

“Who Can We Become?”
March 14, 2010
Martha Dallas, Director of Religious Education
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, VT

I’ve got a question: How many people in this congregation are not Unitarian Universalist, but don’t know it?ⁱ Let me repeat that: How many people in this congregation are not Unitarian Universalist, but don’t know it?

It’s presumptuous, isn’t it? The question comes from the Rev. Liz Strong. It boldly suggests that some of us, despite calling ourselves UUs, may not truly be so.

I find this question meaningfully suggestive, and this morning, I’ll tell you why.

I suspect some of you have heard about the “UU elevator speech.” The challenge is to explain Unitarian Universalism to someone else, as if you only had a short elevator ride in which to do so.

The fact that we refer to the elevator speech, points directly to why I like Liz Strong’s question so much. The UU Elevator Speech exists as a *challenge*, precisely because of what we have failed to teach recent generations of UUs.

Here’s an example of what I mean. Last year, I preached a sermon that explored the history of UU religious education. Afterwards, a mom about my age thanked me for shedding light on something that had puzzled and frustrated her: raised UU, she knew more than most about other religions, but very little about her own. She discovered that day, that learning about her own UU faith was not given much importance in our congregations when she was growing up.

I hope you find this a little shocking.

But that’s the way it was.

When I was first a UU Director of Religious Education, back in the mid- 1990’s in Massachusetts, I bought into the prevailing, and paradoxically enticing idea that we raise our children and youth to be their true inner selves, and that *it doesn’t matter to us whether they grow up to be UUs or not*. That’s how liberal and liberated we were, I thought! I felt pretty smug when I explained this to parents visiting that congregation.

But the last quarter of the 20th century saw a 7% decline in UU membership across the continent.ⁱⁱ Not a surprising result, if we didn’t care whether or not those we raised, stayed UU.

This statistic didn’t sit well with leaders in UU religious education either. About ten years ago, thirty or so of them were invited to respond to three key questions. First: “As we enter the 21st Century, what is the core of our evolving Unitarian Universalist Faith? [Second:] What is your vision of the goals of our lifespan religious education? And, [Third:] What are

the vital components for Unitarian Universalist curricula?”ⁱⁱⁱ Their responses were published in this book, Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education. From their collective vision emerged a goal of programming designed to engage people of all ages to explore faith along with the experiences of their lives.^{iv}

Well, their thoughtful vision has won me over. I’ve changed my mind since the 90’s. I want First UU’s children and youth to keep Unitarian Universalism in their hearts, and to be active UUs when they grow up. I’m committed to the work of helping Unitarian Universalism to GROW, here in Burlington.

And what can make it grow, is if each one of us can see relationships among three things: how we live our lives, this UU religion, and our world.

What’s more, the way we think about religious education needs to change fundamentally, “...from a focus on the information we expect from [our] curricula to personal spiritual engagement with it.”^v

In fact, it’s not even “religious education” anymore. There’s a whole new paradigm. It’s called, “faith development,” and it’s for all ages.

So, here’s Liz’s question again, “How many people in this congregation aren’t UU, but don’t know it?” Her question suggests that, to the extent we allow ourselves to be merely a community of spiritually-oriented people with religiously liberal views, we are both selling ourselves short and disappointing the world. Our theological heritage is rich, powerful, and inspiring! And if we don’t support one another to BE Unitarian Universalists in ever deeper and fuller ways, then I fear that the horizon of this faith, so beloved to us, is a cloudy one. Where else does the heart, the life, and the relevance of our faith live, but in the convictions and actions of its faithful?!

We should expect that those who resonate with this faith community dedicate themselves to their faith development. We must promise to support one another toward greater spiritual maturity and a deeper understanding of Unitarian Universalism, sharing our journeys to inspire one another.

Now, for some of you, all this talk about faith might be making you feel a little twitchy. Me too. This past week, as I was writing this sermon, I accumulated various ideas: possibilities of what I might say to you. And I found myself wondering again and again, *What IS faith, after all?* Whenever it seemed I was holding onto a meaning that would work with the sermon’s message, it kept squirming out of my grasp.

