

**“Are We ‘R’ Or Aren’t We?”**  
**a sermon by Reverend Preston Moore**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock**  
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Good morning. One of my favorite theologians, James Carse, loves to tell the story of his first and last infatuation with a car. Not just any car – a 1951 red Ford convertible with white leather seats and a chrome spare tire case. He and his brother, out for dinner with their father one evening, saw it sitting in a parking lot. The two young men were stricken feverish with desire.

They were still nursing their lust for the car a few days later when they came home and saw it sitting in their driveway. They ran inside and asked their father where the owner was. He looked at them and said “right here,” tossing them the keys.

An air of unreality hung over the remainder of the summer. The redness of the car was exceeded in intensity only by the greenness of everyone who saw them driving it.

At the end of the summer, Carse’s father unexpectedly asked him, “do you know why I gave you boys this car?” He thought it was simply an act of stunning generosity. But his father surprised him, saying “so you would never want it again.”

His father’s plan worked. Within a year the two brothers had grown weary of negotiating over care and custody of the car. When his father sold it, there were no objections. His falling into and out of infatuation with this shiny object pointed him toward a new question -- whether there might be something fundamentally different in life that, unlike the red convertible, could satisfy desire completely, and yet somehow continue to be desirable.

I believe this story says something important about why people pursue religion. We go through life meeting one obligation after another, setting and achieving one goal after another, satisfying one desire after another. At some point a question begins to well up from somewhere: “is there something deeper and different in life, something that satisfies my desires and yet somehow continues to be desirable. OR, is this all there is?” Whether he is materially secure or insecure, lucky or unlucky, the question “is this all there is?” sits there in every person’s life . . . ripening.

It’s as if we’re all driving through life on a highway dotted with signs like those ones with religious messages in some rural areas – messages like “Repent, the end is near.” Only the messages are much more direct and disturbing. One comes along that says, “IF THE RED CONVERTIBLE DIDN’T DO IT FOR YOU, WHAT ELSE POSSIBLY COULD?” And then a mile or two down the road, another one: “IF BECOMING THE FIRST WOMAN PRESIDENT OF YOUR COMPANY DIDN’T DO IT FOR YOU, WHAT ELSE POSSIBLY COULD?” And so on, until finally we hit a stark and simple one: “IS THIS REALLY ALL THERE IS?”

For some people, a short film begins to roll in their heads at this point, reviewing the pattern of their obligations, successes, and desires. They are exhausted by it. Fearful of falling

asleep at the wheel, they take the next exit and pull into the parking lot of a church – or a fellowship -- in the hope of finding an answer to this infernal question.

Meanwhile, back out on the highway, other people are reacting to these signs by saying things to themselves like, “I’ll think about that after I get my student loans paid off.” Some people keep driving, and before they know it the odometer has a really big number on it and they’re saying, “I’ll think about that after my children’s student loans are paid off.”

And then there are people who look at these signs and say to themselves, “my life is pretty darn good – good job, good family life, nice circle of friends. If this IS all there is, what’s so bad about that?” There was a “pretty darn gooder” in a spirituality program I led last summer for a community action group. I told her that in religion sometimes the hardest thing is having an active enough imagination about just how good life could be. She replied, “I don’t think lack of imagination is my problem.” I said, “if it was, how would you know?” I wanted her to consider whether she had been keeping her imagination on a pretty darn short leash. One of these times when she says to herself, “my life is pretty darn good,” maybe she’ll see a roadside sign that says, “as compared to what?” From “As compared to what,” it’s only a short drive to “Is this all there is?”

There’s a hymn in our hymnal, # 38, called “Morning Has Broken,” that depicts an answer to the “as compared to what” question. It celebrates a way of living in which morning breaks as if it were the first morning ever, in which birds sing as if they were the first bird ever, in which the dew falls on the grass as if it had never happened before. Of course, objectively, on the morning the singer is singing about, the world is the same one that greets us every day. What’s different is the person singing the song.

In moments, I have been that person. Sometimes for days or weeks. I can imagine being that person on a regular basis. This possibility is why I keep coming to church. This experience both satisfies and remains desirable. It both grants my deepest wish and beckons me to wish even more deeply. It can do this because it’s not about accomplishment or stimulation or finding a new taste for my palate; it’s about how changed I am when I say yes to the possibility of it.

Our question for today is “are we ‘R’ or aren’t we?” – the “R” word being religion of course. And the “we” is Unitarian Universalists, who can be thought about in terms both local and national. We’ll get to this question in national terms, but I think it makes sense to start closer to home:

Actions not only speak louder than words; sometimes they also speak sooner than words. Your devotion of time, talent, and treasure to this fellowship speaks to me in a strong voice. I want to suggest

- that your presence here reflects a yearning for something beyond the conventional – an answer to that roadside question, is this all there is?

