

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Federal Government 101
February 27, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

The light of this chalice is a frail thing.

It can be snuffed out by the winds of cynicism and apathy.

May its little flame be a reminder of the power of spirit.

Let us rededicate ourselves to providing light that lifts our hearts and increases the world's joy. – Alan G. Deale

Opening Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able in our opening hymn No. 1023 “Building Bridges”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, please pick up one of our application forms also located on the table and put it in the offering plate or look it over and turn it in when you feel ready.

Next week I'll be back and my sermon is titled “The Divine in All of Us” and it will explore a little of the world of the Hindu faith.”

This month we are giving our special collection to the SAAFE House, which provides a safe place and support for those who have experienced sexual assaults or domestic violence. Please make your checks directly out to SAAFE House, and that's S.A.A.F.E House.

This is potluck Sunday, so please plan to stay if you can.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Opening Words

John Pepper

My opening words today come from Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. She was a pioneering journalist, author of fiction and poetry, and a professional lecturer. As an African-American in the 1800s, she was active in abolitionism, suffrage, and the temperance movement and she lived long enough to see her efforts rewarded. She gets credit for introducing the tradition of African American protest poetry. Famous during her lifetime, Harper used her prestige and writings to fight racism and also make strong feminist statements.

We need more soul, a higher cultivation of spiritual faculties.

We need more unselfishness, earnestness and integrity of high and lofty enthusiasm and beacons of light and hope,

People ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the altar of freedom.

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Hymn

John Pepper

Please join me standing as you are able singing hymn No. 318 “We Would Be One.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

Offertory Music

Story for All Ages – *We the Kids: The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States*

Readings

My first reading this morning is from the book titled *Oneness: Great Principles Shared by All Religions* and the principle I have selected is titled “Speak Truth.”

The author in his introduction to the section says, “A man cannot be untruthful in one area of his life without having that influence permeate every other sphere. Untruthfulness creates habits in the personality that ultimately affects everything that a man wishes to accomplish. A man cannot speak lies while at work and then, later in the day, be entirely truthful with his family. Love and inner growth are enhanced by speaking truthfully. If only for personal fulfillment, a man should cultivate truthfulness in all aspects of his life.

On another level no less important, untruthfulness indicates an ignorance of the intrinsic oneness of all people. An individual will lie only when he thinks that he is separate from others and that he can make a significant advancement in life by impeding the progress of others. Any advantage gained by untruthfulness is temporary at best, because the most fundamental and important activity in life – the development of an awareness of God – is impeded by deceit.

From Christianity: Putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.

From Judaism: Speak ye every man truth to his neighbor; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.

From Buddhism: Him I call indeed a Brahmana who utters true speech, instructive and free from harshness, so that he offends no one.

From Islam: Do not clothe the truth with falsehood; do not knowingly conceal the truth.

From Hinduism: Say what is true! Do thy duty. Do not swerve from the truth.

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From Confucianism: Sincerity is the way of Heaven, and to think how to be sincere is the way of a man. Never was there one possessed of complete sincerity who did not move others. Never was there one without sincerity who was able to move others.

My second reading this morning is from the book *Who is Man* by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Over and above personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, injustice, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, oppression.

Over and above the din of desires there is a calling, a demanding, a waiting, an expectation. There is a question that follows me wherever I turn. What is expected of me? What is demanded of me?

What we encounter is not only flowers and stars, mountains and walls. Over and above all things is a sublime expectation, a waiting for. With every child born a new expectation enters the world.

This is the most important experience in the life of every human being: something is asked of me. Every human being has had a moment in which he sensed a mysterious waiting for him. Meaning is found in responding to the demand, meaning is found in sensing the demand.

God In All Worlds, p433

Prayer

John Pepper

My prayer this morning is actually a Navajo song.

Please join me now in a time of quiet reflection. Close your eyes, look out the window, center yourself in whatever way feels right for you. (Pause)

It is lovely indeed, it is lovely indeed.

I, I am the spirit within the earth...

The feet of the earth are my feet...

The legs of the earth are my legs...

The bodily strength of the earth is my strength...

The thoughts of the earth are my thoughts...

The voice of the earth is my voice...

The feather of the earth is my feather...

All that surrounds the earth surrounds me...

I, I am the sacred words of the earth...

It is lovely indeed, it is lovely indeed. (Pause) Amen!

