

Birmingham Lecture

Claiming Our Prophetic Voice

The Modern Church in the Post-Modern World

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I am more than a little aware of the fact that, among our colleagues, I am not the most obvious choice to present a paper entitled "Claiming Our Prophetic Voice." Suffice to say, I am not in the same league as a Ray Manker, a Bill Gardener, a Marilyn Sewell, a Nick Cardell, or a Richard Gilbert, just to name just a few of our movement's prophetic voices.

Nevertheless, in addition to pointing out the social inequities of their own place and time and calling their people back to the covenant, the prophets of old were also forthtellers, those who engaged in the art and science of semiotics: reading the signs of the times. The Hebrew prophets were in today's parlance the "futurists." And while I make no claim to the status of prophet, for the last decade or so, I have attempted to read "the signs of the times" in order to better understand the future holds for liberal religion.

"If you are over 30, you are an immigrant. If you are under 30, you are a native. I just say that I am over 30, and I am having Ellis Island experiences all the time. I have to learn new languages, and I have to learn new customs. My brain is needing to be re-wired. It is being re-wired all the time. I am an immigrant to a whole new world. I need to understand - as any immigrant does - that the people you learn the most from are the natives - for whom this new world is their first language. This not a demographic thing - it is a psychographic thing. It is a mindset and a headset..." Leonard Sweet, Faithquakes, Abingdon, Nashville, TN, 1994

This paper is personal, and intentionally subjective. I will make no claim to any sort of scholarly objectivity or intellectual detachment. I know that I am limited by unconscious as well as conscious biases, prejudices, and predispositions. It was around 1993 that I began to be aware of a low level, but persistent discord occurring in the congregation I served. This unease seemed to have less to do with the perennial humanist/theist debate, and more to do with a rapidly widening generation gap. There was, in fact, no debate going on, or even something approaching "creative interchange." It seemed to me as though several generations in one congregation were talking past each other, each using, as it were, a different language to describe their own experiences and expectations. The Tower of Babel was manifesting itself right before my eyes. The issues were not sermon talk back or no sermon talk back, candles of joy and concern versus no candles, printed announcements or spoken announcements, hand clapping or no hand clapping, the kinds of perennial conflicts with which I'd had some experience. No, frustration was mounting around the issues that went straight to the heart of our identity, to the core of what a Unitarian Universalist institution is and is about. What does it mean to be faithful to our history; what does it mean to be an authentically diverse congregation; what do words such as reason, freedom, and tolerance really mean; what is the source of our authority?

The differences seemed more generational than theological, so I began to explore the growing body of literature on generational differences. It was about this time that U.C., Santa Barbara sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof published his book A Generation of Seekers. I immersed myself in the

descriptions of the differences between Boomers, and Busters, the Silent Generation and the G.I. Generation, Generation X, Generation Y, and the Millennial Generation. I found plenty of answers, but not the answer for which I searched. Generational differences was not "it." Generational differences was only one of the signs that pointed in the direction of "it." Slowly, I began to see and understand that the source of the growing discord in the congregation I served was more than just a gap of understanding that separated generations; the true source of our discomfort was a vast chasm that separated entire worlds.

"With joy we claim the growing light, advancing thought and widening view, the larger freedom, clearer sight, which from the old unfold the new. With wider view, come loftier goals; with fuller light, more good to see; with freedom, truer self control; with knowledge deeper reverence be." Samuel Longfellow

Few of us would argue that Unitarian Universalism is the quintessential modern, Western, religious movement. Our prophetic voice has been the voice of modernism. Our nemeses have been the nemeses of modernism.

Up until the late 18th century, Unitarianism and Universalism were Christian heresies, afterwards, influenced by the prophets of the movements known as the Enlightenment and Transcendentalism, we evolved into something distinctively different---a religious movement that was compatible with the emerging scientific consciousness; a religious movement that could easily make the distinction between myth and history; a religious movement that could distinguish between religion as a special revelation of the supernatural, and religion as a purely naturalistic, human-made social, cultural, and psychological phenomena.

Modern Unitarianism and Universalism was characterized by a positive vision of human nature and an abiding faith in human progress guided by reason and the authority of the individual conscience. We defined ourselves and our movement as distinctively humanistic, democratic, non-dogmatic, progressive, ethical, rational, objective, tolerant, and justice seeking. For many Unitarians and Universalists even a concept of God, no matter how broadly defined, was no longer essential to a modern religious outlook on life. The locus of authority was internal and personal. Man, meaning human kind, was the source and measure of all meaning. In fact, I think many of us felt in our hearts as well as our heads, that ours was the only religious view point consistent with a modern understanding of nature and human nature. Our way of being faithful was the only way a modern individual could be authentically religious without having to be at some level intellectually dishonest, or hypocritical. That is to say, we were the only way a modern man or woman could be faithful to both religion and science without having to bracket his/her Jewish, Christian or Muslim world view in order to function in the "real" world the other six days of the week.