- that the yearning is for the wholeness into which suffering and brokenness and disconnection can be transformed; into which the eventual tedium of a merely comfortable or successful life can also be transformed.
- and that an experience of wholeness is in fact the deeper and different condition in life that can satisfy your desires and still remains desirable, without end.

The things our culture holds out to us as worthy of worship – money, status, and so many other conceits – are really too small for worship. So you have gathered yourselves here to try to figure out what is worthy of worshipping – worthy of pursuing with your best energies. You asked for a worship service on the question what is religion, anyway – a question that every UU church and fellowship and every office at UUA headquarters in Boston ought to be asking .

Last week I described a model for thinking about religion. Being religious doesn't mean having a neat set of answers to those eight questions we talked about, because religion is always an ongoing process of becoming. In any religion that hasn't been killed off by dogmatism, there are no final answers. Being religious is about yearning to move toward wholeness and realizing that this movement is an inherently communal project. I think I've seen and heard enough to conclude that those two basic conditions are present in this community.

So whether you use religious language or not, I find you guilty of practicing religion.

By my lights, this means you're traveling in good company – company that includes some outstanding UU churches and fellowships. But I don't believe the same can be said of UUism as a whole, or of our national association. On your way out today, you can pick up some handouts I prepared that connect last week's eight questions with our UU principles, purposes, sources, and declarations of inclusion and freedom of belief. For today's purposes, it's enough to focus on just two reasons why I find it hard to convict UUism of being a religion.

The first is that at the national level, we have no pursuit of religion that matches what I see you and other congregations doing locally. The Unitarian Universalist Association has a blue-ribbon commission, called the Commission on Appraisal, that studies long-term issues in our denomination and makes recommendations. In 2005, it published a report about theological unity and diversity in UUism. The report began with an impressive declaration of the urgency of the issue, asking:

“What is, indeed, at the center of our faith? If we are a community, what is the common unity that binds us together? And if we are a religious community, shouldn't we be able to articulate theologically and religiously what it is that unites us? . . . If we say to anyone or everyone, ‘you belong,’ what is it that they are invited to belong to? . . . Not to take up this question,” the Commission warned, “risks being reduced to an agglomeration of liberal religious boutiques, loosely associated and without any real organizing principle.”

Despite this bold beginning, the Commission concluded its report without even trying its hand at describing a shared theological understanding for UUism. Having surveyed and visited UU congregations around the country, the Commission reported that

with rare exceptions, conversations about beliefs and theology are not regular features of our congregational life. . . . Everything we have observed suggests that we commissioners are breaking a taboo that Unitarian Universalism took on subconsciously at [the consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist movements in 1961] – the taboo against talking through the need to merge theologies. This taboo seems to have been based on a fear that if we start to talk about our beliefs, we may discover we are totally incompatible with one another, and our congregations will fall apart.

In place of an organic development of theology and religion through a broadly based dialogue, since 1961 the UUA has continued doing what the Unitarians and Universalists did for most of the preceding century: periodically convening commissions to re-wordsmith formal statements of principle – semantic safaris of the sort lightheartedly described in one of today’s readings. It’s like sanding and resanding the surface of a piece of furniture without asking what it’s really furnishing.

In the past five years or so, UUA president Bill Sinkford has said repeatedly that every UU should have what he calls an “elevator speech.” He has asked us to imagine getting into an elevator on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor of a building with a stranger who asks you what UUs believe. Your elevator speech is supposed to be an encapsulation of UUism that you can deliver in the one minute that will elapse before the elevator reaches the ground floor.

Upon hearing of Sinkford’s idea, my mentor, Robert Latham, said that his strategy would be to turn to the questioner and suggest that they exit the elevator -- and take the stairs. I never liked the soundbite theology of the elevator speech. As I certainly demonstrated in spades last Sunday, I’m more of a stairwell theologian. I actually think Bill Sinkford is too, at heart. But the way Unitarian Universalism and the UUA are structured, he is constantly in the position of saying, “well, I can’t speak for all UUs.” So, if he had his UUA president’s hat on when you met him in that elevator, a theological stroll down the stairs with him might be filled with some long, awkward silences.

The second reason why I can’t find UUism and the UUA guilty of practicing religion is that they long ago settled for a conception of wounding and healing that is politically rather than religiously grounded. As an outspoken UU minister observed many years later looking back on the Sixties, for UUs, “the spirit of liberal religion couldn’t compare in relevance, excitement or moral clarity with the spirit of liberal politics. . . . The role of [UUs as] liberals would be to speak up for victim groups, to accept the gratitude of their chosen victim groups, and to feel virtuous for their efforts.”

