



“When not to be tolerant in the face of intolerance”

Rev. Krista Taves

March 23, 2009

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

## **Reading**

Today’s reading contains strong and challenging words, stronger words than we might be used to in this sanctuary. Rev. John Dorhauer presided over the United Churches of Christ in this area for much of the last decade, and watched many churches taken over by the religious right. This article is his response. It is a reflection of his frustration, anger, and determination. These are the fighting words of a religious liberal who has decided that enough is enough:

Religion is under attack.

Let me be more precise: moderate and progressive religious voices and traditions are under attack from a strident, right-leaning, theocratic minority that has found a way to spin vitriol into virtue.

Well funded, politically connected, and evangelically zealous the radical right has sunk its teeth into moderate and progressive institutions and ideologies with no intent to let go until all enemies have been vanquished.

The art of compromise, the virtues of tolerance, love, and acceptance, out of which almost every religious philosophy proceeds, and the notion of equality are all perceived by these extremists as tools of the devil. Language about mandate, subjugation, submission, and dominion drive their own ideology.

Knowing that such ideologies will not yet play well in America, with its valuing of individual liberty, personal choice, and freedom of expression, most of this is done covertly. Their strategies include clandestine tactics, coded language, and political deception that have gone unnoticed and unchallenged for far too long.

Having spent years now tracking the radical religious right; I wish to tell what I have known and experienced because it is my belief that what abides in their darkness cannot long endure the light of day.

America was birthed out of the cauldron of the excesses of European political and religious intolerance; our creative and fertile imagination for something new emerged out of the shadows of Inquisition, Crusade, and Tyranny; we dreamed possible a government that would ensure certain inalienable rights for all god's people: these have all come to shape an ideology of acceptance, of liberty, and of mutual respect that is now under attack.

Fools are we if we let the attacks go unnoticed and unchallenged. That progressives and moderates have waited this long to open their eyes to what has been going on around them is an indictment against them. Evidence of complacency and ignorance is not hard to find: but no more.

(original at <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2006/1/23/233413/653>)



## Sermon

I must admit that John Dorhauer’s words make me very uncomfortable. I am unused to religious liberals speaking like he does, at least publicly. My experience is that we strive to speak in the language of acceptance. We try to see different points of view believing that we can never see the whole truth. We are called to live in a state of intentional openness, trusting that there is always more to know.

But John Dorhauer has called the strengthening of the religious right a dangerous attack that must be thoroughly challenged without compromise. He uses words like “invader” and “assault” to describe an enemy.

John’s strong feelings developed out of his experience as Conference Minister of the United Church of Christ in Mid-South Missouri. He experienced an intentional, well-funded attempt by Christian extremists to infiltrate United Church of Christ congregations with the goal of taking getting them out of the United Church of Christ and into more fundamentalist denominations. What bothered them so much about the UCC? Well, basically, their increasingly liberal stance on homosexuality, their pro-choice stance on reproductive rights, and their progressive approaches to scripture and theology. How many of you are familiar with their ad campaign, “God is still speaking,”? The whole principle of this campaign was to say that God’s word is not a done deal. You can’t just go to the Bible and say, “God said it that settles it,” because the Bible is not written by God. The Bible is written by human beings trying to understand God. This means that God is still speaking through us and leading us to new understandings of truth, including understandings of homosexuality and abortion. This drove Christian extremists crazy and some became determined to stop it.

They worked quickly and thoroughly and with ample funding. Using abortion and homosexuality as wedge issues, they connected with dissatisfied conservatives inside the UCC to stir up trouble. Sometimes they flooded a church with new members, or held secret meetings to stir up fear and anger, and then forced congregational votes on disaffiliation, abortion or homosexuality. Their success rate was staggering. Sometimes they simply rid a church of its progressive members. Sometimes they succeeded in removing a church from the UCC and into a more fundamentalist denomination. Worst case scenario, they disrupted church life so badly that the church died.

Tired of seeing this happen over and over, John began developing his own war chest of strategies to stop it. And he was challenged, often by liberals uncomfortable with his confrontational approach. What about love? What about diversity? What about acceptance? To which John said, what about it? We’re seeing people with no respect for diversity and difference, with no respect for our four hundred year tradition, going to war against us. I am fighting for acceptance and love and truth and diversity. I respect all people, but that does not mean I am compelled to respect all ideologies and religious beliefs. The time for complacency is over.

As far as I can tell, John’s war chest was based on three foundational principles. 1) Religious moderates and progressives are actually the silent majority no matter what the religious right says. Success depends on breaking our silence so we can see how strong we actually are. 2) You play fair. That means no secret meetings. No backroom politics. No deceptively worded resolutions. If you use dirty tactics, you lose your claim to a higher moral ground and you can never truly win your battle. 3) Fair doesn’t necessarily mean nice. Extremism depends on secrets, fear, and misinformation. Name what is happening and name who is doing it no matter how uncomfortable that is. You put the heat on simply by telling the truth. And then hold on, because the ride is going to be rough. Things may get worse before they get better. But you must keep responding with open and clear strategies that engage the conflict and strengthen the healthy relationships.

