

When 'Weakness' is Our Strength
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UCV

Journey back with me again, if you will, to that November morning in Berkeley, California in 2001, when I met with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. The principal task of the MFC is to determine whether women and men are qualified to serve as professional UU ministers, and ready for ordination. You preach a ten minute sermon to the members of the Committee arranged before you in a semi-circle, and then what follows for the next forty-five minutes is an intense oral examination during which they ask you any question they want on Unitarian history and thought, congregational dynamics and systems, religious education, and your personal life as it relates to your psychological fitness to serve in a demanding profession; any question, and you have to answer, and your future is on the line. It's a very heavy, high-stakes event.

I was sailing through just fine, when one member cleared his throat and then asked me: "Tell us what you know about the 'Cambridge Platform.'" "*The Cambridge Platform?*" Uh-oh, I was stumped. I quickly thought, ok, this has something to do with the history of Unitarianism, not academic politics at an English university. Something old, probably long ago...Cambridge, *Massachusetts*...Unitarians in New England...which century?...what was the issue at stake? Platform? Platforms and Politics? Church, or ecclesiastical politics...That was about all I could come up with. *Do any of you know the answer?*

As I recall, I said I didn't really know what the Cambridge Platform was, but I imagined it was an important issue faced by Unitarian congregations in New England, and that it dealt with ecclesiastical polity, or church government. There was a pause, a rustling of paper, a thank you from my inquisitor, and then an invitation to look it up in the near future. In spite of that gaffe, I passed the MFC examination that day; but then, believe me I hunted down the "Cambridge Platform" for the next time the question arose.

1648. There were no Unitarians congregations in New England, the British Isles, or any of its colonies. The Unitarian movement in Italy and Poland had been smashed by the Inquisition and the Counter Reformation. Individual Unitarians who had survived that onslaught had gone underground, or sought refuge in scattered, persecuted Unitarian communities in Transylvania. If anyone, lay or clergy in Europe, in Britain or its colonies, had even heard of Unitarianism by 1648, they would have considered it a rank, dangerous heresy. Any person expressing anti-Trinitarian beliefs in that era was subject to imprisonment, exile, or execution. So what does the controversy in *Puritan* New England and the Cambridge Platform of 1648 have to do with Unitarianism and us, meeting here today?

Two words: *congregational polity*. 360 years ago, in 1648, a great controversy had arisen in the religious culture of *Puritan* New England that focused on three key issues: how individual congregations governed themselves; how, and in what manner congregations were to be associated with each other; and where and to what extent *authority* was vested in how religious societies defined themselves, financed themselves, and carried out their work within their religious societies and out into the larger world.

Beginning with the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation, in the 1520s, these issues had never been settled. The Reformation was a widespread 16th century movement which, in every imaginable way and outcome, questioned, overhauled, and reconfigured every aspect of traditional Christian religious belief, theory, ritual, institution and practice. It was one of the great transformational eras in Western history and culture. The roots of our own religious movement are embedded deeply in these times, events, and in the crucial reforms that took place centuries ago on both sides of the Atlantic. And for us, a key legacy, a precious fruit fed by those historical roots of ours embedded in that era is local, autonomous, congregational, democratic self-government.

In the 1640s, Civil War raged in Britain, and there, and in its colonies, the white hot issue of authority and forms of government in civic and religious societies was bitterly contested. King or Parliament? Monarchy or representational government? Bishops, synods, or ministers? Dioceses, presbyteries, or congregations? Which form was most legitimate? Where did authority reside? You may think this an arcane issue confined to the remote past; but to this day, how often do we fret over the health of our democratic political institutions? And this past week in Vancouver, our own Anglican diocese has been rent by the action of a wealthy, reactionary parish just down the road that has defied its own bishop and polity over the question of blessing same-sex unions and marriages. You may think this an antique or foreign affair: but every time we vote in this congregation to call and ordain a minister, form a Board of Trustees, gather in Annual and Extraordinary Meetings, present, debate and approve a budget, every time we rally around and generously support an annual pledge drive, we plug in directly to four hundred years of history that is very much alive today; we enact, we live, we embody the responsibility, the consequences, and the gift of congregational polity. It's living history; and we bring it alive and keep it relevant.

