



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

January 13, 2008

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Reading

Selections from "The Church That Is Free" by James Luther Adams, 1975, as published in *The Essential JLA: Selected Papers and Addresses*, ed. George Kimmich Beach. Boston: Skinner House, 1998. 17-19.

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ground of freedom, that sustaining, judging, transforming power not made with hands. It protests against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority. ...

I call that church free which[,] in covenant with that... community-forming power[,] brings the individual, even the unacceptable, [into] a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes his or her integrity and spiritual freedom. Its goal is the prophethood and the priesthood of all believers – the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing. ...

I call that church free which liberates from bondage to the principalities and power of the world, whether churchly or secular, and which promotes the continuing reformation of its own and other institutions. It protests against routine conformity or thoughtless nonconformity that lead to deformity of mind and heart and community.

I call that church free which in charity promotes freedom in fellowship, seeking unity in diversity. This unity is a potential gift, sought through devotion to the transforming power of creative interchange in generous dialogue. But it will remain unity in diversity.

I call that church free which responds in responsibility to the Spirit that bloweth where it listeth. The tide of the Spirit finds utterance ever and again through a minority. It invites and engenders liberation from repression and exploitation, whether of nation or economic system, of race or sex or class. It bursts through rigid, cramping inheritance, giving rise to new language, to new forms of cooperation, to new and broader fellowship. ...

I call that church free which is not bound to the present, which cowers not before the vaunted spirit of the times. It earns and creates a tradition binding together

past, present, and future in a living tether, in a continuing covenant and identity, bringing forth treasures both new and old. ...

I call that church free which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect. In loyalty to its own historic character and norms, it is open to insight and conscience from every source. ...

But the church is never wholly free: It tolerates injustice, special privilege, and indifference to suffering, as though it were not accountable to a tribunal higher than the world's. It passes by on the other side, thus breaking the covenant. In the midst of this unfreedom the congregation comes together to adore that which is holy, to confess its own brokenness, and to renew the covenant.

I call that church free which does not cringe in despair, but casting off fear is lured... to respond in hope to the light that has [shone] and that still shines in the darkness.

Sermon

This short essay by James Luther Adams is about as close as Unitarian Universalists get to having scripture. There are other writings that have been as profound and had as much impact – Ralph Waldo Emerson's Harvard Divinity School address, William Ellery Channing's Baltimore sermon, Hosea Ballou's essay "On Atonement," some passages from Sophia Lyon Fahs to name only a few more. These seminal works set out some of our most fundamental arguments and positions about the nature of religion, life and death, Divinity and humanity and other Big Questions. This concise piece by Adams, written only 33 years ago, is one that distills much of what Unitarian Universalists think, how we relate to the world and what we strive for.

Adams repeats the phrase, "I call that church free." That's not just a rhetorical strategy, although it *is* that and a very good example. This refers to one major branch of Christian thinking since the Protestant Reformation: the idea that any given group of believers has the right to decide what to believe and how to be religious. This is called the Free Church movement, which, like anything does when individuals and small groups take it upon themselves to make fundamental decisions, exists now in a thousand different forms around the world. Even down the street; Baptists are the most direct religious descendents of the reformation's Free Church. For today, it's sufficient for you to know that because of the *freedom* that these groups of Christians took as their own, we now today can have Unitarian Universalist congregations that steer our own course.

Yes, we are part of a larger movement, and in that movement we have some responsibilities to fulfill, but in almost every way, our community is free of being controlled or defined by anyone but ourselves. In the Unitarian Universalist version of religious freedom, now a roomful of atheists, Buddhists, Jews, Christians and pagans among sundry others, all work out just where we each

stand in relation to the Universe and to each other, just what most deeply inspires and motivates us, and just what we are supposed to do with our lives – or with our church for that matter.

So, we have this free church, freedom of thought and freedom to choose what we believe. What do we do with it? We assemble together every week; we create and re-create community, in particular in this time on Sunday. Some of us see that as worship, others as stimulation or even healing. We take our responsible place in society, reaching out and helping those who need our resources, our expertise or simply our extra hands. We also teach and learn here; we grow as persons and we grow in spirit. We make enjoyable times happen, and we face sorrow and rage together. But why do we do those things?

I'm not claiming to know *why we* do them. For one thing, I don't know why *you* do them, or why *you* do them; I may know some of your reasons, but not necessarily, fundamentally, *why*. For that matter, I only have some ideas about why *I* do what I do here.

My old friend Freud claims that none of us does anything deeply important for only one reason, nor even for a list of reasons. Rather, Freud asserts that we always repress our most compelling motivations in the unconscious because our most basic drives are, in his view, anti-social, selfish, shameful, erotic, rageful and all those messy things. But something that people often forget about Freud is that he also thought this was entirely normal. Apparently good, decent, effective and loving people all have these vicious motivations inside, and we can all function *because we keep them unconscious*. Freud both exposes us all and lets most of us off the hook at the same time.

On that psychological level, we may not know all the reasons we make this community happen. One of our individual responsibilities is to develop deep self-awareness so we not only understand ourselves, but we also can govern ourselves; we must become wiser, more judicious and discerning, and that will help us better understand those around us. For the record, I don't see that as entirely psychological or emotional work; I see a continuum that runs from learning how to behave through growing up emotionally and dealing with our issues on into developing spiritually.

