



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“A New Narrative”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

A sermon delivered March 3, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative; the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but a family. Mahopanishad 6:71-73

No man is an island. John Donne

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. Aldo Leopold

The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace.

One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today.

Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012

Sermon

A few weeks ago I watched with interest the passing of a huge asteroid which zoomed by Earth so closely, it flew within the air space occupied by communication satellites. It offered no threat to life on earth, but to avoid collision some satellites were moved out of its path. While our eyes were on this passing asteroid, we were taken by surprise when an unexpected meteorite sliced through Earth’s atmosphere at sonic speed, causing glass windows to shatter and many minor injuries in Russia. Did you see the news reports?

These two extraterrestrial encounters remind me of the 6-mile wide meteorite most scientists believe slammed into the Yucatan - Gulf of Mexico region, forming the Chicxulub Crater over 65 million years ago. That impact expelled debris into the atmosphere, causing Earth’s climate to cool and greatly contributing to the end of some of Earth’s most amazing creatures, the dinosaurs.

When scientists substantially proved the connection between the meteorite and the dinosaur’s demise, the dinosaur’s eulogy had to be rewritten. For lack of better knowledge, earlier scientists suggested dinosaurs died off simply because they stopped changing or adapting, as if they somehow refused to help themselves evolve. [<http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/dinosaur/2012/01/the-way-of-the-dinosaur/>] ‘Going the way of the dinosaur,’ became a catch-phrase you may still occasionally hear describing anything outdated or that has outlived its usefulness.

Some modern sociologists claim religious life in America is going the way of the dinosaur. As proof, various surveys on church membership and attendance show continual decline after the religious hay-days of the 1950s and 60s.

Mainline Protestant denominations (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and the like) are rapidly shrinking. Conservative evangelical churches are stagnating, despite the appeal of some mega-churches. But non-Protestant religious groups are not experiencing this same decline. Immigration is increasing the number of Roman Catholics and Muslims. Jewish and Unitarian Universalist communities are holding their own, though shrinking in terms of total population percentage. In fact, we UUs are so small in total number we barely register on these religious surveys. Survey authors place us in an ‘Other’ category, which includes New Age and Pagan adherents.

Many sociologists opine the decline is due to religion becoming irrelevant in the modern world. Science has demythologized religion, and these experts presume that without its supernatural narrative story, religion and religious communities have no purpose. In addition, social media, the internet, and smart phones are replacing old ways of communicating and being together in community. Even our own UU President, the Rev. Peter Morales, suggests we need to focus ‘beyond congregations’ if we are to remain vital into the future.

Do not despair, my fellow UUs. I think the changes and challenges of modern life make religious communities like ours *even more* relevant and necessary than they once were. And, within these dire statistics our UU hope actually lies.

Before explaining why I believe the death knell premature, and just to let you sit anxiously at the edge of your seats a bit, a momentary aside.

As we explained earlier, Peter Hartel won the privilege of asking for a particular sermon on a topic of his choice at the UUFA auction. When we met to discuss what subject he’d like to explore, he indicated an awareness of these doom and gloom reports. Since he admitted he didn’t feel the need to participate in a religious community himself, these reports didn’t surprise him.

Peter’s professional environmental ethics background makes him deeply concerned about the future of our planet and the human contribution to climate change. At our earlier Forum, Jim Porter, a UGA’s Odum School of Ecology scientist and member here, passionately shared information and made the case for how necessary it is that we face the problem of climate change, so I don’t need to convince you of this. Taking the next step, Peter wondered how Unitarian Universalist congregations could not only remain relevant in the face of general religious decline, but also could our 7th Principle play a part in saving planet Earth? Could Unitarian Universalism avoid going the way of the dinosaurs, and could all Earthly life as we know it avoid going that way, too?

O-M-G! (“Oh my God,” for those not into texting.) In fifteen to twenty minutes I’ve been asked to save Unitarian Universalism and the entire planet as well. Peter, you’ve either grossly overpaid or gotten an incredible deal. I have an idea which, but I won’t say.

Back to religion's predicament. If declining attendance and modernity aren't enough to kill religious life, the experts reveal what they think is a final factor. According to the research, the fastest *growing* group is the 'none' category. That's 'none' with four-letters, not three. N-O-N-E.

This group includes people without any religious affiliation, who claim they are either atheist or agnostic, as well as those who call themselves—can you recite it with me—'spiritual but not religious'. One in five American adults has no religious affiliation. For more data you can read the summary findings and analyze the charts yourself by going to the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life website. Surveys by other organizations yield similar results.