This became what I call the rescuer theology of Unitarian Universalism. As part and parcel of that theology, UUism adopted the democratic process – later reflected in our fifth -- as our ultimate value, our holy ground. Our mission was to rescue anyone denied the benefits of this value. The civil rights movement fit this value like a glove.

The rescuer theology has two serious problems as a conception of wounding and healing. The first is that it requires the victims of oppression chosen for rescue to stay “in role.” We are the strong, they are the weak. Otherwise, we can’t be the rescuers and can’t get the self-validation that the rescuer role is supposed to give us. When victim groups realize this, they don’t want to follow the script any more, and our story of wounding and healing closes down.

The second problem is that the rescuer theology keeps our attention focused outwardly -- turned away from what might be found if we looked inwardly: first, a deep self determined to break into the world; second, an ego that would perform nobly if put in charge of that transformative project; and third, the obstacles to that transformation – spiritual wounds that need to be healed. The Neal Bowers poem (“Living the Parable”) Fran read this morning is all about this. In one way or another, we all are the wounded man in the ditch.

To turn toward these inward possibilities is harder now than if we had no story of wounding and healing at all. The rescuer story has become entrenched in UUism. Some people are offended by seeing it portrayed in an unflattering light. Vindicating the rights of oppressed people is a fine thing to do, of course; but you can’t make a religion out of the ACLU, or the NAACP or the National Organization for Women just by adding a chalice and singing hymns.

I don’t think looking to the UUA for theological leadership is a smart bet. Instead, I think it makes more sense to cultivate religion where you are, at the grassroots level.

How to do that? There are lots of possibilities, but I want to suggest that the most fruitful place to look is in the spiritual practice known as covenant groups, also called small group ministry. A few decades ago, churches began to realize that the large group experience of Sunday morning worship can’t meet all of the spiritual needs of a religious community. There are some kinds of spiritual practice that call for a smaller scale. In a small group, a deeper mutual trust can be cultivated, which provides the foundation for what may be the most powerful spiritual practice of all: self-revelation. Last Sunday I talked about love and truth-telling as the most powerful forms of healing. Covenant groups are about telling one another how it really is with us, about seeing and accepting others for the truth they are and being seen and accepted by them for the truth we are.

A covenant group is a surprisingly simple construct. What’s so special about half a dozen people sitting in a room talking, with no set agenda, no curriculum to follow, no recipe? It’s the covenant they make – first, to show up for each other, consistently, twice a month for ten months; second, to speak and listen in a particular way that is different from everyday conversation; third, to keep confidential whatever is confided in this circle.

When we started our covenant group program in Williamsburg two years ago, the response from the congregation was strong: thirty people signed up. We couldn’t help but notice, though, that twenty-seven of them were women. On a hunch about the possible explanation for this lopsidedness, we extended the enrollment period and offered to start an additional covenant group just for men. Twenty men came out of the woodwork. Three men’s covenant groups were formed.

Toward the end of the first year of the program, one of the three groups came forward and asked to lead a worship service in which they could share their covenant group experience with the congregation. In the words of one member of that group, here is a taste of what they said:

“I consider myself blessed to have fallen in with such a band of brothers. Individually and collectively, week after week, the members of my covenant group have inspired me, taught me, provoked me, supported me, and loved me. Yes, we talked a lot about the spiritual life. But whatever we have learned came about, not because spirit was the subject of our meetings, but because spirit was made real in the very act of our meeting -- in the “deep community” we made.

We spent hours together, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, but always talking -- talking about men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, philosophy and politics, music and art, books and movies, success and failure, hope and fear, joy and sorrow, life and death, space and time. In those hours, in all that talking -- and often in the silences between the talking -- I have come to know that spiritual wounds are very real, that spiritual healing is indeed possible, and that a spiritual life is a potentiality awaiting me, and each of them, and each of you, in every human encounter. . . .

I have come to believe that the deep community we forged will never end, nor is it the unique product of seven specific men. It is the product of the work we covenanted to do.”

The work begins with wanting to know what religion really is, instead of settling for mass media misconceptions. It goes deeper by exploring new possibilities in the way you relate to each other – by getting to know what it means to be kindred spirits. Ask yourselves, what is it that makes us one strong body? Is it something deeper than fellowship, deeper than friendship, maybe even deeper than family? To what power might we open ourselves when we gather here to share the struggle to make meaning out of mystery?

These are questions big enough to live in – worthy of the time and talent and treasure you have brought to this place. AMEN.