

**“The Paradox in Liberal Religion: Self and/or Community”**

**UU Church in Reston**

**January 10, 2016**

**Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman**

*The liberal approach to religion presents a number of dilemmas or paradoxes. Perhaps most compelling is the tension of creating communities made up of individualistic, self-reliant people who may be suspicious or questioning of organization, leadership, and hierarchy. Let’s consider the “both/and” of this tension in congregational life and how too much preference for uncertainty can impede growth.*

**Reading: excerpts from “Self Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson**

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today.

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all mean, that is genius.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.

I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let the words be (gazetted and) ridiculous henceforward. Instead of the gong for dinner, let us hear a whistle from the Spartan fife. Let us never bow and apologize more.

It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views/

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation.

**Sermon: “Doubt and Paradox in Liberal Faith: Self and/or Community”**

Last Sunday we welcomed a new year in worship. I also explained our plan for the next few months, as we explore several core qualities of liberal religion. In January the worship theme is Doubt. If doubt is core to free faith, we may wonder where we find authority for our values and beliefs: we’ll consider Religious Authority in February, and in March we’ll consider the theme of God by Many Names.

I also clarified that while there are many facets to ‘doubt,’ I’m focusing here on doubt as open-ended-ness, which invites questioning and critical inquiry. I suggest that being open-ended

contrasts with a more fundamentalist, non-questioning approach to religion, which comes with fixed answers about intimate and ultimate questions of existence and doesn't invite alternate viewpoints. I hope you'll consider that doubt has many positive aspects, that it carries with it a certain energy as it invites on-going exploring of life's perplexing questions, on-going searching. Indeed, liberal faith is a faith driven by doubt and uncertainty, and Unitarian Universalism perhaps among the more "doubt-full" approaches to being religious. Religious practice grounded in doubt and uncertainty usually asks more of us participants than do more fundamentalist religions, yet I expect few in this room would want it any other way.

Last week I also suggested that we probably don't want our religious life constantly steeped in doubt, because deep exploration of religious truth often requires some degree of trust and faith: that is, the capacity to believe in or to give over to that which is not totally provable. I referred to Ralph Waldo Emerson to illustrate someone who had many reasons to doubt both religious habits and inherent goodness in living, but he never gave up faith in the capacity to find the holy.

Last week we also considered four of the more definitive features of liberal religion and liberal theology: 1) Influenced by late eighteenth-century rationalism, the liberal way is informed by current scientific and cultural knowledge and practices. 2) Because it comes out of the world, liberalism also calls us to work in the world, in justice-making. 3) Because a liberal way is influenced by current human engagement, the lines between liberal religion and culture can often blur. 4) Consequently, liberal religion can be filled with ambiguity, paradox, and tension. This quality of paradox may be one of the greatest challenges in liberal congregational life. There is far less ambiguity in fundamentalism.

### Ralph Waldo Emerson

It is this fourth feature of liberal faith that I want to explore today: how to cultivate a healthy acceptance of paradox, in our personal lives, in our communities, and especially in congregational life. The particular aspect of paradox I want to focus on today is the tension between the individual and the community. Let me give you my viewpoint here at the outset: in the liberal way, in our organizations, endeavors, and congregations, we often give inordinate preference to the individual at the expense of community. Liberalism connotes the acceptance of a variety of viewpoints or opinions, but often that honoring of the individual prevents the liberal agenda from being as effective or influential as it might be. In contrast to liberalism, the more conservative or fundamentalist mindset often creates much efficient community action or positioning.

