

"Lighting Candles in the Dark: Making Change"

Rev. Fran Dearman AUUF November 24th, 2003, 9 AM and 10:45 AM

This address was delivered from notes. What follows is a summation of that.

I began by noting the time of year: that November is native Heritage Month in Alaska; that Ramadan is November 6th through December 6th this year, a time of fasting in sympathy with those less fortunate; that next week will bring the first day of Hanukkah, a celebration of religious freedom; that next week will also bring Thanksgiving Day; and that we are not far from the first Sunday in Advent, a time of waiting, a time of "full attention and imagination".

I also noted that November 15th marked the end of early bird registration for the UUA's annual General Assembly, to be held in Boston next July, where I will be voting on General Resolutions for the first time. Further information on the process and content of General Resolutions and the democratic process that generates them can be found on the net at www.uua.org under the heading Social Justice Statements.

I felt a need to review what I knew about making change, about lighting candles in the dark:

- it feels right, just basic human empathy
- it seems logical, and just
- we are all part of an interconnected web

- I do this out of long reflection that grows out of my own empathy for the oppressed, and also out of a healthy self-interest, that there but for fortune go I
- I do this because faith without works is dead, (Epistle of James, chapter 2, quoted as reading number 668 in our UU hymnal)
- I could have cited #560, Dorothy Day (1897-1980), of the Catholic Worker's Movement, that change comes through small effort, one brick, and one step at a time.
- I could have cited #609, from the thirteenth century Persian poet Saadi, that "to worship the holy is to serve the people", that "if fate brings suffering to one, the others cannot stay at rest".

So much for Why, on to How.

My preparation for ministry included two sources I have found useful: "Getting to Yes", from the Harvard Business School, about win-win negotiations; also Rabbi Ed Friedman's "Generation to Generation", about systems dynamics, what works, and what works to make change. Friedman's thesis, baldly stated, includes: all systems are interconnected; causation is multiple, not linear; systems tend to try and remain stable; change is painful, most of us prefer peace to progress. You may have your own examples on the subject. For example, this is in part why we have rites of passage, like marriage, memorial services, and child dedications, to ease major changes.

How to make change? We can change structures within the system. Most effective, we can change ourselves. These changes within the system will of themselves change the system as a whole.

How do we change ourselves? We can determine to be pro-active rather than re-active, that is, we can choose to act as we wish rather than leave the initiative to other people. We can choose to be a non-anxious presence. We can nourish this calm presence through self-care and a spiritual discipline.

As I recall his teaching, Ed Friedman might say: we can change the world by changing ourselves; we can name our own goals; we can claim our own authentic passions. He might also say that guilt was not necessarily a useful emotion.

Along similar lines, Harvard Business School would ask: "what do I need out of this?" Harvard would invite us to negotiate from principle rather than position, i.e. ask for change that embraces human worth and dignity rather than lock ourselves into rigid demands. We could recognize the complexity of questions. We could seek to generate creative, imaginative response. We could ask the people we are trying to help, what they would like to see happen - and expect some surprises! We could build relationships and communications and work towards recognizing mutual needs and gains. We could work on joint problem solving towards negotiating win-win solutions. We could look to external standards of legitimacy. And we could respect our own integrity, making use of such phrases as "that doesn't work for me" and "I have difficulty with this" and "what I need out of this is." We could start small. And we could pay attention to the way we negotiate, to the process, as much as to the content and result.

I would like to think that the Statements of Conscience, and Actions of Immediate Witness, generated by successive UUA General Assemblies embody such a process, that they start small, come out of principle rather than position, and that they emerge from our own integrity. I imagine them like Buddhist prayer flags: visible, exposed to the weather; spreading through the world thread by thread. I believe that for some people and institutions these

UUA resolutions might represent an external standard of legitimacy,. Certainly, they are well considered. Statements of Conscience emerge from several years of democratic process and congregational review. They also offer a means of interacting with other faith group, as in the resolution that commended the 1963 Encyclical of Pope John the 23rd.

They also serve as a matrix of policy statements for the UUA Lobby to Congress. I, too, have found the collection of these statements a useful resource when I have been invited to speak in public on a specific issue, for example, against the death penalty.

You will find these statements on the Internet at the UUA web site, indexed by year and also by topic, with sixteen areas of issues. The print out is over 30 pages long. The collection begins in 1961, the year that Unitarians and Universalists joined together to form the UUA. The topics addressed include: issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, health, justice, environment, religious freedom, economics, the conduct of government, war and peace from Vietnam to Tiananmen Square, and international relations.

There are also some Business Resolutions with respect to how the Association conducts its own affairs. Thus we see, from the very beginning, tension over UUA shares in Eastman/Kodak with respect to issues of employee equity. Other issues include ethical investment, equal opportunity within UUA ministry and denominational employment and placing. Issues of institutional apology and restoration are addressed in a resolution regarding reparations for UU involvement in the 1921 riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Other issues mover from the particular to the general: smoking in public places; the right to die (x3); AIDS; Universal Health Care (x2); also Nutrition and Preventive Health Measures. Issues of

Civil Liberties and Freedom of Speech and Dissent are also addressed.

For me, at times, to read this catalogue can be heart breaking. There have been no less than five resolutions passed against capital punishment, in 1961, 1966, 1974, 1978, 1979, and 1989. And there seems to be no diminishment of this obscene evil. If anything, it gets worse.

Even so, I believe we do this for us. We bear witness, we claim our voice. Like prayer flags, we cast our votes and publish our opinion, but what changes? What changes? We have changed. We claim that change with these statements.

Change is slow and painful. Think of the generations and generations it took to claim votes for women. Few of those who instigated the great suffragette campaigns of the nineteenth century lived long enough to cast their vote when change did come. Few indeed.

We do this to make change. We do this, in part, for us, to claim and proclaim our own integrity.

In conclusion, our denomination goes through a three-year process, including congregational review, to generate Statements of Conscience, through democratic process, that serve as policy guides to lobby Congress. Change is slow: small bricks, pebbles in a pond, prayer flags spreading their threads upon the wind. At the very least, this process may lead up to a conversation that will bring about change in ourselves, and change in the way that we go about our daily business.

I believe you could each speak to some way your reflection has brought you to a change in your own actions. Perhaps you have

had the good fortune to see that change echoed in the actions of those around you.

This year I am going to make one change. I shall embrace November 29th as Buy Nothing Day. I never understood it in Canada. But here in the continental USA, where I can see it as the commercial pivot point from Thanksgiving into the Christmas frenzy, it suddenly makes sense. Buy Nothing Day. A small change, and what I change is myself. One tiny pebble in the pond.