

The Transient and Permanent in Unitarian Universalism

Readings: "I Dwell in Possibility" by Emily Dickinson

"Ithaca" by C.P. Cavafy

"For the Children" by Gary Snyder

The poet Gary Snyder tells us

"In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it."

But first we must climb the rising hills and slope of statistics.

On this, the first Sunday of 2016, as we look to the future, the unfolding year before us and the years beyond that, there are slopes – jagged mountains — of statistics that impact us here at People's church and Unitarian Universalism more broadly.

The first Sunday of the new year is a good day for casting visions and dreaming dreams. Who will we be decades from now? What forces will we need to respond to? How will we meet the challenges before us and how will we be transformed to face a new age?

First, the slopes of statistics. One of the big hills ahead is the rise of the religiously unaffiliated. In a survey from 2014, 23% of American adults self-report as "nones" that's n-o-n-e-s. They are not part of a religious community as traditionally defined. These nones are increasing rapidly – up seven percent in the past seven years.¹ This rise in "nones" is new and novel. This particular slope of statistics might be reason for hope for us. These religiously unaffiliated people might be our people. These atheists, agnostics and spiritual but not religious people might be seeking what we have to offer. We know that many of us came to Unitarian Universalism after a period of being religiously unaffiliated, of not knowing that there was a community out there who shared our values and would welcome us fully. Can this 23% percent of the country—or a significant portion of them—find their spiritual home here with us? Perhaps. What will we need to do to make sure they know that we are here ready to welcome them and help them join once they walk in our doors?

Perhaps this rise in the religiously unaffiliated will mean hundreds of thousands of new Unitarian Universalists. Perhaps not. The open question is if these nones want church. Is their unaffiliation a

¹ 'U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.' *Pew Research Center*. November 3, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

temporary waystation as they search for a religious home or are they done with congregations altogether? I believe that the increasing lack of religious unaffiliation presents challenges for us. Unitarian Universalists benefit from cultures that value churchgoing. We have the most adherents in areas with high church attendance. The largest brick-and-mortar church is in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Do you know where the highest per capita population of Unitarian Universalists is? Any guesses? The Minneapolis/Saint Paul metro area in Minnesota. As someone who used to live there, I can tell you that there is a strong culture of churchgoing there. The Lutherans and Catholics go to church every Sunday or at least say they go to church every Sunday – and it's expected that everyone else will too. So those who don't fit at the Catholic or Lutheran Church seek us out. Can Unitarian Universalism survive in its present form as church attendance and religious affiliation declines? I don't think so.

Another important statistical slope that lies before us is the decline of the middle class. Since 2000, the middle class – households earning between \$35,000 and \$100,000 annually – has been shrinking and the proportion of lower income people has been growing. This is especially true for households headed by people who are 30 to 44 years old.² While income is decreasing in this younger cohort, expenses are not. My cohort is indebted—especially from student loans—in ways unimagined by previous generations.

I know that anecdotes are not data, but my family's story illustrates this generational shift. My grandmother is in her 90s and a member of the Silent Generation. She went to college in the aftermath of the Great Depression, which stripped her family and so many others of their wealth. She enrolled in college with no savings or financial support from her family. She paid for college by doing farm work, harvesting raspberries mostly. Think about this. She could do seasonal farm work, which is some of the lowest paid work, to pay for a college education, graduating with her degree in botany with no debt and considerable experience with plants.

Both of my parents, Baby Boomers, grew up in solidly middle class homes. When my parents went to college, their families could afford to pay their school costs at public state universities. My father's college tuition was roughly 1,000 dollars a year at the University of California at Berkeley. My parents left school with no debt.

Now, my generation. College tuition has increased faster than the rate of inflation every year since 1980.³ My husband Brian and I both have two degrees – liberal arts undergraduate degrees and professional degrees for our chosen fields. To pay for our schooling, we worked, we received scholarships and grants, we had financial support from our families, and we still left school massively indebted. When we married four years ago, our combined student loan debt was over \$100,000. We're working hard to make payments on it and are making progress, but debt payments are one of our largest expenses, second only to our mortgage.

