



# Ploughshare

## ***A Piece of Mike's Mind...(Politics from the pulpit?)*** **by Rev. Mike Morran**

Recently, the question was asked at First Unitarian, "How can you become truly diverse when you only support liberal positions?"

It is my privilege to answer.

I share these thoughts because you have a right to know where your minister is coming from. It is also my privilege to unequivocally state that nothing I write here or speak from the pulpit includes an expectation of anyone's agreement or endorsement.

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## ***Honest, Direct, and Respectful*** **by Erin Kenworthy, DRE**

Winter is a time for slowing down, internal renewal, rest, and reflection. As a congregation, we've been engaged in recovenanting with each other, examining what our agreements are when we are together, and participating in the process of building our covenant in this community. I love covenant, particularly because they make space for us to challenge one another, to have difficult conversations, to make mistakes and return again in love.

I recently re-read a book that has helped me engage in difficult conversations, with love and space for mistakes. *Honest, Direct, and Respectful* by Dennis D Adams was brought to my attention during a professional conference a year ago in a workshop led by another DRE from Seattle, Aisha Hauser, who is now serving on the board of the Liberal Religious Educators Association.

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Without doubt, in the past few years I have spoken about #MeToo, women's rights, racism, Supreme Court confirmations, presidents lying, refugee children in cages, impeachment hearings, presidential abuses of power, attacks on the press, denial of climate change, political corruption, mass incarceration of people of color, decisions I believe exhibit poor judgement like abandoning international treaties and agreements, the fallacies of trickle-down economics, and much more.

I am aware that many if not all of these could be interpreted as "liberal" positions, however, I do not accept that label. To the best of my memory, I have been careful to NOT identify with any particular political party, candidate, or ideology.

What I do identify with, explicitly and religiously, are matters of morality. It is morally wrong to imprison immigrant and refugee children. I don't see this as liberal or conservative, I see it as wrong. No ambiguity. It is morally wrong to use the power of political office for personal political gain. Full stop. It is morally wrong to make false accusations against the press, public servants, Gold Star families, or anyone else who points out obvious falsehoods. There is no doubt about this. In a democracy, I believe it is morally wrong to sell economic theories of taxation that have consistently and empirically proven harmful to the poor and middle-class. Etc.

Again, I don't see these are political positions. I see them as moral positions. And, I believe the church and people of faith have an obligation to speak on moral issues that affect the lives of people and vulnerable communities, people we believe are sacred and worthy.

I am also deeply uncomfortable with simplistic labels like liberal or conservative when applied to complex issues, as if either of those words are definitive. It is perfectly possible and reasonable to despise abortion and still support a woman's right to choose. It is perfectly possible and reasonable to support a strong and enforceable immigration policy and still believe that deportations, refugee detentions, and walls are wasteful, short-sighted, and unnecessarily cruel. It is possible to be offended by (and set limits on) political lies and corruption, even if it's someone from your own preferred party. In a complex and dangerous world, it is possible to acknowledge the need for a strong military and still despise war. Etc.

These only scratch the surface, but our national dialogue would greatly benefit from more nuanced distinctions, less labelling, and a deeper commitment to truth-telling when immoral policies or decisions result in people and whole communities being hurt.

This is where I'm coming from when it comes to politics from the First Unitarian Denver pulpit. I hope these comments are clarifying and helpful. I do not intend to stop.

## *Honest* from page 1

Aisha brought the book to conference in response to a difficult conversation within our association about communication styles. The book is a quick read, and one that has helped me in the personal and professional areas of my life. In the spirit of our recovenanting, I offer this resource to each of you with the hopes that it might inform our work together and in our worlds beyond these walls.

Dennis Adams invites each of us to examine our own communication style, with the hope that we might get to a place where we can say what we mean and live at peace. Many of us use at least one, and possibly two out of the three book title terms when we communicate, but there is an art to doing all three at the same time. Being Honest, Direct, and Respectful allows a person to come into a conversation from a place of strength, speaking truthfully, and not attempting to control the outcome of the conversation. Letting go of outcomes can be a hard practice for many of us, especially in the culture that we live in every day. The book guides you towards being able to communicate in a way that brings you internal resolution, without manipulating the other folks at the table. The book provides a simple but effective formula for putting together your thoughts, and gives you a concrete place to start from as you implement your own honest, direct, and respectful communication.

I've recently started working on this with my own kids, and though we are far from grasping it, we are working toward it in a process that is probably more valuable than the outcome itself. I've purchased an extra copy of the book to loan to friends. I re-read the book when I need it, reread my notes when I have a moment, and re-implement the strategies. Honest, Direct, and Respectful communication is a beautiful tool for untying the relational knots that exist in our day to day lives, and it supports the inherent worth and dignity of everyone in the conversation, which is a much-needed element in the world today. This book supports the creation of healthy boundaries, covenantal behavior, and returning to community values when there is conflict or difficulty. May you send and receive messages with honesty, simplicity, and respect for the benefit of everyone, including yourself.