To his surprise, it worked. With planning and perseverance, and with incredible pastoral support for leaders who went through hell, he helped resist the takeover of several UCC congregations, including one in Chesterfield, Ivy Chapel United Church of Christ over on Woods Mill Road. In the process, his own feelings of despair, loneliness



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and darkness transformed into hope. You can stand before a raging stream, you can stand before those who will use any means necessary, and you can prevail, because ultimately, God is still speaking,

Today is Youth Pew Sunday, the day that I preach on a theme chosen for me by the youth. Today’s sermon is inspired by a facebook status update that I came across from one of our youth, expressing frustration at being surrounded by people who seemed unwilling to consider what he might think, feel, and believe. They were so sure they were right that there was no room for him and his ideas. On that particular day, he felt like there was no one who understood or wanted to understand him. And I got the feeling that he felt quite powerless to change that. Like the odds were simply against him. He is not alone in his feelings. One of the questions that I hear over and over from the youth is, “How do I be who I am around people who don’t want to accept who I am, who try to change me into who they are?” “What do I say when I hear religious ideas that I don’t agree with, especially when someone’s trying to force them on me?”

I know that you struggle with the fact that you’ve been taught as a Unitarian Universalist that there are many paths to truth, that there is wisdom in all world religions and that being a good religious person is about accepting and affirming this. But what do you do when the acceptance you try to practice isn’t returned? It seems like sometimes we end up accepting people who won’t accept us and it just doesn’t seem fair.

So today I want to talk about what might seem like a paradox – that we can be religious people who stand for acceptance of diversity. We can be religious people who proclaim that truth is larger than any of us can understand. We can live as if God is still speaking. And we can also speak clearly and loudly against religious and spiritual ideologies that fail to affirm life. Our liberal religious tradition does not demand that we accept all the truths claimed in every religion. Some religions are truer than others. If we didn’t believe that, why would it make a difference for us to be here?

The truth is, we implicitly value some religions over others. We have much more in common with some forms of Buddhism than we do with Fundamentalist Christianity. We have more in common with the United Church of Christ than we do with the Church of Christ. We have more in common with Progressive Judaism than we do with Orthodox Judaism. We have more in common with liberal Catholicism and Episcopalianism than with conservative Catholicism and Episcopalianism. We simply see more truth in some religious beliefs than in others because quite frankly, some reflect our values and some do not. We value equality of all genders, including those that lie outside male and female. We accept all sexual orientations as true and good. We value personal conscience. We value individual freedom. We value collective responsibility for the well being of our world and its people. We are not called to support beliefs and practices that threaten those values. We have right and responsibility to challenge and criticize and, if appropriate, judge beliefs we deem to be oppressive and harmful.

You know what makes me most uncomfortable about the UCC experience? That it was actually the church’s position of tolerance that made it so vulnerable. People wanted everyone to find room in their church and so they tried to practice openness when it came to the new people who had harsh positions. Wasn’t this what they were supposed to do? Wasn’t this the core of Jesus’ message, that all are welcome at the table? But the problem is that the people they made room for weren’t interested in putting a new leaf in the table, but rather in taking out a few and making it smaller. The tolerance offered was used against those who offered it. The way they practiced tolerance created a foothold that enabled intolerance.

I think of our first principle, and if you’re new to Unitarian Universalism it is in the front of our grey hymnal. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It does not say that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every idea. There are bad ideas out there, ideas that deny the worth and dignity of every person. And we should not be shy about saying that. We should not be shy about saying what we stand for and why and being very public and open about it. And I’ll tell you why in a minute.



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Sometimes I think our sense of isolation is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We think we live in a uniformly conservative area, and so we keep our thoughts and ideas to ourselves to protect ourselves, to avoid being judged by our neighbors and our friends, but then no one knows who we are, so we experience isolation and loneliness. Do you know that there are people in this church who were neighbors for decades and never knew they had anything in common until they met here? Rule number 1 in John Dorhauer’s war chest: religious moderates are actually a silent majority. End the silence and you’ll find you’re not so alone.

I wonder how many people are feeling isolated because so many of us choose silence? We are protecting ourselves, trying to fit in, but denying others the life saving message that Unitarian Universalism offers, that we are an open minded religion committed to freedom and responsibility, that we honor the whole person. In our silence, we’re not unlike those well meaning kind people in the UCC who enabled religious extremism through a culture of niceness.

To be sure, there is a cost to speaking our truths. Every time I write a letter to the editor, I get hate mail. When you start being open about who you are and what you believe, some people will change how they are with you. You may lose friends. You may get push back. You may be laughed at, or simply ignored. And I know it’s hard, it is for me. We know that at all stages of life we need people to depend on, places where we belong, having a crowd that’s yours and that you can count on. It can mean the difference between a great life and a lousy life. But sometimes, you think you’re going to pay a price, and instead, a door opens, even if it’s just in your own heart, and you find that you’re not so alone after all and you’ve become stronger. Indeed, God is still speaking.

There’s no doubt about it. It is a challenge to practice a religion where we are called to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person AND speak the truth about what we believe and why. It is be a challenge to affirm the worth and dignity of an intolerant person, while standing firmly against that intolerance.

You know, whatever your religion, there is a place for faith, not faith in the sense of believing the unbelievable, but a more mature faith through which we trust that goodness and truth will prevail, through which we trust that we can make it through the most difficult things in life, and that therefore, we have good reason to live in hope, gratitude, and compassion as we proclaim those things that have given us new life. Amen and blessed be.