

State of the UUA 2009
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
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READING

From “The Prophethood of All Believers” (1947)

By James Luther Adams

In the great ages of prophecy, the prophets (whether inside or outside the church) have been foretellers as well as forthtellers. They have been predictors – proclaimers of doom and judgment, heralds of new fulfillment. They have attempted to interpret the signs of the times and to see into the future. They have stood not only at the edge of their own culture but also before the imminent shape of new and better things to come...

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. We have long held to the idea [first articulated by Martin Luther] of the *priesthood* of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons. As an element of the radical laicism we need also a firm belief in the prophethood of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all the members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.

SERMON

State of the UUA 2009

Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

In 1921, Lewis B. Fisher, Dean of a Universalist Divinity School, said, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all. We move.”¹ This assessment seems to me to be as true to us today as it was with the Universalists nearly 90 years ago. An appropriate question subsequent to this statement, however, is, “Yes, but in what direction?”

¹ Charles Howe, *The Larger Faith* (1992), p. 96.

Though I sometimes use the word “denomination” to describe our organized faith, technically, we are not a denomination. Rather, we Unitarian Universalists describe ourselves as an association of congregations – that is, as our formal name states: the Unitarian Universalist Association (or, the UUA). So when I talk about our organized religion, I usually use the word “association.” But my favorite word, the word I like to use most to describe our organized religion – in line with the description that Lewis B. Fisher provided – is to say that we are a “movement.” Ever since the election of our immediate past president, Bill Sinkford (whose eight year presidency just ended two weeks ago), I have felt that the word “movement” has grown increasingly appropriate to the work we do and to our liberal religious presence in the larger world.

Two weeks ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association held its 48th annual General Assembly, the annual business meeting and educational conference of our organized faith, in Salt Lake City, Utah. Over 3,000 Unitarian Universalists from all over the world were in attendance. While most of those attending were from the United States, UU ministers and representatives from other parts of the world were also there, including Olufemi Matimoju, the general secretary of the First Unitarian Church in Nigeria, who shared that Unitarians have existed in Lagos, Nigeria, since 1917.

Unfortunately, this year I did not attend General Assembly. After the birth of our daughter, Mirek Joy, in March, and my return to the church in mid-May, it was too soon to leave my family and the church for a weeklong professional trip. Through the magic of modern technology, however, I watched several portions of General Assembly through live-streaming video on my computer, read even more on the internet, and researched even more after GA was over, and as I prepared for this morning’s service. Watching GA on my computer was not nearly as fun as being there, but Luddite that I am, I am grateful for this modern technology so that I can track our association from afar.

I attended my first General Assembly in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1979 when I was 13 years old. It was the summer between my seventh and eighth grade year, and for the previous two or three years my parents had begun to explore the liberal religious Unitarian Universalist movement, and dragged my brother and I along. Except for me, it didn’t take much dragging. And after I attended that first GA at age 13, I was hooked. Back then, GA was a lot smaller and was held on college campuses where we – even families – slept in college dorm rooms and ate at the college dining hall. But we are a movement, and we keep moving. I’ve attended at least 10 General Assemblies since I was 13, in locations ranging from Maine to California. These days, and at least for the past 20 years, with the larger and larger numbers attending, General Assembly has been held in the Convention Centers of large cities and attendees stay in surrounding hotels. Last year GA was held in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; this year in Salt Lake City; and next year, be prepared to attend because it will be right here in downtown Minneapolis.

Over the years I’ve noticed a movement toward what I feel is greater maturity. Though the Unitarians (if not in name then certainly in theology) were around for about 2000 years, and Universalists were around for about 200 years, they didn’t merge until 1961. So as a cohesive organized religion, we are still relatively young, and are just now growing out of our adolescence. By this I mean, broadly, that we are now moving beyond what we are against, or what we do not believe, and are beginning to articulate who we are and what we do believe.

Though many issues were at play in this year’s General Assembly, two of the biggest issues were 1) the vote about whether to revise the statement of Principles and Purposes (which

is actually a proposal for a change in a bylaw of the Unitarian Universalist Association); and 2) the election of a new president of our Unitarian Universalist Association.

