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“The Woods Are on Fire: How Should First Church Respond to Our Times?”

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In June of 2005 in Fort Worth, Texas, at our General Assembly, where we had the service of the Living Tradition, where new ministers are welcomed into our midst, The Rev. Patrick O’Neill electrified the two-thousand plus Unitarian Universalists who were there with a sermon called “Out from Walden.” I want to read just a few excerpts from this sermon.

What lends the free church both constant power and constant challenge of course is its unique placement on that city on the hill that it always both part of society and profit to society. It has been the nature of our church and its ministry from time immemorial always to wrestle with a kind of schizoid tendency to shift back and forth from full-blown retreat from the world on the one hand, offering itself as a sanctuary and refuge from the world, and full-blown engagement and confrontation with the world on the other hand. Perhaps no one figure in our history more personally incarnates the push and pull of our Unitarian Universalist dance between retreat and engagement with the world than our beloved idealist, Henry David Thoreau, who in his intentional withdrawal from society into the woods of Walden Pond for two years appeals to one very deep historic strain of Unitarian Universalist sensibility while his great essay on Civil Disobedience and his willingness to be jailed as an anti-war and abolitionist tax protester makes him a hero in another chamber of the Unitarian Universalist heart.

He goes on to describe the people throughout our history who spoke out against evil and injustice...

Dare we hope to find again, in this newest generation of ministers, preachers who burn with unapologetic indignation on behalf of equal opportunity, equal education, equal healthcare, decent housing for everyone, and the equal right of every person to marry whomever they love, and the right of every woman to be the sole decider of what happens to her body? Dare we look to you, newest ministers of our living tradition, for preaching and teaching that will pour concrete foundations under the moral arguments for a just society, for a world at peace? For these are moral human issues before they are social policies no matter what party is in power, no matter who happens to be sitting in the White House, or sitting in Congress, or sitting on the Supreme Court. Our ministry has no moral right not to speak to these issues no matter whom we might offend or make uncomfortable in our pews. Whether our preaching grows our membership or not, whether it is effective institutional strategy for our association or not, these are the issues that will always determine the health and integrity of liberal religion, or what’s a pulpit for? To you, young colleagues, who are the focus of this service, who tonight are officially invested at the beginning of your ministries, oh how we welcome you and how we need you to take up your work with passion and determination to make your mark. Brothers and sisters, I come to announce to you some rather alarming news: Walden is burning. The woods, our beloved woods, are on

fire. Our Eden, our idyllic retreat, our Sylvan sanctuary from the mundane cares of the world, Eden is ablaze tonight. I cannot urge you enough to take up the ministry at this point in our history, young colleagues. Be aware, do not take up this mantle merely to save your own soul, rather we need you to become ministers as the poet urges to spend your souls, spend them lavishly and wantonly in the service of the world. I entreat you; do not use your trusted office to take refuge while your trusted office is going to hell. Do not employ your preaching talents to give comfort to the already too comfortable. We do not need at this point in our history anymore retreatants, or dilettante scholars, or idle poets. I implore you; do not seek here amid these thousand plus congregations for ministers of quietude or for more churches in the woods where you can take shelter in theological reverie while the social policies of our country are increasingly determined to protect the already privileged and to ignore the already deprived. The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, but you have promises to keep. The liberal ministry of our time needs ministers with fire in the belly, fire in the eyes, and fire in the heart.

Thus ends the reading. I can tell you it wasn't only the ministers who felt the call that evening.

The greatest Unitarian Universalist theologian of the twentieth century, in many peoples' opinion, was James Luther Adams. A few years ago, when I was in theological school, he was teaching at Harvard Divinity School and also led a seminar at University of Chicago Divinity School, where I was. Adams had been studying in Germany when the Nazis took power and he warned us young ministers that before our careers were over we would have to deal with the danger of an evangelical Christian fascism that would be challenging our world. He seems to have been right.

