

**Changed by What We Cannot Name: The Transformation of
Unitarian Universalist, Past and Present: A Response to From
Salvation to Self-Determination
Nurya Love Lindberg**

The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price. If I thought he could teach me to find it and keep it forever I would stagger barefoot across a hundred deserts after any lunatic at all. But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise.

-Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

It is an honor to respond to Rev. Lisa Friedman's paper "From Salvation to Self-Determination" and thus to open discussion in this session of the Ohio River Group. Lisa, I found your paper both incisive and illuminating. You clearly named the basic assumptions that we must address as we begin to consider the issue of classism in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. It is my hope that this response can lift up some directions for discussion as well as offer the perspective of a minister serving at what I consider to be perhaps a historic moment in Unitarian Universalism.

The key issue for Unitarian Universalists, as for any other religious people, is transformation. We are called into communities of memory and hope in order to be transformed. What is the process of transformation? Annie Dillard describes it well. We prepare ourselves to receive and respond to the "secret of seeing," that nameless essential, the pearl of great price. This gift comes to us from beyond ourselves, but allows inner illumination. The secret of seeing also enables us to glimpse, if only in part, that beloved community in which people are valued "for the content of their character" rather than for their status in society. The secret of seeing is what discloses the numinous in the ordinary, the sacred in the everyday, the divine mystery within the heart of every human being.

As Unitarian Universalists, we speak in theologically various ways, yet together we seek to see rightly. "We feed our eyes on the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters."¹ To grow in this way of seeing is the purpose of the church, as the Rev. Kirk Hadaway writes: "In modern America, there are plenty of good social groups, but not many good churches... [R]eligious institutions are those that connect the everyday world (the immanent) to the world that is beyond the ordinary (the transcendent)... [I]f this sort of experience is not part of a church, then one could say that that church is not really a church."

Our churches are "not really churches" if we allow classism to linger unconfessed. Classism hinders us from the "gift of seeing" by encouraging us to remain focused on the economics of commerce rather than on the economics of transformation. Our human household ("economy") is betrayed by the devaluing of any group of people within it. Where classism is unexamined, we are "conformed to the world" rather than being "transformed by the renewing of our minds." ³

So it is that we gather to discuss classism as a body of Unitarian Universalist ministers. This discussion will be not only sociological and historical, but also theological and spiritual. We gather as a group of people seeking not simply our own transformation but the transformation of the world. Tired idealists and unrepentant cynics among us, nevertheless we hold a hope that there is more truth... more love... more peace somewhere. As Unitarian Universalists, we carry certain assumptions about the makeup and ideology of our wider movement. We characterize ourselves as a "privileged few." We describe ourselves as "non-conformists." And in this century we have seen a theological sea-change of immense proportions as we began to describe the Ultimate not in our traditional theological language (which spoke of God and Jesus) but in terms of human dignity and unity, and the need to honor the web of life. Thus we encountered (and created) the "problem of God."

These three aspects of our life together underscore one another. Each perpetuates our self-assessment as a people set apart. Current demographic data from our entire movement bear out this self-assessment. One report of such data is noted in *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, the recent report from the UUA's Commission on Appraisal. A 1987 survey ranks U.S. Unitarian Universalists highest among 30 religious movements in aggregate social status in an instrument which includes level of education, household income, extent of home ownership, and patterns of employment. A 1992 reader profile survey of the World magazine showed no notable change in this data. ⁴

It is no wonder that we have a sense of ourselves as a people set apart—due not to being "chosen" by a Deity, but to obvious theological and demographic differences. To perceive oneself or one's group to be set apart, or different, in such a significant way, can provoke feelings of guilt, confusion, dismay, and often a desire to change the situation. Such feelings may underlie much of our discussion this week as together we sort through our individual and collective participation in classism.