The Principles and Purposes were affirmed in 1985 by a near-unanimous vote, with the specific condition that they be reviewed every 15 years to determine their continued relevance. Since our faith tradition does not require a creed for people to become members, the concern was that any set of written beliefs or principles might come to be a creed in function.

So in 2006 the Commission on Appraisal took on two years of study and listening, traveling the country visiting congregations, listening to their ideas and concerns, and holding interactive workshops at the past two General Assemblies. Finally the Commission on Appraisal developed a document that revised the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association. On Saturday, June 27, 2009, the Commission brought their proposed document of revised Principles and Purposes to the floor of the General Assembly for a vote.

The Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association affect us in both form and content. We are a creedless religion, yet when we attempt to share our faith with others, most of us use some form of the seven principles. In form, the Principles and Purposes are written on wallet cards and in pamphlets; curriculum was written, and continues to be written, around each one separately and all of them together; colored candles – each different color uniquely relating to a principle – can be found in children’s religious education classes in churches across the country (including ours); and every once in a while I even see posters displayed in churches I visit that replace the covenantal introductory language to the seven principles with the shorter – but inaccurate – phrase, “We believe...” followed by the list of the seven principles.

In content, the wording emphasizes individuality and the power of UUA headquarters in Boston, rather than on the action of congregations in covenant with one another. So, for example, the current wording of our purpose states:

The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen the Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

The proposed new wording for our purpose is:

[To *support*] the creation, vitality, and growth of congregations that aspire to live out the Unitarian Universalist Principles. Through public witness and advocacy, it advances the Principles in the world.

Regarding the six sources of Unitarian Universalism in a bullet point format, the Commission on Appraisal revised our sources into the format of two paragraphs, stating clearly at the beginning that our religion is rooted in the two religious heritages of Unitarianism and Universalism. This is one change I deeply appreciate, because as it is now, the six sources do not list either of our own religious traditions as a source for our current living faith.

Personally, I mostly like the Purpose and Principles of our Unitarian Universalist Association as they are, but I also appreciate much of the new proposed wording. The new wording also helps to remind us that we do not have a creed and so these words need to change over time.

One primary problem this year though – according to our association’s bylaws – was that we had to either vote for the new wording without being able to change or amend it, or to vote it down completely. According to our UUA website, here’s what happened in Salt Lake City:

The time set aside debate was twice extended for ten minutes as many delegates tried to find a way to move forward with the change while, at the same time, allowing for improvements to address specific issues. Eventually, the question was called and the delegates moved to a vote... It became clear that the nearly 1,200 credentialed delegates present were too closely divided on this issue to allow a visual count to accurately determine the outcome, and [the moderator] called for a teller vote... When all votes were counted, the result was 573 “Yes” and 586 “No.” By a margin of 13 votes – slightly more than 1% of the total cast – the motion failed. The proposed change will not be on the General Assembly agenda for a final vote in 2010.

The assembled delegates asked that the General Assembly Board reconsider the bylaws that prevented any amendments to proposed changes. The Board agreed to do so. In addition, a group of delegates [formed] to bring proposed changes to Article II to the General Assembly two years from now, after congregational discussion. Two years is the earliest opportunity the bylaws currently allow for this type of change to be reconsidered.

It may be easy to brush this off as a petty internal debate, but this is democracy in action, a democracy that we hold as essential in our current seven principles. This is also the same process that occurred some 25 years ago when the Purposes and Seven Principles first came into existence.

The other big issue for this year was the election of a new president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Our former president, the Reverend Bill Sinkford, served us for eight years, first elected in 2001 and again in 2005. Bill Sinkford will be remembered well, perhaps most notably for his challenge for us to engage in a greater dialogue around a language of reverence, for overseeing the revision of UUA governance structure, for increasing our liberal religious public witness across the country and in the world, and for helping to raise our awareness of and action regarding anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism.

The two new candidates for president were the Reverend Laurel Hallman, who most recently served the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas, and the Reverend Peter Morales, who most recently served Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado. I believe both candidates were very highly qualified, but because of what I felt were her qualities of building relationships across lines of race and income, her theological depth, and her vision for Unitarian Universalism, I voted through an absentee ballot for Laurel Hallman. As you saw from the video clip I showed, however, Laurel did not win the presidency. According to the UUA website, the Reverend Peter Morales “received a total of 2061 votes, 1020 of which were cast as absentee ballots. His opponent, Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman... received a total of 1481 votes, 827 of which were absentee ballots. Morales’ margin of victory was 580 votes” (or 59%).

