***Is This a Faith for the Few?***

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Durango, CO

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**READING :** Mark Harris, *Elite: Uncovering Classicism in Unitarian Universalist History*

Unitarian Universalists often assume that UU congregations belong in wealthy suburbs where the grass is greener, and the children go to high-achieving schools. This assumption exists alongside the half-defensive, half-optimistic ideology of genuine diversity…. We say we aspire to be democratic and inclusive, but we are comforted by our litany of influential and prestigious forebears. Many Unitarian Universalists are torn between who is actually sitting in our pews and who we wish was sitting there.

Class is a hard subject to talk about because many of us grew up believing that American has no class structure or that most everyone is middle class…Yet in many ways class is the most important predictor of what kind of opportunities someone will have in life… Unitarian Universalists say they want to work toward greater equality by creating a multicultural and multiracial faith. But how do we do that with respect to class if our racial and cultural diversity all comes from the same socio-economic group? … Most of us do not personally know people who live in poverty. If like attracts like, then reaching out to different socio-economic populations might mean that we would have to change and adapt. Can we do that? Can liberal religion appeal to all classes of people?

As a minister, I have learned that rich and poor, educated by traditional measures or not, all have religious needs that we can respond to. I believe that at the heart Unitarian Universalists long to have a faith that learns from all kinds of people, rich and poor. I never want to feel there is anyone, including myself, who does not belong.

**Sermon: “Is This a Faith for the Few?”**

In support of the February worship theme of Justice and Equity, as well as this being Black History month, today let’s consider class and classism and its corollary theme of racial justice. Class and classicism are related to a range of diversity issues. Today’s final hymn (#113: “Where is Our Holy Church?”) notes that in our Holy Church, “race and class unite.” We’ll explore more about that hymn at the end of the service.

Diversity lies at the core of liberal religion. A liberal way contrasts with fundamentalism, which asserts that there is only one path to religious truth. In explaining Unitarian Universalist theology, we often note the theological variety among UUs, as well as the divergence from orthodox religious traditions. In addition to theological diversity, Unitarian Universalists strive to practice social diversity on many levels, welcoming all persons who honor UU values, regardless of their social categories as defined by race, sexual orientation, ableness, and more, which they represent.

Respect for diversity means that Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have long stood on the side of normalizing that which lies out of the mainstream and bringing the margins closer into the center. Just within professional ministry, there are many examples of supporting social margins. In the mid-nineteenth century we celebrated the first women in ministry, such as Olympia Brown. African Americans were ordained to our ministries long before the Civil Rights era. In the 1970s we supported the first gay and lesbian ministers. More recently we have been proactive in settling transgender ministers. The UUA’s program “Beyond Categorical Thinking,” which many of you attended last October as part of this congregation’s ministerial search, is an excellent workshop for assessing a congregation’s attitudes toward diversity in ministry, to work through unrealized or unconscious biases toward ministers**.** I hope that each of you who attended that workshop came away more aware of any implicit biases you’ve been carrying about ministry and ministers.

Institutional diversity

Indeed, UUs support for diversity has been strong, especially in matters of race, sexual orientation and gender identity, re-enforced all the more since 2020, when the Commission on Institutional Change developed the publication and curriculum *Widening the Circle of Concern.* During this jam-packed interim ministry, we haven’t had time together to pursue the “Widening” adult education curriculum, but I continue to urge you to keep in on your bucket list of adult faith formation activities going forward.

Today I want to examine one of the thornier topics in Unitarian Universalists’ palette of diversities: the topic of class, defined as “economic stratification created by wealth and privilege.” I expect that issues around class are the least talked about, perhaps even the least realized among Unitarian Universalists. A 2001 report, *The Meaning of Membership,* addressed the “disparity between the ideal of pluralism in free faith and the reality of uniformity in most congregations.” In the past several years UUs have begun to discuss class more openly, but we have a long way to go to practice the pluralism we promote in theory. In my view, class is the biggest factor limiting numerical growth in this denomination as a whole as well as in individual congregations. I hope this service inspires you to expand your lens on classicism here at UUFD.

It’s a bit ironic, that class remains so unspoken at church when in society at large class increasingly is defining of American society, delineating the rich and poor sections of town, our brands of dress and cars, where or if we take vacations, where or if we receive higher education, and more. Books about class are hitting best seller lists. About five years ago a new history of “white trash” examines the four- hundred-year history of class in America. Around the same time, the meteoric popularity of J.D. Vance’s memoire *Hillbilly Elegy*, a story of the poor white working class in America, catapulted its author to the United States Senate. About to be released is a movie called *Origin* by Ava Duvernay, based on the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, which compares India’s caste system with social stratification in Nazi Germany and oppression of Black people in the United States.

