

On Being a UU in the South

**A Sermon by Dick Creswell
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As many of you know, I've just completed four years as Vice-President and then President of the Mid-South District of the UUA -- the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. The duties of a district president are like those of a congregational president, except that:

- your "district congregation" is composed of all 32 UU churches + 3 emerging congregations scattered across Mississippi, Alabama, Middle & North Georgia, Middle Tennessee and the Florida Panhandle; and, except that
- instead of having a congregational minister, you have a District Executive as professional staff for what is essentially a volunteer organization; and, finally, except that
- each of the congregations that are members of your district have "congregational polity" -- that means each is autonomous and doesn't have to pay attention to anything the District President or District Executive says. On second thought, I guess that makes the analogy of the district president to a congregation president complete, since members of a congregation often don't pay any attention to the congregational president either!

Come to think of it, the position of district president is absolutely powerless and has no authority whatever -- but that position does get the occasional opportunity to take "the bully pulpit" -- which is where I find myself today as a member of High Street.

My purpose today is not to tell you about the district organization so much as to introduce you to a few of the people I've come to know in our 5-state region who are part of our extended religious community. While the district and the UUA is an association of congregations, our extended religious community is really composed of people just as High Street UU Church is composed of all of us rather than of the bricks and stained glass of the building where we meet.

As our opening words described it, a religious community -- both our High Street community and the Mid-South District community -- enlarges our vision, renews our strength, and inspires us to act together for justice. What unites us with the people of the 35 Mid-South congregations in such diverse places such as Biloxi, Mississippi; Panama City, Florida; Huntsville, Alabama; Nashville, Tennessee; and Douglasville, Georgia is our shared commitment to the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. The Seven Principles -- before the responsive reading most of us could have recalled only 2 or 3 and could now list 4 or 5 -- read as a pretty bland and vague statement of purpose. But I think, when they are translated into action by the people in our religious community and extended religious community, they become dynamic and powerful.

But I'm getting ahead of myself . . . let me begin by describing just one day out of my four years of serving in the Mid-South District. Last March 23rd, I was in Montgomery, Alabama for an annual district conference called "Church Basics" -- a Saturday of workshops for lay leaders on topics such as church finance, social justice, RE, and publicity. High Street was well represented at that meeting -- I recall that Jane Donahue, Lynn Shelley, Chris Sama, Karen Jackson, and Dorner Carmichael were there to attend or help present several different programs. Incidentally, that conference has been redesigned to make it more useful to both new and experienced church members and it will be called the Healthy Congregation Conference when it is held this October

12th in Marietta. I hope many of you will consider attending for High Street.

For the publicity workshop last March we had a special guest -- the UUA's Director of Electronic Communication, Deb Weiner. After the conference officially ended, there was a special training session given by Deb in response to a very urgent local need. But I'll have to give you a little background about some folks in Montgomery so you can understand what was going on.

The UU Fellowship of Montgomery is about the same size as High Street Church, but they have been meeting in a very different sort of facility, a low brick structure with a large all-purpose meeting room, classrooms, and offices. What strikes a visitor as strange about the building is that it has no windows. It was built in the 1960s, at a time when the Montgomery fellowship had received numerous threats due to its outspoken support of civil rights for African-Americans. The bombing of churches was a very real concern. At that time the fellowship was lay-led, and its president was Morris Dees, a lawyer known nationally now as the head of the Southern Poverty Law Center -- the group that closely monitors and attempts to bring to justice racial hate-groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations.

Montgomery's current minister is The Rev. Tracy Sprowls -- a young, single mom who came to the South from Community Church in NYC with her 7 year old son, Isaac. Tracy has continued in the activist tradition of the fellowship and, with many church members, has been publicly visible in support of the civil rights of gays and lesbians in Alabama. In early March of this year, a lesbian couple living in California, which recognizes the couples' relationship under its Domestic Partnership Act, was denied custody of the child of one of the women in an Alabama court. The Alabama Supreme Court affirmed the denial of custody for reasons ostensibly unrelated to the mother's sexual orientation, but Chief Justice Roy Moore took the opportunity to write a special concurring opinion to make it clear that his vote was motivated by a belief that lesbians are not fit to be parents. Further, Moore relied on biblical text to support his attack on the basic right of gays and lesbians to exist in our society.

Moore's opinion in In Re: DH v. HH says:

I write specially to state that the homosexual conduct of a parent . . . creates a strong presumption of unfitness that alone is sufficient justification for denying that parent custody of his or her own children or prohibiting the adoption of the children of others.

Homosexual conduct is, and has been, considered abhorrent, immoral, detestable, a crime against nature, and a violation of the laws of nature and of nature's God upon which this Nation and our laws are predicated. . . . The Courts of Alabama should continue to recognize that a homosexual lifestyle is "illegal under the laws of this state and immoral in the eyes of most of its citizens."