² Parlapiano, Alicia, Robert Gebeloff, and Shan Carter. 'The Shrinking American Middle Class.' *The New York Times*. January 26, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/01/25/upshot/shrinking-middle-class.html? r=0>

³ 'Tuition Inflation.' *FinAid: The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid*. Retrieved from <http://www.finaid.org/savings/tuition-inflation.phtml>

And why am I telling you this? Because Brian and I are typical. Of course, not everyone goes to college, of course a single story never is the full story. And yet, it is important to note that so many in my generation accumulate massive amounts of student debt as we try to launch ourselves into the world. This was not true for previous generations.

And the generations that follow me are often even more indebted than I am.

And why does this matter? Because the shrinking middle class combined with these monthly debt payments impact the financial reality of many in my generation – and consequently impact the financial future of the church. In congregations, people are noticing that when a member of the church in their 60s or older moves, or dies, or leaves the church, it takes about four new members under 40 to equal their pledge. Of course, this is a rough estimate and not true in all circumstances. This is happening not because the younger set are less generous; it is because they simply don't have the money to give. Many of the younger members of our congregation are financially stretched with living expenses, student debt, and child-related expenses, if they have children. Generosity is different to different generations and the rising generations are indebted in ways previously unprecedented.

What will this mean for our congregation? If current trends continue, it could mean a significant decrease in our church budget over the next few decades– or a more concerted effort to recruit new members. Either path presents a new set of challenges. Perhaps here, with the Kalamazoo Promise in place, we will be somewhat buffered from these impacts, as many in our community receive college scholarships. I know that, if these current trends continue, we will have to have some hard conversations about what it will mean to be People's Church.

There are so many other slopes of statistics before us worth highlighting, including the future impacts of climate change and the seemingly perpetual wars our country is engaged in, but my time this morning is limited. These slopes of statistics are steep and daunting, but our faith has a tradition of facing the changing world with innovation and adaptation.

I'm borrowing the title of my sermon this morning from one of the most important sermons in Unitarian history. On May 19, 1841, Rev. Theodore Parker gave a sermon entitled "A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity." In 1841, most Unitarians considered themselves Christians. In his sermon, Parker separated aspects of Christian theology and practice into categories – the transient and the permanent, dividing between what he thought was the meaningless detritus attached to the faith over the centuries and what he believed would endure forever. Almost everything ended up in the transient pile – "the thought, the folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notions, the impiety of man," he says, as well as the idea that every word in the Bible is literally true, and the belief that Jesus

was God. Parker said the eternal truth of God as revealed in the teachings of Jesus was all that is permanent.⁴ Or to put it another way, Parker valued the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus.

Unsurprisingly, this sermon sparked controversy. He was vilified in the press. He was ostracized by his Unitarian ministerial colleagues for his theological views. He also developed a devoted following among his congregants and others. A few years after this sermon, he was called to a newly formed church – the 28th Congregational Society in Boston. This new church quickly grew to have over 2,000 members, including Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and William Lloyd Garrison.⁵

I call on Parker's memory this morning because I think we, and Unitarian Universalists everywhere, need to decide what is transient and what is permanent in our faith today. What are the aspects of congregational life that might have outlived their usefulness? What is transient? What might we need to let go to face this new era? What are the core tenets of our faith that we will carry forward on the rising hills and slopes of statistics that lie before us?

Please know that I don't say any of this lightly. I love Unitarian Universalism as it is right now, blemishes and all. I love People's Church as it is right now and would love for us to keep doing what we're doing, with a few adjustments and course corrections along the way, for decades. But that is not the path ahead as I—and many others—see it. When I gather with colleagues in their 20s and 30s, there's almost always a moment when someone whispers "are we going to be able to retire after a career of full-time parish ministry?" A hush usually falls over the group. We worry that the world in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular will be so transformed over the next few decades that ministry and congregational life will look radically different than it does now.

Again, what is the permanent in Unitarian Universalism? I believe there are four aspects of our faith, as practiced now, that are permanent. We are seekers. We are diverse. We are activists. We are together.

We are seekers. We believe that truth is ever unfolding, that revelation is not sealed. Unitarian martyrs have died for this idea, for the right to change one's mind religiously. We believe that our beliefs should change as our lives change, as science progresses, as we gain insight. More experience, more thought, more knowledge, and more wisdom should change how we view the world and what we believe is true. If that changed, if in the future practicing our faith meant you were stuck with one belief system for the rest of your days, that Unitarian Universalism wouldn't be Unitarian Universalism at all.