Last week I was intentional to remind you about Emerson because I knew that today I would reference one of his more well-known writings, his essay "Self Reliance," to illustrate this theme of paradox between individual and community. There is some paradox simply in our regarding Emerson as one of the important fathers of Unitarian Universalism, even though ministers frequently reference him and his voluminous writing. He came from a long line of Harvard-trained ministers, which provided him the privilege --- the networking --- to be called as minister of a prominent Boston church while still in his 20s, but he quit ministry three years later. He was consumed with doubt over what he regarded as empty church forms and lifeless preaching: he referred to church as a mausoleum: "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching," he said. He didn't stop having faith in the presence of God in his life: he just

couldn't find God at church. With other Boston philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, Emerson was influenced by German Romanticism, which emphasized emotion over reason. This group became known as Transcendentalists

Indeed, Emerson may not have been cut out for ministry. He was a solitary figure.. He didn't build friendships easily. He said the ideal community was two like-minded people walking together in silence in the woods. Each human alone is sincere, he said: once a second person comes in to the picture, hypocrisy begins. He liked the notion of social reform, but hated reformers: he thought reform should happen within the individual, not within the social systems in which they lived. He was frustrated with the emerging Unitarian denomination, founded in 1825. After abandoning the ministry, Emerson gained much fame as a writer and lecturer. He toured the entire country. I'm sure he enjoyed a much more financially lucrative lifestyle than if he'd remained a minister.

Still, it's always seemed a paradox to me that one of the people we look to as a founder of Unitarian Universalism was so anti-church: not anti-religion, but anti-church. That paradox is even more profound in that, if we know one thing about Emerson, it is often his advice about Self Reliance, especially his line about "Consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds." Nineteenth-century Unitarians had many other compelling reasons to learn from Emerson, and modern Unitarian Universalists are true beneficiaries of his wisdom, but not if we know him only for his call to self-reliance and take his advice about self-reliance out of context. Here in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, proponents of modern liberal religion do well to move beyond unquestioning acceptance of the legacy of this influential thinker .

### Shadow Side of Emerson

There is a shadow side to Emerson's advice about self-reliance. I believe this and so do many of my colleagues, including the late Forrest Church, who published his opinions during the birthday year of 2003. There are actually several facets to this Emersonian shadow: for one, many moderns have extracted Emerson's words about self-reliance to satisfy their own need for authority about independent actions. For another, many have mis-interpreted what Emerson actually meant in the context of American religious and social life of the early nineteenth century. A clearer understanding of Emerson's self-reliance helps us live into the paradox of the individual and the community.

As to extracting Emerson's words for our own purposes, his call for self-reliance does not mean only 'be yourself.' It really does not mean 'do your own thing.' Yet that's how he is often invoked by anti-establishment folks in our congregations who think that in coming to a 'free' religion --- perhaps after breaking away from fundamentalism --- that there are no rules, no guidelines, no standards. Emersonian self-reliance is often expressed as the notion that in Unitarian Universalism, you don't have to believe anything, or you can do whatever you want. This is blatantly not correct: not a correct reading of Emerson, not a correct understanding of the liberal religious community.

We should also place his advice about the hobgoblins of little minds into appropriate historical context. In promoting self-reliance, he was trying to move his readers beyond what he regarded as unhealthy conformity to social standards as they stood forty or fifty years after American

independence. Especially in religious practice, he didn't want people to lose sight of their own responsibility to democratic ideals. Emerson wanted to challenge a mechanistic interpretation of religion among those who believed that God had set the world in motion and then detached from interacting with humans. That way of doing religion was indeed "corpse-cold," to use Emerson's phrase, full of empty ritual but not much personal expression, with a God detached from human experience. Influenced by German philosophers like Friedrich Schleiermacher who said he knew God existed because he felt God, Emerson likewise came to understand the religious experience as something one felt. Thus religious experience came from within each individual, not from some external, abstract institution. Emerson believed that each person carries the divine within. That's why Emerson promoted self-reliance.

### Emerson Keeps Unitarian Universalism Adolescent

Even when we interpret Emerson's writings correctly, we should also realize that free faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to move beyond Emersonian Self-Reliance. Grounding liberal theology on self-reliance in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have been useful. It may also have been helpful in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century --- especially during the "me decade" of the 1980s -- when the Unitarian Universalist Association was young, in its first decades of existence. But it's time to move beyond. In the 2003 Emerson birthday essay I referred to earlier, Rev. Church argued that continuing to live too fully in Emerson's shadow of self-reliance will keep Unitarian Universalism from growing up, from becoming all that we can and must be for the world. He argued that over-emphasis on Emersonian focus on the individual will keep this denomination stuck in adolescence.

