

**Why Do We Create Religious Congregations?
What are Our Purposes and Ends?
a sermon by
The Rev. Bryan Jessup
The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Sunday October 16, 2016**

Chalice Lighting

From the Rev. Vincent Silliman

Let religion be to us life and joy.
Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we are and yet may be;
Let it be a call to generous action.

Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that need to be changed,
Let it bid us serve more eagerly what is true and right.
Let it be the sorrow that opens for us the way of sympathy and service.

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood:

An eye that glories in nature's majesty and beauty,
and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness, justice and courage.

Let religion be to us a source of peace and serenity,
Let it be a source of hope and purpose,
Let it open us to opportunities to express our best through daily tasks:
Let it unite us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;
And let it hold before our eyes the prospect of a better life for humankind,
which, through wisdom and compassion we may help to make actual.

**PLEASE STAND AND JOIN ME NOW IN A RESPONSIVE READING OF THE "Draft"
Values, Purpose and Ends of our Fellowship:**

Reading – from Katherine Bindley of the *Huffington Post* – March 2013

The number of Americans who claim to have no religious affiliation is now the highest it has ever been since data on the subject started being collected in the 1930s. Sociologists from the University of California, Berkeley, and Duke University have found that the number of people who do not consider themselves part of an organized religion has jumped dramatically in recent years.

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, the number of “nones” – “n-o-n-e-s” — those who said they were religiously unaffiliated — hovered around 5 percent. In 1990 it was 8 percent. But by 2013 it increased to 20 percent!

One interesting thing about this data is that the number of people who say they are atheist or agnostic has not increased much – just the number of people who say they are not affiliated with any religion.

“When we’re talking about whether people affirm a religion, we’re talking about identifiers like Catholic or Mormon or Muslim,” researcher Claude Fischer explains. “But identifying with a religion is different than talking about a person’s beliefs.”

The research found that men were more likely than women to claim they have no religion and that white Americans were more likely to claim no religion than African Americans or Mexican Americans.

But perhaps the most telling numbers pertained to the breakdown of the respondents’ politics: 40 percent of liberals claim they have no religion, compared to just 9 percent of conservatives.

Claude Fischer and his colleague, Mike Hout theorize that the shift away from organized religion is directly tied to politics.

“The movement of liberal people away from religion might well be a product of the involvement of the religious right in American politics,” they say. While Fischer and Hout have not yet conducted further research they suspect conservative political factors are continuing to drive many Americans away from religion.

“Increasingly, people link organized religion with anti-gay attitudes, sexual conservatism, a whole range of social cultural values,” they say. “One way you can think about it is, this is as blowback against fundamentalism.”

Fisher and Hout’s research echoes some of the recent findings of the Pew Research Center. In October of 2012 the Center noted that a third of U.S. adults under the age of 30 don’t identify with a religion and aren’t particularly looking for one.

Solo – Bob Billstrom will now sing “Losing My Religion”

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Sue Merhtens, a teacher at the Jungian Center for Spiritual Studies in New York says we are living in a culture that in many ways has lost its religion and has stripped the world of its mystery. Merhtens' inspiration - Psychologist Carl Jung - believed that without a sense of mystery human souls (or the essence of who we are as a mix of body/mind/consciousness/emotion) cannot be whole. He believed for our well being we humans need a sense of wonder and a relationship to a deep reality larger than our isolated egos.

Jung, who was born in 1875 and died in 1961 felt that the problems most of his patients over the age of 35 were at least in part spiritual. Loss of a healthy soul, Jung said, is as serious for people as loss of memory, muscle control, or senses. Loss of a healthy sense of mystery and a healthy soul – he said - seriously compromises the quality of one's life.

When we have no sense of connection to something beyond ourselves, no sense of our place in the mystery of things and no sense of deep purpose to our lives:

- We fix our interest upon trivialities like football scores or designer dresses.
- We set our sights on superficial goals – like whether our children go to the most prestigious schools or whether we climb the corporate ladder of success.
- We feel we a need for recognition for ephemeral conditions, like status and beauty:
- We lay “stress on possessions like clothes, jewels, and fancy cars
- We feel less than worthy if our list of possessions is shorter than our neighbor's..

Carl Jung suggested that a healthy response to the emptiness of modern life is spiritual growth. He suggested that health requires that we care for our spirits and commit to values bigger than our egos. To heal our inner beings and to hold ourselves together – Jung said – we need “regain a spiritual understanding of life.”

This does not mean he felt everyone needed to join a religion. But he did feel we need to become aware of who we truly are, what our values are and how our lives fit into the greater whole. When we have this kind of awareness – he said - we find our lives have more meaning. more purpose and we have a greater feeling that our lives truly matter.

Again, Jung pointed out that people don't have to be part of any formal religion to develop this kind of awareness – but guarding and preserving and promoting this spiritual awareness is the core of religion.

When religions lose sight of this core and their major focus becomes perpetuating their institutions, people “lose their religion.” And it isn't as if people aren't encouraged to lose their religion by other factors as well.

