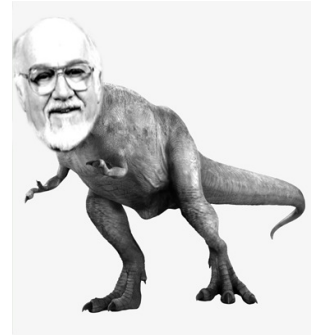


**“Musings of a Dinosaur”
50 Year Address
The Rev. Dave Weissbard
UUA General Assembly 2015**



One of the traditions of the UUA General Assemblies, is that the ministers who have served 25 and 50 years choose a representative of their group to speak at the pre-GA gathering of our ministers. When I received the invitation to vote for the representative of those of us Ordained in 1965, I perused the list of survivors and put it away. When a member of the UU Ministers' Association staff called to say she had not received my vote, I told her, considering the distinction with which each of the ministers on the list had served our churches and Association over the last 5 decades in so many different ways, I was unwilling to make a choice among them, and declined to vote. I was shocked to learn subsequently that I had been chosen. It has occurred to me that perhaps my colleagues made the same choice as I did and someone in Boston rolled the dice and decided to punish me; it is a burden. As the fellow said in the Mark Twain story, after being tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail, "If it weren't for the honor, I'd just as soon have walked."

However achieved, it is actually an honor to be in this role. I hasten to add that I did not pretend to speak for my colleagues, merely as one of them. They cannot be held responsible for what I said.

[function of a sermon]

James Madison Barr was minister of the Albany church during my formative years. Jim was socially conservative in many ways and my family often disagreed with his sermons, but we loved and respected Jim – in his preaching he got us to examine many of our assumptions.

I decided back then that the role of sermons is more to stimulate thinking on the part of the listeners and less to elicit agreement. I have faithfully followed that path up to and including today.

I begin with an epigraph from the Roman historian Seneca, who said of a certain general: **"He remained the same as before, but the same was no longer befitting."**

[change]

The UUA to which I and my cohort committed our careers in 1965 was not the same then as it is today. Back then, almost all of the 25 of us ordained in 1965 had attended a UU related seminary. Today only a minority do.

Back then, one statistic suggests there were only four women in ministerial fellowship - I doubt that number, perhaps it was 14 - it wasn't 40! Today females are in the majority in our

ministry.

Back then, there were no openly LGBT ministers allowed in fellowship. There are many today.

Back then, ministers were not subjected to corporate style performance evaluations. That has become appallingly common.

Back then, there were no church computers and no internet.

Back then, it was virtually unheard of for a UU minister to refer to themselves as "Rev. Dave," or "Rev. George" – or to be spoken of by congregations in that way. I used Rev. only when dealing with hospitals or the police. Today, it seems as if the great majority of us use it much of the time.

Back then, we all thought "man" was generic. That, thankfully, is history.

Back then, actually two years after our Ordinations, the UUA's Committee on Goals reported:

Unitarian Universalists no longer regard their faith as distinctively Christian, and an overwhelming majority hope the denomination will move toward a universal or distinctively humanistic religion in contrast to liberal Protestantism or ecumenical Christianity..

The Association urged the committee not to disclose regional differences in their findings because it was very clear that while New Englanders clung to theistic language, outside of New England, the Humanist-Theist debate of the 30's and 40's had been resolved in favor of the Humanists. They did not want to offend the New England UU's with that reality.

Back in those days, I had a lot of compassion for the ministers of the older generation who had seen their denomination move away from its Christian and theistic roots. They were no longer mainstream through no failing of their own. They had not changed, they had "remained the same as before, but the same was no longer befitting." They had become dinosaurs - relics of the past.

In my pulpit and at meetings, I insisted if the UUA truly had no creed, theists had every right to continue to assert their legitimate place in our movement. If they could be pushed aside because of their theology, what might happen to us down the road? There had to be room for diversity.

Hymns for the Celebration of Life, [the blue hymnal] which came out in 1964, the year before our Ordinations, included 23 readings and 13 hymns by the humanistic Ken Patton. Now there are only 3 readings and 5 hymns by Patton in our hymnal.

In receiving the UUA's Distinguished Service Award in 1986, Ken, who had always seen himself as an outsider, perceived a trend to which many of us were blind as he cautioned the UU's:

Now, as you are cuddling up to the concepts and metaphors of traditional religion, you need young and feisty mavericks more than ever, and they may be hard to find in this yuppie generation." [Ken went on to say] "This is not as liberal a movement as the one I entered. The evidence that drew many of us to humanism has grown exponentially since, and yet religious humanism has waned.

[some history]

In 1998, the Episcopal religious scholar, Robert Bellah was invited to address the General Assembly. Bellah told us his favorite Unitarian leader was Henry W. Bellows.

