

“A RECIPE FOR HEALTH”

**Delivered by Howell Lind, Interim Senior Minister
September 24, 2006**

Last winter, I was flying back home to Colorado after conducting a seminar for a cluster of Unitarian Universalist congregations in Florida on a new model for a church's Nominating Committee. It was a trip that combined both the workshop and being able to preach the sermon at the Installation Service for a good friend and colleague in the Tampa Bay area.

I had boarded the airplane and was slowly moving my way back to my seat in the rear of the plane – 28F – when the flight attendant came up to me, took my carry-on out of my hands, and said, “There must be some mistake here. Come with me.”

So I followed her and she led me back down the aisle, through some curtains and into the first class section and pointed to seat 4B, a very wide comfortable looking seat covered in real leather.

I know that I must have looked at her with a perplexed or quizzical look, but she just smiled and motioned for me to sit down and said something like “Enjoy your flight” before turning and moving back through the curtains to the rear of the airplane.

I did not fully comprehend what was happening until another smiling flight attendant came up to me and said, “Would you like a beverage before the flight takes off, Mr. Wolf?” I said something like “You must have me confused with someone else. My name is Lind, not Wolf.” The flight attendant continued smiling and said, “Of course, whatever you say, Mr. Wolf.”

Then it dawned on me. I was being mistaken for the food critic and television chef, Burt Wolf. On several other occasions in the past couple of year, I have had people tell me that I bear a resemblance to Burt Wolf – in fact, since I arrived in Rockford a number of you have also made similar observations. At the Board of Trustees' retreat in late August, it was either Paul Goddard or Tom Jones – oh, it might even have been Gary Lawrence – well, whomever – somebody went into Jill Gnesda's kitchen and brought out a cookbook with Burt Wolf's picture on it to highlight the resemblance.

Well, anyway, here I was sitting in first class, thinking about protesting, showing my Colorado Driver's License with my photo ID that said I was Howell Lind . . . but I didn't.

They were getting ready to shut the airplane door and they seemed busy with that – and I'm usually not one to make a fuss – and . . . well, this was only the second time in my life that I found myself sitting in first class.

So, I let the case of mistaken identity go and I sat the entire three hour flight in first class, enjoying my complimentary drinks, hoping against hope that no one would come up to me “as Burt Wolf” and ask me how to roast a Cornish game hen with an apricot glaze or for some other recipe.

I found my mind racing trying to reconstruct whatever limited recipes that I did know just in case someone approached me. Culinary knowledge has never been my forte. I am a kind of “add a little dash of this and a smidgen of that” kind of cook and my food creation turns out pretty well, if I do say so myself. My wife invariably compliments me on whatever the dish is that I have made and always adds – “Do you know just what you put into this? Can you repeat it? ” In my defense, I do maintain a pretty good general idea of how to replicate the dish.

However, when it comes to knowledge about religious communities – well, that is another story! Here, I do know a few things about the proper ingredients and the steps necessary to create a varitable feast.

Many years ago, there was a cartoon in the NEW YORKER magazine created around the idea – as has often been stated about statistical possibilities – that if one could position chimpanzees in front of typewriters and permit the chimpanzees to type long enough – for eons, down through the ages – eventually, just by chance – and, remember, given a near-infinity of time – statistically, one of the chimpanzees would type – without error – the complete works of William Shakespeare.

So, there in this NEW YORKER cartoon was a chimpanzee, seated in front of a typewriter, typing away, and what you read on the paper – over the chimpanzee's shoulder – was: **“To Be Or Not To Be, That . . . Is The Garzoninplotz!”**

– Almost perfection, but not quite!

In religion, that same attitude is reflected in the idea that if a bunch of people are put together for a long time in what we call a “church,” we will automatically come up with a religious work of art of Shakespearean quality – that is, perfection.

My experience over the years, however, as someone who has observed and worked with a great many different churches tells me that it just isn’t so!

