

## 2007 Canvass Kick-off Remarks (Bill Schulz)

I'm going to assume that you're ready to yield up the contents of your wallets. About ten years ago a very pleasant young man from Oberlin College, my alma mater, came to call on me in my office in New York. After about twenty minutes of conversation about the School, I said, "Well, I'd like to make a pledge to the Campaign for Oberlin." My caller looked crestfallen. "Oh, no," he said. "I'm not instructed to take your money. I'm only here to cultivate you." "Well," I said, "I'm cultivated enough and I'm ready to make a pledge." "No, please," he said. "I can't. I just can't." and sprinted out of the office. But two years later he was back. "I'm ready to take your pledge now," he said proudly. "All right," I said, "What would you like me to give?" And without missing a beat, he said, "One million dollars." There's a lesson here and that is that you should always pledge the *first* time you're asked.

And the reason I hope you'll pledge and pledge generously tonight is because the world desperately needs this faith of ours. That's what I'm going to talk about tomorrow morning so I won't give it all away tonight except to say this...

We are witness today to an enormous struggle in the world today between those who would close down culture and those who would keep it open. Between those on both sides of the divide who would resort quickly to violence and those who would resist it as long as possible. Between those who believe that the future is set by forces beyond human control and those who would take responsibility for the planet's future. Between those who welcome the preeminence of one nation and those who give their fealty to the common interests of the globe. It is, in short, a struggle between those with a parched vision and those with a generous heart. And Unitarian Universalism, for better or worse has always cast it lot on the side of the generous heart.

At the heart of a Unitarian Universalist faith is the conviction that truth takes many forms, that love takes many guises and that there is no necessary correlation between wisdom and power. Osama bin Laden doesn't believe that. Dick Cheney doesn't believe that. Hu Jintao doesn't believe that. Pope Benedict doesn't believe that. Bill O'Reilly doesn't believe that. And Howard Stern doesn't believe that. *But it is true.*

Sometimes, I admit, I wish it weren't. Sometimes I wish the secret of life was a lot simpler than it is. The Chinese philosopher Hung Tzu-ch-eng said, "Only those who can appreciate the least palatable of root vegetables can possibly know the meaning of life." I wish it were that easy. "What is man," asked the Danish novelist Isak Dinesen, "but an elaborate machine for turning red wine into urine?" I wish that was all there was to it. But I'm afraid my sympathies lie with the rabbi who upon his deathbed was asked by the head elder to reveal the meaning of life before he passed beyond it. "Life," said the rabbi, "is like a river," and those wise words were passed on down the row of elders—the rabbi says, "Life is like a river"—until they reached the lowest of the low, the poor, stupid schlemiel. But the schlemiel was puzzled. "What does the rabbi mean, 'Life is like a river?'" he asked. And the schlemiel's question was passed on back up the row of elders until it reached the head elder who put it to the rabbi, "I'm sorry, good

sir," he said, "but the schlemiel, poor, stupid fellow, has asked what you mean 'Life is like a river.'" But the rabbi just shrugged: "So," he said, "Life is not like a river." Truth takes many forms; love takes many guises and there is no necessary correlation between wisdom and power. That's why everybody's rights to free expression must be protected: because every one of us may sometimes be right and we know for damn sure every one of us is often wrong. And UUism places protection of that right at the apex of its faith, its generous heart.

And then, again, Unitarian Universalism has sought to propagate the notion that the world—that life itself—flawed and fragile though it be, full of strangers and full of fury, is fundamentally worthy of our love and trust. In my job with Amnesty, I learned every day of some new manifestation of the worst that the world could be. The greatest danger to those of us who try to save the world is that we will succumb to the fatal disease of earnestness and stop loving the world that we are trying to save. But what is the point of saving something that you do not love? And so, in the face of the world's brutality, I spend a fair amount of time trying to stay in touch with her blessings. How, after all, can any of us doubt the magnificence of a world that contains luscious pears and endless seas, jazz by Ellington and paintings by O'Keefe?

Though we are all born with it, this trust in the world is one of the easiest things to lose. Jean Amery, a member of the Belgian resistance who was tortured by the Nazis, was a modest man and, though both his arms had been forced out of their sockets at the shoulder, always claimed that what he had endured was trivial compared to the sufferings of others. But Amery was able to describe the consequences of torture for its victims better than anyone I have ever heard...and I have heard from hundreds. This is what he said:

If from the experience of torture any knowledge remains that goes beyond the plain nightmarish, it is that of a great amazement—astonishment that all those things one may call one's soul, one's mind, one's consciousness, one's identity can be so quickly destroyed in the splintering of the shoulder joints, that a living person can be transformed so thoroughly into flesh and, while still alive, made into a prey of death. Whoever has succumbed to torture can never again feel at home in the world. The shame can never be erased; trust can never be restored.

Jean Amery lived some thirty years more after he had been tortured and then he killed himself. He was simply never again able to feel at home.

I sit on the deck of my home in Gloucester, MA, looking out at the ocean. When it's warm, I see the sunbathers frolicking on the beach. When it's cold, I see the great blue herons dipping into the marsh. I hear the children laughing behind me in the street; I see our elderly neighbors walking hand in hand down the hill. I think of those I love and those who have loved me. And I feel at home in the world, unashamed and trusting.

That's the way the world should be. I mourn for Jean Amery and every person like him and I relish a faith of generous heart that assures me that the world is fundamentally

worthy of my love and resolve to do what I can to make the world worthy of our trust as well again.

And the third characteristic of that generous heart is UUism's conviction that history is not finished; that the future is not fated; and that every one of us has a responsibility to build a more benevolent nation, a more hospitable people, a more welcoming world.

Somewhere in one of the great art museums in Europe hangs a large painting of Faust and the Devil sitting at a chess table. Faust has made his pact with the Devil and now his face is contorted in anguish because he retains on the chessboard but a knight and a King and the King is in check.

One day a great chess master happened into the museum and naturally this painting eye caught his eye and he sat down in front of it and stared. Fifteen minutes passed. Then twenty. And still the master stared. And then suddenly, leaping to his feet: "It's a lie!" he shouted at the top of his lungs for all to hear. "It's a lie, I tell you. The King and the knight—they have another move. They *have* another move."

And that, my friends, is the final message of UUism's generous heart—that, no matter what orthodoxy may claim or ideology may bluster, history is not finished, the future is not fated, what comes next is in our hands, so that in the face of hardship and injustice, of suffering and of death, we say, "The story is not over. The end is not here yet. For it is not just the King but the knight, not just the Queen but the rook, not just the Bishop but pawn, not just the wealthy but the pauper, not just the powerful but every starving, lonely, frightened person in the world, every single person, every single one of us, who has another move. We all have another move.

I hope you'll support your living church and its generous heart as robustly as you can. For I hope you'll remember that in the ancient world a poetry contest was held each year and the third place winner was presented a rose made out of silver; the second place winner a rose made out of gold; but the first place winner received a real rose, a living rose that, while it did not live forever, spoke while it did of art and beauty and passion and power and who among us, my friends, if we had to choose, would not always choose the living rose?