Here I want to insert some history that I took for granted among the ministers. When we trace the history of Unitarianism, we often go back to the early Christian heretic Arius who

opposed the concept of the trinity [Father, Son, and Holy Ghost] insisting the Bible offers no proof that while Jesus thought of himself as anything but human, he was still divine. There was a conflict among early liberal ministers in America, many of whom considered themselves followers of Arius, in contrast to those who insisted that Jesus was a fully human teacher. That latter group was known as Unitarian and it was considered a pejorative label by Christians and many of the liberals. Ultimately the liberals came to accept it. One of the central events in Unitarian history in America was the delivery by William Ellery Channing of his sermon "Unitarian Christianity" at the Ordination of Jared Sparks as minister of the Unitarian Church in Baltimore in 1819. Channing stressed the use of reason in religion and the humanity of Jesus. That sermon was reprinted and widely distributed. The label "Unitarian" was thenceforth accepted by the liberals.

Jesus was still the center of their religion, but a human rather than a divine center, although, at that time, few questioned the miracles or the supernatural basis of Christianity. Actually, Thomas Jefferson edited his Bible, cutting and pasting to eliminate the miracles attributed to Jesus and focusing only on his ethical teachings.

In 1825, the liberals formed the American Unitarian Association which was an individual membership group - not an organization of churches.

The Unitarians felt they had "gone about as far as they could go." And then, in 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had been a Unitarian minister, was invited by the graduating students at Harvard Divinity School to deliver their graduation address. Emerson asserted that religion should focus on human experience more than ancient scriptures which were a product of their own times. He threw out the miracles - and that caused a major controversy.

Among those impressed by Emerson's religious ideas was The Rev. Theodore Parker, one of my heroes. In 1841, three years after Emerson's address, Parker delivered his great address on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" in which he asserted that the teachings of Jesus were important, not because Jesus had spoken them, but, on the contrary, Jesus was important because of the things he said, just as Euclid's geometry was important because of its truth, not because he proclaimed it.

There were many among the Unitarians who could not stomach the radical ideas of Emerson and Parker and the many ministers influenced by them. They had a problem, however. Because traditional Christians had rejected them for what were seen as their radical beliefs, they had stressed individual freedom of belief which made it hard for them to reject Emerson and Parker, although many tried to distance themselves from them.

As I said, the American Unitarian Association was an association of individuals, not churches per se, and so it was loose. Many felt there was a need to go to the next level if Unitarianism were to grow. The Rev. H.W. Bellows, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City to whom Bellah referred appreciatively, was an organizer par excellence. In 1865 Bellows proposed the creation of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches, and a gathering was organized to which the churches were invited to send delegates.

[the challenge of diversity]

It is fair to say that diversity is often a challenge to organizations. It is so much neater if those gathered have clear agreement on principles. Being among those who found more radical Unitarian ministers a threat to unity, Bellows convinced the National Association of Unitarian Churches that it could be strong only if it distanced itself from the radicals. According to the Unitarian historian, Earl Morse Wilbur:

The language of the preamble to its proposed constitution implied that all its members were disciples of "the Lord Jesus Christ" and devoted "to the service of God and the building up of the Kingdom of his Son."

The radicals did, understandably feel excluded and many joined in creating the Free Religious Association. The Unitarian organization was strengthened for a time by excluding divergent

ideas. It was 30 years before that breach between the conservative and more radical Unitarians was healed with an amendment to the Conference's constitution that welcomed diversity. I, therefore, always considered Bellows a villain – not a hero – in our history. It is understandable that an Episcopalian like Robert Bellah would view him differently.

[the Humanist-Theist conflict]

The next great controversy in our history was the Humanist-Theist conflict. As time went by, a number of Unitarian ministers and their congregations continued to push forward in their challenges to traditional beliefs, with some challenging even the belief in the existence of a supernatural deity. They believed that this world, not another, and current times, not the past or an imagined future world, should be the focus of religion. The feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton sought a religion which would “teach the dignity of human nature, inspire its worshipers with self-respect, and offer freedom from fear and superstition.”

John Dietrich, originally a Reformed Church minister, became a Unitarian and in 1916 became minister of the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis. Dietrich preached, “The kind of world we live in depends not upon some God outside of man, but upon man himself.” [Remember, this was 1916 when even most feminists considered “man” a generic term.]

Humanism spread among Unitarian Churches and the more traditional Unitarians saw these radical ideas as a threat and tried again to exclude the radicals and their ideas, but a resolution to exclude them again from the National Conference failed.

As I noted earlier, the conflict continued in the 1920's and '30's, and saw the eventual dominance of Humanistic ideas within the Unitarian movement, but that did not mean the exclusion of ministers or congregations which continued to view themselves as liberal Christians – particularly in New England.

[retrenchment]

But, going back to Ken Patton's observations in 1986, there seemed to be a change afoot.

In 1980 Carl Scovel, minister of the Kings Chapel in Boston had delivered a GA Living Tradition sermon on "The Journey Home" Carl declared:

I would like religious liberals to think it was all right to come home. I would like religious liberals to think they could pray, could read scripture, could say the psalms, could hear again the stories of our heritage. . .

What Carl, whose parents were Christian missionaries in China, appeared not to understand was that, unlike him, for some of us Humanism was home - that was where we were raised.

