

## Happy Trails or Safe Parking Lot      12/31/17

This sermon is the result of an email exchange I had with a church member who shall remain nameless about the possibility of buying the parking lot next to the church. I ended the email with ‘happy trails’, not my own sign-off but a good one, and then thought that we don’t need happy trails as much as we need a place to park the horsies. This has been much on my mind, and indeed on all our minds, since the bank next door was sold and our free ride (or our free end of ride) came to a close. To recap a bit, we have worked out a deal with the new owners that means that we will pay a quarterly sum for maintenance for the parking lot but we will not be charged rent. Instead, the new owner will take the equivalent of the rent as his charitable (i.e. tax deductible) contribution to the church. We inquired about buying the lot, but he’s not interested in selling, so this is our best deal. It’s not bad. Nothing is as good as free but this could be much, much worse.

This need of ours led me to think a bit about the needs of congregations in general and, naturally, that which is always on my mind, the needs of UU congregations in particular. Do we need happy trails or do we need a place to park the horses?

Of course, the answer is “Yes.” Those people who come to a church that regards freedom as one of its highest values are also people who desire trails,

probably preferably happy ones, or even may desire off-trail adventures. We are people who do not ask for easy answers, or any answers for that matter. We are people who prefer to do our own spiritual searching and seeking. We start with the assumption that we should question assumptions. We are determined to maintain our spiritual independence. We take seriously Luther's injunction to be a "Priesthood of all believers" and just as seriously the call of the great UU theologian, James Luther Adams, to also be a "Prophethood of all believers." Although some might take issue with the word 'believers.'

The assumption might be, then, that we are people who don't need parking lots. We are forever riders on the journey, for each spiritual trail leads to another and another and another. The questions deepen as we go and there is no end in sight in that tangled wood of speculation. There is, then, no particular reason to have a church building, let alone a parking lot beside it, because we are all individual travelers on our own paths with only our own spiritual desires to satisfy. In this view, we are the ultimate spiritual heirs of both the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the rugged individualists of the western frontier, self-sufficient and proud of it. We have certainly been caricatured as this. Is this all there is to us?

If you believe some of our own rhetoric, it would seem to be so. One of the first things people talk about is that, in this denomination, people can "believe

whatever they want.” This is not quite the way I see it, but it’s an attractive idea for some.

However, we find ourselves with a paradox. If this is an attractive idea for some, if this is the idea that makes many people sympathize with our denomination or say that this would be where they would go if they went to church, it does not seem to be attractive enough to lure them across the threshold on a regular basis. Like the mainstream Protestant churches, our not-so-distant-cousins, we too are losing membership. Like them, we are losing membership to the church of the nones, those who are attracted by no church at all, not to the fundamentalists who are themselves seeing somewhat of a decline.

They are in decline despite the fact that the megachurches have been light years ahead of the rest of us, making sure their churches follow marketing trends, have good production values and, yes, large parking lots. Large, well-lit, well-guarded well-locked parking lots with No Trespassing signs every few feet. Only those who are willing to conform get a key. Also, a parking lot is, by definition, where people park. They stop. They do not go forward. Not much exploration is done in a parking lot.

There has been a move within our church, as well as mainstream Protestant churches, to copy some of the moves that made fundamentalists so successful.

There are books written on how to compete, books that seem to me to counsel churches that use the same formula that has made for successful business enterprises, especially malls. If this is what we need to continue, I can tell you that I am not the person for the job. There are also theories that say only clubs that are difficult to enter get members. To paraphrase Marx, Groucho, not Karl, no one wants to belong to a club that would have them as a member. Who wants to find Paradise if every Tom, Dick and Harriet is there? That's why there are Platinum Card memberships for credit cards and airline seats. This is also a marketing ploy, and, again, I'm not the person for marketing ploys.

I have always seen religion as acting as a corrective to mainstream ideas and worldly values. As UU's, we have usually stood against the unthinking acceptance of majority views. We are by no means perfect. We have been slow to challenge the evils of our time; we have been guilty of acting in our own interests rather than in the interests of the powerless. In this I am thinking of Theodore Parker's ouster by the cotton barons of Boston when he challenged slavery. But, at the same time, Theodore Parker was a Unitarian minister. At all times and in all circumstances, Unitarians and Universalists, and since merger UU's, have been represented in much greater proportion to our numbers than other denominations. We have always acted as the conscience of the nation. This comes from our belief in the power of our own consciences and our belief that we can bring about a better

world. When people know about us, it is often through our visible support for those who have not had support. But this is not enough to get younger people over the threshold of church participation. The group that is called the millennials are the group that has rejected church most strongly. We are not seen as really different from other churches.

