

The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

**Annual Program Fund  
&**

**Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association**

**1999 Sermon Award**



*“Going It Alone”*

*Sermon Delivered on February 28, 1999*

## **READING:**

### **From “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the [adulthood] of every one of its members. Society is a joint stock company in which the members agree, for the better securing of their bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. Whoso would be an [adult] must be a nonconformist. [One] who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind . . .

. . . I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that with all this ostentation of examining the ground of his institution he will do no such thing? Do I not know he is pledged to himself not to look at but one side, the permitted side, not as a man but as a parish minister? He is a retained attorney, and these airs of the bench are the emptiest affectation. . . .

. . .now we are a mob. [People] do not stand in awe of [people], nor is [our] genius admonished to stay at home, to put itself in communication with the internal ocean, but it goes abroad to beg a cup of water of the jugs of other[s]. We must go alone. . . . I like the silent church before the service begins better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how chaste the persons look, begirt each one with a precinct or sanctuary! So let us always sit . . .

It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of [people]; in their religion, in their education, in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in the property; in their speculative views.

It is only as a [person] puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him [or her] to be strong and to prevail. [They are] weaker by every recruit to [their] banner. Is not an [individual] better than a town . . . Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

## **THE SERMON:**

The schedule in our house worked like this: Karen wakes up at 5:00, I generally get up at 5:30 or 6:00. Karen leaves for work at 6:30. I am often on the computer in the morning, so Hilary, our seven-year-old, called down to me at 8:00 or so when she woke up and I took her a bowl of Cheerios which she ate on a bed table while she watched kids' shows on TV. At 8:20 or so I started nagging her to get dressed which took about 20 minutes, and her bus comes at 8:42. Those last 20 minutes were a bit frantic and we sometimes got mad at each other. Finally I had a brainstorm. Let's get out of this pattern, I said. From now on, Hilary will get her clothes on first, and then eat. She informed me that she no longer liked Cheerios, so we got a disgusting new cereal. The tension is gone. It is working like a charm. In fact, the other day I fell back asleep reading the paper and didn't get Hilary up until 8:10. I told her to get dressed and I turned on the TV as I went to get her cereal. She said, "Dad, I don't get dressed well while the TV is on." The breakthrough came when I realized that we were locked in a pattern which was not paying off. That happens in organizations too. We certainly do it in church.

### ***[Problems Needing Creative Solutions]***

When I thought about counterproductive patterns into which we have locked ourselves, I thought about my ongoing frustration regarding our congregation's support, or non-support, of the Association of Congregations of which we are a part. Each year at budget time, I advocate our meeting our responsibility to the Unitarian Universalist Association by paying the full share paid by two out of every three other congregations, it goes in the preliminary budget, and it comes out of the final budget when we find we "can't afford it." And I get this burning sensation in my stomach.

If we were to step back and look creatively at how to change this, we could not avoid asking the fundamental question, "Do we really need the Association?" "Why not go it alone?"

### ***[An Historical Reminder]***

A two minute historical orientation to religious liberalism in Rockford. A Unitarian and a Universalist congregation were founded in Rockford in 1841. The Universalists joined with the Unitarians soon after. It was a somewhat fractious group, calling ministers and then sending them packing when there wasn't enough money to pay them. One student of our history suggested that it was because the Universalists were more conservative and quickly became dissatisfied with the liberal Unitarian ministers called by the majority. In June of 1870, The Rev. D. M. Reed, then minister, resigned during a statistically healthy period—allegedly because of poor health, although he lived another 20 years. Before the church had an opportunity to seek a new minister, the very liberal Baptist minister, Dr. Thomas Kerr, resigned his pulpit and in September, 1870 48 members of the First Baptist Church who resigned with Dr. Kerr, joined with members of the United Unitarian Universalist Church to form a new liberal non-denominational church which they called The Church of the Christian Union.