Having consulted with all kinds of Unitarian Universalist congregations – both alive and healthy churches as well as dysfunctional and unhealthy ones, I have come to identify several major ingredients or characteristics of what alive, vibrant and vital Unitarian Universalist congregations are and should be about.

These learnings are the focus of my remarks to you this Sunday morning. I want to speak about what it means to be a religious community and – in the process – disclose the “not-so-secret” ingredients of the recipe for being an exciting, growing and healthy Unitarian Universalist congregation.

. . . When I was in the settled parish ministry, I served for many years a congregation in Augusta, Maine. Often, I would find myself driving in the west central part of the state and I will always remember the billboard slogan on a small rural church in Sangerville, Maine. On a sign that stretched along the very peak of the roof from one end of the white-framed building to the other were these words:

“WORKING TOGETHER WITH GOD TO SAVE MANKIND” and it was signed – **THE FULL GOSPEL CHURCH**

Each time I drove past that particular church and its huge sign I experienced a strong desire to erect another billboard – of equal size – about a hundred yards up the road that would read: **ACTUALLY, I’D LIKE EVERYBODY’S HELP** and sign it – **GOD**.

There are two things though that I will say for that statement by The Full Gospel Church of Sangerville, Maine. First, it was clear about the business of its church – amazingly self-assured, but nevertheless, clear. And second, the saving of humankind is a worthy objective – not one likely to be outmoded very quickly.

Yet, the question that I would have liked to have raised with the members of The Full Gospel Church of Sangerville, Maine is: “How do you intend to go about it? Exactly what do you mean by ‘saving mankind’?”

There is, I believe, a large sense in which Unitarian Universalism can view the saving of humankind as a major priority for our movement. But, as liberal religionists, I would suspect that we understand the word “saved” in yet a different way than The Full Gospel Church of Sangerville, Maine’s intention.

For me, the primary business of the gathered religious community is in the translation of the root meaning of the word “religion” into the reality of each specific religious community. “Religion” – from the Latin *religiare* – means to bind things together, to create wholeness out of fragmentation, to find focus for one’s life in the midst of a million possibilities.

The business that I maintain we are in – as vital, alive, vibrant, thriving, healthy Unitarian Universalist churches – and I believe this so strongly – is to provide the stimulation, the encouragement, and the support for individuals to develop and maintain a “wholeness” of life – a personal integration of faith with the “dailiness” of everyday life.

That effort suggests some rather specific activities – deciding what we value most and what we believe to be ultimate – coming to some conclusion about our key beliefs which help us to make sense out of the many diverse demands, attractions, interests, and experiences. It also suggests that we, on a day-to-day basis, live out those key beliefs and all of their implications.

This is not a process that we engage in a vacuum – where we wrestle with the “weightiness” of everyday living is here – in the gathered religious community.

Helping individuals develop and maintain the whole picture of one’s self and one’s life is the business that we are about as a congregation of folks who wish to be together in religious community.

The business of promoting wholeness – the business that I maintain that we are about – centers first on our sense of identity. We need to not only understand why we have congregated together, but we also need to be able

to articulate it – initially to ourselves as the gathered religious community and then to the world around us.

Unitarian Universalism is, without debate, a tiny religious movement. To be strong – to make “what we are about” truly available to those who can grow in and be sustained by our liberal religious faith – congregations have to be intentional about their identity as the gathered religious community – intentional about what they, as a church, stand for.

The best insight that I can offer about developing this strength of identity is for a congregation to own its ministry. I have seen too many churches call professional religious leaders and expect them to do all the work of ministry. Congregations need to realize that ministers alone cannot make strong congregations – it is a partnership – a shared effort of doing ministry.

However, vigorous congregations – strong in the quality of their being and identity – help make strong ministers – strong ministers being those who help sustain dynamic congregations.

It is a circular thing. Both congregation and minister need and aid each other. Churches are – to paraphrase the English poet Phillip Larkin – “serious houses on this serious earth” – places made holy by the concerns and commitments brought there by people like you and me. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, the professional religious leader plays a vital role serving and nurturing and building up such “serious houses.” Yet a congregation needs to own its own ministry and to share responsibility of ministering with the professional religious leaders.