## ***On the Path at First Unitarian***

### **Spiritual Growth - Insight**

In this class of five sessions we will explore the ancient idea that every human soul is a tiny spark of the Oversoul, of the divine. From that basic assumption, or Insight, we will explore the possibilities of intuition, self-examination, and self-knowledge as a pathway of divinity and spiritual growth. Facilitated by Rev. Mike Morran, participants will mix experience with study, reflection, and sharing.

Five Wednesday evenings, March 18th through April 15th, from 7:00p to 9:00p. Call the church office or email [revmorran@fusden.org](mailto:revmorran@fusden.org) to register.

## *Finding Common Ground*

*by Jen Simon, Ministerial Intern*

This month at First Unitarian, we enter into the theme of Common Ground. Theological common ground has been on my mind a lot of late, as Connections and FUSE discuss how best to extend our welcome to as many - and as diverse - a spectrum of people and experiences as we can, and as the Food team begins to discuss not only how we might serve a meal at FUSD every Sunday, but whom we might ultimately be serving.

And one of the questions that has come up more than once as I speak to people about inclusion and diversity is, “Does Unitarian Universalism really have anything to offer to those who aren’t white, middle class, and college-educated?”

In “Not My Father’s Religion,” (UU World, Fall 2007), Doug Muder wrote about the theological contrast between the Lutheranism of his working class father, and his own Unitarian Universalism. He pointed out that the questions our churches have historically asked have been about why the structures of our society are the way they are, and how to change them. “Why can’t the minimum wage be higher? Why can’t the government hire the unemployed? Why can’t college be free?” And these are all necessary and worthwhile questions to ask. But for those directly impacted by these issues, the most pressing questions are of course, “How do I get by on \$7.25/hour,” and “What and how am I going to eat this week?” Muder points out that often, working class people adhere to what he calls “harsh” theologies - because those theologies speak to how to navigate a harsh and unforgiving world.

Does this mean that our Unitarian Universalism has nothing to say to people who are struggling to make ends meet? Does it mean we will never be more than what Muder calls a “boutique religion,” serving a niche of upper middle class, college-educated philosophers?

I don’t believe that. So here’s the thing: we do have working class people in our congregations. We do have people of color. I know; I’m one of them. And while the difficult truth is that sometimes the cultures of UU congregations require that we leave some of our racial, ethnic, or class backgrounds at the door, it is also true that, for those of us who do show up in UU congregations, we have found a thread of truth in Unitarian Universalism that sustains us. That is liberatory and, yes, even practical.

Yes, it is important to acknowledge that we have, by and large, been a religion of privilege - that our outlook on the whole has been shaped largely by the Enlightenment values of the late 18th and 19th centuries, which has both given us tools for exploring our world and provided us a limited and stifling narrative about whose perspectives matter in our society. (Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, for instance, had very specific - and disgusting - ideas about who is able to reason.) And it is absolutely imperative that we untangle these unhealthy, white supremacist, classist notions from our theology.

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## *President's Corner*

*by Mary Sullivan, President of the Board of Trustees*

In January, I attended the Pacific Western Region Leadership Experience along with Peggy Ulrich-Nims, Stu Ferguson, Coral Cosway and David Alley from FUSD. The weekend workshop was held at the Mother Cabrini Shrine and Retreat Center in Golden. The historic stone three story building where we stayed was built by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and serves as the basis of my article.

What I feel drawn to write about at this moment focuses more on my experiences of the place, rather than the content of the workshop (this will most likely be covered in a later submission). First, allow me to give a little history of Mother Frances Cabrini, an Italian immigrant from a small village near Milan, who emigrated to New York City at the age of 39. For the next almost 30 years she worked tirelessly establishing schools, hospitals and orphanages throughout Europe, the United States, Central and South America. She fell in love with our mountains on a trip in 1902, while she was ministering to Italian families in the Clear Creek, Argentine and South Park mining districts. In 1910, she negotiated the purchase of the property in Golden to provide a summer camp for the girls in the Queen of Heaven Orphanage in Denver. The original Stone House completed in 1914 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places is where the PWR Leadership Experience was held this January.

From the moment you step foot into the entry of the old Stone House, you are engulfed in the world of Catholicism. There is not a room to be found that does not feature prominent semblances of the Catholic Church: crucifixes, statues of saints (mostly Mother Cabrini), pictorial renderings of Jesus, etc. For some in attendance, the reactions ranged from mild unease to extreme discomfort. For some others, there was a slight curiosity about the customs of an unfamiliar world. For me, it was like coming home. As you may guess, I was a practicing Catholic for well over the first half century of my life. I still hold near to my heart many of the customs and rituals that pervaded my life for so many years. Being surrounded for a weekend by objects reminiscent of those traditions felt like visiting an old relative in a distant home town.