Traditional religious groups may feel dismay by this growing, apparent lack of religiosity evidenced by the 'none' category. But that doesn't mean *we* need to feel dismay! The 'nones' describe many of us! But we, obviously, have heard about UUism and know atheists, pantheists, pagans, new agers, and the 'spiritual but not religious' are welcome alongside the theists and agnostics. And, we apparently find value in being part of a caring community. Your presence here attests to that. We willingly gather in community to worship, to lift up the values we hold in common while granting each other the freedom to hold individual beliefs.

So while others despair, we can be joyful. It's quite possible that if the 'nones' knew about us, many would be interested in what we have to offer. If only we were not so shy to talk about our good news, our message of welcome and religious freedom, reason and tolerance. Where might we be if this fast growing group knew we accept the findings of science and we individually weigh the mythology or metaphors of religion for our own individual truth, wisdom, and meaning? I believe many of them are spirituality, emotionally, and philosophically hungry for what we offer. All those do-it-yourself spiritual practice books scream out that people are seeking something they can't find in traditional churches. They reject empty calories, the mythology few literally believe, and they desire fresh, nourishing bread, not stale or moldy offerings. I believe we have a moral imperative to feed the spiritually hungry just as we do to feed the nutritionally hungry.

If UUs miss this opportunity to reach out to all those who say they are spiritual but not religious, a lot more than our congregations will fail. We'll have failed the larger world because our particular values will have lost a voice. Our truth that a religious community can respectfully embrace diverse beliefs and diverse peoples will be silenced. As the world shrinks and we find it impossible to isolate ourselves from other people and beliefs, our Unitarian Universalism shows a harmonious way forward. We can be a universal religion that shows the world how to get along.

That's my UU hope for saving ourselves for the good of others. Can we save the planet, too? I believe if more people acted in accord with our Seventh Principle, life on Earth might avoid going the way of the dinosaurs. If we affirm and respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, then we must act as one planetary community. What happens on one side of our web reverberates throughout its entirety. What we do on planet Earth matters to all that exists.

If, at our religious core, we believe what we do affects others, and if we affirm the rest of our Principles—to respect all people and their paths to meaning and to work for freedom, peace, and justice everywhere—and if we also believe everyone wants to pursue happiness, as our

Unitarian ancestor Thomas Jefferson wrote, then we must balance our individual desires against the communal needs of the whole planet. Because we struggle with these two, often competing interests, one of our purposes in this liberal spiritual and religious community is to remind ourselves of what really matters, of what holds ultimate importance.

Yes, I recognize some can be reminded of this without coming here. But I believe this is only one reason we need a religious community. We also make meaningful connections with others. In the face of modernity's virtual reality, we need real face time more than ever. We need human touch; we need to look into each other's eyes without screens between us. We need to feel each other's presence and know we really matter, we really have worth. As families become distanced by geography or history, and because some don't have family, we become extended family. Religious communities are one of the last places in America where generations mix and mingle.

We also live in a culture where few of us know our neighbors, where we come and go independently, needing nothing from our neighbors, living in isolation from each other. Outside of a hospital, isolation is not a good thing for social creatures.

There is value in religious community, we are relevant. Our challenge has been letting others know we're here. If our beacon can shine more brightly through our voice and actions, then some of those 'nones' might be attracted to our good news. Not because we want more numbers, but because we want to offer our sanctuary to those who might find it valuable, as we do.

The eulogy for liberal religious life must be rewritten. We are proof of that. This Fellowship is alive and well! We are vibrant with activities and with people who find meaning and purpose in being part of this community and furthering its mission and vision. We are thriving! If I speak truth, give me a Hallelujah!

Let's shout our good news into the pine-covered Georgia hills and beyond. Let's not give up on faith communities. Let's not hide our light. Let's not go the way of the Brontosaurus and Stegosaurus; let's take care of planet Earth.

May you and I become ever better stewards of this Fellowship and of Planet Earth. May you show your passion for what we have and what we offer the world by participating not only in the Pledge Drive, but by continuing to be present and engaged in our communal life, and by affirming and acting in according with our shared values as articulated in our Seven Principles. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What yearning or need drew you to this spiritual community? What keeps you connected?
2. Do you boldly claim and proclaim your UU values in public settings? Share why or why not.
3. What greater role could Unitarian Universalism's 7th Principle play in transforming people's lives, within UUFA and beyond?