Today this country and this denomination are in much different places than they were back in Emerson's day. Today the compelling criteria is not individualism but interdependence. Rev. Church asserted this thirteen years ago and I suggest that the imperative for interdependence is even more compelling today, in this denomination, in this country, in this modern world so fractured by suspicion of The Other. Only when free religion will fully and authentically move beyond the influence of the anti-institutionalists, the renegades, the individuals who think that the rules don't apply to them, will we be able to bond together to create an effective presence with any hope of bringing substantive change to this hurting world.

### Examine the Tension Between Individual and Community

Think on your own adolescence, or adolescent persons around you .... Think on how adolescence was that time marked by searching for internal self-definition, searching for a path to maturity, searching for what we want to be when we grow up. I'll leave it for each of you, in your own way, to decide where you are on the continuum of growing up ....

Religious denominations and community organizations can experience adolescence just as individual do. I agree with Rev. Church. In my ministry to date, I have often experienced inordinate preference for the individual at the expense of the community. I'm not trying to suggest that people walk around quoting "Self-Reliance," or carry pocket books of the complete works of Emerson, but I do believe that that essay and Emerson more generally received inordinate attention during the formative early years of Unitarian Universalism in the mid-twentieth-century. Individualism in congregations is manifests in habits like: 1) a single loud individual dominating habits in congregational life, or 2) several individuals making independent

and conflicting decisions about congregational practices and then bumping heads with one another when their plans are in conflict, or 3) hyper-cautiousness about placing limits on renegade individuals living outside community and denominational values. I do find it perplexing, that people seeking religious community join congregations, but then have minimal commitment to or engagement in the congregation. Isn't connections with others core to the meaning of religion: "re-ligio." Gathering together to share common experiences of "re-ligio" occurred as far back as the early Christian church. In the modern church, coming together with others is an imperative for justice-making: it is hard to change the world by oneself. Effective religious institutions require the paradox of the individual and the community, coming together.

### Mission is one expression of community

One of the most important tools congregations have to remind everyone about this partnering of individual and community is through the concept of mission: remember that mission means "purpose," our reason for existing. This congregation knows well what I'm speaking of: you recently held small-group cottage meetings to discern together the mission of UUCR as you move forward in your search for your next settled minister. You identified a new mission statement, which is printed in your order of service, and, by the way, will appear prominently on the new UUCR website, soon to be unveiled. You identified that:

**The mission of this church is to be an inclusive ethical and spiritual community in which we strive to live our values and make the world a better place.**

The point of these conversations about mission was not to come up with a catching, pithy message to promote on letterhead stationery. Instead, the point was to understand what it means to be mission-based, to be a congregation in which your first priority is about the good of the whole, not the needs or preferences of individuals. Of course, it's important to be your own person, exercise your own self-reliance in following a path for spiritual growth, or in informing yourself about a current social justice project, or in making decisions about stewardship --- a topic you will discuss during the Second Hour forum. Still, when you are mission-based, you consider what is best for the good of the whole, and if your individual view differs, you'll cooperate and support, not protest and undermine. This is what Rev Church meant by moving beyond adolescence.

In approximately fourteen weeks this religious community will probably take its most important step into maturity to date, when you vote to call your next settled minister. An amazing, wonderful adventure lies ahead for you: I know you are ready for this new phase of your life. You are a respected, mature UU congregation here in northern Virginia. Most likely during the course of that new ministry, this congregation will also celebrate its fiftieth birthday, in 2020. Fifty years, an awesome marker of maturity as a congregation of liberal faith which understands well how to draw on the heritage of liberals ministers and theologians who have come before you such as Emerson and Church, who have called us to understand how to live in the paradox of the simultaneous existence of the individual and the community. May you hold a truly awesome fiftieth birthday party in 2020!

MAY ALL THIS BE SO

*Do not copy or reproduce without permission of the author.*