

# WHY DON'T WE GROW MORE?

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Church and Parish in Dedham  
Association Sunday,  
October 21, 2007  
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister  
First Parish in Needham

READING from the Rev. Suzanne Meyer, First Unitarian, St. Louis Rali Weaver

Unitarian Universalism is in the throes of a major change--a change that will have significant institutional implications. Since the 16th century, we have positioned ourselves over against religious orthodoxy. Our existence was necessitated by the presence of religious repression, superstition and persecution. In the religious dialog, we were the voices of reason, freedom, and tolerance. But today we must position ourselves over against secular culture--challenging the values that diminish the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.

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The dominant cultural values are [now] shaped, not by religious orthodoxy but by secular materialism. The worth of an individual or a group of individuals is based on their value in the market place. Nature, far from being regarded as a sacred trust, has been reduced to "natural resources" to be exploited for profit regardless of the long-term consequences. Freedom has been perverted into license; tolerance into indifference; individualism into alienation. Our culture is characterized by a growing sense of anomie and anxiety. The rise of Religious Fundamentalism infused with right-wing rhetoric is a tragic symptom of the desperate retreat from authentic freedom in the wake of increasing fear. But religious fundamentalism is the symptom, not the problem. As a religious body, we must confront not the symptom, but the source.

We must reposition ourselves, not as the rational alternative to conservative religion, but as the rational and spiritual alternative to the values of secular materialism. Therein lies the future of Unitarian Universalism.

What this means at the congregational level is this: whereas UUs were once typically come-outers from conservative traditions, in the future they will be the un-churched--the "shell-shocked" come-inners from secular culture. Our commitment to an ethic based on the inherent worth and dignity of each individual and our recognition of the interdependent web of nature and human nature is a radical antidote to secular materialism. Our understanding that the fate of the individual spirit cannot be separated from the fate of the body anymore than that fate of the body can be separated from the fate of the earth makes us "pro-life" in the larger, more global sense of the term. We have religious communities of nurture and support. We have a "gospel"-- some good news and a salvation story to proclaim. We proclaim it in two ways, through our passionate social witness, and through the creation of nurturing congregations.

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Often, when we think of growing, we think of growing UP, like we do from childhood to adolescence to maturity. But I like a contrasting image I found years ago in a children's book called *The Phantom Tollbooth*, by Jules Feiffer.

Milo, the child protagonist, has just rounded a corner when he encounters a little fellow about his own age, ten or so, but floating about two feet off the ground. He explains that in his family, everyone is like that. They're a very idealistic, egalitarian people, and so it's been arranged that children are born with their eyes at the same level as their parents. So as they grow, you see, it's not so much a matter of growing UP as of growing DOWN. And when they are fully grown, their feet finally touch the ground. "Of course," he adds, "some of us never DO quite touch the ground. But I suppose it's the same in all families."

"Why don't we grow more?" When Unitarian Universalists would ask me that question when I was President of our Association, I would often think of that story. Or of this one:

The occasion was a suffrage rally held on the Boston Common about a century ago now. Coming down from her town house on Beacon Hill, a Unitarian grande dame, dressed in her finest, was greeted by a younger woman, who remarked, "Why what an elegant hat! Wherever did you get it?" To which she received the reply, "My dear, Unitarian ladies on Boston's Beacon Hill do not 'get' their hats anywhere. We simply have them."

For too long, I'm afraid, we treated our faith rather like that. A century and a half ago there were only about 150 Unitarian churches in all of America – half of them within 50 miles of here. Leading one wag to say our forebears had faith in "the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston." Unitarianism spread slowly,

and largely only where New Englanders moved. We didn't proselytize; quite the contrary -- despite Garrison Keillor's myth that Lake Wobegone was started by Transcendentalists who came to convert the local Indians by means of interpretive dance!

Moreover, for all too long, we really weren't all that democratic. We tended to rely on a few wealthy patrons in each congregation to pay most of the bills. Even the American Unitarian Association for its first 75 years was simply an individual membership society of ministers and wealthy laymen, not an association of congregations. It printed sermons and books, and sent grants to a few new congregations and ministers, but did little more. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, one-third of all Unitarian churches in North America closed when patrons couldn't provide funds any longer.

The Universalist side of the family had been more inclined to go out into the highways and byways spreading the good news of liberal religion, and among more working class and rural people. At one time there were 300 Universalist congregations just in Maine! But few Universalist institutions were very well funded. Their state conventions gained assets chiefly when local congregations closed and sold their buildings. Their seminaries were too poorly endowed to keep going after they merged with the Unitarians.

I once told the story of that consolidation in a way that prompted a new member to ask, "What did each of them have to give up?" An astute question, which prompted me to say the Universalists gave up most of their endowments, and their identity, while Unitarians were challenged by the merger to give up their elitism, and their reluctance to reach out.

Actually, even before merger, in years after World War II, the AUA had been out starting new congregations -- often lay led fellowships -- in college towns and suburbs wherever a critical mass could be gathered. The man behind the new fellowships, Monroe Husbands, was an AUA staffer-- and a staunch member of First Parish in Needham. Sadly, some of these fellowships chose poor lay leaders, who were better at fleeing from conventional faith than affirming anything, or getting through the 1970s, when the 'Me Decade' hit American culture, and all forms of institutional religion and restraint lost their appeal.