Just in writing this, my own understanding of faith has shifted and grown.

Here’s what faith is about for me: When I am truly faithful, I walk my talk. Developing my faith is stretching and deepening my beliefs, and linking them more consistently with my

choices and actions. In this sense, faith differs from spirituality or belief. Our beliefs alone are lifeless ideas. But when we live them out, we practice our faith.

As I suggested in my Reflections for All Ages this morning, *development* is about more than just getting bigger over time; it involves essential *change*, an increase in maturity, in complexity.

There's a developmental psychologist, James Fowler,^{vi} who has proposed a six-stage structure for understanding faith maturity. Like the chambered nautilus, we push through to a new and larger "compartment" when an authentic faith expression feels too cramped in the current one. I want to illustrate Fowler's framework through some personal stories.

Our faith development starts when we're about three, and our imaginations are wild; our curiosity endless. My niece, Rachel, who is now seven, has maintained a belief that my cats can talk. English. On the phone. When she was younger, she would call frequently, asking to talk to Dandylion, her favorite of our two cats. If Dandy was available and up to talking, I'd let them chat for a while. And so you get the idea, the conversation on my end would begin like this, "Herrow! Dis is Dannyrion! Who is dis on da terrefone?"

Rachel was always much chattier with Dandylion than with me or even her mother, and Dandylion often had to come up with creative reasons for why it was time to say goodbye: "Oh, Rachew... I feerin' kin'a sreepie..." Now that Rachel is older, I suspect she has developed a distinction between real and imaginary that she didn't have when she was a preschooler. But she still sometimes calls to talk to Dandylion, and if there's anything imaginary about what's going on, she doesn't ask, and I don't tell.

As Rachel's faith develops, stories are becoming more and more key in how she draws a connection between herself and the world. For myself, I remember becoming enjoyably immersed in stories during *my* elementary years. When the children's author, Roald Dahl, brought James right into the giant peach, I was there too, with the friendly centipede and other bugs, sweet peach juice trickling down my face as I tasted the fruity flesh and inhaled its aroma from the inside!

At the age of about twelve, I read C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. I devoured each book in daily succession, completing the series in a week. My heart warmed and softened in the presence of Aslan, the wise, gentle, good and loving lion, ruler of the land of Narnia. Aslan's character, I learned much later, was modeled after the author's understanding of God.

In eighth grade, I took confirmation class at the Episcopal church to which my family belonged. The only part of confirmation that really grew my faith was the required service component. I opted to read once a week to an elderly blind man, who was the father of a dear family friend. I'd go see him after school, and over a cup of tea, I'd read Gramps a chapter from Little Women, his choice – a book he knew we could enjoy together.

In high school, my church's youth group was led by our new assistant minister, Edward. We were all drawn to him, because he made youth group fun. And we got to do cool and

unusual things like serving at a soup kitchen in Boston and singing Christmas carols for the prisoners at the local correction facility. The cocoon of my safe, comfortable existence started to crack a little when, talking directly to some of the inmates afterward, I realized they had daughters my age.

And then, because I trusted Edward, I asked him one day if he *really* believed in the Bible's creation story, because *I* didn't. I don't remember the details of his answer, but I do remember how I felt to hear it. Relieved. Excited. There were possibilities of meaning to be explored out there, so exploring I would go.

In fact, Edward was the one I went running to, during college, when I failed to stand my Episcopal ground against a Bible-quoting born-again Christian friend. "Help!" I cried to him, "I thought I was okay!" With his trusted reassurance, I was once again, okay.

Of course, I didn't realize any of this could be called "faith development." It was just me following my nose through life. Each of us proceeds differently, some quickly, and some more slowly.

Part of the next stage of my development was taking "Philosophy of Religion" in college. Challenged on day one with the apparent paradox created at the intersection of these two fields of study, I was drawn right in. Here I learned for the first time that for centuries people had not only debated the *nature* of God, but had worked up logical proofs for God's very existence! And meanwhile, the church *I* knew was carrying on – la dee dah – like it was all clear and settled. My gut screamed otherwise, and my curiosity wouldn't rest.