Sixty years ago, Martin Luther King described Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in the week in the United State. Unitarian Universalists are no exception to this generalization. While UU theology, mission, and values are strongly grounded on diversity, the reality of people who participate in this liberal faith does not represent the diversity we say we promote. You may have heard statistics about Unitarian Universalists. We are overall, highly educated, pursuing professional careers, in the upper brackets of income and property ownership, never mind among the lowest giving in percentage of income to the church.

Do you recognize any of the following features here at UUFD? For instance, how easily conversations can turn to topics of jobs and education and vacation. Some congregations call orientation classes “UU 101,” a clear reference to an academic tradition. The fellowship movement of the 1950s, which accounted for the seeding of many lay-led congregations called “fellowships,” intentionally chose university towns. Additionally, there used to be a habit in many congregations, particularly in New England, to close in the summer, because any self-respecting congregant goes to Cape Cod for three months, where indeed the churches thrive all summer long. Unitarian Universalists prefer National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting System TV, and we never shop at Wal-Mart. Our parking lots are filled with Priuses and Subarus. Although things are improving, our annual national meeting, General Assembly, is not really a representative meeting, available mainly to those with financial means and enough time off to attend. Many churches are located in the “right” areas of town, sometimes on that woody acreage on the outskirts, not likely seen by average passersby, especially people without cars. Even for those in cars, there is a good chance of missing the small, pale signage, if present at all, locating the church building. I wonder: would this congregation consider posting signage on Maine Ave in Durango pointing to the this fellowship? One congregation I served advertised on an electronic billboard coming into town, and recently I heard a radio promo --- on NPR, of course --- for one of our Denver congregations.

It is rare that congregations take steps toward diversity like the church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania did. Several decades ago, this congregation moved to a woodsy building in the suburbs. Then a few years ago they created a second campus in an existing church building in downtown Harrisburg. One congregation I’ve served remained downtown intentionally, which, as I understood it, accounted for a higher degree of class and racial diversity than in many other congregations where I have been interim ministry.

Still, I expect a story by Unitarian Universalist Doug Murder, published in 2007 in *UU World,* the magazine of this denomination,is all too common. Muder grew up in a blue-collar family in a small town in rural Illinois. His father was lucky enough to have a full-time job with steady income: he worked in a cattle feed factory, which meant that he came home most nights smelling of fish oil. His father’s Lutheran church promoted the literal truth of the Bible and belief in a personal God. As an adult, Muder moved to New England and joined a UU church in Boston, but he regretted that he rarely saw people like his father at church. Frankly though, he wasn’t sure who his parents would talk to. Once Muder offered a lay-led service at the UU church back home, when his dad came to hear him, but dad never went back again.

I have a friend in Texas with a similar story. Kathy was an active lay leader, a good organizer, and a lovely human being. She told me about being invited to a dinner at a national General Assembly for volunteers on the planning committee, and when one of her dining partners asked her what she did for a living, and she replied, “I’m a hairdresser,” Kathy’s conversation partner abruptly shifted her focus to others at the table. Kathy said to me, “I should have said, ‘and I’m darn good hairdresser too.’”

Unitarian Universalism has a class problem, asserts Doug Muder. While basic values say we stand for all people, usually we are standing with people just like us. His father found more welcome in conservative churches. Perhaps people who have spent their entire lives working in the same factory don’t need multiple choices when it comes to finding how to live a good life. They want assurance that there is one source of good in the world. Muder asks, “Does free religion allow us to speak about conditions that take us into darker, less respectable human conditions? Does free religion allow us to speak about evil? Is liberal religion a faith for only the few?”

History of Classism

You have often heard me say that the present is defined and shaped by the past. This applies to the habit of classism in Unitarian Universalism. Modern UUs come by classism honestly, as demonstrated by my colleague, Rev. Mark Harris, who wrote *Elite: Uncovering Classicism in Unitarian Universalist History,* published by the UUA press Skinner House. *Elite* became a UU best-seller and comes with a study guide. I recommend it as an excellent resource for adult education programming here at UUFD.

