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# *A BECKONING LIGHT*

Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*, and Carol Carter Walker, *trustee*

Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — August 26, 2007

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**Barbara ten Hove**

In the Bible (Matthew 5:15-16), Jesus is purported to have said, “*You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick: and it gives light unto all that are in the house.*”

This popular Bible verse has called many an evangelist out into the world to spread the gospel. It may be why the Christian religion did indeed spread throughout the world. Many believe, as one Southern Baptist pastor I know does, that it is their religious duty to share their good news with others and seek their conversion.

Our (Unitarian Universalist) religious forebears must have started out this way because we share spiritual ancestors with, among others, Baptists. But something happened to our folks on the path to this present day. They got shy. Maybe it’s more accurate to say that they got smug. Many of our Unitarian (and to a lesser degree Universalist) ancestors seemed to take on the mantle of New England taciturnity and it became if not improper, at least impolite to share one’s faith openly with others.

But how else is faith shared except through telling people about it? I know that our religion is one of only a few that aims to be tolerant and accepting of a diversity of beliefs. I know that unlike my Baptist friend, we don’t think everyone has to believe as

we do or go to hell. This attitude may be good—it *is* good—but it can also keep us from doing something I believe we can and should do: share our good news with others.

When Carol and I decided to do this service together, we focused on the image of light—not under a bushel but held high, beckoning others to see—as a metaphor for what we want this church to be. What if we were to imagine that our steeple (which is by the way, made of glass), was not simply a pretty skylight but a true beacon? What would we want to shine out of it? What energy would we want that light to generate in our community? What would we want it to say in invitation to others who might see it and wonder?

I think that like Jesus' disciples we would want to share our gospel—our good news. What is our good news? That God is one and God is love. That all creation is connected and the only way we'll survive is to respect one another. That we share the same source and the same destiny [F. Church]. Unity and Love. Unity and Love. That is our good news.

If we were to imagine sharing that good news, what do you think would happen? I'd like to think we'd just grow and grow. But truthfully, it's not enough just to shine a light and open a door. We need to look at what happens when people start coming. Congregations are a bit like families. What happens to a family when a daughter or son brings home a new love from a very different kind of family? We may think we're accepting but if we look honestly at ourselves we may realize that we are actually making it hard for the new person to feel welcome, particularly if they don't act like we do. But just like in families, congregations can become far more interesting and change in incredibly positive ways when we are truly able to accept diversity as not only interesting but also essential to our growth.

But what would that really look like? I've asked Carol Carter Walker, a long time Unitarian Universalist and a member of our board of trustees to speak about that this morning...

## HOMILY: “Let’s Shine Our Light”

Carol Carter Walker

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I haven’t owned a car since 1985. I pride myself on getting pretty much anywhere in the Washington Area by METRO, taxi and, now, Flexcar. Several years ago when I was very active in area denominational affairs, a taxi driver who carried me to many Unitarian Universalist (UU) churches in Maryland and Virginia asked me this question: “Ms. Walker, he said: (We were quite formal with each other although we’d been ‘together’ for about five years.) Ms. Walker, why are all of these churches in the woods?”

It’s a question I’ve thought about almost every Sunday when I come to Paint Branch and whenever I visit other UU churches. I couldn’t give an honest answer then, but I will try to, now.

I know why most churches in this area were built in the suburbs—following their congregations, the availability of relatively cheap land as compared to that in the city, many UUs’ love of nature—but these explanations aren’t the whole answer. If I were pressed for what I think is an honest explanation, I’d say that we as Unitarian Universalists *like* to hide our light under a bushel—or in the woods.

Some would say that many of us are introverts—although Kathleen (today’s Worship Associate), Barbara (our co-minister) and I—are living proof that isn’t always the case! Another possible explanation is that many of us have had bad experiences with proselytizing and we shun it. Although most folks come to UU (and other) churches when asked by family, friends and co-workers, most of us seem loath to extend the invitation.

UUs have certainly been active in virtually all of the bendings toward justice in our country—abolition; civil rights for women, blacks, gays, Native Americans,

undocumented immigrants, the poor; various anti-war movements. But when we return from the public square, we tend not to bring our cohorts or the people in whose names we march, with us.