Moore's opinion even suggests that capital punishment is an appropriate sanction for homosexuality. He wrote: "The State carries the power of the sword, that is, the power to prohibit conduct with physical penalties, such as confinement and even execution. It must use that power to prevent the subversion of children toward this lifestyle, to not encourage a criminal lifestyle."

In claiming a legal basis for his opinion, Moore asserted that Alabama law derives from the Common Law of England and that English Common Law was, in turn, based on Natural Law. This is not an unusual formulation in American jurisprudence, but from that point forward, Moore's opinion raises serious fundamental questions for those of us who believe there is and should be a "wall of separation between church and state" erected by our Constitution's 1st Amendment prohibition of the "establishment of religion." Moore wrote:

Natural law forms the basis of the common law. Natural law is the law of nature and of nature's God as understood by men through reason, but aided by direct revelation found in the Holy Scriptures.

He then quoted from Blackstone's Commentaries, written in the middle of the 18th century, and adopted Blackstone's rationale and words as his own:

The doctrines thus delivered (through natural law) we call the revealed or divine law, and they are to be found only in the Holy Scriptures. These precepts, when revealed, are found upon comparison to be really a part of the original law of nature, as they tend in all their consequences to man's felicity.

Blackstone's reliance on the Bible as a source of civil law was appropriate in an 18th century society with an established church and with a civil law based on custom; but Justice Moore's reliance on Genesis and Leviticus as legal authority is, at best, extremely disturbing in our 21st century society with a government founded upon a written constitution that expressly forbids the establishment of religion.

Rev. Tracy Sprowls and her Montgomery congregation were quick to take issue with Moore's pointed attack on gays and lesbians as presumptively unfit parents and with his reliance on biblical text as authority for the exercise of the state's judicial power. Tracy organized a coalition of concerned citizens that placed a full page ad in the Montgomery newspaper announcing a petition drive to recall Justice Moore and organized a peaceful demonstration at the state judicial building with signs calling for "No MOORE Justice."

Shortly thereafter, during the week of the district conference last March, the Montgomery UUs received notice that they themselves would be the subject of pickets and demonstrations by the Rev. Fred Phelps -- a fundamentalist minister from Topeka, Kansas who travels the country stirring up hatred of homosexuals and those who support them. This man maintains a vitriol-filled website called "GodHatesFags.com." Phelps has become nationally known for his hateful protests characterized by aggressive personal attacks designed to provoke a violent response. At the funeral of Matthew Shepard, the young gay man beaten to death in Wyoming, Phelps held up a sign and shouted over a bullhorn that "Matthew is now burning in Hell."

In March, Phelps was on a hate campaign in the South and planned a demonstration in Montgomery in support of Justice Roy Moore. The Montgomery UUs received faxed notices from Phelps that he would bring his protesters to the Montgomery UU Church on Sunday morning, March 24, the day after the Church Basics Conference.

So, the audience for the special workshop by the UUA's Deb Weiner on how to handle such a hate-filled, aggressive protest and the expected media coverage had a very obvious and immediate importance to the people of the Montgomery fellowship. Since I was the scheduled speaker at their Sunday worship service, I have to admit I also paid extra-close attention. Deb first told us about what to expect from Fred Phelps. When she told us how Phelps has often resorted to attacks upon children -- "Little boy, don't you know your mother will burn in hell for her sick and wicked life?" -- I stole a glance at Tracy and thought of her son Isaac. It was a chilling moment.

But Deb offered strength in knowledge and know-how. When the workshop was over we all had a better idea of what to expect, who would take what role in speaking with the media, and how we would handle ourselves in a situation that we hoped would fail to materialize. We were all anxious, but resolute.

Although it was supper time when Eunice Benton and I helped Deb Weiner gather her materials and piled into my car, we decided on taking a quick pilgrimage. Selma, Alabama lies about 45 miles from Montgomery and the miles whipped by as we hurled down the blacktop highway in the blustery spring afternoon. We talked about the day's meetings, the expected events of the next day, and about events that had taken place in Selma 37 years earlier.

In 1965, the miles had not "whipped by" at 65 miles per hour, but at 2 miles per hour for the marchers who walked from Selma to Montgomery in protest of the systematic denial by the State of Alabama to its African-American citizens of their right to vote. But before the marchers had even reached their destination, they had made their point and attracted national support in their attempt. It was the events that preceded the actual march -- Bloody Sunday and the beating death of UU Minister James Reeb -- that created the political will to enact the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and that helped bring about a virtual revolution in government in the South and in the entire nation.