To do this, members have to want to lead – and take leadership – and respond to leadership, and others to follow – and assume “followship.”

A vital and dynamic religious community demands that its membership be strong and participatory – that we pay attention to the norms and standards for our life together in community – without becoming too judgmental. – Do not be like the man who prayed: “O Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Will . . . preferably in an advisory capacity.”

No! A religious community ought to ask something of us! In our Unitarian Universalist congregations we attempt to foster up-right living, supporting conduct becoming true humanity.

Yet, we must also be places of forgiveness. I had a woman tell me once: “You Unitarian Universalists out-Christian the Christians!” Now, what I took that comment to mean is that we genuinely accept into our midst all sorts and conditions of human beings without moralistic judging, more so than that woman found in the faith community of her origin. Perhaps no religious community fully lives up to all of its ideals, but our faith heritage of tolerance means that we do not look down our noses at others, especially those who may have stumbled.

Yet, at the same time, the free religious community cannot allow demanding or small-minded or unloving personalities to control the ways things are going to go – or, to control how people are going to handle tolerance. . . . As Unitarian Universalists, we do not “tolerate” intolerance very well.

So, folks in our kind of religious community are responsible to accept and forgive and support each other and yet reject behaviors that fly in the face of that acceptance and support.

The great 19th century Unitarian preacher, William Ellery Channing, once remarked that Unitarians do not excommunicate anyone except by the death of goodness in their own hearts.

By way of comparative illustration, listen to the way the Benedictines did it and put it. They said: “If a pilgrim monk comes from distant parts to dwell within the monastery, and will be content with the customs he finds in the place, he shall be received for as long a time as he desires. If, indeed, he finds fault with anything, or expresses it reasonably, and with the humility of charity, the Abbot shall discuss it prudently, lest, perchance, God has sent him for this very thing. But, if he has been found ‘gossipy’ and contumacious in the time of his sojourn as guest, not only should he not be joined to the body of the monastery, but also it shall be said to him, honestly, that he must depart. And, if he does not go, then let two stout monks, in the name of God, explain the matter to him.”

Unitarian Universalism doesn’t quite put it that way, but still there ought to be guidelines! There ought to be standards of cooperation, mutuality, and excellence for men and women in our churches, where each person is to be held accountable for his or her furtherance of the common good.

In our individual Unitarian Universalist congregations, we need to make the rules for our individual and communal behavior that are “ours” – behavior norms that speak to our particular religious community – that address the norms we want to have for our being together. They have to be ours – we have to own them! How can we be a credible religious people out in the larger community if we do not demand credible standards of fellowship among us in our own individual congregations?

A congregation that is strong in its identity, helping individuals uncover wholeness to their lives, supporting conduct becoming true humanity, owning the norms they set for being in community, invites new folks into its midst because it has and owns a message of faith of “who and what they are” that it needs and wants to share with a waiting world.

Vital Unitarian Universalist congregations that understand “the business they are in” focus on creative renewal – personal and institutional. Through informal sharing, open forums, small group ministry or covenant groups, workshops, social gatherings, life-span religious education experiences, intergenerational networking, times of fellowship and so on, opportunities are provided for creative interchange – the sharing of feelings and the exchange of ideas – people stuff! The church becomes the place where we can come and “get it together.”

. . . As I think about this I am remembering a conference that I attended which was sponsored by a church research group. The speaker drew an oval on newsprint and put a huge “X” inside of the oval and said: “This ‘X’ represents the church – where the people come.” – Their place of belonging.

Then she put arrows going out from the church – arrows at the top of the oval representing the members going out into the work-a-day world each week. And she said: “The people of the church go out there to face the world and their tasks, their obligations, and their attempts to serve and change the world each week – and they get tired – and some of them are darned near beat-to-death by the world that’s out there.”