On the one hand we perceive ourselves as set apart. But there is another side to the story. As Robert Bellah reminds us, "You face in your denomination the most basic conundrum of American life."⁵ The individualism that is basic to Unitarian Universalism (and at the root of our non-conformity and theological diversity) is also basic to life in these United States. "[A]ccording to a Gallup poll 80 percent

of Americans agreed that 'an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.'" ⁶

If, as it appears, our religious message is not so "different" after all, why is it that this 80%-in all their economic diversity-are not pouring in the doors of our churches?

Lisa holds up the changing theological message of the past hundred years of Unitarian Universalism. In a nutshell, she describes us as "a group of rugged individuals, who affirm a theological diversity and are united to be on the cutting edge of social change." This she connects with the class theory of Melvin Kohn, who describes the "higher class" as those who expect their actions to be consequential and the "lower class" as those who understand themselves to be at the mercy of forces and people beyond one's control or understanding.⁷ In this schema, the current theological message of Unitarian Universalism ("self-determination") perpetuates our marginalization as "higher class."

Tex Sample describes the class continuum in the United States similarly by drawing on the polarity between the ethic of self-fulfillment and of self-denial. He describes the self-denial ethic in this way: 1) The understanding that one denies self for the sake of the security and well-being of the family; 2) One works hard and has to provide the necessities of life; 3) One maintains a respectable place in society. By contrast, adherents of the self-fulfillment ethic hold: 1) A sense that life is intrinsically valuable; 2) A belief that life is to be creatively and emotionally expressive; 3) A psychology of affluence, understanding abundance (of things, ideas, and experiences) to be available with a minimum of effort.⁸ The authors of *Interdependence* describe Unitarian Universalists, using Sample's analysis, as followers of the self-fulfillment ethic.⁹

It is easy to make one of two movements in face of this evidence. The first possible movement is to accept that Unitarian Universalism appeals to an "intellectual" and "affluent" segment of the population. Contemporary church growth publications urge congregations to have a "focus group" for their ministry and mission. We may be able to comfort ourselves with this notion, and resign ourselves to remaining a "higher class" association. We have chosen this approach in the past, choosing to "market" ourselves to those who are "like us" by advertising on NPR. But there are pitfalls in this approach. James Luther Adams speaks of the temptation of the "religion of the successful..." which "amounts to a systematic concealment of and separation from reality."¹⁰ This cannot help us be open to the gift of seeing.

The second possible movement goes on simultaneously. And it is one of despair. "What is wrong with us," we ask. "Why can't our churches reflect the wider society? Surely not only intellectual and affluent people seek freedom in religion. Is it our cultural bias, our prejudice, our classism, rather than our theological message that drives our demographic?" Lisa responds to this movement toward

self-abnegation by stating "The obstacles we face in developing class diversity lie not so much in the number of degrees we have or the clothes we wear or our style of worship as in how we present our deepest values and faith." ¹¹ I would like to take this point further. The obstacle we face is not simply how we present our deepest values and faith. The questions lie deeper still: is our faith true to reality? Is our deepest loyalty to truth rather than to the ethic of our class?

The "gift of seeing" requires from us the confession that both self-fulfillment and self-denial are necessary. It requires from us the realization that (ontologically) we are at the mercy of forces we cannot control, shaped as well as shaping beings in the world. If we are to be changed by what we cannot name, we must be open to the truths that both classes bear. Truth is paradoxical; to the extent that we stifle the gifts of one group, we are all diminished.

It is my conviction that as we have moved from theological language to socio-economic language to describe life's deepest realities, we may have lost the ability to bear the weight of this paradox. It is also my conviction that in our collective move away from Christian language and symbols, we lost the ability to speak to at least 60% of the 80% who seek freedom in religion. Like it or not (and for the last fifty years, we have not), our tradition and North America as a whole have been shaped by Christianity. To the extent that we are "set apart" from this tradition (which is most deeply and historically our own) we are impoverished.