On our pilgrimage, Deb and I had a better tour guide than even David Halberstam's book -- we had Eunice Benton. Many of you know Eunice in her professional capacity as our Mid-South District Executive, but I am pleased today to tell you a little more about Eunice as a fellow member of our extended religious community. Eunice is a native of Mariana, Florida, where her father was, among other things, the county superintendent of schools, an elected position. Eunice comes from a long line of politicians -- including the governor of the State of Florida at the time that state seceded to join the Confederacy. She is, indeed, a daughter of the South. But her southern character is not just an accident of birth; she has a graduate degree in Southern Studies and she knows first hand, as well as from academic study, the history, literature, politics and culture of the unique region in which we live. As a "born again UU" -- by that I mean that, like me, she came to Unitarian Universalism in mid-life -- Eunice has served as president of her congregation, president of Thomas Jefferson District, and now is a member of the UU Fellowship of Oxford, Mississippi and District Executive for our Mid-South District, working in all these capacities to make the world, or our part of it, a better place.

On that Selma pilgrimage last March, Eunice recounted for me and for Deb -- a wide-eyed Massachusetts Yankee on her first trip to the South -- the story of the Selma March.

As our car approached the center of the town of Selma, the four-lane highway was lined by an assortment of run-down businesses -- gas stations, auto repair shops, used car lots and abandoned restaurants, not an inviting place to stop. But, as we approached a steel-girder bridge leading into Selma's downtown, we pulled off the highway into a small oasis of remembrance. On the verge of the Alabama River, on the Montgomery-side of the bridge, is a small park. A trail winds through the vegetation along the river with signboard memorials recalling the events of Bloody Sunday and Selma's place in civil rights history.

A chill wind had whipping up and the light was failing, but we decided to retrace the steps of the 1965 marchers over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. There was something special about that 500 yard walk that transcended the noise of the traffic, the 37 years that had intervened, and the fact that we had to first cross toward Selma before beginning to follow in the marchers' footsteps. Somehow, it was easy to imagine myself in the midst of a large throng of hopeful, purposeful people -- beginning a peaceful walk that was to turn to chaos as they topped the crest of the round-backed bridge and saw what awaited them: scores of state troopers, under orders from Gov. George Wallace to stop the march with any force possible short of murder, and dozens of Sheriff Jim Clark's deputized vigilantes, with night sticks and axe handles, ready to literally beat the marchers until they abandoned the idea of equal rights for blacks. What courage it must have taken to walk forward

toward that sea of armed men!

From the bridge, Eunice led us to Brown Chapel AME Church, the center of the protest movement in Selma and the gathering spot for the marchers. An historical marker in front of the red brick church recites the events of 1965 and the names of the key people involved, among them the Rev. James Reeb.

Jim Reeb was one of dozens of UU ministers and lay people who responded to the televised footage of Bloody Sunday and to Martin Luther King's urgent call to church people to come to Selma in support of civil rights. Rev. Reeb, Rev. Clark Olson, and Rev. Orloff Miller were the three UU ministers attacked by white thugs as they walked past the Silver Moon Café on March 9, the Tuesday evening after Bloody Sunday. Reeb died from the beating on Thursday and two days later the UUA Board of Trustees adjourned their quarterly meeting in Boston and all 30 of them traveled to Selma to join the march. On the day that 3,000 marchers walked unmolested across the bridge and on to Montgomery, over 200 of the 500 white clergy present were Unitarian Universalists.

The Silver Moon Café was located on the edge of Selma's warehouse district adjacent to the black residential community. In the 1960s, the Café served mostly working class white folks. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had officially ended segregation in hotels and restaurants, federal law had not yet come to Selma, and the Silver Moon was a hangout for segregationists. Today, the restaurant building is still there, but now it is a black-owned, community restaurant known as the Strong #2 -- that is, Strong's Restaurant #2. Eunice and I had a good time introducing our Yankee friend, Deb, to the menu. We settled on catfish & hush puppies, fried okra and cheese grits with pecan pie for dessert. When we left the Strong #2, we saw that the side of the restaurant building is now covered by a mural that commemorates the events of March, 1965. The face of James Reeb is featured prominently, along with those of John Lewis and Jimmy Lee Jackson, a young black man shot to death by police in a voting rights demonstration two weeks earlier.

James Reeb was from Boston, a slight young man who wore glasses -- his face on the mural is the essence of what high school kids in the 60s would have called a "nerd"-- the only details that distinguish Reeb's likeness from a Mad Magazine cartoon of a nerd is the absence of a pocket protector and a slide rule. At least that's what I would've thought if I'd seen him in 1965, when I was a high school senior concerned above all else about being cool. As a southern high school kid, to the degree I was aware of the civil right movement, I thought it wasn't about me. Jim Reeb was just 28, but already he knew the truth of the words Martin Luther King wrote in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Reeb never made a decision to die "to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person" or to "promote the use of the democratic process." But he did.

