

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
"A Common Fire"

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore May 17, 2009

Sermon

Last Sunday, I celebrated mothers as examples of being in the service to life. Today, I'd like to look more widely at what motivates people to move into public life. I'm defining "public life" as extending oneself beyond one's personal concerns such as making a living, putting food on the table and taking care of one's family. Living a public life means being willing to walk into the public square to serve the common good. Today, I'm asking the question, "What initiates and feeds our fire of commitment to reach beyond "us," to care about and care for others?"

I reflected on this question as I interviewed the thirteen youth who participated in our Rite of Passage program this year. I spoke with each one so I could get to know them better and to assist them in defining their personal beliefs. I noticed some of the youth were strongly motivated toward serving others. "What made the difference for them?" I wondered. How did our religious education program support that growth? What could we do to encourage all our youth to serve the common good?

Our American focus on individualism, particularly ego stroking advertising messages that constantly nibble at the edges of our consciousness, drives teens toward narcissism. Developmentally, teens are already intensely focused on themselves. They are preoccupied with the statement their clothing label makes, who to "friend" on facebook, who they are, what they want to be, and do with their lives. Getting them to pay attention to the public sphere isn't easy.

I wonder if a lack of attention to the public sphere could be an adaptation to what many of us struggle with: information overload. The many different sources of 24 hour news coming toward us via the Internet and television can overwhelm the emotionally sensitive person with more than they can handle. Add to that badgering emails from advocacy organizations that want to manipulate us into action, and teens can want to flip the bad news switch off and just play video games and listen to a favorite musical group.

Yet many of our youth do care and do keep up with current events. My son Andrew faithfully watches the Daily Show and passionately speaks about how to solve the world's problems to Philomena and me. So what makes the difference and motivates people to care and to act?

This is the question taken up in the book, *Common Fire: leading lives of commitment in a complex world*. The book had been sitting on my shelf, calling out to me to be read, so I decided it was time to open it up and see what it had to say about this subject that might be useful.

The authors approached the question I've posed today by identifying people they thought were models of engagement with public life. They chose these servants of the common good to understand why they were who they were and what, if any, common history, attitudes, beliefs and practices united them. Selecting fifty men and fifty women from as diverse a demographic as possible, they sought these qualities in their subjects:

- Commitment to the common good
- Perseverance and resilience
- Ethical congruence between life and work, and
- Engagement with diversity and complexity

The book is full of inspiring stories of wonderful people doing great things in the world. These were not dreamy eyed idealists but committed realists responding to compelling situations and needs. People like Andy Lipkis founder of TreePeople. Andy began planting trees in 1973 to rehabilitate smog- and fire-damaged forests in and around Los Angeles when he was 15 years old. People like Kelly Seabrook, who works with young drug offenders in Boston's "combat zone." People like A.J. Brown who was moved to work with Artists For Humanity. Artists For Humanity's mission is to bridge economic, racial and social divisions by providing underserved youth with the keys to self-sufficiency through paid employment in the arts.

What did they discover? Much that many of us would find familiar from our own personal experience. No one factor seemed to determine the course of their lives, no "Gandhian factor," rather an accumulation of factors. Growing up in a loving home helps, as does having parents working actively for the common good.

Add opportunities for service during adolescence, cross-cultural experiences, and a good mentoring experience during young adulthood,

and the likelihood grows still stronger. [The authors argue] the greater the number and depth of certain key experiences one has, the greater the probability of living a committed life. (p.17)

One of the key experiences they document in their book, shared by all their subjects, that jumped out at me, was the experience of being an outsider. To understand this discovery, we first need to reflect on its opposite, our human affinity for tribes.

Probably driven by biological programming, people belong to and identify with groups from an extended family, to a sports team, to a region, nation or culture. Tribalism shows up early in our development. Middle school students act like pack animals looking for their group to belong to. This gang behavior draws on deep social urges for group identity. The sense of belonging is very important to all of us.

Coupled with the desire to identify with a group is the urge to define ourselves as *not* part of another group. Democrats dis-identify with Republicans and visa-versa. Race, skin color, sexual orientation, ethnic identity, economic status and academic standing, are all little boxes we close in around ourselves to both define us and separate us from others.

The subjects the researchers identified with commitment to the common good resisted this urge to divide and separate.

The capacity of [the] people [they] studied to live both within and beyond tribe appears to have been significantly shaped by their engagement across differences that were sometimes dramatic and sometimes subtle. But always [their subjects] would describe some event or experience of "otherness" that jolted their idea of who they were and where they stood in the world, challenging their previously held assumptions about who was "one of us" and who was not. (p 65)

This research finding intrigued me and stimulated a reflection on my experience of otherness. I wondered how it may have affected Philomena and my commitment to the public good.

My most powerful experience of otherness happened when I was ten years old. My father took a yearlong sabbatical in England and brought the family. My sister and I attended the regular school and felt like outsiders. I spoke English with a funny accent. I had no clue what happened in the War of the

Roses or how to multiply Pounds, Schillings and Pence. I looked different and got teased mercilessly. My sister read, *Lassie Come Home* about 50 times, holed up in her room.