The theoretically non-denominational church was, in fact, closely aligned with the Unitarian movement. When the cornerstone of its new building was laid in 1888, virtually all of the guest speakers were Unitarians, and a great Unitarian hymn writer wrote a special hymn for the event. Dr. Kerr received associate fellowship as a Unitarian Minister. Unitarian hymn books were used in the church, and Unitarian Sunday School curricula. But it was a non-denominational church, so it had no obligation and contributed no money to the American Unitarian Association. I can find no indication of how the congregation found The Rev. Robert Bryant, the successor to Dr. Kerr, but it is clear in the records that the secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference helped put the church in touch with The Rev. Thomson Anthony Mills, Bryant's successor, and the church did send a small contribution to that group. The next minister, Dr. Charles Parker Connolly, who was called in 1913, was a Congregationalist in background, but he quickly became involved in Unitarian circles. It was in 1928 that the congregation voted to affiliate formally with the American Unitarian Association, which merged with the Universalist Church of America in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalist Association.

### ***[The UUA]***

The UUA is an association of independent congregations. Its primary purpose, according to its bylaws, is "to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles." The support of the Association, like the support of our own church, is entirely voluntary. As with our church, there is a requirement that members contribute, but the amount is not specified. In practice, the Association's Board annually designates an amount which is a "suggested share" based on so much per member. (The current amount is \$39 per member.) The reality is that most of our churches and fellowships take that number seriously and more than two-thirds of them give

at least that amount—some more. It has been many years since the Rockford church has come even close to giving its share - its full share is \$19,000 - and it is currently giving \$10,000.

When I have raised the issue of this discrepancy, some people have insisted that the UUA isn't worth that much to us, and others have urged full support only until we have come to the point where we would have to cut something local to meet our continental responsibility. It may be important, but it's not that important.

Hence, my radical suggestion: How about our "going it alone?" Since we are not prepared to be a fully responsible member of the Association, perhaps we should sever our ties and go back to our former status of sympathetic but unaffiliated. We could save \$10,000 and any guilt we might carry about being only partly responsible. [And Emerson suggested a minister would not dare to examine "the ground of his institution."]

### ***[What's It Worth?]***

A reasonable question to ask is "What do we get from being a part of the UUA?"

The reason for the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825, according to William Ellery Channing, was "to spread our views of religion; not our mere opinions, for our religion is essentially practical. The convention should bring together [people] from every part of the country to compare their views, & ascertain the wants of different places."

Fundamentally, the job of the gathered group was to print pamphlets and support growth of new churches in the West (ie. West of Worcester). The UUA continues to print pamphlets that we use to introduce ourselves to visitors, and it supports the growth of new churches. But we could probably print our own pamphlets, and does a new church in Door County, Wisconsin really affect us?

### ***[Religious Education]***

It is true that we would be hard pressed (impossibly pressed) to do religious education without the curricula that are written, field tested, and published for us by the UUA. It is not very productive to throw kids and a teacher in a classroom and say "be together." The "being together" is important, but it is fostered by the curricula that we choose as a context for that interaction, and we do have values to share and support. Most of what happens in our church school is a result of UU published curricula. Now, some have suggested that since most of our members have grown up in traditional Christian churches, maybe it would be more effective to close our church school and ship our kids off to a Christian Church against which they can later rebel. And then there are also the adult education materials that the Association also develops. One possibility, of course, is to simply buy curricula from the UUA at their publication cost which is a very small portion of their actual cost. Morally we'd be stealing, but hey, what the heck!

### ***[Ministry]***

Perhaps next in line of importance is ministry. The UUA helps to recruit students for the ministry, and to support seminary education (to an inadequate degree.) It then, as we know from some dissatisfaction with the process, tries to filter from that graduating pool, people whom it believes are not prepared to offer the quality of ministerial leadership expected by our congregations. There are goofs in both directions - passing some they should not, and placing obstacles in front of some who should be encouraged. Probably the most essential service in the eyes of many is the provision of an intensive process for assisting in the matching of prospective ministers with congregations in search. Now, some of our members have pointed out that we could save a lot of money by seeking out a liberal Methodist instead of a UU minister - their ministers are paid a lot less than ours. Or, if we disaffiliated with the UUA, our church could simply pirate ministers who had been educated with UU scholarship money and gained experience in UU congregations. I know of one liberal Baptist church that does that - but it has succeeded by offering salaries that even UUs can't turn down. There goes that savings, and that isn't really ethical conduct.

### ***[Other Services]***

The UUA also provides congregations with consultant services, like the Canvass Consultant who helped us so much two years ago at a price much lower than we would have paid on the open market, and consultants in conflict resolution, religious education, capital fund drives, social justice, and church growth. There are interfaith organizations from which we could purchase these services, as long as we are prepared to do the theological and structural translating that is necessary - they often don't understand our form of governance.

