

The Costly Heritage We Claim

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I'm so happy to have the opportunity to speak to you again today. For those of you who don't know me, I'm a student at one of our Unitarian Universalist seminaries and I've been a member of All Souls for about sixteen years now.

Sixteen years ago I wasn't exactly looking to join a church, but out of curiosity –and mounting frustration at the Midwestern in-your-face religious environment I found myself in—I dragged my family in here one Sunday morning. I had hardly dared hope, but yes! it seemed to be true: Unitarians were free to believe – or not to believe -- anything they wanted. Cool! This initial impression was confirmed, that first day and during subsequent Sunday services, when the congregation would rise and the moderator would say these words – maybe some of you remember: “Knowing that neither this nor any other form of words will ever be a creed in this free church, please join in saying our covenant.” “This free church.” Liberal religion. Enlightened. Modern.

Fast forward fifteen years, and by this time I've been involved in about a gazillion activities around here and have been in seminary for four years. This is last January, and I've signed up for a class on “Congregational Polity.”

Only because I had to....the same reason everyone else in the class had signed up. Polity...yes, that's really a word...has to do with church governance.

Boring.

Except that...by the time the course started we had read all the materials and... a funny thing happened. All twenty of us, Unitarian Universalist seminarians from all over North America, were saying to our professor, “So, why didn't we know all this before? Why doesn't everyone in our congregations know this stuff?”

We found we had really never understood some of the basics of our own tradition!....like, for me, that “free church” thing...turns out it wasn't really about just doing your own thing after all.... What we

learned made us feel connected — connected to centuries of history, and even more connected to our home congregations. It was exciting!

Now, I like history and tradition as much as the next person, maybe even more, as long as it doesn't involve celebrating past institutions and practices that perpetuated oppression and superstition. You know, like a whole lot of Western church history. Sure, I knew that Unitarians had some older churches in New England — Universalists too, though this course focused on our Unitarian side. Even this congregation, All Souls, is 138 years old, so yeah, Unitarians have history, but it's mostly liberal, enlightened history...right?

I had heard occasional references over the years, though, to the Puritans... and that we were somehow connected to them. This didn't make any sense to me—I mean, talk about oppression and superstition--- witch hunts, land grabs from native Americans, and besides, could there be a less Puritanical people than we Unitarian Universalists? You may remember Puritanism being described as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be happy.”

But, alas, it is true. Since I now must live forever with this knowledge... I want to share it with you too.

Many of the early Puritan churches, established in Massachusetts in the early 1600's — four hundred years ago -- are Unitarian Universalist churches. And it's not because the original congregations folded and eventually sold their buildings to the Unitarians, or any such thing.

No, these congregations of ours were indeed established by uptight, orthodox, rigid Trinitarian Puritans, who got one very important thing very right: they established free, creedless churches, whose theology evolved and expanded over the centuries as it continues to evolve and expand today. Because the free church structure, revolutionary four

hundred years ago, allowed for that, made it inevitable for that, to happen.

We owe these Puritans bigtime, and I'll tell you why. But not without first issuing my disclaimer. They had a dream, and the will to carry it off despite all odds, without which our Unitarian Universalist churches would not exist as liberal, autonomous, free churches today. This means, though, that we do indeed also have a direct connection to their history of oppression and superstition. The First Parish Church in Plymouth is the oldest continuous church in New England, the original Pilgrim church, and is one of ours. These days, on Thanksgiving they frequently open up their building to events of local Native Americans, in a carefully crafted compromise, letting them tell their not-so-happy side of the Thanksgiving story.

And check out the website of the First Church in Salem, Unitarian, also one of the oldest churches in North America. I quote from the home page: "this church was one of those involved in the Salem Witch Hysteria of 1692 that resulted in the tragic deaths of 19 women and men. Two of our full members were excommunicated and executed in the ensuing events of that year, Giles Corey and Rebecca Nurse. In addition, many members of our church participated in and supported the witch-hunt that quickly consumed the entire area. Many of these people later recanted and publicly apologized."

First Church in Salem, Unitarian.

Acknowledging the severity of this atrocity... in the spirit of compassion we have to look at what they did in the context of their time and circumstances. One writer on this subject, subscribing to what she calls the blind spot theory of history, says we should not ask, "How could they do that?", but "What are we, with all our best intentions, now doing that our descendents will find morally reprehensible?"

We can only imagine that some of what we, their descendants, are doing now, our Puritan forebears would almost certainly find morally reprehensible:

- Women in the pulpit.
- Our commitment to same-sex marriage.
- The comprehensive Our Whole Lives program which teaches our children and youth to understand and respect their sexuality.
- Embracing earth-based spirituality.... including Wicca – you can appreciate the irony ---

Can you imagine how all this would just blow their seventeenth-century Puritan minds?

