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Children's Story "The Mitten Tree" by Candace Christiansen

Reading – "Risk Blessing" by Rev. Christine Robinson <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/188489.shtml>

Musical Interlude - "Tell it like it is" Aaron Neville. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/tell-it-like-it-is-lyrics-aaron-neville.html>

Sermon *The State of the Church Address*

When our quarterly magazine, *UU World*, announced last May that the number of Unitarian Universalist members in the United States had dropped for the third year in a row, you could hear the reaction ricocheting through our very small Unitarian Universalist world. My inbox filled with emails from many of you, sending me the link to the article. It was the main focus of discussion on my various list serves and Facebook pages for more than a month. It was the major fact held out to us at a Ministers Convention that I attended in February. And, our reading this morning comes from the latest edition of *UU World*, and it asks some of our leading ministers what the next step is for Unitarian Universalism. Many of their answers are a response to our shrinking numbers. They're telling it like it is. So I thought that in my state of the church address today, I would tell you what my take is on these numbers.

The first year that our national membership dropped, 2009, nobody paid much attention, including me. It was less than 1% and it was the first time in over 25 years. Perhaps it was a blip. We had gotten used to growing at modest levels, maybe 1% a year. Nothing major, nothing to run around celebrating, but certainly we were doing a lot better than the mainline churches, like United Church of Christ, Episcopalian, United Methodist, and Lutheran that are shrinking quite dramatically. We knew that Unitarian Universalism had been shrinking in the Northeast for years, but our gains in places like Texas, where Unitarian Universalism is growing faster than anywhere in the country, usually made up for it. But then, we dropped membership for a second year, in 2010, and now in 2011, and the national alarm bells have gone off. Even though these drops are small, less than 1%, they are now emerging as a pattern rather than an anomaly.

You know it's always interesting to see how people respond to bad news. Whether it's at work or school, or in your family, or in your marriage, or in politics or at church, when you tell it like it is, people are going to respond in all kinds of ways. Maybe when Aaron Neville told the woman of his dreams, "Tell it like it is!" she turned and ran the other way. Telling the truth is a vulnerable thing. What if it opens Pandora's box?

When the truth is told, will those who dare to listen close their ears or open them? Will they blame others or themselves? Do they try to explain it away or deny it? If they're going to point fingers, who are they going to point them at? If there's going to be an explosion somewhere, who's going to start it and who's going to join in? You can always tell who your anxiety addicts are because they will latch onto that truth and run with its most negative possible meaning, causing all kinds of self-serving dramas. All of these reactions happened when we got the news in May 2011.

When I was in seminary, I did not go to a Unitarian Universalist seminary because there are none in Canada, so I went to seminary with the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada because they welcomed Unitarian Universalist students. At that time, the United Church of Canada was closing about 1 church a week. Canada is a much more secular country than the United States and mainline churches are dying

like flies. Imagine the anxiety in my seminary! I was studying alongside people who had made the decision to dedicate their lives and their financial wellbeing to a church that seemed to be dying in front of them! They were desperate to know why. What was happening to their beloved church, and as its future leaders, what should they do?

Listening to them discuss the predicament of their church was fascinating! The conservatives generally argued that liberals were watering down the faith and making it stand for nothing. The liberals said that conservatives were squeezing out all kinds of people with their judgmental theologies so no wonder people were leaving. There was no room for them.

But others had a different take on it, one that stood outside the usual divide of conservative vs. liberal. Their take was that this was actually good news. Christianity had lost its way when it became a dominant religion. The early Christians were a small group of persecuted people who stood for and were part of the underdog. When Christianity became the dominant culture, it lost its way. It became part of the status quo, which was so not what Jesus was about! So, they saw this decline as a good thing because it was cleaning house. Any church that wasn't healthy, died. Any church with a weak sense of mission and purpose, that was inward focused and self-absorbed and had become irrelevant, died. And they said, "Good! Let them die! Christianity is returning to its roots, as a religion of the minority providing a strong theological critique of the excesses of society that result in growing poverty and a culture of selfishness. We are paying for having lost our way and becoming the religion of the mighty and the powerful and the status quo, rather than the religion of the poor and the oppressed. This is a time of cleansing, so bring it on!"

I kind of compare it to what is happening to a lot of businesses in today's economy, especially small businesses. We're in a big housecleaning. Any business that was on shaky footing before the recession is likely gone. One of the pearls of wisdom I heard when my partner and I started her business in 2009, in the midst of this recession, is that this is the perfect time to start a business because you are unlikely to make stupid decisions. If you can make a go of it during the recession, you have a strong business.

Now, I don't want to minimize the impact of this drastic housecleaning that we are experiencing. Many of you have lost jobs or experienced your job being at risk. Perhaps you've faced paycuts, loss of hours, or loss of benefits that have significantly affected you and your family. We also know that many of our largest corporations have been artificially held afloat, protected from their own mistakes by huge bailouts that we are on the hook for. The housecleaning is not being equally applied by any means. But, many of the businesses that have survived these last two years are ones who watched their environment closely, made difficult decisions to respond to their new reality, often completely revisioned who they were and how they did business. They are stronger now for having been through this very uncertain time, and when this economy turns around, watch them take off!

