

I had it all worked out for this morning, I really did. The sermon I planned to preach, which is one of a few I ‘take on the road’ as it were. But then the weekend news shoved itself in the way and demanded my attention. What I have to say still matters, matters more in fact, but in a different way than I expected. Such are the promptings of the spirit, some would say. Life is what happens while you are making other plans, as someone said. What I have this morning thus lacks the spit and polish of a well-worn sermon but hopefully has pertinence to make up for it.

So here goes:

Since I used to live in New York, I’ll tell two New York stories. Story #1: Cardinal Spellman was speaking at a formal dinner, telling his story in fact. “I came to a point,” he said, “where I had to decide which path to take, the one to business or the one to religion. Looking back I am glad I decided to go into business.”

My second New York story comes, from the movie “Moonstruck,” which was filmed in my neighborhood. If you know the movie, one strand involves the aging Cosmo Castorini who is cheating on his wife. His wife knows and asks Johnny Cammareri why men cheat. He says, “because they fear death.” “I knew it,” she replies, and when her wandering husband comes home that night she says in a voice heavy with honesty, “Cosmo, I just want to let you know that you’re going to die!”

With those two, ‘readings’ my message begins.

We are in a tumultuous time. If you are on social media you might have seen an image of a distraught man and the caption, “plague, recession, racism, murder hornets! What next aliens?” As a clergyman I think, “four plagues down, six to go?” Actually only five, as climate change is right up there. And to be honest, maybe four because I want to name another, spiritual climate change.

What church was like generations stopped working some time ago. It’s no secret that churches are shrinking, most of them. Oh, there are those megachurches. They did great for a while but even they are now shrinking too, much the shopping malls they look like. Social scientists tell

us people do not want their parent's church any more. They may not want church at all. Up to 20% of people have no religion and man with religious beliefs have no interest in organized religion. I am not here to explain it, but to say that we, notwithstanding our significant differences, are dealing with spiritual climate change. Or more accurately, failing to deal with it. Even as we genuinely work to address physical climate change, we are not as astute about spiritual climate change. In many ways we are like all those other churches who are like Cosmo Castorini, doing whatever they can to avoid dying.

Here are some strategies I have seen over the years. They want new people, but in order pay the bills and fill the pews and preserve what exists. I call this the vampire church, because they want "new blood." Other churches believe that if they get a new building, a new program, a new minister, things will turn around. I call this the Frankenstein church – hoping that they get all the right parts and sew them together, it will come to life. There zombie churches too, that everyone knows are dead except those in them. Mummy churches are those so wrapped in their past they cannot move. These are ways being church when you're dead. Do you recognize any of them?

The Religion section of my local paper gave me a slap on the head a few years back. An evangelical minister named Neil Cole, was quoted as saying, "We need a theology of death. We are so afraid of death, [and worried that] if the church dies, God has died... the greatest sin of the North American church is self-preservation..."

That sent me back to the first story, about Cardinal Spelman. He was being brutally honest. Churches are businesses, and staying alive is their job. But is staying alive our job? Audre Lord puts this question starkly,

"For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision crucial and alone  
For those who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice  
For those of us who were imprinted with fear like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk...  
we were never meant to survive."

Maybe, I thought years ago, that our essential mission is not self-perpetuation. I did a thought experiment then. What if there were no chalices, hymnbooks, “joys and concerns,” flower and water communion. If they were gone would liberal religion be gone? How about the UUA, the Purposes and Principles? How about buildings, committees, clergy, budgets, and bylaws?”

Liberal religion existed before all those things, existed before us, and exists now outside UUism, without most of those things. We have a habit, as all religions do, to idolize the symbols. But is UUism what we do, or why we do it? The bumper sticker is wrong, ‘whoever dies with the most toys wins.’ Mary Oliver is right, “what are you going to do with your one wild and precious life?” Like the parable of the talents in Matthew, we were given a treasure, liberal religion, and the we will be held to account by posterity for what he do with it. This treasure is not ours, but held in trust, something we are told to use.

