

A MISSION BORN OF MYSTERY

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Religious liberals wish to invest in that which is noble. But like most humans we want to see immediate results from this investment. We want to know that what we are doing counts. This is a valid expectation. However, it can lead to a trap that is counter-productive to our desire. This trap is to make our investments in symptoms rather than causes because the effect of symptoms is immediate to our vision.

Here is an example. We see hungry people. So we participate in projects that lessen their hunger. We feel good about our participation because we can see immediate results. However, we have not addressed the cause of this hunger and it becomes necessary to continue feeding these people. Now I have not said that it is wrong to feed the hungry. We should invest in such endeavors to uplift the quality of life for our neighbors. What I am illustrating is that unless we address the causes of their hunger, it will remain a project without end.

The question is what has this to do with the mission of religion? I suggest it has everything to do with this mission. But in order to answer this question with clarity we must probe history.

Emil Brunner suggests: “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” And a careful reading of church consultants reveals a firm belief that all powerful, growing religious institutions share three priority characteristics:

- A strong devotion to a clearly stated religious mission.
- A cadre of basic leadership committed to this mission above all else.
- An organization designed to maximize the effectiveness of this mission.

Here is the problem. Because of our liberal desire to see immediate results from our investments, we have tended, as religious institutions, to ignore our real mission in favor of substituting missions that visibly gratify our sense of investment. The two most popular of these substitutes have been:

- Creating Community---but while community is focal in our movement, it can also easily be nothing more than an embracing haven for frustrated liberals.
- Doing Social Action---but while social action is an imperative in our movement, it can also be nothing more than an activity that temporarily relieves the guilt of theological irrelevance.

There are two essential problems with such substitutes. First, they are symptoms of causes and, thus, are never finally relieved. Second, by only focusing on symptoms we remain confused about the causes that produce the symptoms. We actually come to believe we are making a difference. And while this may be true on an immediate and limited scale, it is not true on a long term and larger scale. And this is one major reason why nothing ever seems to change despite our best efforts.

Now that we can see the trap of substitute missions that our desire for immediate visible results poses for us, let us look at what the real mission of religion might be. There are actually several clues that can lead us to an insightful definition.

The first clue is found in the type of institution for which a congregation is created. It is society that creates the institutions required to serve its needs. And the type of institution it creates defines that institution's social mission. A governmental institution is created to serve society's political needs. An educational institution is created to serve society's learning needs. A financial institution is created to serve a society's economic needs. And, a religious institution is created to serve society's meaning needs.

This mission is not up for grabs any more than the mission of any of society's institutions are up for grabs. As liberals, we do not have a special prerogative to change the mission of society's institutions.

What this clue reveals is that the mission of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is the same as any other religious institution that has ever existed in history.

The second clue comes from the circumstance that provoked the birth of the religious institution. It seems obvious that the first institution society created was the community. And it was out of this original institution that all other institutions emerged.

It is possible that the second institutional need was what we, of the modern world, call religion. Back when we lived in caves, there was little to ponder except survival in a savage and terrifying environment. But then came art and language, howsoever primitive, and meaning making was born. Critical to this meaning making were answers to the compelling questions inherent in the mystery of cave clan's environment. So there arose an institution in the midst of community which function was to enter this mystery and return with answers that gave meaning to human existence and direction to human community. Thus, the meaning-of-life

institution was born. Again, note, this mission was to give meaning to human existence and direction to human community.

At first, this institution seems to have been a single person that was called by many different names – shaman, witch doctor, priest. etc. Maybe it happened this while. One morning the leader of the cave clan said: “Joe, while the rest of us go out and hunt and gather, you sit on that rock over there and ponder what this whole big mess we are in is all about.” And so, Joe sat on the rock and pondered and sought to penetrate life’s mystery and make sense of existence. And the community wanted to know Joe’s conclusions and, in turn, did their own pondering. And, given the passage of time, this pondering enterprise grew in both importance and power and was finally called religion, which means to bind together, because that is precisely what its answers did for the community. So, religion, and its answers to life’s mysteries, became the holy enterprise, the sacred pursuit that infused community with a sense of meaning and purpose upon the earth.

However, as population grew and communities proliferated, so did various religions. But one thing remained the same, the purpose for which society had created religion. Thus, whether it is a Jewish Temple, an Islamic Mosque, a Southern Baptist Church or a Unitarian Universalist congregation, they all have the same mission. They all exist for the same purpose, a purpose created by society, itself,

What, then, distinguishes between all of these religions? Their distinctions are that they all answer the compelling questions of mystery differently, thus, give different meaning to life and different direction to community living. And these differences become critical to human destiny. Indeed, they have essentially shaped the human drama. As a recent example, consider the world since September 11, 2001, an event initiated by Islamic religious fundamentalism.

