

## **SPREADING OUR UU GOSPEL!**

The key to numerical and spiritual growth at San Dieguito (and I'm interested in your *growing* not merely swelling) is going to bank upon sufficient numbers of you standing tall and shouting from the housetops, "Hey, look at what I've found at the Fellowship! I've found life and life abundant. And I invite you to come and see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears San Dieguito's good news!" You see, it's crucial, my friends, that San Dieguitans dare to become low-key evangelists, for we live in a religiously partisan culture, and we don't possess the luxury of remaining neutral or spectating from the sidelines.

I ask you, "If you were on trial for being a Fellowship partisan, and all that it's stood for, since 1959, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Would there?

Now it may come as a surprise, but the word *evangel* isn't owned by the evangelicals of the world. Evangel simply means good news, and good news surely dwells at the core of our San Dieguito Fellowship legacy and mission. So, your shining light needs to emerge from underneath the proverbial bushel. Never forget that the world of North County hankers for life-affirming news, rather than news beset with fear and judgment.

For you and I, as Unitarian Universalists, belong to the heritage of brother Isaiah who wrote in the Hebrew scriptures (61: 1-2):

*Yahweh has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, and to comfort all who mourn...*

Yes, do we not commit ourselves to bringing good tidings to all who are afflicted? Do we not aspire to live lives of liberation: freeing ourselves and others from all sorts of slaveries of mind and body, heart and soul? You bet we do...for we belong to the living tradition of bearers of good news, wondrous news, liberal, liberating news.

Mortimer Arias, a Methodist bishop in Bolivia, was visiting a congregation in an extremely poor part of a Bolivian city where people were starving. On Sunday morning, he presided at the communion table. The congregation was singing a joyful hymn. The table was spread with an embroidered cloth, and on it stood a chalice and a loaf of bread.

Just as the hymn was ending, a small boy slipped through the open doors at the back of the church—a child of the streets, dirty and thin. He raced up the center aisle to the communion table, grabbed the sacramental bread and began to eat it.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the Bishop cried.

The child stopped eating, then stared at the Bishop, and said with a face full of utter joy, “Well, they told me there was bread in the church, so I came to get some!”

And a little child shall lead us toward our mission. The hurting of humanity always force the issue, don't they? So that's the telling question: does our Summit gospel offer real spiritual and material nourishment to young and old alike, all who go hungering and happen upon us? Does our Unitarian Universalist outpost in North County furnish nutritious bread for the body and the spirit?

You know what? I'm tired of our Unitarian Universalist gospel—our “good news”—being hidden, misinterpreted, and trivialized. I'm weary of people confusing us with *Unification*, the Moonies or *Universal Life*, a mail-order ministry.

It's time to let our true light shine, shine, then shine some more!

Is it too much to ask that the world start to recognize, if not appreciate, us for who we really are? As a colleague remarked: “Being agreed with isn't a fundamental human need, but being understood is!”

However, there's more that disturbs me. *Outsiders* not knowing who we are, what we stand for, or where we're located is bad enough, but too many *insiders*, our own partisans, are prone to dismiss their chosen religion as well. Self-insults really sting!

There are card-carrying Unitarian Universalists, scattered throughout our 1000+ congregations in North America, who consider themselves political action centers with a side-order of spirituality, or like-minded social guilds, or sometimes, I'm embarrassed to repeat, “spit and argue clubs.” My fellow religious progressives, please beware that such assessments are both erroneous and debasing.

The undeniable truth is that we've cast our lot, for better and for worse, with a bona fide *religious* enterprise. The enduring center of Unitarian Universalism is historically rooted, theologically rich, ethically courageous, and unabashedly spiritual. You and I have joined a religion comprised of mystical activists and compassionate change-agents. We belong to an honorable, worthy heritage, despite our ample warts.

But, if *we're* hesitant to promote ourselves as a genuine religion, why should we expect a disinterested world to do so?

I'm convinced that Unitarian Universalism is missing grand opportunities to bear crucial witness in today's world. Individuals and institutions need our buoyant, transformative message. Desperately and daily. Yes, I'm bold enough to claim that the world would be better off if there were more Unitarian Universalists.

