

ON CATCHING A MOVING TRAIN

Betty Mills

In 1927 the American Unitarian Association, built a new headquarters building in Boston at 25 Beacon Street, placing it immediately adjacent to the state capitol building of the State of Massachusetts, certainly an auspicious location. What makes it more intriguing is that you won't find the next door neighbor with a corresponding number, say 27 Beacon Street. The denomination's previous office had been 25 Beacon Street and the Boston city fathers let them take their number with them when they moved several blocks up the street, probably confusing generations of cab drivers, but taken for granted by the Unitarians of Boston.

Now, of course, we will soon lose that historic number, and when a new postcard is produced showing our national headquarters, the dome of the Massachusetts state capitol will no longer be visible to the right of our blue UU flag. That train is moving on.

Actually the denomination owns four buildings in the vicinity, another one on Beacon Street and two just behind the headquarters. According to reports, the denomination will get a sizeable sum for all that property on pricey Beacon Street, which will be used to build a new headquarters on less expensive real estate in the greater Boston area, and presumably with building wide air conditioning, elevators to all floors, bigger and better conference facilities, up to date electrical wiring, parking space, none of which are present in the current headquarters. As you can imagine, however, the property on Beacon Street is very valuable and is expected to bring a hefty price, much more than the new headquarters will cost. The balance of the funds will be invested for future funding of denominational concerns.

That building has been strongly entwined with our history, however – maybe because it was in Boston, the center of the largest collection of U-U churches in the denomination and in the world, and some of the most famous ones. The Arlington Street church where once draft cards were burned on the altar is down the street and around the corner, and not far away from headquarters, is King's Chapel, the first UU church in what was still colonial America.

When the American revolution broke out, the Tory members of the church fled to Canada along with their minister -- and the church silver. So the remaining congregants hired the student minister who had been helping out, and one day he announced from the pulpit that he no

longer believed in the trinity and would understand if they no longer wanted him in their pulpit. They wanted him, and thus did King Chapel become the first Unitarian church in our soon to be nation.

To carry on the moving train metaphor, think of the events, the people, the places which have figured in the history of the liberal religious movement as parts of a denominational train, some of which have been switched to the sidelines, others dropped altogether while new cars were added. In fact, as metaphors go, the switch to modern day locomotives is pretty apt, too, and although I once spent a lot of interesting time in that old 25 Beacon building, like the coal powered trains of my childhood, it's time to move on.

Interesting that this congregation is also considering a major change in its accommodations. There are, I believe, only two of us remaining here who remember fellowship life not in this building, and several generations of children have known no other. And we, too, have a prominent view of the state capital building.

Maybe it's harder to give up the past if it comes with stained glass windows and intricate brick work, if your ancestors are buried in the adjacent cemetery. There is a Unitarian church in Massachusetts with stained glass windows by Tiffany, but you can hardly see them from the outside so encased are they in protective grill work to prevent theft and vandalism—also a metaphor of sorts.

Undoubtedly we are more than the buildings which house us, and that really is the moving train I want to talk about this morning because, as is obvious, it was not the location at 25 Beacon St., nor the Tiffany windows, or even our warm and wonderful blazing fireplace on a cold North Dakota night, which puts people in the pews, the folding chairs, the back bench of our churches. It is the ideas, the causes, the moving and shaking, and the freedom to attempt to turn those ideas into reality which over the years has brought people to this denomination, to this fellowship. It's that there is no back cover on the bible, or even no bible if it no longer contains the words, the contentions that move you, that make your life make sense. The choice is ours.

As an aside on the business of insisting that the words which are proposed as governing our lives make sense, I recently, and very unexpectedly, found this succinct piece of Biblical criticism in a most unexpected place. I was ensconced beside a Mexican hotel swimming pool

reading a current whodunit by Lee Child entitled *Nothing To Lose* which I found on the swimming pool's trading shelf.

One of the novel's protagonists says: "The Revelation of Saint John the Divine. Most of the original is lost, of course. It was written either in Hebrew or Aramic, and copied by hand many times and then translated into Koine Greek, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Latin, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Elizabethan English, and printed with opportunities for error and confusion at every single stage. Now it reads like a bad acid trip. I suspect it always did. Possibly all the translations and all the copying actually improved it."

That's the stuff I like to remember when someone explains to me why I'm going to hell for not believing in the Word of God as printed in the Bible.

Actually, these words by Rev. William Schultz are the kind that I consider contenders for modern day scripture, for inclusion in that bible with no back cover. They are from his book *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism*, 2002 :

"It is not particularly important to me anymore whether I or anyone else uses 'God talk.' What is of supreme importance is that I live my life in a posture of gratitude -- that I recognize my existence, and indeed, Being itself, as an unaccountable blessing, a gift of grace. Sometimes, it is helpful to call the source or fact of that grace God and sometimes not. But what is always helpful and absolutely necessary is to look kindly on the world, to be bold in

pursuit of its repair, and to be comfortable in the embrace of its splendor. I know no better term for what I seek than an encounter with the Holy."

What a great phrase "to be bold in pursuit of its repair." The question we wrestle with inevitably is how best to carry on that pursuit. We need to be alert to the advice of one of our notable theologians, James Luther Adams, who said that "attitudes do not become effective in public life until they find an institutional instrument." To which Rev. Bill Schultz adds, "if indeed we dare to struggle, we might at least resolve to win."

Those ideas are to be found in a pamphlet entitled "Toward A Theology of Dirty Hands," written by Rev. William Schultz who is currently the head of the U-U Service Committee. The pamphlet ends "A wise man once went to preach righteousness to Sodom and Gomorrah but without success and soon someone asked him why he continued when he knew he could not change the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And the wise man replied, "Now I know I must continue so that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah do not change me."