And yet. They could have carved their own religious understandings in stone, so that future generations of church members would have to subscribe to them, or begin a long struggle to try to overturn them. Historically, most churches have ... threatened by change, blind to the truth that revelation is continuous. The Puritans resisted that temptation.

There is so much I'd like to say about these rather amazing predecessors of ours – and I could, if you'd be willing to experience a typical Puritan Sunday, sitting in church all day, singing 30-minute-long hymns and listening to a two-hour sermon.

OK, then here's the short version.

While they were still in England, members of the Anglican Church, these people had learned to read the Bible on their own, and found nothing there about popes and cardinals and top-down hierarchy and some people being closer to God than others. They were forced by law to attend church on Sunday, but outside of church, they just got together on their own and endlessly discussed what they thought the Bible meant, and began to envision what a church should be. A church based on what they thought to be the original Christian model.

~~Not a church of people forced to belong, but a gathered church~~
meaning that people who believed themselves to have a deep religious sentiment gathered together in community to support each other in mutual love, and to live as an example to the world.

It would be a free church, with no hierarchy, educated ministers appointed by the members, who would also elect their own leaders and, if necessary, get rid of them. There would be no creed to which members would have to subscribe. They would only have to show they lived a good life and shared a religious vision.

No way could they make this dream a reality in England -- the Anglican bishops wouldn't stand for it, and actually ordered them to stop the offsite discussions, even in private homes. Which is why they ended up in New England, far away from the prying eyes of the hierarchy, gathering their free churches.

Another one of my disclaimers: most history books say that every member had a vote, regardless of status. Privilege, wealth, class—none of that mattered in the free church. All were equal. Well, I also subscribe to the blind spot theory of history, but I'm compelled to point out that gender **did** matter and that in fact, only about half of the members could vote.

All of them, though – men, women, and children – paid a high price to realize this dream of a free church. They had to leave behind most of their possessions, say goodbye forever to family, friends, and everything familiar, undertake a long, risky ocean voyage – to come to an unfamiliar wilderness and build a community. (On someone else's land, but that's a story for another sermon...)

And they paid a huge price in constant, long-term anxiety, because they never knew when their charter might suddenly be revoked and they would lose everything. The years passed, then decades, and they settled into their lives and their churches – and every time a ship

doomed, it could bring news from England that the whole social experiment was cancelled.

In fact, there was a lot of agitation going on in England to check out these free churches, and to shut them down. The Puritans reacted by trying to keep everything quiet, dissent to a minimum, no controversy or anything strange that could get reported.

The experiment and the free churches survived, but just barely, and eventually the king decided a Royal Governor would in the future have to be put in charge. It was within days of the king's governor landing in Massachusetts, that the Salem witch hysteria broke out.... and as often happens, the vulnerable and innocent fell victim to an atmosphere of fear, superstition, and the survival instinct.

In so many ways, for so many people, realizing the dream of the free church, was costly.

It is this costly heritage we claim today. It is this heritage, our heritage, that makes possible our free Unitarian Universalist churches where we practice our liberal faith today. The Puritans bequeathed us way more than a form of church governance.

The Puritans bequeathed us our religion.

OK, granted, these people didn't have a liberal religious bone in their collective body. Our Puritan free churches in seventeenth century New England were nowhere near even doubting the divinity of Jesus or the trinity or the doctrine of original sin.Not yet. But they would get there, and would add the word "Unitarian" to their name. They would get there, because members of a free church did not agree to a creed, something that began with the words "We believe." What held them together as a religious community, was their covenant, something that began with words such as "We promise." And this

premise usually was about reasoning together in the spirit of mutual love, in order to seek truth.

Make no mistake. This has everything to do with theology, with what we hold to be most important religiously. It's all about how we understand ultimate reality, how the universe is governed, how we agree to govern ourselves. It's the understanding that the spirit of mutual love is central to our lives, and freedom is essential to that spirit, and that if we try to control it with a centralized hierarchical organization, we will kill it.

When I studied the Puritans' principle of how people find collective truth together – not individual, but collective truth...I was fascinated, because I know I've seen this same principle in action over the years here at All Souls. I've seen it at annual congregational meetings, and at monthly committee meetings, at Wednesday evening church chats, at Forums and Religious Odysseys. I've seen it at work in Capital Campaigns and I've seen it upclose, while serving on the task force to study implementing an early morning service. I've seen it done well, very well, and as we are humans, very rarely I've seen it turn into a disaster.

Reflect on that as I explain the principle to you, translate from the traditional language as you need to, and see if it feels familiar to you.

The Puritan principle on finding collective truth, is that God can and does speak through anyone, so we all have to listen to everyone. Just in case. This is the purpose of discussion – to find something out, by hearing what each person has to say. Not to get a majority, but to discover truth, together. Listen: Which one is speaking the truth?