It is interesting, in the light of these convictions, to examine the congregation now in formation in Fenton, Michigan. I am speaking of the church I serve, Epiphany Community Church, Unitarian Universalist. Named "epiphany" after both the holiday in which the Wise Men visited the infant Jesus and for the "moment of insight" known as (continuing!) revelation, this church seeks to be a specifically Christian church within the UUA. In the move from salvation to self-determination, Epiphany is taking a third step that may synthesize the first two: self-determination towards salvation-not for the individual, but for society as a whole. And with a story and a language that the wider community can understand and to which they can relate.

What kind of church is built when the language and the symbols of the congregation are self-consciously Christian? I cannot claim a congregation that is any more economically diverse than another in the UUA. Plenty of the folding chairs on Sunday morning are taken by professionals; some by high school and college students; some by factory workers and retired people. I know some are poor; I know most are not. Fenton is known as an affluent community; that makes some difference in terms of who finds us in the first place.

What I am discovering is that nevertheless there is a different ethos at Epiphany. I have no better word to describe it than "neighborliness." We are not self-consciously different from those who surround us. There is no sense of being "set apart" as Unitarian Universalists. The church is neighborly to the entire

community, not only to those who support liberal causes. Epiphany is not a haven for liberals; one of our newest members is a strong supporter of the NRA and another WWII veteran just told me that he could not sing "O Young and Fearless Prophet" because he perceived it as anti-patriotic. Epiphany is also not a haven for conservatives; we are clearly against homophobia and other forms of oppression which preclude social and spiritual development. Somehow (surely by grace), Epiphany is a church—a group of people from both sides of the ideological spectrum seeking to be transformed by awakening to the transcendent.

As a church, we seem to be welcoming people who would not be Unitarian Universalists without our presence. At a recent Membership Committee meeting, two people said "I would not be in a Unitarian Universalist church if it were not for Epiphany." For one, a cashier at Wal-Mart, it was because "I expect God in church." For another, a retired insurance executive, it was because "Epiphany is a Christian church." What I heard behind these comments was a sense of trust: these people were familiar with Christianity as a positive force in their lives. Because Epiphany was drawing on the symbols and languages they knew, they could trust the church enough to join it. Within the Christian story lies both the need for self-denial ("lose your life that you may find it" ¹² and self-fulfillment ("I come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." ¹³) Perhaps in the years to come this may help us to welcome a greater diversity of people. It is too soon to tell.

There are many neighborly churches within the UUA; probably I am not stating anything new or different. Yet it seems to me that there is something new and different about Epiphany: rather than being "over and against" the wider culture—as I have experienced in some (though not all!) other UU churches—we are within the culture working to change it. ("A little yeast leavens the whole loaf"¹⁴ -but not if it is kept apart from the dough.) We speak the Christian language of those around us with strong accents on freedom, openness, discovery and adventure—accents newcomers seem thankful to hear and embrace.

I am intensely curious to discover the outcome of Epiphany as a theological experiment in Unitarian Universalism. I am curious to see what, if any, impact there may be in the social ethos of Unitarian Universalism from the growth of churches like it. Changes in Unitarian Universalist theological and social expression are not only our past; they are also a part of our present.

¹ The Rev. Kenneth L. Patton, "Let Us Worship," *Singing the Living Tradition*, #437.

² "To Change or to Stay the Same," unpublished draft, The Rev. Kirk Hadaway. Rev. Hadaway is a consultant of the United Church of Christ Board of Homeland Ministries and led to UUA's training for Extension and New Congregation Ministers at General Assembly in June of 1998.

³ Romans 12:2.

⁴ *Interdependence*, p. 52.

⁵ "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective," Robert Bellah, June 27, 1998.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Friedman, p. 7.

⁸ *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches*, Tex Sample, Louisville, KY:
Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.

⁹ *Interdependence*, p. 53.

¹⁰ "Hidden Evils and Hidden Resources," James Luther Adams, *Prophethood of All Believers*.

¹¹ Friedman, p. 2.

¹² Matthew 10:39.

¹³ John 10:10.

¹⁴ Luke 13:21.