I surprised myself when I realized that a *seminary* was the place to continue my inquiry. The key for me was to choose a theologically liberal school. What I loved about Union Theological Seminary, was that it had heart. What we considered and discussed in class, we then applied with our hands and feet and voices around the school and in our neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. My first protest march took a route through the streets of Harlem. Prior to going, I expressed to a friend that I feared for my safety. Her reply? "Safety-shmafety!" And off we went.

I groped along liberal fingers of the Episcopal church, to limited satisfaction, until in my late 20's, I started attending a UU congregation with my girlfriend at the time. Experiencing it from the inside was such a contrast to the cold, intellectual reputation I'd come to understand in "Unitarianism," as others referred to it. I LOVED this religion. At the stage where I was so enjoying the dance of discovering and refining MY personal beliefs, its questioning orientation, along with its complete affirmation of me as a lesbian, made it my new faith home.

As I deepened my UU identity, I took deliberate steps to distance myself from my Episcopal roots. When I accompanied my family to Christmas Eve midnight services, I refused to recite the Confession of Sins. If I opened my mouth to join the congregation in reciting the Nicene Creed, I felt like a hypocrite, because it began, "We believe..." ... (Ahhh... no I don't!). And when I recited the Lord's Prayer, my mind would whip through a series of gymnastic interpretations of the beliefs I was speaking, to try bridge the gap

between my evolving spiritual identity, and my now distant Episcopal roots, which I no longer held true.

And so my faith continues to evolve. When my mom was in the hospital, late last December, the day before she became unconscious and was transferred to the ICU, someone from that same Episcopal church brought her communion. I had expected something quick and simple, and just for mom. No, these are the Episcopalians. I and my Dad, who was also there, were invited to participate in a small, bedside service of Holy Eucharist. There was nothing but the completeness of Yes and Thank You in my heart. I prayed the Lord's Prayer. I took the bread and the wine, along with the goodness and hope it stands for, into my body. I ate this holy meal with my parents five days before my mother died. Wider graces have infinite room. I participated fully, in that circle of love, including with respect, both my present faith and that of my upbringing.

Sometimes I experience moments of my faith fully evolved. In my whole being I feel one with creative existence. I feel alive, and at peace, and like everything makes sense. There are a few people whose every moment of living is completely suffused with ultimate depth and complete wisdom. Good thing my faith is still developing, because the journey never bores me. Growth can be wearisome, but the paradox is that it also feels intensely good and right.

We don't have to figure out our talk, to start walking more faithfully. In other words, we can decide any time to take a step that comes from the heart. Chances are, the world will be better for it.

Liz Strong wondered who among us isn't UU and doesn't know it. I wonder to what extent we will guide, and lead, and teach, and inspire those of ALL ages in our midst. Because being a Unitarian Universalist is something only you can claim for yourself. And when we choose to claim that faith identity, we join a precious tradition whose many visionary and hopeful dreams await fulfillment.

So, join me. See who you can become. The world will smile to see what our lives can give, when we deepen our faith together.

ⁱ I heard this question suggested in person by Rev. Elizabeth Strong.

ⁱⁱ Unitarian Universalist Culture: The Present and the Promise, by Marilyn Sewell, Fuller Press, Portland, OR, p. 12

ⁱⁱⁱ from "New Paradigms in Lifespan Faith Development", by Rev. Elizabeth Strong. UUA website: http://www.uua.org/documents/strongelizabeth/sgm_in_re_ga03.pdf p. 2

^{iv} from "New Paradigms in Lifespan Faith Development", by Rev. Elizabeth Strong. UUA website: http://www.uua.org/documents/strongelizabeth/sgm_in_re_ga03.pdf p. 2

^v from "New Paradigms in Lifespan Faith Development", by Rev. Elizabeth Strong. UUA website: http://www.uua.org/documents/strongelizabeth/sgm_in_re_ga03.pdf p. 1

^{vi} from "Handout 34," in the UU Curriculum Renaissance Reader. This handout is a adapted from James Fowler's *The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Harper and Row, 1981