What was happening in the UUA became crystal clear in a General Assembly "Meet the President" session, when a young woman minister complained to the President about the Humanists in her congregation who were resistant to her sermons on spirituality. I was stunned when I heard him reply, "Don't worry, the Humanists are dying off." [Actually, we weren't dying, only feeling driven out again.]

Last year, a retired UU minister, Tom Schade asserted in his "Lively Tradition" blog on the internet:

There is a short list of items in our UU consensus, the first of which, the "language of reverence." is now our vocabulary. [Former UUA President Bill] Sinkford was roundly criticized for suggesting that we needed to break out of the straightjacket of humanist language, but then, we did. We're all about "calls," "prayer," "faith," "mission," "spirit," and "soul." [Tom acknowledged] Admittedly, we are probably sloppy in our usage, but everyone kind of gets what each other is talking about and goes along with it.

I am not suggesting that Tom's statement of consensus is wrong. On the contrary, I fear he is

correct, but I and many others are not a part of that consensus. We certainly define “straight jackets” differently.

[dinosaurs]

Some of us have effectively become dinosaurs in our movement. We remained the same as we had been, more or less, and the UUA is increasingly reverting to the traditional religious language many of us no longer find relevant.

My friend and classmate, Rolfe Gerhardt, delivered a paper to the Harper’s Ferry Ministerial Study Group in 1998, in which he compared sermon titles and worship materials in use in UU churches at the time of our Ordinations in 1965 and then in 1998. Rolfe suggested that we had experienced a paradigm shift from seeing ourselves and our congregations as being composed of what Carol Pearson called “Seekers” to a self-perception as “Orphans.” The “Seeker” wishes to find adventure, to cut loose and explore the new, while the “Orphan” seeks security by clinging to the past, the familiar, and the known.

We ministers of my generation had been taught that the words Peter Finley Dunne wrote in 1902 about the role of newspapers, applied to the role of liberal ministers: namely “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” It appears that through the lenses of today’s consensus, all are afflicted [that is to say, orphans] and the role of the minister is more to comfort than to challenge.

[counter-cultural]

Concurrent with the shift from the “language of humanism” to “the language of reverence,” our membership has gone from 282,307 in 1968 to 208,177 today, a 24% decline. Those numbers include adults and children, so actually, it represents only an 8% decline in adult members but a 45% decline in RE. What that indicates is that our membership has aged so there are fewer children.

The recent Pew Report on America’s Changing Religious Landscape found that 23% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, while 21% are Catholic, 15% Mainline Protestants, 15% are Evangelicals are 25%, while the remaining 16% claim other religions. [Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Ba’hai’s, etc.] UU’s who used to be 1/10 of 1% of the American population now represent 9/1000 of one percent.

It is the UUA’s position that many thousands of the unaffiliated claim to be UU and the remainder are fertile ground for us to plow. I don’t believe many of them have even heard of us. If they have, I believe we no longer represent the alternative to traditional religion they are seeking.

[Sunday Assemblies]

Consider the “Sunday Assembly” movement. In the two years since its founding in England in 2013, it has grown to more than 480 congregations in more than 30 cities around the world. Among the movement’s principles are:

1. [Sunday Assembly] is a 100% celebration of life. We are born from nothing and go to nothing. Let’s enjoy it together.
2. [Sunday Assembly] Has no doctrine. We have no set texts so we can make use of wisdom from all sources
3. [Sunday Assembly] Has no deity. We don’t do supernatural but we also won’t tell you you’re wrong if you do.
4. [Sunday Assembly] Is radically inclusive. Everyone is welcome, regardless of their beliefs – this is a place of love that is open and accepting.
9. [Sunday Assembly] won’t tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can.

The Sunday Assemblies have laid claim to what many of us viewed as our territory. If I were church shopping today, I believe I would be more likely to be drawn to the Sunday Assembly movement than to what appears now to be the largely liberal-Protestant UUA.

[[affirming diversity]

I am not here to call for the vanquishing of traditional theology by a triumphant naturalistic humanism. Many of our theistically-oriented ministers deliver sermons attesting to their belief in the immaturity or inferiority of humankind. I am here to advocate for an end to the dissing of philosophies and theologies that help some of us live more beneficent, more compassionate, more responsible, more fulfilled lives. I am a religious pragmatist. I do not believe we all need the same beliefs to sustain us. I honor whatever works for another, so long as it does not seek to denigrate my beliefs. The current interim minister in the church I attend has been clear with us that he was formerly a humanist, but he found that his life was enriched by belief in a god. At no time has he suggested we should follow suit. At the cottage meeting to discuss the kind of minister we are seeking, I tried to be clear that I would not propose a test of a candidate's religious beliefs, but I would have the search committee inquire as to how the candidates view humanism and humanists.

We need to devote our energy to the conquest of greed and hate and the exploitation of people and our environment. We need to work together, theists and humanists and pagans alike, to conquer the human tendency to demand conformity and instead to celebrate the value of creative interchange which is only made possible through diversity.

[what do I expect?]

What do I expect of Unitarian Universalism today? Nothing more than what some of us have understood to be a foundation of our religious community: the practice of R E S P E C T for religious diversity.

But what do I know? After all, I am only a dinosaur.