But, of course, we can't get away with throwing our hands in the air, saying "I don't know myself enough yet." We face the need to figure out to the best of our knowledge at any given time, at least on the intellectual level, why we do things.

We also address that question collectively. We work out statements of mission and vision, using these as reminders and guides to us about what we do here and what we want to become as a community. In a way, these statements do answer the question, "Why do we do what we do?" We do them because this is what we are, because this is our plan of how we want to be.

When I was seventeen, I had a mission: it was to do well enough at school to get into university where I'd take the appropriate courses to get into medical school, graduate with a medical degree and go on to do a residency in psychiatry. My vision was to be a doctor who engaged with people's feelings; healing invisible hurts; hearing what wasn't said; seeing people light up with insight and walk off unburdened and smiling. That was when I was seventeen, mind you.

My mission in fact included doing a long series of tasks that had nothing directly to do with my vision; I didn't need Physics 1000 to *be* a psychiatrist, but I needed it to complete my mission to *become* one. Likewise with suturing cuts, starting intravenous lines and reading electrocardiograms. And my vision was very general; I didn't know enough at that time to be more specific about what kind of psychiatrist or what kind of patient. There was a point in the fall of my senior undergraduate year when I became uncertain of my mission and wondered about dropping out of university; I also struggled to be sure if I'd selected the right vision and began looking at programs in Education, but those were temporary wrinkles in my original plans and I continued on. My mission was what I needed to do to achieve my vision of what I wanted to be.

None of this says *why* I was doing any of it, nor why I wanted that outcome. I'm sure you're not surprised that Freud comes back to mind at this moment! Of course, I had my unconscious reasons; I was in terrific pain, filled with buried rage and boiling with unacceptable sexuality, and all of that was layered over with a conscious desire to help *other* people. That's all I really knew at that time.

Later on and gradually, I started to realize I had both a deeper and a higher reason why I was doing all that. The deeper reason was that I am made to do that kind of work. Psychotherapy is the 'talking cure', and I have a facility with language; I haven't worked hard at it, it's just there. Further, the extravert side of me loves to hear people's stories, and I've learned in life, partly through painful experiences, how to hear them. My introvert side is introspective and thoughtful, and finds richness in the interior life. It would have been a waste of my innate talents to become a surgeon. On that deep, instinctive and even biological level, I was made for that work.

Eventually, when dealing with my issues started evolving into a conscious spirituality, I came to see that I felt *called* to that work. What I mean by that is that my place in the Universe was to be in that office, listening to and talking with people, facilitating their awareness or at least being company through their irresolvable dilemmas. It came to feel not just that my earth-based, chemical and biological make-up was constructed for that, but that all of what I knew and understood, as well as Something beyond my knowledge and understanding had meant for me to do this. It's what I *had* to do.

Just to wrap up that story at some point the shift in my own development further towards the spiritual left that psychiatric work unsatisfying, and I came to hear the next level of my call. I felt then a *spiritual* reason to do nearly the same thing, but the shift in my reason-why needed a new venue, a new set of skills, a new level of commitment, a new place.

So how does this individual story relate to why *we* do what we do. Well, it illustrates that the level at which we ask and can answer “why” evolves. At first the question is concrete: “why am I taking this course?” And the answer is obvious: “to help get my degree.” Other higher level but still concrete questions follow: “Why this degree? Why medical school? Why psychiatry?” The answers get further along towards the *real*, by which I mean the truest and most evolved answer: “To help people. To help myself. To use my talents in the best way.” These kinds of answers to “why?” are found *within* the mission, *within* the vision. “We’re doing this now in order to be that down the road.”

Eventually, though, the question has to be raised – and I mean that in a different kind of figurative way. We have to *raise* the focus of the question: “What is the most crucial and fundamental reason? What reason answers all the other questions?”

When I chose the James Luther Adams reading, to be honest, I was expecting it to suggest answers about that most crucial, fundamental reason, but as I studied it, I realized that it’s a vision statement. Adams is describing the church that he calls free in the sense of all that it can be and, we hope and work toward all that it *will* be. And, for those of you who listened closely, Adams also acknowledges its failed and broken humanness. In Adams’ vision of the free church, he expands upon its values and principles, not as in the seven principles that are the watchwords of Unitarian Universalists today, but an expanded sense of what the living of those principles requires and will create.

In doing this, Adams elevates his vision above the congregation, above even the denominational level. He raises it towards the horizon of the universal, a horizon that pulls us ever forward, on which we build a sense of what we want to be, what we *must* be, but are always only approaching. Adams’ essay demands that we consider on a very high level why we work towards his lofty vision even as it is rooted in our immediate, local, present congregation.

In the end, Adams didn’t answer the question “why” for us, and I’m not going to answer that for “us” either. Rather, I offer you the challenge of *raising* the question. Why *do* we as a congregation do what we do? Why do you as a member or friend here do what you do? The answer for some of us may be to help people. For others, it may be to help ourselves. Some of us may feel called to help. But help *how*? Help to do what? Help to become what? And why help? And if not to help, then to do what?

I’m *raising* the question. May you *raise* your answers.