Not only were our religious teachings and values consistent with modernism, but in some sense we sought to sanctify the modern world view. This view of nature and of human nature was not only correct in that it was an accurate, empirically verifiable portrait of the way the world worked. It was also in some sense right, that is to say, correctly understood, this world view could help to promote a higher level of ethical and moral behavior on a planetary scale. Democracy, equality, and voluntary associations were the means through which modern social reform would take place. Truth would win out through vigorous debate and discussion, and emerge unscathed out of the conflict of opinions. Worthy heirs to the best of both the Enlightenment and Transcendentalism, we understood ourselves as the religious embodiment of the beliefs and values, hopes and fears, strengths and limitations inherent in the modern consciousness. Our mood was optimistic. Progress was our most important product. "Onward and upward forever! With joy we claim the growing light, advancing thought and widening view, the larger freedom, clearer sight which from the old unfold the new." I don't mean to imply that we were arrogant, or smug. From those to whom much is given, much is expected. We took social reform very seriously as our history will attest. Out of this modern matrix of ideas, vision and responsibility came our movement's unique prophetic voice.

In 1961, ironically the same year that the Unitarians and Universalists merged, the "Saturday Evening Post" published an essay (imagine that The Saturday Evening Post, Norman Rockwell, et. al., exactly the kind of irony of which pomo'ism is so fond) in which scholar/philosopher Houston Smith pronounced modernism dead, over, finished, kaput. "Quietly, irrevocably something enormous has happened to Western man." wrote Smith. "His outlook on life and the world has changed so radically that in the perspective of history the twentieth century is likely to rank--with the fourth century, which witnessed the triumph of Christianity, and the seventeenth, which signaled the dawn of modern science--as one of the very few that have instigated genuinely new epochs in human thought. In this change, which is still in process, we of the current generation are playing a crucial but not as yet widely recognized part.

It now appears that the modern outlook has run its course and is being replaced by what, in the absence of a more descriptive term, is being called simply Post-modernism..."

According to Smith: first there was the Greco-Roman World View which was replaced in the fourth century by the Christian World View, which was replaced in the 18th century by the Modern World View, and at some point in the middle of the 20th century the Modern World View began to crumble and pass into history. In other words, if we were indeed the religion uniquely suited for the modern man and woman, there were already cracks in the foundation upon which our movement was built.

I know that nothing I have said thus far comes as news to any of you. We are all aware of post modernism and its critique of the hidden and not so hidden biases and blind spots inherent in modernism. We know that the postmodern method of social analysis is to deconstruct, that is to say, its goal is to tear a thing apart in order to reveal it's hidden contradictions, biases and assumptions. Leonard Sweet, a church historian, says that those of us who are over age thirty are like immigrants in a new world. We do not know the language. We do not understand the customs. Those who are under age thirty are the natives. This is the only world they know. So if indeed one world, the modern world is passing away, or being deconstructed and a new world(s) is/are being born, we have no choice but to pose the question: Can the quintessential modern religious movement claim its prophetic voice in the post modern world?

This is not an abstract or impersonal question for most of us. So I will risk framing it in the most personal terms. I was born on the cusp of the first and second wave of the post war baby boom. I was drawn to Unitarian Universalism in the mid 1970's because it was a progressive religious movement that seemed in touch with the real social issues of the day. It promised a spiritual alternative to the self centered "Me Generation" values of that decade. A member of the post Vietnam War/Watergate generation, I was skeptical of all institutions, especially religious institutions. Unitarian Universalism did not demand that I abandon or bracket my critical, intellectual faculties, or my skepticism or my liberal politics in exchange for affiliation. Unlike the church in which I had been raised which choose to either condemn the "ways of the modern world" out of hand, or to simply ignore what was going on in the world outside the church, in my new church I heard sermons that boldly addressed contemporary social issues. Nothing was "too hot to handle," or sacrosanct, or inappropriate. No topic was outside of scope of religious inquiry. The message I heard in church was world affirming, not world denying. The prophetic voice of our movement had a strong, clear, consistent message. Although, at the time, it would have been difficult then, for me, as a layperson to make the distinction between the liberal political agenda and the liberal religious agenda had I even cared to do so. Liberal religion or religious liberalism? Was this a way of being religious or a sanctification of a particular political viewpoint? Nevertheless, the message I heard was up beat, and optimistic, never moralistic or self-critical. Although my new church was adamantly non-creedal, we simply assumed that most of us shared similar opinions about "the way the world worked," those things necessary for the good life, and the absolute reasonableness of our view points, and the implied unreasonableness of the opposite points of view. We spoke unselfconsciously about being a religious home for like-minded people. There was an acceptance of diversity within the congregation to which I belonged; there were those who preferred "God-talk" and those who did not, those who believed in open marriage and those who did not, those who ate meat and those who for ethical reasons did not, but the