The Little Book of Prayers, p68

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Sermon – *Federal Government 101!*

On a recent trip home, I offered to go and pick up my mother at the beauty shop where my father had dropped her off earlier. She wasn't quite ready when I arrived so I waited and entered into the ongoing conversation.

One of the ladies bemoaned the sorry state of "Obama-Care" because her daughter had to wait in a long line at the Doctor's office. I casually mentioned that few if any of the new medical reforms had actually gone into effect and thus "Obama-Care" couldn't be the cause of the problem.

Of course my words fell on deaf ears but it got me to thinking. Most educated people understand the basics of our federal government, but I firmly believe few realize the finer points about how it actually works or even fails to work given the proper set of inputs. I'll give you a concrete example of the process.

In May of 2008 George Bush signed into law the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008. The law took effect in November of 2009, which was almost a year and a half after Bush signed the law.

The regulations which implemented the law were written by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and they didn't go into effect until January 10th of this year, 2011.

Only now after almost 3 years can someone use this law if they feel they have been discriminated against based on genetic information. The same process that took almost 3 years to bear fruit in this EEO case is also surely at work on all the new health care legislation. Quite frankly it is far too soon to see the affects of many of the new health care laws.

Signing a new law into effect is usually the last event the broader public is aware of, but the regulations written to implement the law often take years to write and it's here where special interest groups have a huge opportunity to help ensure the process works and that the intent of the laws are implemented effectively by the regulations.

Sadly, however, it's at this point that these same special interest groups get involved and help to derail the intent of the laws by watering down the regulations to such an extent that the laws can be rendered useless to the American people. Special interest groups can have a huge impact on the entire process by influencing the crafting of the regulations for good or for ill.

It simply depends on the motives and the honesty of the special interest groups. Effective special interest groups, of which there are thousands, have a defined organization, people who track the issues and there are dedicated workers and managers who gather and move information and the information isn't always accurate or reputable.

They also have scientists, engineers, or other specialists who understand the technical or scientific aspects of the issues and they hire lawyers who understand the legal processes and they help navigate the governmental system and agencies responsible for addressing the various aspects of the new laws.

These fully staffed highly motivated and generally very biased special interest groups are always ready to take on any crisis which could lead to what they perceive as burdensome new laws and regulations which could potentially have a negative financial impact on the companies that make up the special interest group.

The Equal Employment Advisory Council is one such group with over 300 member companies including The Coca Cola Co., American Express, Walgreens, Microsoft, GE, Office Max, UPS, and Shell Oil, just to name a few.

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When new EEO laws or regulations are being considered, the 300 member companies of this “Advisory Council” throw their full weight behind this their special interest group and they seek to ensure that any new laws or regulations don’t significantly impact their bottom lines.

The federal government may be huge but the individual agencies which implement the laws through regulations are generally small and with limited resources when compared to the special interest group member companies whose goal is to minimize any business impacts from the laws or regulations.

The special interest groups are in fact involved throughout the process from the crafting and passage of the laws to the crafting and writing of the regulations, but it seems to me most ordinary citizens are mostly engaged only with congress and the laws they create and the people generally neglect the remainder of the process.

It seems like almost every day, I receive emails from someone about some pressing issue asking me to call or write my congressperson and express my anger of the subject of the email. Sometimes it is an emotional appeal and devoid of any facts or statistics to back up the claims and the reasons for the outrage.

If the issue negatively affects big business, I assure you there is a special interest group on their side of the issue and they are doing their homework, contacting every one of their members, and developing position papers and backing them up with their own facts and statistics. So our lawmakers are bombarded on the one side with emotional appeals and on the other side with supposed facts and statistics.

In the absence of any other or better data, the lawmakers often side with the facts and the statistics provided by the special interest groups simply because they offer something tangible to hold on to, not just emotional appeals.

But then there is always the crisis and when a crisis happens, emotions and personal appeals often win the day. The crisis simply trumps all the facts and statistics lobbed at the lawmakers by the special interest groups. Unfortunately, this is where the general public becomes complacent. The crisis often generates very appropriate laws and the public then goes back to sleep. But the special interest groups do not.

After the laws come the regulations and the responsible agency must issue an announcement of proposed rulemaking and they ask for public comments – that means you and me.