Each person has to recognize that he or she is fallible, and that it might be hard to distinguish God's word from our own imaginings... so—and may this be heard all the way to the White House - - those who claim to speak the will of God must be prepared for real discussion or

criticism and be ready to be corrected. Through this process, the person speaking the truth will be able to persuade others.

And that is the spirit of persuasion described in our readings this morning.

That is the basis of the covenant of a free church.

As we go through our lives, and have new experiences, new truths may be revealed to us at any time. And it is within this community that we test our beliefs against other people's experience. This is a covenant of trust. We live it out as we're willing to engage openly and thoughtfully in shaping our congregational decisions. And we live it out as we're able to live with the decisions that emerge.

Some of our oldest churches still recite, every Sunday morning, the exact covenant that they first affirmed nearly four hundred years ago. Others have updated the language, keeping the original meaning. The All Souls covenant that we recite together every week – and will again today following the last hymn -- has been our bond for well over a hundred years.

It's interesting to see how people in other religious traditions understand, or misunderstand, our free church tradition. It's probably not for everybody – some people feel more secure with creeds and hierarchies.

A few months ago I was talking to a new friend, a very conservative young Catholic from Africa. We were in a theological conversation, simultaneously sharing our mutual commitment to social justice, while challenging each other's religious perspectives. We got on the topic of ordaining women. He revealed that he supported his church's opposition. I honed in on this as a justice issue, and I could see that on some level, he got it, and was sympathetic, but seemed frustrated and worried that I might be expecting him to change his position.

Suddenly his face brightened, like he'd found a way to finally make me understand, and he said "Listen, what if your church leaders made a rule, and you were against it. What would you do? Just, challenge them about it in front of everybody?"

Well, yeah! Maybe even, before they made the damn rule.

I remember a few years ago speaking at an interfaith program at a Presbyterian church – they'd invited representatives of various religious movements to make short presentations, and I had tried to describe this, this working together in the spirit of persuasion – affectionately, even proudly, I thought. When I finished, expecting sighs of envy and admiration, there was just silence, except for one woman who said, "That just sounds *exhausting*." I thought for a minute and admitted that yes, sometimes it is indeed exhausting. And slow. And frustrating.

Especially at those times when many of us just feel compelled to speak out as a congregation, or as a movement, on a moral issue of some urgency. Like the war in Iraq.

So, how come the Methodists can do it and we can't?

No, we can't just do it, not without a long process, being sure that everyone feels heard, respecting freedom of conscience. At those times, an empowered leadership committed to social justice can look pretty good. For about a minute. Until we realize that the person, or board that presumes to speak out in our name against the war today, could speak out against same-sex marriage or stem cell research tomorrow. In our name.

When it seems slow and frustrating for us to take a stand, look around at religious denominations that do have creeds, and hierarchies. Where the spirit of persuasion is not in charge. Progressive leaders may take stands in the name of their members, but that doesn't mean

the people in the congregations follow. In the twenty-first century, denominations are falling into conflict and being torn apart over issues such as women's ordination, gay and lesbian ordination, and same-sex marriage.

We watch this and think, "For God's sake, what is the big deal, get over it!" We as a movement resolved these issues decades or even a century ago, not always easily or calmly, but always through the spirit of persuasion, of listening to each other's voices until finally we were persuaded by the voices of truth. And today, with no authoritarian leaders having pushed or pulled us along the path toward justice, we still find ourselves by far the most progressive faith group on social issues in North America. Not despite our free church tradition. Because of our free church tradition.

Unitarian Universalists are often thought of as radical individualists, for whom religion is a private feeling. We often think of ourselves like that. But freedom as the Puritans understood it was not about individual freedom, it was about connection. And I think they got that right too. It was freedom in service to a vision of shared life. If our religion were only about our theological beliefs, there'd be no reason we couldn't hold those beliefs privately, avoid all contact with other UU's, and stay home on Sundays with the New York Times. The fact that many do believe that, must explain the national surveys showing that twice the number of people report being Unitarian Universalists as are members of our congregations.

Who are they? Where are they? Creating the beloved community of justice, love and compassion, with others who freely join us in that quest, is not something we can do alone. Being in community is not incidental to being a UU, it's intrinsic.

How else can we model a commitment to justice, to a society consumed with economic self-interest?

How else can we demonstrate democracy and the powerful spirit of persuasion, to a nation where increasingly, only the voices of the powerful are heard?

As this congregation continues to grow, and our movement turns its energy toward growth, I hope that we – longtime Unitarian Universalists and newer members -- claim and proudly proclaim our heritage of the free church. We need to understand it...and we need to honor it...because it is both the roots that hold us close, and the wings that set us free.

May it be so.