differences were never so profound that they threatened the commonly held world view.

Right or wrong, that was the Unitarian Universalism with which I fell in love, and felt called to serve. Now twenty-five years later, I find myself living on the borderline between the modern world and the post-modern world. I continually ask myself: Is my church in the process of passing away, or is it in the process of being reborn? And as a religious leader in this movement, is my role that of undertaker or midwife, or perhaps both?

"Modernism was a battle between competing belief systems: science versus religion, capitalism versus communism... Postmodernism is a battle over the status of belief itself," (Houston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, Quest Books, Wheaton, IL 1984)

"What exactly do you mean by postmodernism? Define it for me?" challenged a colleague with whom I shared my concerns for the future of our movement. That question itself may embody one of the critical distinctions between modernism and post modernism. Defining "it" becomes one of the chief frustrations that those of us who were born and raised in the modern world discover when we try to get a handle on postmodernism. The question, "How do you define it?" brought to mind an encounter I had a couple of years ago. An older gentleman from Texas, a member of one of our smaller fellowships, saw me at a District event, and taking note of the fact that I was a minister, approached me and without further introduction demanded that I "give him a definition of spirituality." Caught off guard, I hemmed and hawed a bit, and mumbled something about context. "See," he said with obvious glee, "You can't do it! That proves my point. I have personally collected two pages full of different definitions of that word spirituality and I still don't know what it means and neither do you!" He turned and walked away obviously satisfied. For the man from Texas, a thing exists or does not exist to the extent that we can agree on how to define it. That is modernism in a nutshell, as well as a source of the growing divide within our congregations between modernists and those with a post modern consciousness.

Definition implies boundaries or limitations. Something is this and not that. Postmodernism resists defining in the way we moderns are used to differentiating between such things as fact and fiction, myth and history, past and future, true and false, real and not real. All of the lines are blurry. There is no meta-paradigm, there is no meta-narrative. The very notion of an all embracing system, or world-view is automatically suspect. According to church historian, and author of a number of books on the church in the post modern world, Leonard Sweet:

Part of the new paradigm (of postmodernism) is the existence of multiple paradigms though the realization that each paradigm is to a significant degree socially conceived and constructed. There are no truth claims anymore, only rules of speech. Life lived in submission to a single, fixed, dominant principle is over. Postmoderns accept the permanence of pluralizing realities, the valuation of plurality over sameness, the coming together of the plurus around a common unam (which increasingly is being called pluraformity), the celebration of "them," the "other," and the outsider," means that issues of pluralism and diversity are here to stay." The reigning postmodern concept is as much uncertainty as the reigning modern scientific notion was certainty. Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principe" has the same metaphysical standing for postmoderns as Decartes' Cogito, Ergo Sum had for moderns beginning in the 17th century. All of life is seen less as something under the central control of command headquarters then a synergy of chaotic, complex, even contradictory, always surprising but interdependent processes. (Len Sweet, *Faithquakes*, Abingdon, Nashville, TN, 1994)

As impossible as postmodernism is to define, or "capture" we can make some broad generalizations: from the postmodern perspective, there is no such thing as objective reason. Reason, rationality, logic are no longer a-historical, disinterested, and objective, rather all are social constructs. Far from transcending the

particularity of its location, rationality is understood to be fundamentally shaped by its historical context. We think in and through systems of interpretation, whose symbols, biases, and interests inevitably shape the reasoning process. What is reasonable in the context of one set of cultural norms, may seem irrational in another. So called scientific or empirical evidence is also viewed with suspicion. Since all knowledge and perception are social constructs, then there is no such thing as impartiality, objectivity, or truth. Knowledge has no correspondence with reality. There is only knowledge and truth from the particular realities that people inhabit which serve their particular interests. All knowledge is therefore political. The notion that progress is inevitable or desirable, or that the present is better than the past, or that the future will be better than the present are considered to be unproven assumptions. Post modernism is neither liberal nor conservative, nor is it progressive. It does have the effect of making both liberals and conservatives uncomfortable and confused.