I had a taste of the immigrant experience that my wife Philomena had as a child. Philomena arrived here from Ireland in the late 1950's. She struggled with being an outsider in Buffalo with her strange accent and the odd clothing her mother made her wear. While her older siblings held onto much of their Irish heritage, Philomena went the other direction and chose to assimilate into American culture. Yet she retained the experience of otherness in a way that opened her heart rather than closing it.

Globalization is bringing us into closer and closer contact with otherness. Urbanization around the world throws together people from different classes and cultures. Even though the tribal urge drives us to separate from others and seek those we identify with, contact seeps in around the edges. Cross-cultural experience can separate us from our tribe and initiate the experience of being "other" and that can lead to the experience of being marginalized.

Most Unitarian Universalists know what it feels like to be marginalized, as we are far less than 1% of the population. Our religious beliefs are not accepted by many of those around us. Most of us believe Jesus was a human teacher rather than an incarnate God. Most of us do not embrace the Bible as the Authoritative Word of God. Many of us have non-Biblical views of divinity, if we believe in God at all. While we live in a more religiously tolerant area here in the Northeast, those who have lived in the South and Midwest know a different reality. There, if you aren't Evangelical Christians, you are other and marginalized.

The authors of *Common Fire* believe the experience of being marginalized can be turned toward the good:

Even when it carries a price, marginality can also bear certain gifts: greater self-knowledge, greater awareness of others, and a kind of comfort with life at the edge. The central gift of marginality, however, is its power to promote both empathy with the other and a critical perspective on one's own tribe. (p 76)

The painful experience of being marginalized, combined with a self-acceptance that *resists* accepting inwardly that rejection, can deepen our compassion for others who are marginalized. Add a sense of personal

empowerment to make a difference and the experience of otherness can activate a desire for fairness and justice that will draw people into the public square to serve the common good.

The practice of embracing otherness and elevating the practice to a religious principle and core value makes Unitarian Universalism an unusual way to do religion. Rather than defining boundaries of “us” and “them,” we prefer to explore the edges of boundaries looking for ways for both sides to be right. You can embrace Judaism and be Unitarian Universalist. You can embrace Buddhism, as I do, and be Unitarian Universalist. You can be Pagan and be Unitarian Universalist. You can be Christian and be Unitarian Universalist. You can be an atheist and be a Unitarian Universalist. Welcoming a diversity of beliefs and theologies isn't easy. Welcoming those with different lifestyles, family sizes and arrangements, economic status, social status and political views, stretches us. There will always be tension in a congregation like ours that commits itself to welcoming all free seekers of truth and meaning.

Pushing beyond the tribal fear of the outsider is a core religious task. The more sheltered we are from the outsider, the harder this work can be. But when we are in creative tension with those we consider outsiders, or when we are the outsider in creative tension with those we consider the insiders, the opportunity for our hearts to grow a little larger arises.

This, I believe, is the genius of what Unitarian Universalism is and has been evolving towards. By growing the diversity in our congregations, we will grow our hearts and expand our minds. We are only now discovering the spiritual power of this work as we explore ways to be anti-racist, anti-oppressive and welcome multiculturalism. It rubs up against all our tribal urges. It ruffles the feathers of our historians and institutional leaders. It flies in the face of those who'd like a snappy sound bite to communicate our identity.

When welcoming the other works, as I see it working in our congregation, the willingness to embrace otherness naturally draws us into the public square and toward serving the common good. Experiencing the value of the other makes real our principle of the inherent worth and dignity of all people. When I am not separate from the other, I'm moved by the suffering of the other and naturally want to respond.

Our congregation offers our members a variety of ways to respond as our heart and conscience move us. Our Social Responsibilities Council right now supports a number of initiatives such as helping families of prisoners, building a

Habitat for Humanity house, and resettling an Iraqi family. We support Interfaith Impact advocating for liberally religious social issues. We support ARISE working with other religious and neighborhood organizations in the Capital Region on urban issues. All these organizations provide ways for FUUSAns to join together to make a positive difference. Our congregation cares deeply about serving the common good and many of us, through this congregation and in other organizations, are doing just that.

The most powerful way we can teach our children to value and work for the common good is by leading with our example. We strive to be counter-cultural to the message that a meaningful and satisfying life can be discovered through accumulation and consumption. Wealth is empty without a heart for service to the good of all. The one with all the toys doesn't win the love of his neighbor.

As I said last week, meaning and satisfaction can be discovered through the service of life. Each one of us is but a tiny speck of the greater living whole. Through service to the common good of the greater living whole, we can find the meaning and satisfaction we desire.

And this congregation is one great place to express your passion for the service of life and the common good.

Benediction

The Rev. Judy Tomlinson ended her lecture at the 2002 Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association's Convocation with this sentence: When our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger, the mind and soul catch fire.

Let us find that deep gladness in ourselves and then in those we experience as other. Then, let us find that deep hunger in ourselves and then in those we experience as other. Finally, let the gladness and the hunger find each other in your mind and soul, and let vision of the common good fire you up to serve it with love.