So, at its beginning, religion gave meaning and direction to a community that already existed. It was the community that created religion for its own sake and not vice versa.

Nor is the purpose of religion to initiate social action programs. There was no need for social action programs when society created religion. This need only came about with the proliferation of both societies and religions and their consequent competitions.

In modern history community and social action are symptoms of the religious community’s beliefs. What religion does is create a community around its beliefs

and then define what issues of social action might best serve the community's mission of cultural transformation. In essence, rather than being the mission of religion, social action is the imperative arm of the religious community serving its mission.

Here are some of the most vital of those questions emerging from the mystery of human existence which are the primal concerns of religion:

- WHO AM I? (which is the question about the nature of my being)
- HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I KNOW? (which is the question about my source of authority)
- WHO OR WHAT IS IN CHARGE? (which is the question about my ultimate value)
- WHAT IS MY PURPOSE? (which is the question about that which informs and sustains my sense of self-worth)
- WHAT DOES MY DEATH MEAN? (which is the question about the boundaries of time in my existence)

The answers to these compelling questions create the core of a view of reality. And out of this view of reality emerge values that create individual and community conscience that give direction to living. A religious community is a group sharing a common view of reality. It is this view of reality that transcends differences and bonds the community in mutual allegiance.

Now, if a religion dominates a culture, as Christianity has in America, then its values and language will provide the foundational meanings and directions of that culture and serve as some major part of its conscience, depending on what political myth drives the culture's existence. When this happens, that religion has been successful, whether we like the result or not.

Flowing from these perceptions is the definition of the mission of religion. It is to transform the society in which it exists into the shape of its own view of reality and values conscience. And it does this by transforming enough of the individuals in that society into the image of its own answers to the compelling questions with the end result that its own conscience prevails. And the tool it uses for this

transformation is its answers to life's compelling questions. Through this transformational process it gives meaning and direction to community.

Here, then, is another governing truth. No society is ever transformed by any social action that is only designed to change its laws. Laws are only kept by a nation's people if their conscience subscribes to these laws. This is the singular most important lesson of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was not interested in simply changing laws so blacks could eat with whites at dime store lunch counters. He wanted to change the heart of his culture so that the mingling of blacks and whites in the same eating establishment would be an irrelevant issue.

And his primary message was that if you want to change a culture's behavior in any sustainable manner, you first have to change the culture's heart that produces sustained behavior. In other words, you have to change the culture's answers to the compelling questions that are at odds with the behavior of racial respect and acceptance.

To affirm this truth I invite you to look at the history of the black population in America. Their civil rights were constitutionally secured in the late eighteenth hundreds and the end of the Civil War but these rights did not become a social reality until the late nineteenth hundreds. That is, these rights did not become a social reality until the cultural heart was brought into accord. In brief, the constitution and the laws of America will not be kept except by those whose hearts believe in their efficacy.

This means that the ultimate value of social action is that it raises a society's consciousness of the need to change its behavior. But here is the crucial point: unless society is, at the same time, offered a message of transformation the society can use to change its heart, it will continue its behavior and such social action will, in finality, be futile finger in the dike activity. This social action will become an endeavor of endless repetition.

This does not suggest that there is anything wrong with social action. Acting in ways that announce the need for social change is imperative. What is wrong is holding up social action as the mission of our religious movement. Social action is to engage in that which is noble. But that which is most noble is changing the heart of a culture so that its behaviors reflect noble beliefs and values.

So, the most profound and critical agent of human transformation possessed by a religion is its answers to life's compelling questions of mystery, its view of reality.

And the more committed in commonality a religion is to this message the more powerful a tool of social change it becomes. The opposite, of course, is equally true---the more diversified a religion's answers to the compelling questions, the greater is its social impotence.

So, I say again, your mission as a religious institution is individual and social transformation: a transformation that brings society into greater accord with your answers to the compelling questions of human existence. And as a community of faith it is to model this message so that the social order can actually see its transformative power at work.

I challenge you to commit in fullness to this mission for which society created you. At the heart of this challenge will be overcoming the fear that grips us liberals, namely, that if we hold a common answer to anything profound we will have created a dogma.

We may adore the notion of unity in diversity, however, only social impotence lies in this notion. Moreover, I suggest that it is a false notion. Unity does not exist in diversity. It exists in commonality. If we wish the social power to transform then we must become enamored of the notion that diversity resides in unity. That is, unity is the singular source of both the capacity to embrace diversity and to express social power, simultaneously. Unity is the sine qua non of all constructive social power. And, if we wish to be endowed with any empowerment to transform society, then we must grasp and embody this essential truth. The key is not unity in diversity, rather, it is diversity in unity.