And then she drew arrows at the bottom of the oval representing the return of the people into the church each week – people returning to the affirmation and acceptance and celebration and religious services of their faith community. They come back at the end of the week – the beginning of a new week – seeking community and looking for sustenance.

And the church's job is to "be there" for them. And to send the people out once more – refreshed, nurtured and affirmed and full of spirit and ready to meet the world again. That is Renewal.

Unitarian Universalist churches need to be – and ought to be – places where we come to get our spirits fed and go out from our religious community happier, nourished, and ready to meet life – the demands, the suffering, as well as the surprises-of-joy that shall greet us out there.

. . . So, my list of ingredients in the recipe for a healthy and vital Unitarian Universalist congregation – begin with a sense of identity – at least a full cup – better yet, a cup overflowing. Then add a level measure of the ownership of its shared ministry. Mix well with the standards of behavior that we set for ourselves in order to be in community, and then, add a full heaping scoop of being a place of creative renewal. Oh, . . . and one more special ingredient.

A gathered religious community – one of our Unitarian Universalist churches, anyway – ought to be a place to enjoy fellowship and have fun! Add this ingredient to suit taste, but I would caution this is not an ingredient to be stingy with! If the business that we are about in the name of our faith is not fun some of the time, we are going to learn that it is just not worth it much of the time!

Many years back, there was a story floating around about two college students who had rented full, deluxe gorilla costumes. They also rented top hats, canes and capes to be worn with the gorilla suits. They said that they had tickets for the opera and wanted to do something different. Upon returning the outfits, the young men recounted the events of their evening at the opera. "We have been going to the opera for the past three years," said one, "and nobody has ever spoken to us. But you'd be amazed at the number of people who will speak to a gorilla!"

. . . There are two obvious lessons here – well, maybe they are not so obvious.

The first lesson has to do with how inviting and inclusive we are in welcoming people who are coming to our churches, hoping to discover our identity – hoping to uncover what business our Unitarian Universalist congregations are really in. We need to be vigilant in how we share our good news – our gospel

of Unitarian Universalism so that newcomers to our congregations do not have to resort to dressing in gorilla suits in order to get our welcoming attention and caring concern!

The second matter is probably easier to discern. The playfulness of attending the opera in a gorilla suit with formal cape, cane, and top hat touches the soul of others. The sense of joy, openness, and spontaneity which comes from playful activity restores the soul – nurtures the spirit – widens and deepens the humanity of what we are about. A playful spirit probably does more good than anything else to temper our human tendency toward neurotic self-absorption.

Vibrant Unitarian Universalist congregations are places where we can enjoy fellowship and have fun together – where we can play together!

In every thriving and healthy congregation that I have ever come across, there are play times – potlucks and circle suppers – game nights and church retreats – women’s groups and men’s groups – work parties where there is fun in working together to accomplish a task – book discussion groups and lively conversations and sharings and coffee hours – and then, curling up on Sunday afternoons at the end.

. . . We ought to bend our congregations up at the end – like a smile – make them happier, more fun and joyful places to seek together wholeness! – and go out of them caring more about each other, in meeting new friends and glad for having been together.

. . . Langston Hughes did that for me one time – bent his public reading, some of which was the reading of sad, sad poems – bent them up at the end like a smile – when, almost a half a century ago, on the stage of Central High School in Joliet, Illinois, Langston Hughes closed with the reading of his poem called “MY MOTTO,” and I still hear him down the halls of time doing it. He said:

“I play it cool and dig all jive.
That’s the reason I stay alive.
My motto as I live and learn
is . . . Dig
and be dug in return.”

Well, Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford – Do it here, folks!

Dig it! And do it! Affirm your identity, own your shared ministry, own your reasons for being together – continue to be that free, accepting religious community that welcomes all into the business of creating wholeness in our lives – always be a safe and sacred place of renewal as well as a place of fellowship and fun.

And dig . . . and be dug . . . in return.

And more power to you! . . .

And blessings on you! . . .

So be it! . . .

Amen! . . .

And Shalom!

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09/24/06