In the postmodern paradigm, history is neither objective nor factual, but rather is the official version of the story as told from the perspective of the winning side. For the most part what we call history is a story told from the Western, Eurocentric, capitalistic, technocratic standpoint, a standpoint which omits the histories of women, people of color and non-westerners.

Post modernism also claims that by imposing an artificial mechanical model on the universe, modernism left us with a fractured world view, a world view that creates artificial dualism that drastically separate mind and body, subject and object, culture and nature, thoughts and things, values and facts, spirit and matter, the human and the nonhuman. This artificial mechanical model has proven to be a dirty and distorted lens through which we have come to misunderstand our world and our relationship to it. Modernism has given us a worldview that is dualistic, mechanistic, atomistic, anthropocentric, and pathologically hierarchal.

By desacralizing the earth, modernism also paved the way for environmental exploitation and destruction, as well as the exploitation and genocide of indigenous people. Inherent to modernism is the concept of entitlement and domination: humans are entitled to dominate the earth, first world people are entitled to dominate people of the third world, whites are entitled to dominate people of color, men are entitled to dominate women and children and so forth.

Post modernism expands the range of legitimate epistemologies beyond strict empiricism to include intuitive knowledge, the knowledge of the body, and the kinds of knowing that are transmitted through cultural mythos, ritual, drama and art. There are multiple intelligences, many valid ways of knowing, experiencing, and interpreting the world.

"Why Queer? I use the word queer, which I know makes some people uncomfortable, because it says NO, we don't have to be like everyone else in order to have the right to a full life. No, we don't have to accept the paradigms and constructs that we are fed on a daily basis. No, we don't have to accept categorizations and binary, either/or thinking as the only way."

"Decolonizing (UU) religious education means looking at how it can subvert the dominant paradigm instead of reflecting it or having a merely reactive response to it." The Rev. Elias Farajaje-Jones, Fahs Lecture 2000

In our own religious movement, the places where we have first felt the joy-pain-confusion-rage-dislocation-frustration of postmodernism has been around issues of diversity and inclusion and what those terms might really mean. When women began entering our ministry in significant numbers during the 1970's, we brought with us a different consciousness. The issue, as you will recall, was not just about gaining parity for women clergy in the settlement process, or just about changing some of the words of the hymns and the liturgy to be more gender inclusive. The issue was about power, patriarchy, entitlement, sexual ethics, and the institutionalization of a feminist

consciousness. Likewise, today, when we speak of seeking greater diversity within our congregations, we speak of seeking a multicultural, anti-racist, diversity. We are speaking not just of the successful integration of people of color or gay/lesbian/bisexual/trans-gendered, or disabled individuals into our congregations. Nor are we speaking about the casual appropriation of sacred rituals, symbols, songs, and stories from non-western religions into our forms of worship. If we are speaking in the language of postmodernism we are speaking of the process of initiating a significant change of consciousness around issues of power and privilege. In other words, the prophetic voice(s) of postmodern Unitarian Universalism involves not only what is being said, but who is being permitted to say it.

In this context, People of Color within our congregations may speak of the En-darken-ment, in contrast to the Enlightenment, as a process of bringing in to our midst a consciousness that has grown out of the experience of identities formed in relationship to racism and white cultural imperialism. In a similar process, Gay/Lesbian/Trans/Bi individuals speak of queering theology. Womanist thea-ologies attempt to disclose some of the hidden racial, sexual, and class biases within modern feminism. In what is perhaps for us an even more radical voice, is the deconstruction of the ethical norm: "man the meaning maker." In a postmodern cosmology the natural world, may have a meaning or a kind of justice all its own of which humankind is only a part, and not the focal point at all. Who are we after all to project our sense of justice on to the whole universe, or to assume that the entire meaning and purpose of great cosmos was human evolution? The post modern prophetic voice will speak of a level of justice that is not defined in human terms, but rather in terms of the whole of creation, a cosmic justice that presupposes the natural world is larger than the framework of human meaning.