Let me confess that I believe in liberal religion more than the liberal church. That came to me after thirty years of trying to find it by growing members, raising money, adding programs. I tried them all and failed at every one. Maybe my ministry was not to grow the church but to grow the faith. But what is that faith?

It is not the purposes and principles. It is something deeper, wider, and I found it. That sounds bold, I know, but the first servant succeeded by being bold not timid. So here goes: Liberal religion, including our UU faith, exists to do three things: - to free the mind, to grow the soul, and change the world. I'll make it even simpler. Liberal religion has three tasks – to liberate, animate, and agitate. Now let me say a little more about what I mean by these three things. Time is short, so I can but plant seeds and hope they grow.

- The goal of religion is fullness of life, is it not? Now, the only way to be fully alive is to be fully awake, as the Buddha would say. It means plucking the plank from your eye as Jesus said, choosing life as Moses demanded. That is freeing the mind. We must live by the truth, no matter how difficult it is to accept, because living a lie is not life. It is death.

- Once you commit yourself to freeing the mind, you must ask “Does this freedom change me?” That’s what growing the soul means. A great preacher of my youth said, “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.” If the truth stays in your head and does not affect your heart and your hand, it is a dead truth. But when truth affects how you live – your soul grows.
- And when that happens, you change your life, and you end up changing the world. It might only be those you know directly; but true spiritual living, fueled by the devotion to the truth and living by it, always shakes the foundations of power.

These three things are the spring from which everything flows. And like a spring in the desert, this is what we thirst for in life, what we need to live. Those visiting us are seeking it, what the ancients called the ‘water of life.’ But what do we give them when they come to visit and ask to join? Pamphlets, red coffee cups and sign-up sheets.

Sure you can build buildings, do flower communion, have committees, potlucks and all that. But if you do that and do not liberate, animate and agitate, you are in the church business but you are not in the religion business. If you sing new hymns and celebrate water communion and recycle but do not liberate, animate and agitate, you are in the church business not the liberal religion business.

But if you decide to be in the liberal religion business, everything else is secondary. Whether folks are theists or humanists, even muslims or christians won’t matter. Whether you are large or small won’t matter. Whether you are young or old, whether you sing chorales or songs, meet on Sunday or zoom on Monday, won’t matter. Because none of those things by themselves are what free the mind, grow the soul or change the world. If a church does those things it is a liberal church – be it UU or Congregational or Ethical Culture or a Reform synagogue. Heck the “nuns on the bus” are more UU than most UUs. Members of AA are more UU than most UUs. We don’t own liberal religion, you know.

This is our mission. We exist to proclaim it, not to protect it, to spend it not to save it, to give it to a thirsty world not keep it for ourselves.

That is my original sermon, and I still believe in it deeply. Today, though, I need to amplify that a little more. The volume of vitriol from the highest places, contempt and anger and paranoia parading as strength and patriotism, is downright terrifying. I feel powerless to address it, even with those I know and love who share it.

Maybe you know that feeling. Then, less than two hours ago, I remembered a quote from Dr. King. “We must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil in the universe. And you do that by love.” Now, I would have to share six sermons with you (or a book of essays) to explain love as Dr. King means it. It does not mean tolerating hate or injustice or oppression, but defying it. To love requires a new way of thinking which is why we free our minds. To love means a new way of living which is what growing the soul means. To love is to stand in the way of hate, which is what changing the world is.

This is supremely hard. Elsewhere Dr. King says, “I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate myself; hate is too great a burden to bear.” But love of the kind we need is a spiritual discipline. It is not something individuals can do alone, which is why we need churches. Only in community can we find the strength to love like this.

My message to you today is free your minds, grow your souls and you will change the world. Do it out loud, recklessly, without fear. Pour out the water of life that is liberal religion everywhere. We were never meant to survive, but we may well be resurrected if we are ready to risk “the ship ourselves and all,” as Whitman said. Whoever saves his life shall lose it, says an ancient rabbi. And the opposite is just as true.

What are we afraid of, then? After all, as Audre Lord, said, “We were never meant to survive.” What will you do with this one wild and precious life that is this church? That’s not for me to say. But if you dare to ask it deeply, you will drink from the waters of life and have enough to share.

We may be religious after all!

