

Future Present

Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris

February 2, 2014

Reading – excerpts from the sermon by the Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern for the Service of the Living Tradition, General Assembly 201. Rev. Southern serves our congregation in Summit NJ. Here is her take, and it is one I share, on the future present . . . and a religious revolution heading our way.

. . . we are standing on the edge preparing to leap into a world beyond what we know and trust. . . Diana Butler Bass, professor of religious studies and writer, calls this the great turning. . . Mainstream denominations are on the decline. The nones, those who identify themselves as having no religious affiliation, they're on the rise. Increasing numbers of people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. More and more families . . . are made up of people of mixed religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. And in the rising generation of adults 18 to 35, these trends are growing fastest. When asked why they reject religion. . . (they) say. . . they associate it with words like narrow, judgmental, homophobic. . . They bring to their lives an ethic informed by a world that has grown smaller and more clearly interdependent . . . where differences of race and gender and sexual orientation blend and brush up against each other all the time. Where they gather, they want professed truths to be visible and in action. They are tired of religion getting in the way, rather than paving it. In this future, increasingly shaped by the radical democracy and full and open participatory influence of the internet, if people don't find a community they like, they will make their own in one great flash mob of religiosity.

The religious wave . . . washing over us is made up of people who have no innate love of institutions. And why would they? In the last decade alone, we have watched institutions launch war against Iraq without proof of weapons of mass destruction. Institutions allowed bundling of subprime mortgages that collapsed the economy into which many people entered the first time looking for jobs that were not there. And religious institutions . . . fought and split over the rejection of gay and lesbian clergy. And. . . protected priests over children.

What is in is communities alive to spirit, (where) people gather to question, doubt, struggle, live with ambiguity, serve directly, who are ecologically minded and affirming of pluralism across all real and supposed differences. These are the

. . . communities (to) which this growing cohort of adults will . . . offer allegiance. Perhaps under your breath (you're) singing, we are the ones, we are the ones we've been waiting for . . . We love questions and doubts too, don't we? Deeds over creeds, baby, you want to shout out. We live pluralism and interfaith dialogues, some of us in our own homes. . . .Some of our . . . ministers and lay people, let alone friends, lovers, children, are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer folk. We get this wave of the future. We get this age of spirit because we've been wrestling to live it for decades, for centuries. But that doesn't necessarily mean that our work of preparation is done.

Sermon: Future Present

Never mind that it's Ground Hog Day AND Super Bowl Sunday. Just never you mind. At least for now. Today is Annual Meeting Sunday! A time when the words "Wake now my vision of ministry clear . . . mingle my calling with all who will share. . ." are just right. Just right for this time of future present.

Now I confess to you I love meetings like this. I love them because I am an institutionalist. I believe that our coming together in congregations, and congregations coming together in association matters. The reason is simple. I can be more and we can be more ***together*** than any of us can be alone. More just. More caring. More hopeful. More accountable. More whole. Even when I am compelled to kick the institution in the shins or worse, I value what our coming together makes possible. And when we gather to make important decisions, to help the institution thrive . . . we have an opportunity *to live into more*.

In about an hour we will reconvene here in the sanctuary to do the "business" of the congregation.

We will take time to remember those who died during the past year, to remember they helped make this congregation what it is.

We will take time to review what has been done in the past year . . . as we hear and read reports of ministries and programs, of finances and facilities. .we tell the story of ministry shared, and remind ourselves of groundwork laid for the future.

We will take time to adopt a budget – in that moment we transform financial stewardship into ministries of many kinds.

We will take time to elect leaders who, with our blessing, will act on behalf of the congregation in matters of ministry and administration.

We will take time to thank leaders who are retiring – it is an awesome responsibility you’ve held and you have made a difference for us all.

To mingle our callings. To follow Robert’s Rules. To participate in the democratic process . . . for the express purpose of making more possible than any of us can do or be alone.

Take a look at the back page of our Order of Service. You’ll see the word WELCOME at the top of the page and below – in the second paragraph – you will find these words: “We come together as a community of people to deepen our spiritual lives and to live in right relationships with our fellow human beings and with all creation.” A good description of our shared calling, of our aspirations, of the more we want to be.

To deepen our spiritual lives. To live in right relationship. With our fellow human beings. With all creation.

Today as we hear reports and vote on matters of congregational business, be mindful of that promise. Be mindful, as well, of the edge on which we stand, the edge of future present, the world beyond what we know and trust. Leaping into the unknown can be a bit messy . . . Come on and lean over the edge with me . . . take a look. . . .

- What’s changing in this city, this region, and for the people here? What of development here on North Main. What are the impacts of an expanding health care/medical presence? What is going on with the many academic institutions in the city? Who are their students and faculty? Who are the immigrant communities? How are they doing? What is the ethnic, cultural and racial diversity around this place? Is it changing? And what is the landscape of employment like these days? How is the region’s economy doing in recovery? What is First Unitarian’s ministry to the city, the region and its people?
- “The religious wave washing over us is made up of people who have no innate love of institutions.” Unitarian Universalists are a reasonably flexible lot. At times we need to use some of our flexibility to take risks, to experiment – to try out new and different things in the institutions we’ve

come to love – or at least accept - just as they are. This “great turning” as Diana Butler Bass called it, is such a time. Experiment with programs. Experiment with new ways to be involved in the community. Talk about the meanings of things. Stop doing some things. Start others. Celebrate the victories. Laugh with and learn from the face plant failures. Experiment. Be open to new and different ministry. “Throw open the doors” and let folks see an institution relevant to life and to lives.

- We Unitarian Universalists love questions and doubts, deeds over creeds. We live pluralism and diversity and interfaith dialogues, some of us in our own homes. We get this wave of the future. But that doesn't necessarily mean our work of preparation is done. Our laurels – the good things we've already done – are important and necessary. And they are not sufficient. Resting on them is not an option. What now? Renew the commitment to be a welcoming congregation. Be a welcoming **and** inclusive congregation. Be a full in/all out partner to Jericho Road. To the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Be crazy generous to those organizations who are recipients of the 50/50 offering. Be a spirit filled community that anchors life here on North Main. And that brightly lit steeple shining in the night sky – imagine it as a beacon to those looking for a path to their spiritual home. Be that home!

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard wrote “churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.” It is madness, she says, to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets!

And ushers - listen up! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares! They should lash us to our pews.” . . .

Why? Because we want the Spirit we sing to, the spirit of the free and prophetic church, the spirit of ministry to the future present, we want that Spirit to show up here, to **be** here, to be **more** here.

So let's sing to that Spirit one **more** time.