

“60 Years of Unitarian Universalism in Columbia”
Sunday, January 23, 2011

OPENING WORDS

I invite you imagine a Sunday evening sixty years ago: January 28, 1951.

A Missourian, Harry S. Truman, is President.

Brown vs. Board of Education is 3 years in the future;

the Montgomery Bus Boycott almost 5 years away.

John F. Kennedy is still a young congressman from Massachusetts,
and only a few have heard of Martin Luther King, Jr.

War in Korea has been raging since June.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are on trial for espionage.

Senator Joe McCarthy’s public career has begun.

Political paranoia in the US is growing, about an “international Communist conspiracy.”

And just yesterday, January 27, at Frenchman Flat, Nevada, an atom bomb was exploded - the first test of a nuclear weapon on U.S. soil since 1945.

Not everything is grim in 1951.

Later that year, “I Love Lucy” will begin its run on a new medium - television.

Walt Disney Studios will release the animated *Alice in Wonderland*.

And J.D. Salinger will publish *The Catcher in the Rye*.

1951 is the year that Edward R. Murrow launches “This...I Believe.” He sees this series of testimonies as an antidote to these times, which he describes as follows:

“We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion. A lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism, or a for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the marketplace, while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply. Around us all—now high like a distant thunderhead, now close upon us with the wet choking intimacy of a London fog—there is an enveloping cloud of fear.”

But in the midst of it all, on the evening of January 28, 19 people gather in Columbia, at the Daniel Boone Hotel. They are there to form the new Columbia Unitarian Fellowship. Monroe Husbands, the guiding light behind the Unitarian fellowship movement is there to assist in the launch. Also accompanying the group, we might guess, are some measure of “courage, and fortitude, and faith.”

Within a few years, an ad would appear in the papers, summarizing Unitarian faith in the language of their time and place:

WHAT'S YOUR IDEA OF TRUE RELIGION?

- Do you believe that man is not condemned by the doctrine of “original sin,” but is inherently capable of improvement?
- Do you believe that striving to live nobly and constructively is more important than the acceptance of religious creeds?
- Do you believe in the brotherhood of man, irrespective of color, religion, or country?
- Do you believe that the primary responsibility for human progress rests upon man?

THEN YOU ARE PROFESSING UNITARIAN BELIEF.

*In honor of those who met at the Daniel Boone on January 28, 1951,
and in gratitude for their legacy to us,
we kindle the flame of our Unitarian Universalist faith.*

REFLECTION

What is the meaning of a congregation's history?

Ken Wiley mentioned the workshop that took place here in November. In that workshop, in addition to the conversations Ken referred to, participants joined in creating “The Great Wall of UUCC History.”

Unless you've just joined us in the last week or two, you probably noticed the “wall,” consisting of long sheets of butcher paper, covered with photos and post-it notes, containing memories from the congregation's past. It is now spread out on my living room floor. Last week I took the time to transcribe it into a print document; once it's checked for accuracy, it will be made available on the Information Table for anyone interested.

The creation of the History Wall was part of our work together during the interim period you're in as a church. As I've said before, “Coming to Terms with History” is one of the tasks for a congregation in transition. The phrase “coming to terms” may imply something negative or painful - and it will be important to come to terms with some painful incidents in the congregation's past.

But it's just as important to celebrate the positive aspects of the church's story; sometimes these get lost in the shuffle of self-improvement and problem-solving. In the short time that's available to me this morning, that is what I'd like to lift up. As I thought about UUCC's story in preparation for this morning, two themes emerged in my mind: One of these is Gratitude. The other is Resilience.

Gratitude is a theme that emerged directly from the “History Wall” workshop. One part of the workshop allowed people to record their feelings about times and incidents in UUCC’s past. These were written on purple Post-its, and taken down soon after the workshop was over. I never quite know what to expect from this “feelings” part of the workshop. But when I read the many, *many* purple Post-its that people had left, I was bowled over.

Yes, there are lingering feelings of sadness and anger, linked to specific incidents. But the overwhelming sense of these “feelings statements,” extending over a long period of time, was gratitude: appreciation for this congregation, and what it has meant in peoples’ lives, in both good and bad times.

A few examples give you an idea of the tone:

“I will never forget the love shown to us by this church community - thank you!!”

“What a kind and welcoming group of people!”

“It feels good to be surrounded by people open to new ideas and concerned about local and global issues.”

“When I returned to the church I felt “this is where I belong” – back to a warm welcoming home. I love being part of this community.”

Resilience, the second theme, came to me just this week, as I looked over the sweep of your 60 years in Columbia, and tried to see it whole, as a unity. What finally struck me was the number of times that the Fellowship, and then the Church, has re-invented itself. When the times and circumstances demanded it, you as a congregation, were able to change and grow.

In 1970 you went from a small group, meeting in borrowed space at the University, to a congregation with its own land, and its own building.

In 1980 you went from a completely lay-led fellowship, to sharing your ministry with an ordained minister, Gertrude Lindener-Stawski.

Nearly a decade after Gertrude came, you moved into what turned out to be a long-term ministry with Bill Haney. You still carried forward your tradition of strong lay leadership - at the same time you were prepared to hire professional staff: an administrator, a music director, a director of religious education.

And a decade into Bill’s time with you, you were ready to expand this building, to provide the kind of space needed for a full-service congregation.

Ron Heifetz, in his book *Leadership without Easy Answers*, talks about challenges that organizations face.

Some are “technical challenges” - things that can be fixed by applying the right solution. Example: “We need to hire a director of religious education.”

Still others are “developmental challenges,” which involve some kind of learning process before they can be successfully addressed. For example, “The youth program, which used to work well, has stopped working for our current teenagers. What do we need to learn about today’s needs in order to offer a meaningful program?”

The third are what Heifetz calls “adaptive challenges.” These are the ones that have no clear solutions, the ones that may “make us dizzy for a while,” (to quote Dan Hotchkiss). The only way to meet adaptive challenges is to *live into them*. For a congregation, an example of this might be the change in patterns of work, and the loss of a ready-made corps of women volunteers.

When faced with adaptive challenges, we must have the courage to “walk into the wilderness,” living with discomfort and uncertainty. But through that living into the challenge, new ways of being eventually emerge.

Looking at 60 years of UUCC history, I can’t tell for certain the nature of the challenges you faced. No doubt there were some technical challenges involved in becoming what you are today. Certainly there were developmental challenges as well - things to be learned in order to grow and mature. But I have a hunch that you’ve also met some formidable adaptive challenges - becoming a different kind of congregation each time you met them.

And so I leave you with some questions to ponder - questions which don’t have ready-made answers. They’re questions to think about, and wrestle with, as we work together over the next year and a half.

- ★ As a congregation, what are the times demanding of you NOW?
- ★ What has changed since 1951, and 1981, and 2001?
- ★ Is history calling you to some new reality, some new way of being the church?
- ★ What questions must we live into - with courage, and fortitude, and faith?