Listen. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 on this continent (and the Savoy Declaration ten years later in England) asserted that authority to define and nurture religious society resides in autonomous congregations. "There is no greater church than a congregation," the delegates from the Massachusetts churches announced in 1648. Each particular congregation "is a distinct society of itself, having officers of their own...[and]virtues of their own." "A Church" is a "company of people combined together by covenant." Its power and authority "is a prerogative...which the church doth exercise: in...appointing ministers...choosing their own officers...[and] admitting their own members." "Church government...is placed in the officers of the church [and] they are subject to the power of the" congregation. "By Visible Covenant, Voluntary Agreement [and] Consent" we shall be "orderly knit together...reminded of our mutual duty...and meet together [often] in one congregation." (see Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, I, 204-6; *Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd Edition, John Leith, ed., 386-99; *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, 17-28) Sound familiar?

All Unitarian and other religious communities governed by congregational polity trace their roots back to the Reformation. In the English speaking world, they are the direct heirs of these and similar declarations. By 1825, here in North America and in Great Britain, hundreds of congregations, their ministers and lay folk alike, had evolved *theologically* and *emotionally* away from their historic Calvinist, Anabaptist, and Anglican moorings; one by one, over decades, they came out of the "belief closet" and *became* Unitarians—that is, women and men we would recognize today as holding certain beliefs and sensibilities very much like our own.

Today in North America, many, if not most of us would define Unitarianism as a post-Christian, radically pluralistic religious movement. *That* makes us different from most 19th century Unitarians. And yet it would still be possible for us, and them, to recognize each other, in spite of the distances of time and space, because of two enduring characteristic Unitarian features. The first is that our spirituality, belief, and practice evolve, grow and are ever changing; that *what is constant about us is change itself*. The second characteristic, by contrast, has changed very little indeed; and that is congregational polity—our local, grass roots, autonomous self-government; *that* has been a remarkably enduring attribute and practice of what it means publicly to be a Unitarian; it has been a constant for centuries. And for those of us who have migrated here from hierarchical religious cultures and from centralized, bureaucratic institutions, we see congregational polity as an enduring, living practice that we cherish profoundly. We value and hold it dear as a principal strength of this religious and ethical movement.

The strength of this form of religious polity is so clear to me. Authority to define, to act, to finance, to dream, to voluntarily associate with others resides here, with us. It is palpable, real and close to home. We do not dance to any one else's step; we do not defer to any one else's dictate; we do not spend our money according to some remote authority's scheme. We define and discipline ourselves; we pay our own way; we

ordain and call our own ministers; we elect our own officers; we act within this community and beyond according to our own best lights; we make our own mistakes, to be sure; and we savour our own achievements.

These are the strengths of a mature religious community governed by adults, gathered by covenant, to achieve the purposes written in the Constitution of this congregation. (*see UCV Constitution in the Sunday Unitarian insert*)

- To create a caring community of seekers after truth
- To provide a place for exploration of personal religious beliefs
- To share the joys and sorrows of life's passages; to celebrate and grieve together
- To educate children and adults in the Unitarian heritage and values
- To challenge, stimulate and encourage each other's ethical and religious growth
- To act upon Unitarian values in reaching out to a wider world
- To support the extension of liberal religion in society.

This is what we claim to be, to what we aspire, and what we seek to achieve. It speaks to the strength of our vision and is, I think, a compelling, moving document.

As well, I'm struck by the way it echoes key, historical statements about the congregational way and its purposes that are centuries old. In 1605, the Polish Unitarians' *Racovian Catechism* stated that a church is a "particular...single society...a congregation...of believers...assembled in one place," whose purpose is "to consider one another, to provoke one another to good works...to support the weak...to comfort [o]urselves together...to be patient...and to edify one another." Remember the *Cambridge Platform* of 1648? It states that our "communion...more fully puts us in mind of our mutual duty...[it] stirreth us up...to meet...to express...[and] to practice...for mutual edification...for giving power and life to all...and to minister relief and [support] one unto another." And finally, speaking in 1841, William Ellery Channing, one of the chief proponents of Unitarianism in North America, asserted that the "church is adapted to our free, inquiring, moral nature...It acts on us as rational and responsible beings...It speaks powerfully to our consciences and hearts...[Its goal, its end,] is to minister to human virtue...to cultivate universal justice and charity toward our neighbour...[And thus] we seek for others to partake with us." (from *The Racovian Catechism*...London, 1818, 369-83; Channing, "The Church," May 30, 1841, in *The Works of William Ellery Channing*, 1888, 428-46)

The strengths of our liberal, progressive faith and sensibility, of our congregational way and polity, are clear. So too are its challenges, its weaknesses. I'll name two, and very briefly.

Our Unitarian congregations and fellowships are few and far-flung in this great, capacious nation of ours. