

Now Is The Time  
A sermon preached by the Reverend Diane D. Teichert  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
October 4, 2009

I clearly remember the day I knew for sure I was a Unitarian Universalist.

It was back in 1984 or so. I was working in downtown Boston then. One day on my lunch hour, I walked across the Boston Common and up the hill to the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association at 25 Beacon Street next door to the gold dome of the State House. I was on an errand for a college friend who had become a Presbyterian minister and was living far away in California. She wanted me to buy a certain bumper sticker that she knew was sold at the UUA Bookstore.

Up until that day, I had only a vague understanding of Unitarian Universalism, despite having a Unitarian as my best childhood friend and marrying another.

On the wall in the hallway outside the bookstore was a poster of the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, the same Principles and Purposes printed on the back of the cover of your Order of Service.

I stood there in the hallway reading that poster and found myself feeling a certain joyful and profound sense of relief. Here was a set of religious ideals with which I could agree, containing no problematic theological language or doctrine, principles around which I had been trying to live my life already. This is who I am, I thought. I am a Unitarian Universalist!

And, their bookstore even had the bumper sticker sought by my friend. Guess what it said? "God is coming, and boy is she pissed!"

On that day, I would never have guessed that eleven or twelve years later, I would be a UU minister or that I'd be working at UUA headquarters myself!

Of course, it wasn't that poster that caused me to become a Unitarian Universalist and sent me on my path toward ministry. It was the congregation we began to attend shortly thereafter that drew me and my family in.

That is the way most people come to Unitarian Universalism. Through a congregation. Well, actually, I've learned by talking to newcomers, that most people now first visit the congregation's website, and then they attend a service.

But, still it is a local congregation that draws us in and keeps us coming back. But eventually, hopefully, we learn that Unitarian Universalism is something more than our own congregation. I think of it as a movement, not a denomination, because ours is a living tradition that doesn't stand still, it moves!

Eventually, hopefully, we learn that there is a national association of congregations, which provides programs and services to congregations, some of which come through regional offices called districts. Just like our congregations, the national and regional organizations are governed by elected boards, paid staffs, and numerous committees.

The national association is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, usually referred to as the UUA though it really should be the UUA of C.

And our district, our regional association, is called the Joseph Priestley District and serves 67 mid-Atlantic congregations. It is named after the 18<sup>th</sup> century British

scientist and discoverer of oxygen, Joseph Priestley, who was also a Unitarian minister. Following the destruction of his home and laboratory in England for his religious and political views, he was welcomed to this country by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in 1794. He helped found the oldest Unitarian congregation, the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, in 1796.

A very recent example of a service provided to this congregation by the UUA through the Joseph Priestley District is the workshop attended by 55 of you this past Friday night and 25 yesterday. It was facilitated by district staff. Offered to congregations every time they have a new minister or a new director of religious education, we got two Start-up Workshops in one—for me and for Karen Lee Scrivo, our Interim Director of Religious Exploration.

But I digress. Association Sunday is not a district event, it's a nation-wide event.

The Unitarian Universalist Association literally would not exist without its member congregations, but it is also true that we all would be infinitely less without it. We all, each of us, and *this* congregation need the UUA (of C) because by coming together in Association with other Unitarian Universalists we are capable of things that would be unthinkable if we were left on our own.

Now is not the time to rattle off a list of ways we benefit by being a part of the UUA:

Things like the well-developed and thorough process whereby congregations looking for a new minister and ministers looking for a congregation find, check out, and choose each other—through which you found me and I found you!

Things like the new Tapestry of Faith curriculum, a new faith identity curriculum developed by UUA staff, with segments for kindergarten through adult, which we are using this year in our Religious Exploration program.

Things like co-sponsorship of the national march for full equality under the law for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender people next Sunday afternoon at 2pm on the West lawn of the Capitol.

These things shouldn't even need to be mentioned. It should be obvious that together we are more than any of us alone.

And so the purpose of Association Sunday is to encourage us to deepen and grow our association so that our movement might flourish. And of the need for that, too, there should be no doubt. Just take a look at the world we live in. Read the headlines; listen to the news.

Is there any doubt that a faith such as ours, that religious communities such as this one, have a place in our world today? That the world needs what we have?