I don’t know a lot about either candidate, and much of what I do know I read from each of their campaign websites, so I’m not entirely sure what this vote says about us as a liberal religious movement. This past week as I prepared for this service, however, I began to read more thoroughly through the campaign website of Peter Morales, and found there much that I appreciate.

Peter Morales is our first Hispanic president. He was born in a west side barrio of San Antonio, Texas, to a Mexican-American mother and the son of Spanish immigrants, and spoke Spanish before he learned English. He attended college in Stockton, California, and prior to becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister he ran a small, independent newspaper in Oregon. He has also lived in Canada, Spain and Peru. Because of his Spanish and Mexican heritage, Peter Morales is a strong advocate for anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism. On his campaign website, Peter writes:

We humans are relational beings. We become fully human through enduring loving relationships. We transcend the prison of our own egos in community. It is through our relationships that we touch what is sacred.

These relationships need to go beyond our age peers and beyond people from our own narrow cultural backgrounds. But typical gatherings of Unitarian Universalists, whether at a congregation, a district meeting, or General Assembly, segregate people by age. We replicate some of the most dysfunctional patterns of white upper middle-class culture. And we pay an enormous price for doing so.

I appreciate these words from Peter for many reasons. People who come from the traditional societal power bases – in our culture that would mean those who are white, well-educated, and mostly well-off – typically emphasize independence and individualism, especially how it pertains to “getting ahead in the world.” But those who are in the margins, those who are typically poor and people of color, typically emphasize community and connection. This dynamic largely has to do with power. Those who are in power are able to operate independently, but those who have very little power need to band together in order to have a voice.

In part, Peter Morales is speaking to our UU struggle with issues of race and poverty, and our huge liberal religious emphasis on individualism. Despite the fact that we say we welcome everyone, and the fact that Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners, a social service agency here in the suburbs three blocks away from this church, served 4, 248 individuals last year, 48% of whom are African American, Hispanic, Russian or from Africa, our congregation has little or no reflection of that local population in our membership.

In another part of his website, Peter Morales writes: “Of the Americans who are 70 years of age and older, three quarters are “white.” Of the Americans who are 10 years of age and younger, only one quarter are “white.” The America that is coming into being is an America that is dramatically more multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural than the America of one or two generations ago. If we are not relevant to this new America, we will fade into oblivion.”²

Peter Morales is not saying anything especially new, at least not to those who follow more closely the movement of Unitarian Universalism. Historically we have been sensitive and responsive to the needs of the least of those in society. During the civil rights struggle we Unitarians and Universalists were outstanding in our support and involvement. In the Civil Rights struggle though, we Unitarians and Universalists chose to join that struggle from a position of power and privilege. In the future, those of us who are “white” will need to recognize that we are not the majority, and that we must reach across lines of color and income in order to

² Peter Morales, “Ministry for a New Age” (<http://www.moralesforuuapresident.org/pagePlatform.html>)

at least survive, and do much more around building relationships if we want to thrive. It just may be that Peter Morales is the prophet we need.

In 1947, one of our great Unitarian theologians and a great champion of social justice and civil rights, James Luther Adams, wrote an essay called, “The Prophethood of All Believers.” Let me read for you one more time those words we heard earlier from James Luther Adams:

“In the great ages of prophecy, the prophets...have been foretellers as well as forthtellers. They have been predictors – proclaimers of doom and judgment, heralds of new fulfillment. They have attempted to interpret the signs of the times and to see into the future. They have stood not only at the edge of their own culture but also before the imminent shape of new and better things to come...

“A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. We have long held to the idea [first articulated by Martin Luther] of the *priesthood* of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons. As an element of the radical laicism we need also a firm belief in the prophethood of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all the members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.”

We live in an exciting time to create great vision, forge new relationships, share laughter and tears, and work for justice. Let us foresee compassion, and join in this liberal religious movement together.