Special interest groups provide voluminous comments and most of the public does not. When I say “comment” once again the special interest groups provide reams of facts and statistics to support their position and water down or minimize the regulations being developed and absent any other data the agency listens.

Then the agency drafts the regulations and sends them back out, once again asking for public comments. Of course the special interest groups comment and most of the public does not.

Eventually final regulations are written implementing the new law and the only ones who have been involved in the entire process, besides the agency writing the regulations, are the special interest groups. When no one else is talking or sharing information the special interest groups get heard and they can have huge impacts on the regulations.

We need to be involved in the process – the entire process. We need to make sure the process has the opportunity to work as it was designed. But how do we go about it? How do we have a real chance of making a real difference?

Recently I read an article in the UU World magazine where a minister gave a sermon on ethical eating. He delivered his sermon as an open letter to Monsanto’s CEO challenging the CEO to respond to seven moral

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questions. The minister hoped the sermon would plant a seed which if grown collectively could and I quote, “heal some of the most critical relationships of our time.” end quote.¹

The sermon got out beyond the confines of the church, received much deserved praise, and it even caused executives from Monsanto to invite the minister to the corporate headquarters in St. Louis. The minister’s goal was “to inspire Monsanto to adopt a sort of Hippocratic Oath, akin to a doctor’s pledge to “do no harm.”” Ultimately, he’d like other executives from other large corporations to do the same.²

Sadly, the executive who reached out to the minister unexpectedly was laid off. Monsanto went on to claim that their own internal company pledge supplants any need for the oath suggested by the UU minister.

Let’s get real for just a minute. The outreach by an interested Monsanto executive backfired and she lost her job. And Monsanto had no intentions of changing their business practices. While many may believe Monsanto’s practices are unethical, their practices make Monsanto a great deal of profit and currently their practices are not illegal, so they aren’t going to change them because we ask them to play nice.

I’m sure Monsanto has volumes of data that show their practices are not harmful. And if they have contrary data, I’m equally sure it is not readily available. So absent credible data to act on, the government isn’t going to step in and make Monsanto change their ways. Monsanto is not the issue here, our potential for response is at issue and we as a denomination have much more potential that could do some good than we are currently manifesting. In order to manifest that potential, first we will have to understand and recognize our strengths and then prepare ourselves to act in truly productive ways.

And quite frankly, we are at a time in history where our strengths combined with modern technology could result in huge positive impacts in our society.

I am, however, a theologian and I see our strengths and actions in theological terms or in theological constructs which have the potential to come to life.

Liberation Theology comes to us originally from the time of Moses when his people were slaves in Egypt. Moses’ mission was to free his people. He tried to reason with the Pharaoh, much like the UU minister did with Monsanto, but to no avail. Moses’ words fell on deaf ears.

But then something happened – a series of crises, the 10 plagues did what Moses could not, and the Pharaoh changed his mind – he freed the people of Israel. Of course Moses acted immediately and he led his people out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

We must remember two concepts from this story. The first is when a crisis happens, and it will, we need to be ready to act and action is the second concept. Pretty sermons like the one about Monsanto or even this one, pretty or not, at most are just the first few steps.

We have to be ready for the entire marathon to come and not just the first few clumsy steps in a huge crowd at the start of the marathon. We have to be prepared for the entire race and quite frankly we are not prepared at all. Others are, but from what I can see, we aren’t.

Special interest groups are prepared. They have the people, the skills, the data, the resources, the training, everything they need to complete the race and those who participate in the entire race have the potential to win. Since we don’t, we won’t!

¹ UU World, Winter 2010, p39

² Ibid., p38

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If we want to participate we must recognize who we are as a denomination. We are not orthodox – we don't believe in or subscribe to "right thoughts" and that is exactly what orthodox means.

We are orthopraxic – we do believe in "right actions" and that is what orthopraxic means and that is who we are. We believe in right actions whether it's with the Humane Society, the SAAFE House or the UUSC – we believe in taking action, right action. But on a national level we are almost impotent with our actions.

So how do we take not only "right actions" but prudent, intelligent and well thought out actions?

That is where another theological concept comes into play and that is the concept of Covenant Groups. All across our denomination small individual, isolated covenant groups are formed and meet on regular schedules. The people in each group have some purpose, possibly dedicated to some local issue and maybe just to meet some of the needs of the members of the Covenant Family.