Our weakness is that I think we do not always understand or express our strengths strongly enough. Part of the problem is that there is a very narrow definition of religion in the public mind. Most people who reject religion see it as bigoted and exclusionary. Most see religion pretty exclusively as either fundamentalist or as the most rigid form of Catholicism. Religion and stereotyped Christianity are seen as synonymous. Most people see religion as otherworldly, backlit by a halo of impossible perfection or as demonic and oppressive. In short, it is seen through the lens of films, something decorative or ridiculously out of touch. In either case, religion is either dead or evil. No wonder younger people are not flocking to us, or to any church.

It seems it is almost impossible for people to see religion as it is practiced here. How do we demonstrate a religion that calls on each person to honestly search his or her conscience and then to act on the conclusions they find? How can we show them that there are possibilities beyond the lonely world of the isolated

explorer or the safe but stifling world of rigid obedience? How can we demonstrate a religion that is alive, responsive and vital?

There are many, many books currently on the unintended results of the Reformation or the Enlightenment. Maybe there always were but I have been acutely conscious of their number lately. What they point to is the increasing individualism of western society. If Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, started this trend, many others have weighed in on both the problem and the solution. Since some authors put the blame for the fragmented world we live in on the Reformation, it makes sense that they also find the solution to this in a return to a pre-Reformation society, one in which there is one religion to center a culture. This is, at best, a profound failure of imagination. Again, even when religion is seen as a benign force, a centering force, it is also seen in a very limited way. Only a traditional view of religion, one centered in this case on the old concept of Christendom, is seen as authentically religious.

I see UUs as offering a different view, a third view. Alone among all religious groups that I know of, we can lead the way to a world made up of something besides lonely trails or safe parking lots. If we have leaned toward individual empowerment, perhaps excessively, within our principles is an affirmation of the power of community. When our first principle sets forth the

proposition that all people are worthy, it tells us that we must first consider others, not just ourselves. Our second principle tells us of the importance of human relations. Our third principle encourages spiritual growth in our congregations, not alone. Our fourth principle, though it encourages our free search for truth and meaning, reminds us that this must be done responsibly, with the implied idea that there are limits to our freedom. Our fifth principle tempers the right of conscience by setting it in the context of the democratic process both in our congregation and in the rest of the world. Our sixth principle affirms the goal of world community, community of all peoples. And our seventh principle, our most recent principle, reminds us that each of our actions reverberates throughout the universe. Not only should we not act alone, we are unable to act alone. These principles are a powerful balancing act, a careful weighing of individual freedom with the needs of a broader community, as a matter of fact, the broadest community of all, the world as community.

Wait, as the TV ads say, there's more. Sometimes we forget to emphasize the next part of the page. Below the Principles is the section called the Sources, The Living Tradition. This is the section that gives the most trouble and offers the most potential. This is the section that places no one religious source as our authority but one that allows us all to be scholars of the many, many ways in which religious thought has been expressed throughout the world. Again, this is not an

invitation to anarchy. It is not that anything goes. This list has some qualifiers, words like ‘renewal of spirit’, the power of creation and life, justice, compassion, ethics, enriching, ennobling, deepening understanding and expanded vision, reason, avoiding idolatries, and, most insistently, the transformation of us all by the power of love. This is the wisdom of all the people of the earth. We say we need everybody’s wisdom to heal the deep divisions and great problems we all face. We are the only religion that I know of that does not put one tradition before another as the one way.

These are tough words to live up to. They often call forth myriad interpretations and a variety of actions. They ask us to live up to the best that is in us, every day, every hour, always. This is a hard religion to follow.

It is a religion that, at its heart, believes, despite all the evidence, in the potential of each human being and in the power that humans, acting together, in community, can continue to bring about a better world.

We believe in that which is not an aimless trail. We believe in that which is not a static parking lot. We offer recognition of the light within us and in the universe around us, a light that fills us with purpose and makes the vast reaches of the galaxies alive with meaning. It is our task now to be aware of that vision and to give it to others.