Still, I think Reeb's death is beside the point. More important than his death, to me, is his awareness as a young man of the importance of standing up for the rights of others when he himself enjoyed all the privileges our nation offers to the well-fed, the educated, the employed, the insured, the annointed -- all the privileges I took for granted as a member of the senior class of a public, segregated high school.

This past March, Rev. Clark Olsen re-visited the site of Reeb's murder and his own attack, as part of a civil rights tour for UU ministers sponsored by the Mid-South District. He was asked to reflect on what he, Miller, and Reeb had accomplished by responding to Rev. King's call for church people to come to Selma. He began: "To have been connected to that change in American history through almost happenstance was an enormous . . ." but he couldn't finish the sentence as tears welled in his eyes and his voice choked with emotion. He collected himself, then said: "Every time you choose to stand for something that's right, enormous good could come from it. Perhaps something

profound, deep and wonderful could happen.”

Just two weeks ago, I met with Susan Ford and a group of interesting people in Cookeville, Tennessee. Susan is a veterinarian who “discovered” Unitarian Universalism about six years ago -- another born again UU -- and she and her husband recently moved to Cookeville, a small city that has never had a UU congregation. She has gathered a group of folks who – if they succeed – will be the founding members of the UU Congregation of Cookeville. At present they’re writing bylaws, learning how to put on a worship service, finding Sunday speakers, holding their first pledge canvass, and looking for new members. They’re busy people, doing everything a church does, and doing it for the first time.

But Susan’s excellent leadership of these church-founding activities isn’t what she really wants to be doing. She confided that she’s anxious to get the congregation organized so she can get involved in more important things -- in social justice work in and around the town of Cookeville. She and her fellow founders were worried that if they spoke out on controversial issues that they would be regarded and, perhaps, disregarded as kooks.

My advice to her -- and to her congregation -- was not to defer the social justice work. I said, “Go do what you feel needs to be done now. The bylaws will get written by and by.” I said that my own attraction to my congregation was based in large part on the fact that this group of people at High Street are actively involved in walking their talk -- in enhancing the education offered to children in inner-city schools, in feeding and clothing the hungry and the homeless, in supporting Macon’s black community in preserving and celebrating their equal rights as citizens of our city and our nation, in demonstrating pride in Macon’s gay and lesbian community, and in declaring its unanimous support of the Creek Indian Nation’s desire to protect their ancient homelands from highway development. I told her that there were plenty of churches with good bylaws in Cookeville, but only by acting on their convictions would the UU group find a real purpose together and, in the process, find more like-minded people than they had yet reached.

The Cookeville group took great courage from the knowledge that a small group of committed UUs meeting in a bank basement in Macon in 1988 found a way to both buy a church building and hire a minister. They are inspired to hear about the outstanding social responsibility activities of our congregation; and they’re not alone.

This summer’s Peacemakers’ Camp was attended by the minister and DRE from the Athens UU church, trying to learn how Jane Donahue and the High Street crew make it work. I have often said it elsewhere, but I’d like to say in this place that I am proud to be in the same congregation with Jane Donahue, who is now taking her Peacemakers program on the road -- she is scheduled to be the Sunday speaker at the Columbus, GA UU Fellowship on August 25. Folks all across the district are inspired by our Peacemakers story. And we at High Street can take courage and inspiration from the actions of our sisters and brothers in Montgomery, and in Cookeville, and in other UU communities of faith all across the South.

By the way, Fred Phelps didn’t show up at the Montgomery UU Church the Sunday morning I spoke there. He did conduct a sidewalk demonstration the next day in downtown Montgomery showing support for Justice Moore’s attack on gays and lesbians. According to the Montgomery newspaper, his pro-hate, pro-Moore demonstrators were outnumbered 6 to 1 by UUs and other Montgomery folks who turned out to “Just say NO to hate” and to advocate “No Moore Justice.”

I think we folks in the South -- whether we grew up here or just arrived -- have some unique challenges and opportunities that go with being Unitarian Universalists. Most southern folks don’t know us, have never heard of us -- and that presents both a challenge and an opportunity: a

challenge because we want them to know about us / and an opportunity because we can present to them what we want them to know about us. And the best way to do that is simply by doing what we UUs do best -- working to make the world a better place.

I love many things about the history, literature, people and culture of the region we live in; I would like to change many other things. I know that I am in a religious community -- here at High Street and in the Mid-South District -- of folks who will not just join me, but lead me, in standing up for what is right.

So may it be.

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