Even when religions are focused on their deepest purpose, they meet opposition. They are often at odds with the economic and military agendas of the societies in which they exist. For societies caught in the cycle of war and violence, a powerful religious voice that declares war and violence are immoral is a tremendous inconvenience. For societies caught in hyper-competition and greed, a powerful religious voice that affirms the worth of all human beings and planet and demands that they be cared for with respect – is a tremendous inconvenience.

So societies with war-based, capitalistic economies do their best to overcome this inconvenience. On the one hand, they offer accolades and approbation for religions that will silence their opposition to the system, focus people on their individual imperfections and wed their religion to patriotic fervor.

On the other hand materialistic societies often misuse science to dissuade people from the notion that keeping faith with deep humanitarian values will make any difference in their lives.

“Do you honestly believe that keeping faith with Love and Justice will make any difference at all?” this twisted pseudo-scientific rationalism asks? “Life is a war. It’s every person for himself. Your idealism is an illusion. It’s a dog eat dog world. God is on the side of the heavy artillery. Get real!”

So in face of religion misused and abused – in the face of people “losing their religion”....

Healthy, effective religions ground themselves in their core values, in their core purposes and in the ends they commit themselves to creating.

Over the last 20 years many congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association have been asking themselves: “What do we really want to produce? How do we hope to do it? – and Why do we bother?”

When I came to work with you in this Fellowship three years ago, I worked with the Executive Committee and the Board to answer these questions. Based on the HUUF Aspiration and Covenant and the UU Principles we created the DRAFT of the Values, Purpose and Ends statement that Wendy guided us through right after the Chalice Lighting.

That DRAFT was a good start – but as this Fellowship year progresses the Ministerial Relations Committee and I going to ask these questions again and involve the whole congregation in creating and owning our answers.

We’re going to do this because, in order to be a powerful and transformational congregation we’re going to have to know together what we’re really up to in this world.

So look with me again – if you will – at the DRAFT Values, Purpose and Ends – on the insert in the Order of Service. And starting from the bottom up – let's go over this.

WHAT are we trying to create? - Increased peace, justice and respect for the interdependent web of life in our own lives and in the world.

WHAT ELSE – a cooperative, open, diverse, supportive religious community.

WHAT ELSE – individual people of all ages who embody wisdom, compassion and develop themselves into whole human beings!!

Now – we may find that when we work on these ENDS together we articulate them a little differently. But to be effective in the world as a congregation we have to know together WHAT we're trying to produce!

HOW are we going produce these Results? Let's go up the page.

We're going to create a thoughtful diverse Unitarian Universalist religious community that supports us as we grow and deepen in our own humanity and supports us as we do the work that will increase peace, justice and harmony on this planet.

Again – we may word this differently when we talk together later this year – but its essential that we know HOW as a congregation, we intend to create Results we seek.

AND WHY? – Why do we even bother to build and operate this congregation in world that is losing its religion?

The answer is a leap of faith. We believe like Carl Jung believed – that human beings are more than material beings in a material world. We believe that Love, Truth, Service, Freedom, Fellowship and Peace are more important for human wholeness and for living lives of meaning – than tons of money and winning at all costs.

Across the country, we UUs say: We are standing on the side of love. Hands joined together and hearts beat as one. Emboldened by faith, we dare to proclaim, we are standing on the side of love.

And as this Fellowship year progresses I and the Ministerial Relations Committee are going to be offering opportunities to all of us to talk together what our life saving values are – what we hope to produce here in this congregation and how we hope to do that.

As we engage in this process, each of you inspires me and it inspires me to know that we in this Fellowship are part of a long multi-cultural line of human beings who have worked to stay true to the heart of the religious endeavor.

The Jewish prophet Isaiah was one of those human beings – and the teacher Jesus was too. The teacher Jesus in fact used the words of Isaiah when he announced his purpose in the world. Quoting Isaiah he said:

The Spirit of Yahweh is on me. He has chosen me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to restore sight to the blind, to set the captives free, to comfort all who mourn and to proclaim that now is the time and this is the day of the Lord.

The Spirit of Yahweh is upon me and he has sent me to set a crown of beauty instead of a heap of ashes upon the heads of those who grieve for their country. He has sent me to anoint them with the oil of joy instead of mourning, and to clothe them with a garment of hope instead of a spirit of despair.

He has sent me to proclaim that those who have been faithful to the ways of mercy and love will be called oaks of righteousness. That they will rebuild ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated. That they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

He has sent me to declare that Those who have been faithful to the ways of justice and integrity will receive a double portion of honor and instead of disgrace.

For the Mystery that Makes Us All - loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing. It clothes the souls of the faithful in garments of grace – and in the end of days it will make righteousness and praise spring up in the hearts of all people and all nations.

Then the people who heard him were filled with gratitude and awe. For he spoke like a prophet with power and wisdom and authority.

PLEASE JOIN ME NOW IN SINGING HYMN 121 based on these very words.

Closing Words – Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore: Now as we depart this place let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless in facing them. Let us not beg for the stilling of our pain but for the heart to conquer it. Let us not hope for heroes in the battles of life but to find own strength. Let us not pray to be rescued from our trials but to develop the patience to win our own freedom. And then as we go the Power of life will grant us the courage to keep on with the struggle even when we fail.