Rev. Harris was motivated to write this book from personal experience. He grew up in a blue-collar family. Although he was born in New England, he did not attend Harvard University for seminary, and he has served largely blue-collar congregations in working class towns. Now retired, he was minister in Watertown, Massachusetts, when he wrote this book. Throughout his life as a UU minister, he has been acutely aware that his own class identity has been outside many of the prevailing norms of many people in the denomination I cited earlier. He also writes about others’ experiences of not fitting stereotyped ideas of a UU. For example, his brother- in-law visited a Unitarian Universalist congregation. In social time, when this man identified his profession as carpenter, his conversation partner asked why he would want to visit that church, based on the assumption that a carpenter had nothing in common with the culture of the congregation. The UU member was not even willing to hear that the man was college educated and a fifth-generation Unitarian. Clearly, conversations like this are not putting into practice our principles of diversity and welcoming.

In his book, Harris reminds us of the history of class privilege among Unitarians. Always known as liberals and heretics, by the mid-nineteenth century Unitarians in New England exercised much political and economic power in political and educational leadership. Haris cites how early in the century some farmers attended Boston congregations, but they were gradually replaced by merchants, manufacturers, and professional classes. Driven by Emerson’s ethic of self-reliance, Unitarians were responsible for many important cultural institutions in New England, but they kept some of these private. For instance, when Lydia Maria Child advocated for rights for African Americans, a private Boston library revoked her reading privileges. On the other hand, some Unitarians started ministry to the poor, the most famous example being the at-large ministry --- today we call it “community ministry” --- begun by Rev. Joseph Tuckerman in 1826. A large cadre of volunteers helped Boston’s families in need. Tuckerman’s ministry continues today as the UU Urban Ministry, based in Roxbury, MA. One of the most important breakthroughs in Harris’ report of Unitarian elitism was their fairly widespread support of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century.

In some ways Universalists weren’t that much better at avoiding classicism. True, in the nineteenth century members of Universalist congregations tended to be more rural, and of less education and wealth than Unitarians. Still there were many influential urban Universalists. They were also not free of many ugly influences of capitalism. While Universalist P.T. Barnum turned much of his wealth into serving the people, the inhumane work environment created by Universalist railroad magnate George Pullman was responsible for a terrible strike in 1894 in which many workers were killed. Universalists also promoted Emersonian self-reliance, particularly through education. Nearly fifteen Universalist colleges and academies opened in the nineteenth century, such as Tufts University in Boston, Lombard College in Illinois, and St Lawrence College in upstate New York.

According to Rev. Harris, by the end of the nineteenth century, in terms of class, Unitarians and Universalists increasingly resembled one another. A newspaper in 1899 reported that “You could not tell the difference between the two, except that Universalists were more interested in theology and things spiritual. A conservative Universalist might be uncomfortable around a radical Unitarian.”

Classism in Unitarian Universalism today

Harris is right that this history of classism remains with us today. He is also right that more self-awareness of habits of classism can help us move beyond this history. We are starting to speak up about its negative influences. Many denominational leaders are looking to the future and asking, “Who is this free faith for, who can it serve?” For example, there have been many initiatives to make General Assembly more accessible. In June 2024, once again this will be an online only national meeting, lowering costs of registration and eliminating costs for travel. I encourage any of you to consider attending. What you learn and experience will help you welcome a new minister. Further, many congregations are developing hands-on connections with lower income and homeless populations. A congregation I once served opened its doors to the homeless overnight during cold weather, staying over with the visitors as welcoming hosts.

I call each of us --- myself included --- to reflect on how we communicate habits and messages of class and classicism. Are you sensitive to these habits? Have you ever been on the receiving end of habits which convey that you are not in sync with experiences of those around you? Are you willing to take brave, bold steps, so to embrace radical differences in congregational life, or in your personal lives?

I’m not at all suggesting that we not be ourselves at church. What I am suggesting is that we heighten sensitivity to conversations which may not be inclusive of everyone present at the table or in the room, to avoid the story of the carpenter or the hairdresser or Doug Muder’s father. I don’t know the experience of growing up financially privileged, so I tend to be sensitive to stories from others who have not lacked material advantages. However, my family believed in educational privilege, and I often check myself about how I embrace the range of educational experience among people I meet and serve. I strive to not assume that everyone else is like me, and to hope that others will also be vigilant in not assuming that my experiences of class are just like theirs.

This matters, that Unitarian Universalism can be a faith for all, not because we want a larger membership for the sake of grander numbers but because this free faith can change lives for the better. This free faith is good for the world. As Rev. Harris wrote, “We must begin the world anew with all kinds of people, not just with the social circle we create…. We must practice this faith in ever widening circles if it is to be truly transformational.” Isn’t transformation one of the important reasons we come to church? In the words of our final hymn, let us remain vigilant to how “race and class unite.”

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