The UUA's Faith in Action Department - formerly Social Responsibility - keeps us in touch with ways in which we can speak out in the world for the principles which we value. It was that department that initiated the Welcoming Congregation program and has stood out nationally in issues of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people's rights. It is that office that helps us address issues like abortion, gun control, privacy, racial justice, religious freedom beyond our local community. But, maybe the ACLU, the League of Women Voters, and Rockford Peace and Justice suffice. Do we really need that service from Boston?

It was the UUA that, through a major process, developed our new hymnals, as it and its predecessor organizations did the earlier versions. One local church could never do that, but then again, we have members who would be just as happy to sing the old Christian hymns or no hymns at all. Then there are the international and interfaith activities in which the Association represents us, but if we became simply the Liberal Church of Rockford, we wouldn't need any of that stuff.

Ditto, the *World* magazine which keeps our members informed about what UUs are doing around the country and world. And there are the annual General Assemblies which offer a tremendous, diverse, and intense experience of Unitarian Universalism, but few of our members ever attend those. There is a variety of electronic communication going on now, with many specialized groups sharing programs and ideas over the internet, and there is the UUA's homepage which offers information that is tapped into quite frequently. But none of that is really important to us - is it? The truth is, a lot of what any organization does is aimed at self-preservation and self-enhancement. There are times when it seems as if the people in Boston, at our headquarters, act as if it is the headquarters which is most important and the reason for local churches like ours to survive is simply to support the existence of the headquarters staff.

### ***[The Central Reason]***

The hardest to pin down, but probably the most important reason for our affiliation with the UUA is that it makes us more than an isolated congregation in Rockford, Illinois. By being part of the Association we link ourselves with two historical movements dating back two millennia, and with a small but hopefully effective contemporary liberal religious movement with 150,000 adult members. Would it be the same if we were to become the "Liberal Church of Rockford" and sever that connection? If we are to be honest, for many of our members that local presence is all that matters on any practical level. Few of our adult members come into contact with UUs out of town: for most of our members, their concern primarily is local.

### ***[We Could "Go It Alone!"]***

In all honesty, I have to tell you that our church could survive without the larger Unitarian Universalist movement - at least for a while. We've done it before, and we could do it again. There would be some losses, but maybe there would be some gains.

It is clear that, unlike those other religions which are legitimated by their connection to a central authority structure which, in fact, has a measure of control over them, we do not need a continental organization to make us a valid church.

### ***[The Church?]***

If we are really going to get down to the nitty gritty, and examine the ground of the institution, this line of reasoning forces us to raise the even larger question of the need for any church at all. Our church does not offer its members any keys to the Kingdom of God. No supernatural blessing is carried by participation in our church. There is an old saying that you can really be a Unitarian Universalist by yourself.

Virtually everything the church can offer is available somewhere else.

There is intellectual stimulation available from a variety of sources. There are gurus like Brother Macki and others who come to town periodically, or are available on tape or television. There are organizations for social justice.

There are other sources of counseling. Take it apart piece by piece and you can get it all somewhere else.

What if we were to sell our building to our neighbors at Rockford College and use the proceeds for housing the poor or reducing the school deficit or some other good cause? What if the \$350,000 it takes a year to operate our church were channeled directly into other good causes? If you can be a Unitarian Universalist by yourself, then seriously, who really needs the church?

### ***[Putting It Back Together]***

As a kid, I was really good at taking things apart, but not so good at putting them back together. I hope I can do better this evening, or we are in big trouble.

### ***[Independence vs. Interdependence]***

The reading from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" speaks of our belief in the virtue of "going it alone." That is an important part of our cultural heritage - particularly the liberal heritage. Remember Emerson's words:

It is only as a [person] puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him [or her] to be strong and to prevail. What did Emerson prefer in a church? The silent church with people sitting around in utter privacy as if they had walls around them, which, in New England box pews, they did.

Traditionally, Unitarian Universalist churches attract people who are independent - people who are not looking for a religion in which they are dependent on a supernatural power or an authoritarian structure. People who want those things do not stick around long. I have come to believe that self-reliance lives in a healthy tension with community. Our individual integrity is important, but so is cooperation. One of the great concerns of our time is what is being called "the new communitarianism" - a realization of the need among people for community.