Could it be that we don't want too many people—especially those that we perceive as different from us—to come to our churches in the woods? Is it that we posit that only those of only high intellect—and/or high income—can understand our non-creedal faith? Are we fearful that if we reach some number—a tipping point, perhaps—of African-Americans, for example—our music and other parts of our liturgy will change? In my opinion, our principles are simple. Our children understand them as they have eloquently demonstrated in many Sunday Services. Although many of us are well educated and some are well heeled, this isn't universally the case. And in many African American churches of our size and larger, the chancel choirs sing European-inspired choral pieces by both European and African-American composers.

We seem comfortable with a certain amount of diversity, but not too much—not enough to make us think about and act on transforming ourselves, individually, congregationally, even denominationally. We are friendly and welcoming—as long as the newcomers are willing to do it our way. This is a very human trait—discomfort at the unfamiliar. I confessed during a recent after-services session of “UU and You,” to finding a reason to leave the service early when something feels unfamiliar and therefore threatens to catapult me out of my zone of comfort. I know that I and we all have to work hard to do more than proclaim our openness. We really have to live it.

At this year's General Assembly (“GA”—our denomination's annual meeting and conference), one of our local sister congregations, Davies Memorial UU Church (in Camp Springs, MD), was honored as a ‘breakthrough’ congregation. This rare recognition—given annually to only four congregations out of more than 1,000—was in recognition of Davies' growth as an intentionally multicultural congregation. Davies has increased its members of color by over 30 percent while not experiencing white flight.

What I noticed as I sat near the Davies delegation of 15 members at one of the opening sessions of this year's GA and throughout the week as I attended their workshops and encountered them in various venues, was that they were an interracial, intergenerational, interabled group that seemed truly comfortable with each other. It's the kind of comfort that comes from having been through some daunting times and having come out more whole on the other side.

But they're not just comfortable—they're excited and shaking things up—beginning with themselves. They're shining their light with: a quarterly newsletter that goes to the southern Prince Georges' County area where they are located; a well-developed and budgeted strategy for becoming multicultural that is on the first page of their website; a significant budget for marketing and advertising in several media; non-UU community groups that regularly meet at Davies. Their minister, John Crestwell, one of the few African American parish ministers in our denomination, has published a book, *The Charge of the Chalice*, that is extraordinary for its telling of the pretty and not so pretty story of how he became a UU minister and then Senior Minister of the Davies Church and of the struggles and support of the former Senior Minister and the congregation's members and leaders.

Davies is living the basic precept outlined in a pamphlet published by the Unitarian Universalist Association: "Religious Hospitality, A Spiritual Practice for Congregations," by Reverend Peter Morales. That precept is this: hospitality is a spiritual practice—one that requires that we reach out not only to that and those who are familiar, but to the unfamiliar, the different, the stranger.

Here at Paint Branch, we have a long, rich history—not talked about enough, in my opinion—of not only standing on the 'right' side, but in being a initiator of dismantling injustices. Forty years ago, Paint Branchers worked to desegregate the maternity wards of the Prince Georges County Hospital. Thirty years ago, Paint Branchers voted to give a

substantial portion of our endowment to the Black Empowerment Movement of UUs. In the '90s, Marj Donn prepared a multicultural children's religious education curriculum about individual inherent worth and dignity that is still in use today. There was an Anti-Racism Task Force that sponsored Martin Luther King Day events with Sojourner Truth UU Congregation in Washington, DC. There've been adult education courses on anti-racism: *How Open the Door* in the '90s and just a few years ago, *Soul Work*, led by co-minister Jaco ten Hove and the Director of Religious Education [then Natalie Fenimore], plus a film/discussion series this past spring on "Race, the Power of An Illusion."

We've hosted Warm Nights, an overflow shelter for homeless persons one week during the winter for the past several years. Currently, Paint Branch's investment of \$80,000 from a generous Paint Brancher's estate gift helps to support over 3,000 affordable housing units in this area. We raise over \$10,000 a year through monthly Special Collections for social action causes locally and nationally. Although not part of a strategic plan, these past activities show that we have the heart to be sensitive to matters of justice and equity.

But, in order to become more diverse racially and ethnically, we need to be both strategic and intentional. We need to use the model of The Welcoming Congregation (an organized series of classes, film series, services and discussions that made Paint Branch a Welcoming Congregation), one that is certified by the Unitarian Universalist Association as being not just tolerant and open, but inviting to those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT). I have heard many long-time Paint Branchers testify as to the transforming impact of this process on them personally and on Paint Branch institutionally. A handful of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people were resilient enough to step forward, recruit allies, and lead Paint Branch to its current almost casual acceptance of LGBT folks today. Although some of the key movers of The Welcoming Congregation are no longer here, they made a lasting impact and

permanently transformed this place. I'm sure that work was difficult and, at times, painful, but look where we are today!