Since the 1980s, however, Unitarian Universalism has been slowly but steadily growing. Most UUA growth efforts, however, have been funded largely by one wealthy church on Long Island, known at 25 Beacon Street as “Our Lady of the Oil Wells,” or “The Source from Which all Blessings Flow.” At a certain point, they want evidence that the rest of us care as well. And we should. Where our congregations are growing, they do so by paying attention not to the consumer preferences of their existing members, but to the unmet moral and spiritual needs of the community around them. So we make a difference that is far greater than our numbers would suggest. I know one congregation that was down to a mere 60 members in a historic building. A new minister worked with the UUA to start strategic planning by asking the surrounding community – especially the unchurched – about unmet needs. That church, in Portsmouth, NH, grew to over 600 members!

Nationwide, we may currently have only about 160,000 fully signed up adult members, plus 60,000 children and youth, but when the sociologists do surveys of religious identity, they find that three times as many people identify with us as belong to our 1000 churches. Which shows that we need more congregations in many places where we don’t have a presence. And more outreach. Where we have done some marketing, UU growth has been notable. Our largest churches, each with over a thousand members, and some drawing a thousand people a Sunday, are now scattered from Portland, Oregon, to Tulsa, Oklahoma; from Madison, Wisconsin, to Dallas, Texas. But, believe me, there are still lots of places where we need greater visibility. Including some right around here where we have our roots!

The new UUA marketing campaign features ads like the one that appeared this week in *Time* magazine: “Is God keeping you from going to church?” Then it reads, “Maybe you’re uncomfortable with the idea of God – or at least someone else’s idea of God. Yet maybe you yearn for a loving, spiritual community where you can be inspired to search for your own truth amid meaning. This is a church, you ask? Welcome to Unitarian Universalism!” I’ll tell you how ad campaigns like this really work. It’s not just the people out there who don’t know us who may try us. Some of us may be inspired for a change to actually invite a friend or neighbor!

Do you know how often the average UU does that? Once every 27 years! A real study! Nope, we don't proselytize! But "Now *Is* the Time" -- for us to reach out as never before. During my eight years as President I visited over 600 churches. I dedicated over 160 new or expanded buildings. We raised funds for building loans, for ministerial education, for youth programs, young adult outreach, campus ministries, as well as better infrastructure for communications, social witness, and congregational support and consultation. Now we need ads to lift up our collective visibility. "Imagine a religion where people with different beliefs worship together as one faith," reads another test ad. In a time when religious differences are often seen as nothing but a source of conflict, we can give hope. In a time when a spiritually empty materialism corrodes the culture and community life, we are needed not only by skeptics, seekers, and religious liberals, and by people who simply can't go home again to the faith in which they were raised, but by many others.

Mind you, this kind of outreach is new for us. But if the seven last words of the main-line church are "We never did it that way before," the last seven of the liberal church can be "We tried that once; it didn't work." Usually because we tried it alone, without help – and just as none of us are at our best when we try to go it entirely alone, neither are churches. At First Parish in Needham, for example, we may be proud of the many changes we've made and the growth we've achieved. But I must point out that the most crucial changes – in planning, fundraising, social action, adult, RE and youth programs – have all been done using UUA consultants and wisdom and experience from other UU congregations. Not alone. We've also received grants from the district that have helped us advertise and start new programs. We have an application in now for another one, to help with our multi-church project at the William Ellery Channing Elementary School in Hyde Park.

So get out wallets and checkbooks. Make your check payable to your own congregation. Mark it "Association Sunday." But whatever you were thinking of giving today, think about doubling. Some of the funds we raise today may well come back here to Dedham, or to Needham, or to another congregation nearby, to help with UU growth efforts. But for the sake of your own spiritual growth, be as generous as you can be. Every dollar given in both congregations will be matched dollar for dollar by a local matching fund, then doubled again by national fund. So if you give \$100, it becomes \$400.

This, I warn you, is only the first year of a three-year UUA effort. The emphasis this year is on three goals. Raising our collective public visibility. Supporting congregations and ministers that will increase our racial and ethnic diversity. And grants to congregations trying to grow using programs that have been proven to work.

My friends, this is a chance to do some growing down. To let our feet touch the ground. To have our high ideals “tangibilitate,” as the inner city preacher put it, in a place where our true values are surely recorded: in our check registers. I know: as Thomas Merton once wrote in his journal: “Everybody wants to be somebody; nobody wants to grow.” But surely William James, the great pragmatist, was also right when he said, “The great use of a life is to spend it for something that outlasts it.”

One of these days I want to be driving, listening to “All Things Considered” and hear, “This program is brought to you in part by the Unitarian Universalist congregations of your area, supporting religious freedom, spiritual growth, and social justice for over 200 years. See [uua.org](http://uua.org) to find one near you.” Let’s make a start at growing together today – by being generous.

(Donations may be made to the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations at any time simply by visiting [www.uuu.org](http://www.uuu.org). Local congregations give to the Annual Program Fund to support ongoing programs and witness efforts. So do individuals through the Friends of the UUA program. Donations to help grow Unitarian Universalism are now being gathered through a capital campaign called “Now Is the Time.” Deferred and life-income gifts are gratefully accepted.)