For many of us moderns, and I include myself in this, listening to and claiming some of these new prophetic voices in our movement is an excruciating experience. Not only are our most fundamental assumptions about reason, truth, history, and progress being called into question, but the process itself often feels like a repudiation of some of the most cherished parts of our movement's history. We are told that the hidden agenda, within in many of the social reform movements for which we proudly took credit was the acquisition and maintenance of power and privilege. Some of us find ourselves feeling both shamed and wounded by the implications that we are unconsciously racist, sexist, ageist, abilist and classist and that our rational and objective world view is riddled with biases that serve as cultural blinders preventing us from seeing or understanding view points and needs other than our own. Our most natural responses are to withdraw, get defensive, or just shout louder.

The prophetic voices emanating from outside our comfort zone are calling us to repentance. They often seem to us to be strident and demanding, even accusing. Ironically, it is when some of us feel the most "under fire," "dislocated in our own home," "off kilter," defensive and acutely aware of our own differences in color, texture and experience that we begin to comprehend the value of "otherness." From the point at which we begin to recognize our own "otherness", we begin to explore the kind of unity that is achieved through an awareness and appreciation of difference, our own differences, as well as the differences of others.

The role of the prophet in ancient times was that of remembering the future and calling people back to the covenant. Here is my prediction, my reading of the signs of the times: the next wave of prophetic leaders in our movement will not attempt to reach for a consensus amid our diversity. Those leaders who try to manage our diversity will only achieve the kind of consensus that can only come from the lowest level of agreement. In other words: if all stories and symbols are equal, none are compelling. Without the pre-scientific worldview and religious orthodoxy to define us as the modern and thus most intellectually defensible way to be religious, we will in a sense have lost our franchise. Diversity itself is not a galvanizing or motivating vision. We will suffer from multiphrenia---too many images and worldviews, and disorientation---literally a loss of direction. Leaders who try to direct our movement while standing in the middle of consensus will be trampled.

The next wave of prophetic leaders in our movement will stand somewhat apart. They will be self-differentiated. They will not attempt to build coalitions between competing interests, or achieve an uneasy compromise or curry favor, or placate individuals. They will not be all things to all people. They will not be political. They will not call themselves liberal or conservative. They will cast a vision that includes both a new definition of what it means to be human, and a whole new description of the cosmos. This vision will re-orient us. This vision will be poetic, mythic, dramatic, and consistent with the best science we have. It will be less anthropocentric than modernism. It will redefine justice and equality in trans-human terms. It will remember the future, that is to say, it will call us into the future with signs, and symbols from our collective past organized in a new way. It will thus seem comforting and familiar and natural as well as exciting, new, and deeply compelling. Our prophets will be those who call us to remember our future.

Post Modern Script:

We perceive the creative power of the universe primarily in the intelligible order we observe in the universe. Such is the way of the philosopher. Such is the way of St. John in the opening prologue to his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word," the principle of order and intelligibility. Or we can perceive the originating power itself in the disequilibrium of the universe, in the spirit world, in the wildness of things, in the dreams that come into our souls in the depths of the night., dreams that correspond the human soul to the openness of the curve that holds the universe together and yet enables it to continue its infinite creativity.
(Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*)

Where are you going with this post modernism thing, Suzanne ? A colleague asked me that with reference to this paper. Going is the appropriate term, I think. When speaking of Unitarian Universalism as a people of faith, I prefer the term movement to denomination. Perhaps I like that word movement because as an ex-Baptist and have a congenital knee-jerk reaction to the word denomination, but more than that, in this emerging post modern world, I feel that we are in some sense called to be nomads, always on the move, in the wilderness. On the go, at least for the present time... Like the Children of Israel, we have left Egypt. For good or ill, modernism is behind us. Some of us came away fearfully, some joyfully, some angrily, some reluctantly, some resisting mightily. Some of us are not even aware that Egypt is already in our rear view mirror and there is no going back.

As I have previously indicated, I was not uncomfortable in Egypt, in the Unitarian Universalism I came to in the mid 1970's. I am not at all comfortable in the wilderness of post modernism. It confuses me. But I know one thing, post modernism is not the Promised Land. Post modernism is the wilderness. It is the desert of hardship, of disorder, and disequilibria. It may potentially forge us into a new people of a renewed covenant. Like it or not, the movement through this desert experience will change us. Some in our ranks will long for Egypt, where, with all of its faults, at least you knew who you were and where you stood. Others may leave the fold and wander off in a different direction. There will be those who want to put down roots prematurely, who say, this is far enough. There is always the possibility that we may perish in the desert, that our religious movement is so inextricably wedded to modernism that it will not survive long enough to make it to the Promised Land. And although we are the generation that left Egypt, I seriously doubt we will be the one's to enter the promise. Nevertheless, brothers and sisters, we will all have an important role to play as faithful and decisive leaders during this nomadic time.

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