### ***["Voluntary Associations"]***

The great Unitarian leader William Ellery Channing envisioned this modern concern for community a hundred and seventy years ago. Channing is seen by some to be the one of the original articulators of the importance of voluntary associations. Writing in 1829, Channing said this (I have made gender adjustments):

People, if it is justly said, can do jointly what they cannot do singly. The union of minds and hands works wonders. [People] grow efficient by concentrating their powers. Joint effort conquers nature, hews through mountains, rears pyramids, dikes out of the ocean. [People] left to [themselves] living without [others], if [they] could indeed so live, would be one of the weakest of creatures. Associated with [their] kind, [they] gain dominion over the strongest animals, over the earth and the sea . . .

Nor is this all. [People] not only accumulate power by union, but gain warmth and earnestness. The heart is kindled. An electric communication is established between those who are brought nigh and bound to each other, in common labors. [People] droop in solitude. No sound excites us like the voice of a fellow-creature.

The mere sight of a human countenance, brightened with strong and generous emotion, gives new strength to act or suffer.

Channing was fully aware of the dangers of associations dominating individuals - all the sins which concerned Emerson - but it was his belief that if we were cautious, the potential good of people voluntarily linking themselves to others was worth the risk.

### *[The Church]*

If you accept the value of cooperation and community as being of at least equal importance with self-reliance, let us look again at the church. I disavow none of what I said earlier. The pieces of what the church offers are all available elsewhere. What the church offers uniquely is the combination of all of them in a community gathered around certain principles.

Why is it that so many of our members say that life in Rockford would, for them, be unthinkable without our church?

The word Unitarian historically referred to the unity rather than the three-personed view of deity. In a modern sense, it can be seen as a testimony to the unity of our lives. Our churches are places where we gather to celebrate our joys and concerns, articulate our dreams and acknowledge our disappointments. Our churches are places where we gather in a community which began before us and which we are committed to seeing continue after us.

There is much in our lives that is transient, but for many of our members, this church represents a long term commitment. There are some who are here only for as long as it “feels good,” as long as it is “meeting their needs.” Such members come and go through the traditional revolving door. But what our churches are really about is those who sink their roots in them, who stand with them through good times and bad, who declare that it is their church, come what may, because they feel empowered by their relationship to it. They are the church.

### *[The Larger Movement]*

That brings us back to the question with which we began, with the value of our larger movement - the Unitarian Universalists beyond our communities.

I would suggest to you that the non-denominational independent Church of the Christian Union was, in a sense, a fraud. It could not have been what it was without its connections to the Unitarian movement. It was, to be brutally honest, a kind of parasite which lives off something without contributing to it in return.

Just as we are in our churches because we need one another, and gain strength from being together, so too our individual churches need the support of their sister churches, and they gain strength from being the part of a larger movement that makes us more significant than we would be alone. More important than anything the UUA does is the fact that it is. An excess of self-reliance is our version of original sin: it is our curse. We alone are not enough.

But if we are to be a part of the larger church, we need to fully accept not only the benefits but the responsibilities of membership. We need to affirm our commitment to support it in a way that is consistent with other congregations, and stop putting our local needs and desires as the overwhelming concern and letting the UUA take the hindmost. We are troubled that some of our members treat us that way. We should be troubled when we treat the UUA that way.

We cannot just “go it alone.” We need others. We need other individuals, which is why we have our churches. Our churches need the support of other congregations, which is why we have an Association of

congregations. As our local congregations sustain us, so our Association sustains the local congregations. We always have the option of “going it alone,” but we need not to pretend that is our choice when it comes to our responsibilities to it, and claim otherwise when we collect the benefits.

We need to be responsible in our relationships. We need to decide consciously what relationship we want to have with our larger movement. If, in fact, it is not important enough to us to support it fully, then the most honorable path would be to cut ourselves off from it altogether. I urge you to give serious consideration to that relationship and to how we will respond to the responsibilities it places on us.

*[For the “Time for Reflection”]*

People sometimes complain that responsive readings trap them into saying words they have had no time to contemplate. I ask that you take our time of reflection to look at and consider the words by my friend Mark Morrison-Reed which appear in our hymnals as unison reading #580, “The Task of the Religious Community.” I will then invite you to join me in reading them aloud.

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives, and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength is too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

As true as these words are for us as members of this church - so do they also apply to our relationship as one congregation in the larger movement of which we are a part. ALONE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!