Our misperception about the importance of diversity is reminiscent of a Hagar The Horrible cartoon. It is of a Viking boat. Some of the oarsmen are paddling with the blade of the oar and some with the handle of the oar. Some are rowing forwards and some are rowing backwards. The boat is moving in aimless circles and zigzags. And, Hagar, standing at the helm with hands cupped around his mouth, is shouting: "Will you quit saying different strokes for different folks!"

The underlying message of the cartoon captures a principle that governs all religious institutional life, that the power to move in concerted direction and to create positive social change lies in commonality and not in diversity.

Another problem related to this misbegotten stress on diversity is that when a congregation does attempt to create a mission statement, it is usually not a mission statement at all, rather, a long listing of facets of ministry created to honor diversity.

Such listings also normally fail to distinguish between mission and ministry. Mission is why a congregation exists. Ministry is everything it does to fulfill this mission. The distinction is substantive.

Fredrick May Eliot, wise leader of our religious past, during a period of identity confusion, admonished: “It is better to be misunderstood than to be overlooked.” One definition of power is increments of attention. Being overlooked is to be bereft of power.

A few years ago, at the National Gallery of Canada, in Ottawa, I sat in the La Chappell Rideau Chapel and listened to the forty part Motet, composed in 1575 by Thomas Tallis. I was surrounded by forty audio speakers, eight sets of soprano, alto, tenor, baritone and base, each vocal part and each set chanting a different part, yet, every set harmonizing with all the other sets.

The power that captured one’s attention was not that of eight sets devoted to a disparate cacophony of difference, rather, it was the engaging harmony of eight varied sets devoted to a blended commonality. Again, I assert that the power to engage and transform society is found in a commonality that unifies difference into synergistic wholeness.

The most recent example of this power in our religious movement, displayed itself in the nineteen thirties during that debate over the validity of the Christian anthropomorphic god. Some in our movement participated in this debate with reactive postures that distilled in theological terms such as atheism, deism and agnosticism. However a smaller group in our movement responded in a far more profound way. They created Humanism and lifted it up as an alternative theology and in a brief span of years this message brought about consequential social transformation in our entire culture. This happened for two reasons. One is that we addressed the needs of the culture with a new vision of reality. The other is that we spoke with the social power of common commitment, a common commitment that was not a totality but was a majority that compelled social attention.

This dominance of and commitment to the Humanist perspective in the mid-twentieth century did not violate our member freedom to disagree or to offer other theological perspectives. Quite the opposite was and remains true. It has always been out of this maintained freedom to see and believe differently that the new has arisen in our midst. Indeed, if there is hope that we might yet create a new vision of reality that addresses today’s desperate need for a saving paradigm it lies in this maintained posture.

I suggest that a new paradigm is seeking to emerge in our midst. For want of a better term it might be called Spirituality. However, it has remained ill-defined and without power to provoke social change because we have failed to engage both its critical necessity and model its transformative meanings.

How exciting it would be were we to devote our local, regional and national organizations to our religious reason for being - the articulation of a message of redemption for a world bent on self-destruction. However, if this is to happen then it will be because we have decided to engage the mission for which society created us rather than to play safely around its edges lest we inadvertently step on a dangerous commonality.

I was walking down the crowded hall of a hotel at one of our religious movement's national General Assemblies when a woman stepped in front of me, stuck out her hand, smiled, introduced herself, and said: "You have no reason to remember me. But ten years ago I visited a Sunday service at your church. I was in a major life crisis and your sermon helped me make a decision that transformed my life. I just wanted to thank you." And with that, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

This incident continues to remind me of the awesome responsibility and wonderful privilege of our religious mission----this responsibility to change the very being of our culture---- this privilege of being the spiritual guide to its heart and conscience.

The challenge before us is to pick up the mantle of our mission, to speak and model a message of transformation and offer redemption to a spiritually bankrupt and degenerating society. In this respect I offer one more observation. In order to be transforming a religious institution must, itself, be transformed.

I conclude with three quotations:

- Montaign observes: "No wind blows in favor of the ship without a port of destination."
- And RF Mager avows: "If you don't know where you are going you are liable to end up someplace else."

And from Alice In Wonderland comes this dialogue:

"Cheshire Puss," Alice began....

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to”, said the cat.

“I don’t much care where....” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go”, said the cat.

AMEN