This is what Rev. Christine Robinson is asking us to do in our churches. We are seeing some warning signs and we have the chance to learn from them before we start paying the really high costs. I think what's going on is some housecleaning. We have churches that aren't healthy. They aren't responding to the reality of our times, and some of them aren't making it because they are living in times that don't exist anymore. We used to be the church that wasn't about religion. That's how we responded to our over-churched world. But that world doesn't exist anymore, even in Bible Belt Missouri. Why are the evangelicals screaming so loud? Because they're losing power.

We have to be like Sarah in our children's story, watching out the front window and seeing what is happening in our world. What are people hungering for, yearning for, looking for? And what is our response to that hunger? Sarah could have stayed focused on the good old days, with her husband alive and well by her side and her children living at home. But instead, she found a new way to find meaning in her world. Did it mean grieving what she had? Did it mean letting go? Of course, and I doubt that was an easy thing. But she also

needed to move on from that. There were no longer children at home to knit mittens for, but there were children at the bus stop in front of her house who couldn't play because they were cold. In order for her to find new life, not only did she have to be looking out her front window, she needed to be walking out the front door to be part of what she was seeing and to be in relationship with it.

Let me tell you some truths and the meaning I see in them.

Our denomination has been growing about 1% a year for many years, and in the last three years it's been shrinking about 1% a year. But the story of our Chapel is quite different. In the last 10 years, we've grown an average of 5.5% a year. In the last 7 years, we've been growing an average of 8.4% a year. In the last 3 years, we've been growing an average of 12% a year. So we are not following the trend of our association, and this is good news.

What are we doing right? Well, obviously a lot of things. This congregation has invested in staff. You've almost doubled your staff in the last seven years. You also have courageous leadership. Maybe it's because so many of you work in high pressure business environments where you have to think outside the box. The leaders here are often very willing to think outside the box and look for creative ways to do what we do even better. We are constantly making small and large changes to stay ahead of the curve.

I think one of the biggest things that we are doing right is not being afraid to be a religion or to be religious. For many decades Unitarian Universalists identified ourselves in opposition to the churches around us and we would respond to the religious wounding many of us faced by avoiding anything religious. This worked for quite some time. It spoke to the spirit of the age. It was authentic. But we're not in that age anymore. Those churches that are stuck in that mode are the ones who are shrinking.

They are also the ones who reflect the status quo. One of the pitfalls many Unitarian Universalists fall into is putting fierce individualism on a pedestal. This made a lot of sense in the 1950s and 1960s when there was much less social freedom in this country. But now, our culture is imprisoned by a kind of rabid individualism where only you and what you want matter. Many of our UU churches have embodied this kind of destructive individualism. These are the churches that are shrinking or dying.

And while I hesitate to be like my friends in seminary and say, "Good. Let them die!" I also realize that perhaps these difficult losses are allowing us to recover the essence of Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism has always seen freedom as a responsibility. What will you do with your freedom? Unitarian Universalism did not emerge as a rejection of religion, but as a powerful and challenging reformation of it.

The churches in our movement who are growing and thriving use religious language. They pray, meditate, and engage the spirit. They aren't afraid to bless and to forgive and to talk about sin and repentance, or the afterlife, and to engage the God of their understanding. And they never forget that religious talk isn't just about feeling good, it's about changing us, transforming us, for the service of our world. We don't tell our people what they have to believe about prayer or blessing or God, but we offer the room to go deep with these things. The churches in our movement that are growing aren't afraid to go deep, and does it mean touching places that hurt? Absolutely. But if we didn't, then what does that say about us? All we serve is a feel good kind of pabulum. We might as well go to the movies or to the cafe.

We need places to tell it like it is. In an economy that we can't count on, with a political system that is paralyzed, and a national culture that feels shallow and self-serving, we want and need places where we can build constructive, realistic, and heartfelt ways to engage in deepening authenticity with our world.

I think one of the reasons Aaron Neville's song "Tell it like it is" became so successful is because it touched this need for constructive authenticity. You can't have authentic relationship without truthfulness. You can't

have authentic relationship without taking risks. You can't serve our hurting world without letting it into your softest and tenderest spots. When Neville sang, "It you want something to play with, go and find yourself a toy. Cause baby my time is too expensive I'm not a little boy," what I hear is, "Don't play with me, Unitarian Universalism. Don't go the easy route, Unitarian Universalism. Please don't protect me from your truth or mine. I need to know what you see in me so that I can hang my mittens on your tree!"

So let's fill this mitten tree and let it be a symbol that not only are we looking out the front window, we're walking out the front door. This is a much riskier way of living. You know what it did for the truth teller that my seminarian friends worshipped. We all know where he ended up. On a cross.

It is possible that Unitarian Universalism as a whole is going to shrink for a while. But as long as there are ministers like Rev. Christine Robinson who are willing to tell it like it is, if we are able to withstand some loss, knowing that with loss comes opportunity that wasn't possible before, and as long as there are people like you who are willing to walk into these changing vulnerable times with open hearts and minds in the spirit of love, I think we have a hope in hell of coming out of this stronger and more truthful to our liberal religious tradition and to our own souls.

May the spirit be with you and yours.

Amen and Blessed Be.