Next, we are diverse. We are diverse theologically. This is a newer part of Unitarian Universalism, something we've only grown into in the past few generations. Our tolerance for, comfort with, and

⁴ Parker, Theodore. 'A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity.' *Electronic Texts in American Studies*. Paper 14. Page 141. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/14>

⁵ Grodzins, Dan. 'Theodore Parker.' *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*. Retrieved from <http://uudb.org/articles/theodoreparker.html>.

celebration of our different belief systems is the greatest gift we have to offer the world. In a world where theological differences are so often a reason for violence, we are a powerful example. Here, Christians and atheists, Buddhists and agnostics, Pagans, people whose beliefs don't fit into an easy category, and others gather to worship together, to learn from one another, to educate our children, to make the world better. This is precious and valuable. If we lost this aspect of who we are, if we become the spiritual home of only atheists, only Buddhists, only agnostics, we would lose who we are. That Unitarian Universalism wouldn't be Unitarian Universalism at all.

Yet, theological diversity won't be diversity enough to carry us to the valleys and pastures of the next century. Another of the statistical slopes before us is the changing racial demographics of our country. Demographic projections tell us that white people will no longer be the majority in the United States in 2042. Historically, Unitarian Universalism has been a predominantly white religion – not exclusively white—but mostly white, steeped in white culture and with a white worldview. If we want to be relevant in the coming decades, we will need to speak to the concerns of a multiracial America. We will need to be in relationship across racial lines. We will need to become anti-racist. This will be risky, sometimes painful work.

But we are up for this hard work because we are activists. That is the third permanent thing about us. We act on our shared values. What binds us together is our commitment to these shared values. For Unitarian Universalism as a whole, those values are the seven principles, parts of which are on the banners on the wall of the sanctuary. Here at People's Church there is an additional set of shared values – the Bond of Union that every member signs. It was adopted in 1892 and it reads:

Earnestly desiring to develop in ourselves and in the world honest, reverent thought, faithfulness to our highest conception of right living, the spirit of love and service to all people, and allegiance towards all the interests of morality and religion, as interpreted by the growing thought and purest lives of humanity:

We join ourselves together hoping to help one another in all good things and advance the cause of pure and practical religion in the community. We base our union upon no creed test but upon the purpose herein expressed and welcome all who wish to join us to help establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world.

It is not enough for us to believe in these lofty words, we must act. Unitarian Universalists have a long tradition of working to establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world – in the abolitionist movement and the women's suffrage movement historically and more recently in efforts for LGBTQ equality, environmental stewardship, and the movement for black lives and well as in the smaller everyday efforts we make to live lives of integrity and service. If we lost the activist part of ourselves, That Unitarian Universalism wouldn't be Unitarian Universalism at all.

The final permanent aspect of Unitarian Universalism is that we are together. I don't think it is possible to practice our faith in isolation. We need one another for encouragement, inspiration, and fellowship. If Unitarian Universalism became a solo pursuit done without community that Unitarian Universalism wouldn't be Unitarian Universalism at all.

There are a lot of things that didn't make my short list of the permanent aspects of our faith. Lighting the chalice. Gathering on Sundays for a worship services. Having committees. Employing a minister. Again, I value all of these things, I want them to exist and continue to exist. Wishes and hopes will not make it so. We are facing the rising hills, the slopes of statistics – the changes that I outlined earlier— and no one knows who we will be in a few decades.

Again, none of these changes are imminent. I don't want you to be anxious that big transformations will happening in the next few months or the next few years. None of that is happening now, but it might in the next few decades.

I name all this now because I want you to dream with me. Imagine People's people gathering on New Year's Day in 2046, 30 years from now. I know many of us will not be there. Let us imagine who will be there. What will these future People's People be doing? How will they do it? How will those future people be seekers, be diverse, be activists, be together? How might we prepare ourselves now to face the challenges before us?

May this new year be a chance for us to dwell in possibility.

May we cast visions and dream dreams of who we might be as individuals, as a congregation, and as a denomination in the years ahead.

And may we follow the wisdom of the poem we heard earlier.

stay together

learn the flowers

go light

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.