

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

3.9.14 Sermon: “UU...Brand?”

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

In February, the Unitarian Universalist Association Headquarters, in its final days on 25 Beacon Street in Boston, announced a new logo for our Association. It is the red one on the cover of your order of service. The one above it to the left, the star burst chalice, has been used for the last nine years as the UUA's logo. The one above that one is the first logo we used for 20 years starting in 1985. Many of us will continue to identify that one as our Unitarian Universalist **symbol** that will be different from whatever the UUA cooks up as its logo today and in the future.

In announcing the new logo and the new look for the UUA web site, they talked about “brand identity.” Those are fighting words. Here is what they put in the press release:

We asked UUs from across the country, of all ages with various levels of involvement in our faith, to answer three questions: Who are we? What do we do? And why it matters? From these conversations, and more, we began to form our brand identity for the future of our religious movement.

Using marketing style focus groups to develop our “brand identity” and introducing us to a very different looking logo sent shock waves through the small pool of UU's who pay attention to what the UUA does. The commenters on Facebook and the UU bloggers went wild with offense and criticism. “What have they done to our chalice?” “And what is that odd shape that holds the flame?” “And just who do they think they are defining our identity for us?” Messing with our identity and putting it next to the word “brand” was enough to get the ministers upset too.

Your humble minister was not one of the nattering nabobs of negativism. Now I do of course have reactions and opinions. I just sympathize with what the UUA is trying to do. As the chair of the UUA's good governance committee, I'm a close observer of both the UUA Board and staff. I know many of the leaders personally, and understand their struggles and intentions. And my Buddhist meditation practice has cultivated in me a little institutional compassion.

This brand identity language comes from our UUA President, Peter Morales, who worked in journalism and is very aware of the marketing world. I sympathize with his position. The UUA Board has charged him with growing the membership of our congregations, something he really doesn't have a lot of control over. He has to report to the Board about how he is succeeding or failing at achieving this goal. Being someone who has worked extensively in the business world, Morales knows if more visitors show up in our congregations, they are more likely to grow. One way to increase that traffic is to market Unitarian Universalism more effectively. In business, this is referred to as developing recognition, identification and loyalty to your brand. It is the one thing the UUA can do nationally that we can't do locally. Just like Red Roof Motels individually can't buy ads every week on the Travel Channel but the corporate headquarters can.

The problem is, they talked to something like 50 Unitarian Universalists in focus groups

around the country to decide how to put this campaign together. For the UUA to sit in Boston consulting with their “top-notch branding agency” to assess what identity they want to project as Unitarian Universalism is a little presumptuous. I understand why they think they can do it. From where they sit, they have the bird's eye view of what is happening in our congregations all across the country. They see trends in our movement that we in our congregations don't see. Our congregation here in Albany, New York, looks and feels very different than the congregation in San Diego, California or Columbus, Ohio. I get that sense by reading their mission statements and knowing their ministers. Leaders in each congregation may think they know who and what Unitarian Universalism is and is not ... without seeing the larger view. This is especially of our ministers who talk about our identity in the pulpit every week.

Here is the disconnect. Individual congregations reserve the right to define ourselves rather than have any other congregation or our association of congregations tell us who we are, what we do, and why it matters. That fierce congregational individualism is what the term “Congregational Polity” is all about.

This identity tension between individual congregations and the larger association has been going from the very beginning. Yet reviewing our history reveals consistent patterns. Historian Earl Morse Wilber's analysis of Unitarianism came up with this conclusion. What defines us is a commitment to freedom, reason and tolerance. These three words are a very useful way to capture important qualities about our identity but they are far from complete.

We have an independent, elected committee within the UUA called the Commission on Appraisal charged with taking a bird's eye view of our association, analyzing it and making reports to us. They decided to study our theological diversity to see where we had agreement and where we had disagreement, looking for the common core that binds us together. Not surprisingly, they found both agreement and disagreement in their 2005 report to our annual meeting of our Association called General Assembly at the end of June. Their conclusions were very interesting.

We do have quite a lot of agreement with each other that identifies a common core.

We agree:

- All human beings have worth and dignity that deserve respect;
- Our welcome should be widely inclusive not restrictive;
- Though we are optimistic about our capacity for goodness, we are also capable of evil;
- Wisdom and inspiration come from many sources;
- Our perception of truth is incomplete and evolving;
- Reason is a necessary part of religious inquiry;
- Awe, wonder and love are also necessary and healthy parts of our religious journey;
- Each individual ultimately gets to decide what to believe and not believe;
- Each individual member gets one vote in democratically controlling congregational business.
- The natural world is a continuously evolving web of interdependence of which we must be a respectful part.
- Humanity is responsible for creating a just, sustainable and peaceful world;

Now think how other religions would affirm or reject these statements and you begin to see

our unique identity emerging. We have lots of disagreements to be sure. We don't agree about the nature and existence of God; the value of spirituality, spiritual practice and prayer. We disagree about the degree individual conscience should be informed, inspired or critiqued by tradition and community. Still, our vitally important agreements are enough to bind us together as a unique religious tradition.