So, whether you're a chronic Unitarian Universalist or an utter "newbie" who happened upon our worship service this morning, you've chosen to celebrate in a religious communion that possesses a magnificent gospel, what our Universalists rightly named "the larger hope"! We harbor good, good news: the kind that can unclog closed minds and comfort dragging spirits—a gospel with soulful depth and prophetic stretch, a gospel that can work marvels internally, interpersonally, and internationally.

But just why is Unitarian Universalism a faith of exceptionally good news? Why? Because ours is a religion that focuses upon the delights and duties of this world rather than waiting for full benefits in some fanciful realm. Why? Because ours is a religion that commits to saving everyone, not merely our own skins or clans. Why? Because ours is a religion that distinguishes between the necessary pangs of conscience and the regrettable paralysis of guilt.

But there's even more substance to our good news. While recognizing human limitations and shortcomings, Unitarian Universalism endorses our capacity to be and do good, to make real, lasting differences during our earthly stays. Ours is an incorrigibly life-affirming faith that believes that human beings can build beloved communities right where we're planted, that

contends that no moral or political problem exists that can't be thoughtfully engaged, that insists that souls are renewable and society is reformable.

My friends, that's good news, stupendous news, and it's inherent in our history and our ideals. We don't have to grope around for something upbeat. We don't have to manipulate our message. Unitarian Universalism is, both in substance and style, a hopeful gospel, and we're its bearers!

Nevertheless, I don't want to fool anyone. Unitarian Universalism promotes good news but not sappy or dreamy-eyed news. Ours is a relentlessly realistic religion! Our gospel doesn't naively argue that life's injustices will be eradicated overnight, in a few weeks, or even during our lifetimes. We concede that intractable evil dwells within our carefully-crafted institutions as well as our very own souls. Yet, ours remains a religion that summons us to advance step-by-step, maintaining that compassionate talk and walk can grow some corn, as Native Americans are wont to say.

Our Unitarian Universalist gospel promotes chastened hopefulness in an age filled with dealers of gloom and pushers of sweetness. Jesus often said, "Be of good cheer," but when he did, the Nazarene never used the Aramaic equivalent of *cheerio*. Like Jesus, Unitarian Universalism simply avoids the extremes of cynicism and optimism while spreading a resilient confidence. It relentlessly nudges us toward progress not perfection.

Talk about good news: just look at our name. I'm convinced that we'll contribute mightily toward the healing of our single, precious planet if we but reverse—make that resemble—our name: Unitarian Universalism. What's in a name? Lots, if we live up to it.

Unitarianism asserts that the cosmos is *unitary*, that reality is ultimately interconnected, that Divine Reality is one. What a blessing for those among us who don't want to travel the spiritual path alone, who covet living in partnership, at every level of existence.

Unitarianism also decrees that every *unit* of life is worthwhile and to be treated as such. Again, that's good news. Our chosen faith believes that we earthlings can convert life into a just and joyous journey. And, if I'm not mistaken, there are countless folks across the land, indeed in this very North County region, who hunger for just such a heartening view of human potential.

Universalism delivers more good news. It envisions an Infinite Spirit holding every creature in loving embrace, from start to finish, no exceptions. That means even the shaggiest and shadiest creatures in the universe are redeemable.

While most faiths focus on all *saints*, Unitarian Universalism welcomes all *sorts*. Our gospel urges us to come as we are...moving on the road toward whom we might become. Every living soul matters in our faith-household. I ask you, can you imagine better news than that?

The sad truth is that, at different moments in history, the dominants have denied the status of soul to entire classes of beings whom they've wanted to control—be it women, poor folks, homosexuals, persons of color, or some other embattled group. And Unitarian Universalism has always countered by saying: “Either everyone is worthy to be saved or no one is. We're a religion that embraces all souls. We shun no living being.”

And in recent times, we've even upped the ante by exhorting humanity to treat the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea as animated, soulful, with enduring value.