I think Patrick O'Neill's metaphor is right on. There have been challenging times in the past, times of danger and opportunity, but our times are so different from anything that I have experienced before. It seems that everything that we have taken for granted about our democracy, about our lives, about our world is being challenged and undermined. In one of my columns, I said that we lived in dangerous world and a friend sent me an e-mail which made it clear that I wasn't being clear. Actually, as far as personal safety goes, we're very safe. Our chances of being killed by a terrorist are infinitesimally small and we're safer in other ways as well. I didn't mean personal safety. Our planet is in danger. Our climate is changing so rapidly that scientists can hardly keep up with the alarming evidence and we need to change our ways and change them now. Our democracy is in danger with division and hatred and ultra-partisanship. Ethics in politics, in business, in academia, in science, is slipping. Our electorate is indifferent. Most people care more about who wins American Idol than who wins Congress. Many of the people who do vote, vote out of an ignorance of both geography and history; and it's scary. Our culture has been coarsened. It's become angry and selfish and determinedly ignorant. People are making money on these the basest of the human character and condition. We have a lack of support for families and children. We have a growing polarization between the rich and poor and a disappearing middle class. In a way, the metaphor is good. The woods are on fire. It's hard to retreat, so our faith, a

five hundred-year-old faith, has something to say about our times, which are not only times of danger, but times of opportunity.

What is it that our church needs to do to respond to our times? I'd say three things. First, we need to do what we already do very well and that is to take care of each other. One of the things that impressed me most about this church and continues to impress me after my two years here, is how well people in this church take care of each other. There has been a great deal of attention paid over the years to small groups where people can truly support and get to know each other. I see how those small groups help in a world where families are fractured, where sometimes the church is the only family, the only social structure in peoples' lives. I've seen how participants in our Men's Fellowship are surrounded as they make that final passage into death by their brothers from the Men's Fellowship. I've seen how the Women's Federation has come together to support those who are bereaved. Our covenant groups continue to form, continue to provide opportunities along with all the other small groups in this church to build a connection. This will work if all of you understand the ministry is not just for people who have an ordination certificate on their wall. It's something that belongs to all of us. Our Caring Ministry Team is facilitating this ministry of all to all. Victoria Ingram, our Intern Minister, is making it a project of her internship to minister even more effectively to those in our church whose mobility issues make it difficult for them to get here and to connect with us. We don't want to leave them behind. I'm also earnestly entreating all of you to remember that our visitors yearn for this kind of intimacy. They yearn for this kind of caring, too, and they have gifts to give to us. We need to have our hearts open, not only to our friends, but to the new friends who come to visit us seeking community and seeking help.

The second answer is that we need to speak out, to tell our truth in love without rancor, humbly, and without hatred. This is a big job, but our forbearers have done this since the beginning of our faith on these shores, speaking out against slavery, against the ill treatment of the mentally ill, for civil rights, for equal rights for women, gays, lesbians, and transgender people, speaking out against more than one unjust war in our history. This is what our Universalism requires. It's important that we speak out from our faith center, from our history, from our theology and our values because we are not just another social change movement. I sometimes worry that we look like a front for the Democratic Party. We need to look for salvation for the human race, for ideas beyond the usual suspects, beyond the comfortable. We need to keep an open mind and reach out to people who may share some of our values and some of our agenda and oppose us in others. We need to make coalition. We need to build bridges. We need to understand and talk to people. We need to do this because that is what our faith requires. Those of you who are new, Unitarian Universalism is a combination of two major streams of thought in American religion. The Universalist stream meant this: no one goes to hell forever. In the eighteenth century when Universalism was founded, people were living in utter fear because of the Calvinist doctrine that was prevalent in America then. It was the idea that God decided before He made the world who was going to go to hell for all eternity (almost everybody) and who was going to be saved (people in the pulpit and the pews, not everybody in the pews, just the people in the

good pews.) By the way, people financed their churches in those days by renting pews. Universalism said, “No, scripture doesn’t say anything about eternal damnation and we’re made in God’s image and there is no way that the worst of human could torture their children forever. God is love; and love and hell don’t go together.” The Universalist message was this: God never gives up on anybody. We shouldn’t give up on anybody. In the twenty-first century, peoples’ idea of what the divine reality is varies and has changed, but what we hold fast to from our Universalist heritage is this: We are all one family. Nobody can be cut off from the human family, nobody. We are all one. That sounds really new age-y and Coke commercial-y, but it’s really a pretty hard truth and it’s hard to live. That means that we need to keep our heart open for that one politician who when you see them on tv you want to throw something at them. That means that we need to keep our heart open, though we need not capitulate to them, to those who want to force their view of religion on all of us or who will kill us because we don’t believe as they believe. We need, while standing up for our own truth, to not push anyone out of the human family. That’s why we need to reach out, to love, to listen, to understand. For instance, we can work with people who do not share our views on marriage equality to make sure that the poor of San Diego are not left behind. People in this church do that everyday. That’s just one example of understanding, of talking, and of building bridges. We need to do that with love, speaking our truth, not holding anything back, but with humility and with love. Let there be an end to hatred. Let it not be in our hearts too.