I learned long ago to pay particular attention to what Rev. Bill Schultz was saying and doing. He was originally in charge of what was called the Department of Social Responsibility of the national organization, the UUA. He went on to become president of the denomination, then president of Amnesty International, and now president of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the UU version of missionary work.

Many years ago when one of the dictatorial and oppressive hot spots of the world was El Salvador, I talked to the then head of the U-U Service Committee who had just returned from El Salvador. He said, "We take so much for granted in our country. Down there, among several other projects, we are helping them produce a simple newsletter for self help and literacy for the poor, but their government is suspicious of such publications. So, he said, "I met with the committee to help with the newsletter production since they have no experience with what we would consider an easy thing."

The meeting was held in the basement of a nondescript building with everyone sitting on a bare concrete floor and a guard posted inconspicuously outside to warn them should they have to flee. No first amendment rights need apply. He also spent the night on that concrete floor because it was decided it was too dangerous for him to leave.

There are dozens of stories of Unitarian Universalists risking life and limb for a worthy cause. I think of Rev. Emil Gudmundson, an early district

executive for our district, who went from Birmingham, Alabama, to join the Selma, Alabama, civil rights march lying on the back floor of a car covered in a rug so he would not be visible to anyone passing by.

Obviously that qualifies as being “bold in the world’s repair,” but there are many endeavors that also mend what’s awry without literally risking our lives, and it those endeavors which create strong bonds within our church life. Not always without a shouting match or two, I might add.

There is another metaphor that I think works well for Unitarian Universalists and that’s the one about the difficult of herding cats. We come to this church, this religion, from a wide variety of backgrounds, many of us with strong expectations of what shall and shall not happen in our now chosen church.

“Well,” said one of our members with a Jewish background, “I’ll be glad to teach in the church school, but there’ll be no mention of Jesus in my class.” So much for the free and independent search for truth. But someone handed her the curriculum book, *Jesus the Carpenter’s Son*, which she read and said, “Oh, that’s very good. I can use that.”

We come to this faith, some of us, with nerve ends scraped raw by our previous experiences, and we should not be surprised by the emotional outbursts which occasionally enliven our gatherings. It is, for me, one of the great purposes of this church, of this denomination, one of the ways in which we repair our corner of the world-- by being present for others in their struggle to find a religious experience which moves them beyond their past pain.

Maybe even a greater purpose for staying aboard this particular train is the religious community we provide for children. This is, of course, the goal that moved this fledging fellowship off our Saturday night talk fests. Realizing that if we wanted a new kind of religious experience for ourselves, did we not also want to change how our children were taught?

Currently we have a wondrous collection of children in the church school, and some dedicated teachers bringing our version of religious education to a new generation. The next time you are mobbed going down the hall by small people hardly higher than your knees, pause and smile and understand that you have just maybe been surrounded by the future of our church.

The new noun in the denominational talk about who we serve – or don’t serve – is “nones.” N-o-n-e-s, not nuns. The nones are people with no religious identity, none, and it’s pretty much stratified by age. It is a condition of young people not old geezers like me. Nor the age group that just got an invitation from AARP.

The “nones” are to be distinguished from those identified as “free range U-Us,” the people who if you ask them, “And what is your religion, will reply, “ I’m a Unitarian-Universalist,” although they have not been seen for some time at a church service or on anyone’s calling list. There’s a couple of those on my personal family tree. A recent nationwide poll by one of those polling organizations turned up 600,000 “free range U-U’s.”

So, thinking again about the moving train metaphor, do some of that 600,000 live within reasonable distance of our group, and if so, is there something we should be doing to get them to hitch a ride with us?

I remember a 40-something man who came to work at the UUA headquarters to improve our communication system, and who once gave a short little speech to the board which started, “You really make me mad.” He then elaborated. It seems he grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, and had for many years not gone to church, having given up his inherited one. “So there I was without a church and where I belonged was in yours. And there is a UU church in Indianapolis. But did they tell anyone they were there? Certainly not me.”

The objection that often comes up by someone who has taken a look at us, and then not returned, and the frequent phrase once you get past that there’s no pipe organ and no choir loft and no stained glass windows is that we did not provide a spiritual experience for them. And the question, of course, becomes, “How do you provide a spiritual experience in a theologically diverse community?”

When questioned the nones may reply that they want a spiritual but not a religious experience. They see us as religious but not spiritual when we more often see ourselves as spiritual but not dogmatic. Quite a lot of semantics involved for my tired old brain, I’m afraid, but I did like the explanation given by Rev. Christine Roberts at the recent district meetings that “Spirituality is honoring the depth dimension of life.”

Or, in those words by Rev. Bill Schultz: “I know no better term for what I seek than an encounter with the Holy.”

In the other reading this morning by Jeffrey Lockwood, using a kite metaphor, talked about the necessity of tending to a strong string when you are buffeted by life’s winds. And that’s how I see the church—the place to strengthen the strings of my life since I know there will be strong winds.

I am a collector of smart aleck quotations, significant pictures and once in awhile something more profound that zeroes in on what really matters to me. So currently I have a picture of Margaret Sanger posted on

my refrigerator as a reminder of how long the battle has gone on to give women control of their own bodies.

But also posted on my computer is this quotation from Rachel Naomi Remen which pretty much succinctly sums up why I am a Unitarian Universalist. Remen says, "The secret of living lies not in having all the answers but in pursuing the questions in good company."

So, good company. Thanks for listening.