At General Assembly, representatives of our congregations can democratically endorse these agreements to define **how** our congregations will work together. They **cannot** tell individual congregations who we are, what we do and why it matters. Only our individual congregations have the privilege of putting our member's agreement into words that identify, define and bind each congregation. We're bottom up, not top down.

The problem is, many congregations aren't diligent or skilled at putting our agreement into clear, concise and beautiful language. Our congregation's Board has decided we might have this problem. Times change and members change. Our mission was written over 20 years ago. Recognizing that problem when I arrived here in 1999, I recast our mission statement as the chalice lighting we use every Sunday. I took more than a little interpretive license with the meanings that may or may not be part of THIS congregation's member's locus of agreement. After looking at other congregation's beautiful mission statements, maybe you will agree that we could simplify and clarify it too.

Knowing we'd be considering such work, I asked Douglas Taylor, minister of the UU congregation in Binghamton, New York, to lead a workshop here a month ago on our shared theology. He gave an inspiring sermon on this theme the next day. In it, he used some high powered theological jargon to describe what a religion needs to do for its members. The three words he used were intimacy, ultimacy and efficacy. Let me translate for you.

We all face the existential condition of being alone, helpless and insecure. We experience ourselves as separate, limited in our ability to control our bodies and environment. We are all vulnerable to injury, sickness, old age and death. These are inseparable from being alive. Religions provide answers, responses and ways to cope with this existential condition. They provide a way for people to feel part of a greater whole, be it relationship, family, community or congregation. They provide a way for people to feel valued as part of that whole and useful to that whole. They support each person declaring:

I belong.

I matter.

I make a difference.

That is what the identity and the purpose of our congregation, communicated through our mission statement needs to do. The clearer, more concise and more beautiful the language of that mission statement is, the more attractive, powerful and effective our congregation can become.

An example of that kind of clarity of mission happened for the UUA in Phoenix, Arizona in June of 2012. Arizona had passed SB 1070 which enabled discriminatory practices by police officers against people who appeared to be Hispanic or Mexican. The first impulse of our General Assembly representatives was to express our disapproval and move our yearly meeting to another location. But those affected by the law encouraged us to come and take a

public stand against it. So we did that by organizing a symbolic action deeply rooted in our mission, a protest at night outside the Mariposa detention facility where undocumented immigrants were being held unfairly. Thousands of UU's got on buses from the Convention Center to that demonstration in 90 plus degree heat. We listened to speeches, sang songs and chanted loud enough to be heard inside the facility. Thousands held up battery-powered candles in the darkness. Those torches, those beacons, moved many of us who were there as an expression, a visual symbol of our commitment to justice.

Here are the words Chris Walton, the editor of the UU World, used reflecting on that memory and the new chalice:

The flaming chalice is an interior lamp, a flame to light indoors in the particular context of worship. As an emblem, ... it's a symbol of our religion as practiced in sanctuaries and homes. But it has a cousin in our symbolic tradition that is a flame lit in the public square: the beacon lit in times of public crisis, the candles held up in vigils, the lantern in the steeple.

We too have a relationship with the word beacon. Architect Scott Knox worked with us to come up with a phrase to guide the design of Emerson Community Hall that also crystallized our identity as a congregation. What we came up with was, "beacon of light." Look around this space now, to see how we've made those words beautiful in glass, wood and stone. Our success, helped the words "be a beacon of liberal religion" into our strategic plan in 2009.

Now look back at that new logo and see how it strives to hold together the image of beacon and chalice, both cherished parts of our heritage and vision of our mission in the world. I think it does it beautifully.

The effort the UUA put into crafting that new logo and the result suggests the kind of inspiration and beauty that a well crafted mission statement can offer. It can organize and prioritize what we do. It can attract people to us and express our identity and purpose. It can guide us advocating for and building a just, equitable, and sustainable community here and around the world. I hope you see the beautiful results of that effort expressed in some of the mission statements I've listed for you in your insert.

Now it's our turn.

I can't craft the language by myself. None of you individually can do it either. Only this congregation working together can find those beautiful words that communicate who we are, what we do and why it matters. We need your help!

There are two ways you can help. The first is by thoughtfully answering the five questions on the insert and adding any thoughts and comments on the back. The second is by attending the conversation in B-8 after the service.

We're going to give you a little time now to jot down some thoughts. The Mission Task Force members who are here will collect them from you as you leave the service.

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