However, nothing about that warm nostalgic feeling caused me to forget or question why I was so drawn to Unitarian Universalism. My drifting away from Catholic teachings did not arise from any anger, extreme disappointment or disillusionment, although some of that was certainly present due to the fallibility of mankind and institutions. The teachings and tenets simply didn't ring true for me any longer. Every time I attended FUSD as a visitor, I could sit in a pew listening to sermons, readings or songs and not cringe or swallow hard because my beliefs (or lack thereof) were being challenged. I was not participating in worship services that did not reflect my soul's yearnings.

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But, dear friends, it is also crucial that we not confuse the current limitations of our religion for the religion itself. Part of the beauty of a Unitarian Universalism that embraces among its sources both direct experience and words and deeds of prophetic people, is that we are not defined solely by what we have been, and not limited to what we currently are. We get to continually redefine what salvation in this lifetime looks like. We get to take a hard look at the tendencies of UUs to want to save other people, when in many cases we should be looking to our own salvation from assumptions based in the dominant class and race. We get to examine our theology and our way of being and ask ourselves what is getting in the way of its speaking to those our hearts most long to be in community with. These are hard truths, friends, but examining them is holy work, and it will bring about a Unitarian Universalism that is more just, more loving, and more whole.

Now, I'm not saying that our tendency to ask the Big Questions is wrong. Those questions need asking. They need addressing, and they need addressing in the thoughtful, systemic, thorough and intelligent ways that UUs often do so well. But I'm also saying that, if you haven't eaten all day, having your inherent worth and dignity recognized looks a lot less like a heady discussion of the finer points of microeconomic theory, and a lot more like soup and a sandwich. And the sandwich is just as much an expression of our theology as the discussion - possibly more, if we count real unity, community, relationship, and solidarity among our core values.

If we are as dedicated to Beloved Community as we say we are - if we truly believe in the unity that makes us one - then it isn't a question of whether we can worship together, but how we find expressions of Unitarian Universalism that speak to everyone. This work is happening in many quarters in our denomination right now - in organizations such as BLUU, DRUUMM, TRUUsT, and EqUUal Access, through programs such as Beloved Conversations and Class Conversations, and through the voices of so many religious professionals and lay volunteers. And I truly believe that if we continue to seek out these expressions, Unitarian Universalism contains the tools to equip all of us - working class people, people of color, disabled people, able-bodied people, white people, middle class people - to present a truly unified resistance to the powerful forces that are trying to divide us as human beings right now. Because finding common ground doesn't just mean finding a few issues we can all support; it means recognizing that the struggles that most harshly impact some - poverty, racism, sexism, ableism - are struggles that face and ultimately diminish us all. May we dedicate ourselves to finding ever new and ever more inclusive expressions of our faith.

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These are some of the things that attracted me to FUSD initially, but doesn't adequately explain why I stayed. Certainly the sermons, readings and music were the initial strong attractions. Then as I dug deeper to learn more about my new community, I found that the 7 Principles and 6 Sources, our Sanctuary Banner Messages, along with our Mission and Vision statements laid a strong foundation for a faith and spiritual commitment on my part. But perhaps the overriding, strongest anchor that has kept me rooted at FUSD is YOU, all of you in this beloved congregation. Every Sunday I am surrounded by folks from a myriad of backgrounds, pulling in previous faiths and/or spiritual practices into a beautiful patchwork quilt of a loving and committed community that values social justice in all it's varieties.

This has painted a picture of my experiences as a visitor, newcomer and eventual member. This is also what I hope visitors and new members are still experiencing today when they walk through our doors. These goals are precisely the good work the two Board designated task forces (Congregational Covenant [CC] and First Unitarians Seeking Engagement [FUSE]) have been concentrating on for the past 8 months. In short, they have done splendid work fine tuning how we aspire to treat one another within our community; and how we want to engage, encourage and support those who have recently made the commitment to become members of our congregation.

These are the main reasons I am here. Let's all join together in our commitment to show every last member of this beloved community, old and new, the same open arms and welcome I received seven years ago.

## *Whole Souul Living*

Common Ground is our Whole Souul Living Theme for March. In a world that insisently divides and fragments the human community, a central proposition of our faith is that, There is a Unity that makes us One.

Rev. Victoria Safford's wrote; We are alone yet intricately bound, inextricably connected to soil and stream and forest, to sun and corn and melting snow. We are alone yet bound by stories we cannot get out of to ancestors and descendants we will never meet. And all these natural conditions, these bonds we did not forge ourselves and yet cannot deny, are the strands of a theology, the seeds of faith, the beginning of re-ligion, the binding all things.

Below are some questions for personal and communal reflection:

- Relate an experience with finding/creating unexpected Common Ground with another human being.
- What conditions, context, or background allowed this to happen?
- One of the paradoxical truths of being human is the privacy, even loneliness we experience within our own thoughts, and that this is a near universal, shared experience. How much Common Ground do you believe exists among the inner experience of people?
- One result of Common Ground awareness is compassion. How can our community teach this? To ourselves? To each other? To our children? To the world at large?
- What are the limits of compassion? Does compassion ever become destructive?



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