We could grow this concept. We have the tools and the technology. We just need to exhibit the wherewithal to do it. A covenant group is simply a group of like minded people. Across our denomination we have like minded social workers, we have like minded nurses and doctors, we have like minded teachers and educators, we have like minded engineers and scientists, we have like minded psychologists and psychiatrists, we have like minded farmers and ranchers, we have like minded professors, we have countless special interest groups ready to form who have never come together as individual unified, aware, and intelligent voices ready to lead us and guide us after a crisis.

We have the internet which links us all together as though we were next door to each other, when instead we are thousands of miles apart, but we seldom use this potential even though we have a model to show us how it's done.

And that model is the ICUUW or the International Convocation of UU Women who together are successfully advancing the rights of women around the world.

And we have other models coming out of the Middle East and out of Egypt where Liberation Theology was born thousands of years ago with Moses and were it was reborn in the last few weeks where the crisis of unemployment galvanized the youth and through the internet, their coordinated actions toppled a dictator.

We could use these models as our models and create virtual covenant groups across the nation, populated by like minded people who are specialists in their fields or who have decades of experience they could draw on and together they could participate in the entire marathon, whenever it is run, instead of just a few isolated individuals participating in the first few steps. And these new special interest covenant groups could influence the outcome of the race and possibly win the race with our collective help.

If just 3 people from each church or fellowship participated in virtual covenant groups, we could form 30 special interest covenant groups from all over the country with 100 members in each of them.

And these special interest covenant groups when necessary could call on all 250,000 UUs to call or write the congresspersons urging them to action on whatever issue has brought the group to action.

One could be a health care special interest group, which could guide the rest of us in right and proper actions that make a difference. We could form education, mental health, immigration, children's protection, LGBT, banking, real estate, mortgage and a host of other special interest covenant groups.

Surely others with highly specific expertise in fields most of us are only vaguely aware of could form similar special interest covenant groups and provide much needed guidance to our legislators and regulators and even to our own UU population so that we too can use our voices to influence those same legislators and regulators. But we have to know what to say and that will be the job of our special interest covenant groups.

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Knowledge is power and without the right knowledge, the inside knowledge, the industry knowledge and the facts and statistics to back up that knowledge, we are impotent against special interest groups who have other motives, motives mostly driven by profits and bonuses.

We as a denomination often tout the extraordinary influence we have had over the years within the country, influence well beyond our numerical numbers. We quickly point to five past presidents who were Unitarian but we have to go back to 1913 to remember the last president, Howard Taft.

The sad thing is we have to point to the past, the distant past, and I know of few examples where we can point to the present in order to make even vaguely similar claims.

Even so, we have an unbelievable reservoir of untapped potential attending our churches each and every Sunday. You are that potential.

We must use that potential to affect positive honest change, but only you know where you can make a difference. And for those of you who believe you possess no specialized skill or training, you are wrong.

There will be organization support roles too numerous to count. Every existing special interest group has far more organizers and managers than specialists because it takes a broad spectrum of talents and passions to make a real special interest group function well.

We have a choice. We can each drift off into oblivion wasting our skills and expertise developed over lifetime of work and service. Or we can participate in or start special interest covenant groups made up of other UUs just like you who are passionate and experienced in one special area of society and then make a difference by putting our passions and experience to work influencing the only system of government we currently possess.

We can either participate in the entire marathon or watch from the sidelines and watch as others finish and control the outcome of the race. We can embrace technology and its potential to unite us across vast distances or we can sit in our homes and watch others with less than objective motives control our lives. The choice as always is up to you.

I'll close by simply repeating a portion of one of my earlier readings this morning, the one by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Over and above the din of desires there is a calling, a demanding, a waiting, an expectation. There is a question that follows me wherever I turn. What is expected of me? What is demanded of me?

What we encounter is not only flowers and stars, mountains and walls. Over and above all things is a sublime expectation, a waiting for. With every child born a new expectation enters the world.

This is the most important experience in the life of every human being: something is asked of me. Every human being has had a moment in which he sensed a mysterious waiting for him. Meaning is found in responding to the demand, meaning is found in sensing the demand. Namaste!

Sermon Response

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 298 "Wake Now My Senses" and remain standing for our Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

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I am only one, but still I am one.

I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.

And, because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

Rejoice Together, p120, Edward Everett Hale

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude