

What Should Liberal Religion Serve?

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie

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At 35 years of age, I am a young minister – especially if the 30s are the new 20s, which I'm in favor of. I suspect most young ministers don't give a lot of thought to their long-term goals for a lifelong career of ministry. We're too busy with the ministry before us, and learning and developing, to give much thought to how we want our ministry defined when it's said and done. While I'd say this pretty much describes me, I have been fortunate to have some good prodding toward this end. Last year when I had lunch with our Minister Emeritus, Brandy Lovely, he said, "So, what's the *theme* of your ministry, Hannah?" And just a few months ago, at the first meeting for my new Committee on Ministry, church member Sharon Kyle asked, "So Hannah, what do you really want to *do* with your ministry? What are your long-term goals?"

The long-term? What's that? Does anybody think in the long-term anymore? Did we as the human race *ever* think in the long-term? Looking at the current state of affairs these days, I sure think we need to. We need to learn how.

The main prodder in my ministerial development has been Davidson Loehr, my internship supervisor, who will be delivering the sermon at my Installation this afternoon. As Davidson would put it, I was steeped in Politically Correct excrement when I first arrived in Austin, TX in 2003. Throughout the year, Davidson taught me to question the current agenda of liberal religion, and the UUA in particular. He pointed out the pitfalls of the UUA's fascination with identity politics. He showed me how transparent the salvation ideology of the privileged saving the oppressed from oppression can be. He explained how disempowering it is to define entire groups of people as victims, as 'the oppressed' – whether they're people of color, or gays and lesbians, or any identified group. "They're not victims," he would say, "they're *warriors*, they're *survivors*."

Davidson taught me that a religion based on liberal political ideals alone is not much different than a specialized social club of the Democratic Party. He would say, "a good religion has a strong center, based on the highest and noblest ideals." In his mind, Unitarian Universalism does not qualify.

And I'd ask him, "Okay, Davidson, I hear you. So, what SHOULD the center of liberal religion be then? Tell me!" And I know you'll hear some of his answer to this question later today, with his sermon title, "What Does Religion Serve?" He said he wanted his title to sound as arrogantly broad as possible.

I know I never want to sound arrogant up here, but I do want to offer some of my own ideas of what liberal religion should serve, because *this* is one of my long-term goals of my ministry: to shape the focus and direction of liberal religion – especially in a rapidly changing world. As Davidson and I have gone around and around on it over the years, and today's auspicious event was drawing near, I have given thought to what I think should be at the center of a vibrant and viable liberal religion.

So let's bring this down to earth right quick.

We have lived in a time of deeply misplaced priorities – a time that couldn't last. In his essay, "What Is the Good Life?" psychologist David Myers claims that Americans have

big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale, secured rights and diminished civility. We were excelling at making a living but too often failing at making a life. We celebrated our prosperity but yearned for purpose. We cherished our freedoms but longed for connection. In an age of plenty, we were feeling spiritual hunger. These facts of life lead us to a startling conclusion: Our becoming better off materially has not made us better off psychologically.¹

¹From [Agenda for a New Economy](#), by David Korten, published by Barrett Koehler, p. 42, 2009.

While there are things we wish could have gone on forever – such as a good return on our investments – I’m not mourning the end of our time of misplaced priorities. I’m tired of living in a time ruled by the short-term. I want to live in the Bigger Picture frame of mind – I want to live in a time when Bigger Picture thinking is the norm, not the mode of short-term gains and immediate gratification. Not the mode of self-entitlement and impossible expectations. I want to live in the context of the long-term, and not the so-called long-term of the stock market, but the long-term of the common good. A way of life aligned with the Bigger Picture is a start to what liberal religion should serve.

So much is in peril, and yet, there is hope that realigning our priorities will lead to a tipping point of great positive change. The liberal church can lead the dialogue about what these new priorities should be. They are the simple things that everyone wants – rather than phantom wealth, they are the things of real wealth that I read about earlier in the service. They are relationships and the higher quality necessities of life: clean air, water, and food; happy families and healthy communities. The tools that create real wealth are liberal religious values: service to the here and now of this world, integrity, ingenuity, honest work, civic engagement, the free search for truth, and seeing the intrinsic and holy worth of the simple things in life.

My beef with identity politics or any type of divisive politics as a focus of liberal religion, is that it prevents us from focusing on the things that matter to *all* of us. But even this is changing. We are slowly beginning to see a recognizable consensus that the world most of us want to bequeath to our children, is very different from the world in which we live. In fact, the struggle for the health and well-being of our children is potentially the unifying political issue of our time.² It requires that we serve the Bigger Picture.

This all sounds straight-forward enough, but the challenge, as we know, is to embrace new priorities as a new cultural norm, as a people. So many things seem so messed up that it is hard to imagine a different kind of world. And so many of us are raw with the pain and fear of having just lost so much – a loss in income, or a huge hit in the stock market – a pain, that I admit, I can’t relate to as well, because I didn’t lose very much. But I can imagine it. As a younger person who wants to avoid the same predicament later in life, I want to learn a new way of investing in my future; my gut tells me that it will involve a sea change – a cultural shift of how investing is done, by choosing investments that are much, much closer to home.

Just a few weeks ago, on the phone with my parents, they said, “well, we’re much poorer than we used to be.” But you have lots of *real* wealth, I pointed out. You are healthy and have healthy children and grandchildren. You are part of a community of friends at your church where you have belonged for 35 years. You have a good life. I know that may be cold comfort to people who are ready to retire, and now don’t know when that will happen. The mass swindle of Wall Street is not fair to this generation. It is not fair what happened to you. You were all told you could trust an institution, and it turned out you couldn’t.

Perhaps it will be up to the younger generations to embrace a new kind of economy – one that is invested in Main Street rather than Wall Street. It’s time for us to put our trust back into the simple things, into things that are real; there is no great inventing necessary here. These are the things that are as old as humanity itself. John Stewart of the Daily Show alluded to one of these quite dramatically recently, in his interview with Jim Cramer of CNBC’s Mad Money. Stewart was questioning Cramer about the sanity of 35 – 1 leveraged bets on Wall Street. Cramer pointed out that that was the decade when people saw 30% returns. And Stewart interrupted him to say,

But isn’t that part of the problem – selling the idea that you don’t have to do anything. Anytime you sell people the idea that, sit back and you’ll get 10 –20% on your money, don’t you always know, that that’s going to be lie. When are we going to realize in this country that *our wealth is work* – that we’re workers, and by selling this idea of, “hey man, I’ll teach you how to be rich” – how is that different from an infomercial?

²Same, pp. 85 – 86.

Our wealth is work. The wealth earned through hard work, is not only the foundation of what built this country in the first place. It's also the foundation of all that can be good for humanity in all civilizations. It is primordial, it is Biblical, it is sacred bedrock. I no longer trust in a money-making enterprise where no work is required on my part; whether it's too good to be true or not is beside the point. It's a way of living that's hard to feel good about. It smacks of a defective value. The new regulations on the finance industry that we're finally hearing about from the new administration are hopeful, and maybe I'm naïve, and I don't know about you, but I'm still ready for something different.

Something different requires fundamentals for a new way of thinking, fundamentals that are central to what liberal religion is all about. To value real wealth requires *learning* to value real wealth. The liberal church can have both the audacity to teach this, and the openness and humility required, to learn together. In essence, it's about *rediscovering what it means to be fully human*. This is a task the liberal church is cut out for.

More and more of us are coming to believe this: Once a basic level of material wellbeing is achieved, the major improvements in our health and happiness come not from more money and consumption, but rather from relationships, cultural expression, and spiritual growth.³

What are the things that give you enduring pleasure? It's cheesy-sounding, but it's true: the best things in life really are free. The material needs of people who are secure in their identity and self-worth can be met in quite modest ways.⁴ Ways that don't put strain on the earth's resources.

Now, becoming secure in one's identity and self-worth is no easy thing. It's easiest to learn it as children, but adults can learn it for the first time, as long as they have a loving and accepting community to be a part of. We don't learn who we are or accept ourselves as we are in isolation. We come to know and love ourselves in relation to others.

It may sound like I'm venturing into self-help/pop psychology territory here, but I challenge that response as a defense of the consumerist mind-set. The truth is that the best spirituality is also quite simple. Anytime we fill ourselves and our lives with things – whether it's food, or drugs, or stuff – we are trying to fill a hole of spiritual need. That spiritual hunger is insatiable until we admit we're feeding ourselves the wrong way. More often than not, what we really need are new relationships and new connections. And not just with people but with God, with something greater than ourselves. It requires letting go – a vulnerability and surrender that generally can only be learned and mid-wived through the guidance of a religious community, or a community of good purpose.

The successful Unitarian Universalist youth group is a good example of this, and Neighborhood Church has a wonderful one. Here we can see the benefit of liberal, religious values in techno-color. The m.o. is simple: you make a point of making sure everyone feels accepted, included, and part of the group, no matter how different you are. The competitive and individualistic aspects of high school are intentionally abandoned.

The liberal church is already doing some things very well. But our challenge to ourselves needs to be that what we do well, we do much more of, with greater focus and intention. We should recognize that, in a time of great transition that is fraught with anxiety, the UU church is a place where anxieties can be soothed. Because not only are we pro-active in teaching people how to change the way they live, we offer that community-of-place to be part of, to be rooted in. It is belonging to a group of people that can unleash our innate human capacity for cooperation and creativity. Here is how David Korten puts it,

Because financial fortunes are fluid, and great phantom-wealth fortunes can evaporate over-night for reasons wholly beyond our control, we are placed in a position of continuous, sometimes extreme, anxiety, with serious consequences for our physical and emotional health.

³Same, p. 88, p. 75.

⁴Same, p. 75.

In an equitable society in which all people are valued for who they are rather than what they own, our natural concern is for the well-being of the group rather than for our particular position within it. Seeking our place of service becomes more important than defending and improving our position . . . Rather than anxiety, we feel calm exhilaration. Our blood pressure falls and our health and happiness improve.⁵

One of the best things I learned in Seminary had to do with the organizational dynamics of a church. If a church community is dominated by a small group of negative people, the best way to disempower them is to not spend energy on them. Instead, you engage and empower the positive and healthy people in the community, you *move toward the health* in the community.

I mention this as a helpful metaphor for this transition we're currently in of realigning our priorities in our culture, which is dominated by the financial culture.

I don't know what will happen with Wall Street, or if long-term investing will someday be okay again. I can't effectively recommend that it be abandoned. But I can suggest that for now, we move toward health, toward a way of living that is tried and true, that is based on sound values, and that happen to align with the center of our faith. I can suggest that we move toward investing in our local communities, in deepening relationships that produce *real* wealth. I can suggest that we become more intentional about replacing materialism with spiritual growth, with spiritual fitness. The liberal church could have a lot to offer in terms of what our society needs in order to move toward health.

But to make that viable, we need to clean house. We have to admit that we have a lot of our own transforming to do. Liberals are known for being good consumers, and this is probably correlated to why liberals are not known for being particularly generous. In other words, we need to support each other in walking our talk better. It is part of rediscovering what it means to be human, so we can better align our priorities with the Bigger Picture. All of us want to improve the condition of the world that we bequeath to our children.

It will take that thing that John Stewart wants us to wake up to – “when are we going to realize in this country that our wealth is work?” Changing our ways is *work*, it is hard work. Discipline and sacrifice hasn't been at the center of liberal religion for a long time, but I propose that in a brave new world, they need to be.

I can start by working hard for you, for this church. What I hope to bring most to my ministry here at Neighborhood Church is better ways to connect to the larger community of which we are a part. So you can bring more real wealth into the lives of others, and therefore into your own. I also hope to bring the spiritual inspiration required to live your lives according to what is best in the Bigger Picture, for the long term.

As Davidson would point out to us, the religious liberals are a little group, compared to the numbers in the more conservative churches, and especially compared to the numbers who don't affiliate with any religion at all. There are more and more people who reject spirituality and religion altogether. If we want to be more relevant, we have to offer something useful. We have to show that we are a religion that serves life, that serves the goal of long-term, sustainable happiness, for our children's children's children.

Throughout American history, there have been times when people realigned their priorities through an unshakeable work ethic, with a goal of reward that they wouldn't necessarily see in their lifetimes. We too could see further than the end of the month, than the end of the quarter, the end of the year, the end of our career, the end of our lives. This is a high and noble value to serve; it requires spiritual inspiration, or a big , 'a-ha'.

Scholar James Speth says,

⁵Same, p. 73.

Many of our deepest thinkers and many of those most familiar with the scale of the challenges we face have concluded that the transitions required can be achieved only in the context of what I will call the rise of a new consciousness. For some, it is a spiritual awakening – a transformation of the human heart. For others it is a more intellectual process of coming to see the world anew and deeply embracing the emerging ethic of the environment and the old ethic of what it means to love thy neighbor as thyself.⁶

Well neighbors, what do you say. Are you in it? I will guide you to guide yourselves. But it is love that will guide us all.

⁶Same, p. 43.