

Building a Legacy

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A few months ago I talked about the 5 compelling questions that each person must answer in their spiritual quest. These questions, Who or what is in charge? How did I get here? How do I know what I know? And the last two- What is my purpose? What is the meaning of my death?

As I said then- how we answer these questions will drive the way we live. It will impact the choices that we make and shape the life we create. While the answers to these questions are spiritual and personal, they are also religious. They are religious because human beings have been wrestling with these questions for millennium and institutions have been formed through shared beliefs and common answers. Knowing that others have the same answer to these questions is comforting to many people. It is comforting to us, to know that we are not alone in our own searching- while we may not share a single common answer to these questions (I doubt even the most fundamentalist groups have complete uniformity)... We do share something- a curiosity, a desire to learn and grow, to understand and explore. This curiosity allows us a greater understanding of the world because it broadens our view and allows us to consider alternative ways of seeing the world.

Theodore Parker was a radical. He pushed the boundaries of the Unitarian movement by saying that we are responsible for making the world better. We must work to change what we see and bring the world in line with God's word. Parker understood that word to be, justice, mercy and equality. He fought, literally fought- gun in the top drawer of his desk fought, for the end of slavery. He did so because he understood his purpose- to work, to act to bring the world in line with God's word. He used biblical text to support his view and strengthen his argument. His legacy is that he helped moved the Unitarians farther away from the orthodoxy. He also helped to move them into the center of the abolitionist movement.

I don't often quote from the bible, but one of my favorites is from Mica- What does God ask of us? That we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our god. I'm not a Christian, but there is much in Christianity as in any religion that is good. I am willing to bet that many of you say things like: I'm spiritual, but not religious. I get this all the time from people looking for a minister to do weddings or memorial services. I don't know what it means for you when you say that. But I want to challenge you on this - What are religious institutions for? They are a place where we can go to bind our beliefs together. Parker would not have gotten very far if he held the position that his belief in abolition was solely a spiritual matter. He understood that his position was grounded in his spiritual beliefs, and that if anything was going to be done about he needed to bind with others to create change.

The 5 compelling questions are also questions we can answer within an institution, as a group. We may not have uniformity of belief, but we can find common ground. It is that common ground that gives the institution power.

This is the power and beauty of the religious institution. Alone we often feel powerless and helpless, but together we can move mountains. We cannot wait for government to meet our needs, we must act together as member of civic society to make our needs known. Many of feel disenfranchised by the political powers that be. But like Parker, we have the spiritual grounding to speak with some authority about how the world should be. Tolerance, love, justice equity and compassion, a voice and a vote- these are all values that we hold in common. Values grounded in our individual spiritual beliefs that together create a force that is impossible to stop. If- and only if we are willing to work for what we believe in.

This congregation has been here 40 years. It is time for a change. It is time to begin to look outside these walls together- not as individuals, but as a religious institution with power and love at its center.

How would the founders, those now gone, look at you and your care of this institution?

What is it that you wish leave as legacy of this place?

How will the next generation look back at your time here?

What will say you left behind?

Now is the time to find your purpose- not as individuals- but as an institution. How will use your collective power, your shared values to make the world a better place? According to Rick Warren- minister at the Saddleback Church in So CA. Churches with a clear purpose succeed.

Why? Because clear purpose:

1. builds morale
2. Reduces frustration
3. allows concentration
4. attracts cooperation
- and 5. assists evaluation

Your current mission statement says you accept all visions. But by doing so, you have no vision- no cohesive bond, no shared purpose.

Think about this for a minute- when you consider giving to charities- why do you give? Not for salaries, or to pay the electric bill...we give to mission- to purpose. We commit to those who are committed. Are you committed to UUism? Are you committed to this institution? If not, why not? What would it take to build that commitment?

We must, together, find our purpose here. Together, we must develop a single vision for this Fellowship. And from there we can find our mission, a sentence or two that establishes the purpose of this religious institution ...

1. It must be grounded in Uuism,
2. it must be specific- simple and clear...shorter statements can be remembered and repeated to allow for
3. transfer- everyone knows why we are here and the info can be easily transferred from person to person or group to group...
4. Measurable- if we can't evaluate and prove we are working toward our purpose, its not a good statement, stated in terms of results- not activities....
5. We should not be interested in growing programs- but rather, we should be interested in growing people with process that engages, challenges and deepen their life. A process that supports and encourages spiritual growth.

In order to develop such a statement, we need to find out what our vision of the future is. We need to decide what we want to be before we can figure out how to get there. If you could image- with no restrictions -your ideal for this Fellowship in 5 years what would it be? Imagine all aspects of the Fellowship, programs, worship, membership, Religious education for adults as well as children, social action, denominational affairs, staffing, furniture and facilities... all of it- what can you imagine- because we are only limited by our imagination.

If we can agree on a vision, we can make it happen. Nothing can stop us from building the powerful and loving institution that we can be, except our own doubt and fear. There is potential here. And our message is a saving message. Our values are grounded in religious principles. It is this grounding that gives authority to our beliefs and it is this authority that gives power to our actions. We are not helpless, unless we choose to be. Together we can make a difference- we can bind our beliefs, our values with one another to create a path of moving light through the darkness. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Questions from the Town Hall Meeting Following the Service:

1. Why does the church exist?
2. What are we to be as a church? (Who and what are we?)
3. What are we to do as a church? (What does god/spirit of life and love want done in the world)
4. How are we to do it?

It is important to remember that there are 5 Dimensions of Church growth:

Churches grow warmer through fellowship.

Churches grow deeper through leadership.

Churches grow stronger through worship.

Churches grow broader through ministry/missionary work.

Churches grow larger through evangelism.