Finally, what I think is the most important thing, the thing that we share with the best of all of the great wisdom traditions of humanity, which is that human beings are capable of great transformation of consciousness. We’ve seen this with the examples of our exemplars, people who have shown what the human spirit is capable of. They’re not different from you and me. We all are capable of more wisdom, more compassion. We can all do things every day to serve instead of being self-centered, to give instead of to hold on, to have compassion instead of judgment, to move everyday with every decision that we make consciously from selfishness to selflessness, which is really a higher form of selfishness if we are really all one. That is what our religious education is about from the cradle to the grave, what our groups are about, what our teaching from this pulpit is about, to help all of us reach that possible human. The good thing is we don’t have to wait until a majority of humanity has reached the level of understanding how profoundly connected all people are just one more, one more, one more, one more, and then comes the tipping point. That is my faith.

These are pretty inspiring ideas to me. I think of them everyday. What am I working on everyday? Empowered Organization. Facilities. That’s okay because the whole idea of our changing the way we do things is the idea of recognizing the gifts of individuals and being nimble in order to harness those gifts to respond to our world.

We need to talk about our physical home, our beautiful and beloved campus. Look at what happened when some people put their minds together and created this beautiful space a couple years ago. Then a group of people got together to fix the bathrooms in Bard Hall. The problem was studied. Remember that this campus was built as long ago

as the 60s and there's been some neglect and some time has passed. We found that we couldn't just fix the bathrooms and the kitchens in Bard Hall. There have been code changes for one thing. That building and other buildings on this campus need major repairs. If we don't address them now they're going to constant drains on our energy and our finances and thus our mission. We need to take care of our home and we need to do it in a way that fits our values. In other words it needs to be green. It needs to take sustainability into account. It needs to take our planet into account. That is the plan that our committee has come up with. I hope that you'll look at it after church today. There are some very important dates that I would love you to keep in mind. The first is October 8 after each service. That's when all of the consultants and the architects will be here to answer any questions you have so that everybody feels that they know what this problem is about. The second date is October 15. On October 15 there will be a congregational meeting when we'll ask you to go one step further, not to authorize the project as a whole, but to authorize a financial feasibility study to see what the level of support is for this project. We need as many of you there as possible and we need you to be informed.

I want to end with an example from another Unitarian Universalist church, it's the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, a beautiful church in the heart of downtown Portland. There are some pretty wise people in that church who were savvy and they knew that if their continued existence downtown was to be assured that they would need to expand their land holdings. Every time a piece of land adjacent to the church came up there was a capital campaign and they bought the land, three times, until they owned several city blocks. Then, they got a new minister in the mid-90s, Marilyn Sewall. At the time that she took that pulpit there was a horribly intolerant and hateful ballot initiative that would have taken away rights of gays and lesbians in the state of Oregon, not only denying them rights that they didn't have but taking away rights they did have. The religious right was dominating that conversation, dominating the media attention. Rev. Sewall's heart broke. Finally, she had an idea and she just got some purple ribbon and tied them around all of the city blocks, several of them, that the church owned right in the very visible part of downtown Portland. She put up a series of signs that said "Hate Free Zone." They were ready to respond to their times. "Hate Free Zone," that simple message was needed by people all over the state of Oregon and they needed somebody to say it right then. It got citywide media attention, statewide media attention, national media attention and some people thought that it had a great deal to do with the fact that that ballot initiative was rejected. This action which Rev. Sewall did and the Board enthusiastically endorsed was something she did to grow the church. She did it because it felt right. She did it because our values called for something to be said, called for something to be done. The church in a few years went from 600 to about 1500 members with 3 services on Sunday mornings. They need every bit of those city blocks in that thriving congregation. If we stay alert and if we keep our hearts open and are clear about our values, about who we are, then we will know what we must do at First Church to respond to our times.

May it be so.