whom it is good to be inter-dependent. People who enrich our lives, people without whom our lives might not even be possible. Who are the 3 or 5 or 10 people that you would telephone first, if you won the lottery, or if, may all the gods forbid, you were to contract a terrible disease? We don’t want to be free *from* these folks, we want to be free *with* them. Even if they are dead, our memories of them make our lives more meaningful. Whether they are family members, or old teachers, or friends or spouses or even our pets, there are beings with whom we celebrate life.

Praise for these precious persons with whom we share our journey. Praise for independence and creative inter-dependence.

So may we be.