But how does our good news actually play itself out? Where's the evidence that our peculiar gospel really changes personal lives and communal structures—transforming what erstwhile Unitarian Universalist, Kurt Vonnegut, called “the Great Big Everything”? Where's the proof? I say: here, there, and everywhere. And I bet most every one in this historic amphitheater today could testify, perhaps passionately, as to where you personally have been served, if not saved... thanks, in large measure, to the power of our liberal and liberating gospel.

Let me give but two examples, while you ponder your own stories of hope and deliverance.

My first tale is of a Unitarian Universalist colleague whose seventeen-year-old daughter tried to commit suicide, failed, then was placed in a mental hospital. A church friend of the family learned of her plight and went to visit. As she leaned down to hug her friend's daughter, the young woman reached upward, stared at the caring face, then upon recognizing the *flaming chalice* worn around her visitor's neck, firmly clutched it as if she were grasping a life-saving relic.

Can we appreciate the enormous, restorative power contained in our simple and few religious artifacts as well as incarnated in our very physical presence? This teenager, caught in the throes of despair, was, in essence, feeling deep support upon sight of our flaming chalice: “I know I'm still loved, because my Unitarian Universalist parish actively loves me.” No doubt about it, this beleaguered young woman was assisted in her healing by the delivery of our gospel—up close and personal. Eventually she turned her life around, because one of us turned up!

My second example illustrates the potential impact of our good news in the public arena. Fellow Unitarian Universalist Bruce doesn't own a car; so he rides the buses daily to and from his work, as well as to congregational functions. Bruce has condensed his own version of Unitarian Universalism into 25 words, then printed it on colorful cards. During his daily dialogues on the buses and streets of his town, when the moment seems right, Bruce will announce that he's a practicing Unitarian Universalist, or as he puts, "a Unitarian Universalist-in-training."

Bruce then asks if his new acquaintance might be interested in knowing what Bruce has found in our religion that brings him meaning and courage. When people are curious, Bruce testifies to Unitarian Universalism as he knows it in his heart, then leaves them with a card, filled with information about his chosen congregation on the back side. Always respectful, Bruce engages in what I call "low-key evangelism," the best kind. He delivers our gospel via caring conversation rather than pushy conversion.

So, today's sermon is pretty straightforward yet challenging. I'm urging Unitarian Universalists to *claim* and *celebrate* our gospel, then *clarify* and *cherish* it, and, finally, *convey* it in our own special manner, far and wide. I'm exhorting us to let the light of our chosen religion shine, shine, and shine some more...granting the larger world a chance to experience its transforming power.

I'm inviting card-carrying Unitarian Universalists to stand tall and proud—to multiply our good news, both privately and publicly, in brave, imaginative ways.

Here's the truth: North County outsiders won't be assisted by, let alone drawn to our liberal religious parish, if we become smug or complacent hoarders of what we have, if we refuse to let our light shine. As Unitarian Universalists we must always welcome yet one more soul, forge yet one more compassionate connection, take yet one more just and merciful stand.

We fulfill the mission of our honorable heritage whenever we dare to wear a chalice or evangelize face-to-face; whenever we listen carefully, without recoiling, to angry youth in our neighborhood or sustain a lover's quarrel with our government, on specific issues; whenever we reconcile with an estranged relative or spend real time with a child-at-risk. And, yes, whenever we venture anti-oppression work that's beyond our comfort zone or join an interfaith group to appreciate the deeper meanings of their chosen "gospel".

Our light shines whenever we take a walk with an elder in a nearby nursing home or boldly "green" our little corner of the earth. Our light shines whenever we make sure our discretionary money goes to causes and people who need it as well as juggle spiritual disciplines of private meditation and public protest.

And, oh yes, whenever anyone misinterprets or devalues our chosen faith in our presence, we need to call them on it—reminding them where we've come from and what we stand for, that we're unashamedly progressive and unapologetically Unitarian Universalist.

My fellow partisans in faith: I urge you to leave the amphitheater this morning with fresh resolve to sing our gospel, to spread our gospel, and to resemble our Unitarian Universalist gospel—doing your fair-share to insure that it shines and shines, then shines some more...from this day forward and forevermore.

Tom Owen-Towle

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