In what happened here with The Welcoming Congregation, we have a model for letting our light shine to do the hard work of transformation to a multi-cultural congregation. Can we do it again—for people of color? Specifically people of African descent? Again—for Hispanics? Again—for many of the rich tapestry of human beings who surround us on Sundays, and, for many, daily in our neighborhoods and at work? Can we, as Reverend Morales says, reach out to people who don't necessarily make us comfortable, because it is in working through that discomfort that we grow?

Most people who come to PBUUC find us friendly. However, it is my opinion and my observation that those who come and stay are those who find something here they like from their first visit: Chalice Dancers, Choir, Enrichment Hour activities, services—something that gets them beyond the awkwardness they may feel as they stand at the fringes of animated conversations we Paint Branchers are having with our friends on the deck during Coffee Hour.

They overcome the discomfort of having to follow the crowd to Enrichment Hour activities they may have seen listed in that morning's Bulletin in locations they don't know. Some join and find their own niche. A few join and make their niche. They become active in existing groups and, more significantly, form new ones. (Think Festive Fridays, think Shamanic Journeying, think Movie Nights, think service on the feminine divine.) But many more visit once, twice or more and then drift away. Still more don't even know we exist unless they make an effort to find us on our website. We need to do more than keep the same numbers year in and year out. We need to grow!

I am basically a lazy person, so I am committed to both growth and diversity at Paint Branch—believing that a strategy for one will yield benefits for the other.

The bricks and mortar things are easy to identify, such as: a finished lower level; a visible sign; an upgraded kitchen; a more sophisticated, interactive website; state of the art audio-visual equipment to enhance our children and adult religious education programs. Many of us could easily compose such a list. But, the changes we would have to make to transform Paint Branch into a vibrant and growing multi-cultural congregation are more difficult because they begin with shining the light into our own hearts, searching for and facing our fears and trepidation so that we may ultimately and deeply learn and grow together. It may be that being an active part of at least one of the many activities planned to honor the Congregation's commitment to an Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Initiative will facilitate this growth.

The change would mean shining our light on our congregation from both the inside and the outside and making changes that would make us more inviting to all who come to our door. We would have to involve newcomers not just in being part of the comfortable place we have built here for ourselves, but actively invite and draw upon their dreams and ideas.

Let's make certain that the pictures we have on our websites make it clear that we welcome people of all colors. I'd long had a problem with the UUA website that would give visitors a distorted impression of the small number actual of people of color in our movement. But, according to the UU media folks, our website should represent who we want to be and invite in. We need to send pictures to the webmaster that reflect our existing diversity for the website—not assume that's the webmaster's role.

Why not build on the Maryland United for Peace and Justice Conference we hosted in the spring and use our wonderful setting for meetings of diverse community and social justice groups? The Annapolis Church, hosts the Dignity Players, a theater company, an activity that brings many folks of varying backgrounds to their doors. Let's shine our light by seeking out these opportunities, not just wait to be asked.

Let's have a budget for outreach to local and regional newspapers and radios. Place ads in a variety of places. Be a presence in neighboring communities' special events.

Note the visitors when they're asked to stand and move to sit with them during the service. At the end of the service, walk them to the deck and introduce them to folks and make certain they're engaged until they want to leave. Although the New Member Ministry Team is charged with leadership of welcoming visitors and orienting them to the church, we are all responsible for hospitality.

We need to brag to our relatives, co-workers and friends about the goings on at Paint Branch. The most powerful recruitment agent is an invitation from a member. We've got liturgical dancers and a dynamic choir and excellent worship associates who contribute to a quality worship experience week after week, year round. We have ministers who take their calling very seriously and are always stretching themselves—and us. We can emphasize our existing diversity of race, ethnicity, sexual/gender preference and religious backgrounds and beliefs while working to celebrate and grow more varied.

Let's shine our light and ignite our corner of this world.

I close with this final extract from the Morales pamphlet:

*Someone, a long lost relative of the human family, is coming into our lives... At church, it happens every single Sunday. May you and I be there with anticipation in our hearts, warm smiles on our faces, and eyes ready to truly meet the eyes of another, our arms extended, saying, 'Welcome, welcome.'*

(from "Religious Hospitality, A Spiritual Practice for Congregations")

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