This year Association Sunday is focusing on growth in diversity, and the monies we raise will help our movement to develop spiritual communities that are more welcoming to ALL people by:

- 1) Expanding the *Building the World We Dream About* curriculum and associated resources. This is long-awaited program looks at racism in much the same way the Welcoming Congregation program of workshops and actions steps looked at homophobia, heterosexism, and issues facing gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender people to prepare congregations to welcome them/us.
- 2) Supporting congregations who are working to create a Unitarian Universalism that is racially, culturally, and economically diverse.

3) Enabling Unitarian Universalist congregations and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in the areas of spiritual development, racial/cultural identity development, and leadership development.

You see, it doesn't really matter all that much if we grow the size of our congregations and our movement, and deepen the spiritual maturity of our congregations, if at the end of the day we still look, sound, and act pretty much like we do right now. If the only people we attract are carbon copies of the people who are already here . . . well . we're already here!

And it's true that there are other people out there like us who need what we have. But it's also true that there are other people—who perhaps in very real ways are not like most of us here today—and they need it too. And what's more, they have things that we need. A long-time member here put it very well on Friday night when he said that this congregation "values heterogeneity."

Few people like change. People may say they do, but deep down many people really only like change when it's other people who are doing the changing. Let us hope that we Unitarian Universalists are spiritually mature enough to know that whether we like it or not we *need* change. That's why we believe that even our beliefs—even our most cherished beliefs—should be held lightly, open to revision, because we know the importance of evolution in every facet of life. Growth, movement, change, evolution, transformation—in the long run the only alternative is extinction.

And so this year's Association Sunday is not just about —growth in diversity, but also about —growth *through* diversity. Now, in many ways Unitarian Universalism is a pretty diverse religious tradition. We certainly are theologically. And we are around issues of sexuality and sexual identity. And our *understanding* about issues of race is pretty good, though not complete, even though the actual experience in the majority of our congregations is still pretty white. And if we're honest with ourselves we have miles to go on issues of class. So for all the diversity we have to celebrate there is still much work to do.

At Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church, you (dare I say "we" so soon in my ministry here?) have a proud past of involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960's, an involvement which caused you financial hardship; a record of service to the poor of the community by sheltering homeless people for a week each winter; and a two-year old program of educating yourselves about racism through the Diversity Anti-Racism Transformation Team called DARTT—which is already planning to offer the new *Building the World We Dream About* curriculum which will be expanded with Association Sunday funds.

With our location in a county that is about two-thirds African American, we have a real opportunity to become more diverse racially than we are now. This potential is a big part of why I answered your call to be your minister. True, I felt I could love the people already here. And, also, I love this incredibly beautiful setting and the windows that bring it indoors! not only here but in my office, too! But the challenge of diversifying our movement, congregation by congregation, speaks deeply to me!

Do we want to just be an artsy sanctuary in the woods with great music and dance for us, or do we want to open ourselves to the internal work of anti-racism and prepare to become multicultural? Do we just want passersby to know we're here, or do we want to add a sign on the beautiful sign out front that tells others that our services are at 10:00 am so that they can take a chance on checking us out?

We are already doing the kind of work this fundraising effort will further and so I know we will directly benefit from it! In fact, each district will get some of the funds to use regionally, proportionally based what it contributed to the total funds raised.

This congregation is a voluntary association of individuals who, for 55 years, have created a liberal religious home and been a liberal religious voice in the community.

Similarly, our congregation and over one thousand others have voluntarily joined together to create an association known as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. It is us; we are they. And the world needs Unitarian Universalism to be strong, just as the surrounding communities need this congregation to be strong.

Today we have the opportunity to help strengthen our movement for generations to come by deepening our efforts to grow in and through diversity. Together we will bring Unitarian Universalism's powerful, historically-rooted saving message out into the broader community... and welcome in those who resonate with it. Now is the Time.

In a few moments, after the hymn, your contribution in the envelope provided in your order of service, will be gratefully and graciously received.

This hymn, "Standing on the Side of Love," was written and composed in 2004 by Unitarian Universalist musician Jason Shelton as an anthem for the campaign for equal marriage. This past summer, the UUA announced that it is sponsoring an advocacy campaign with Standing on the Side of Love as its slogan, including but going beyond gay marriage, to promote respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe that no one should be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression, or violence because of their identities. When there are acts of hate or when people gather in support of justice, congregations are invited to use the Standing on the Side of Love banners as a gathering place for any and all who share this belief. Please rise as you are able.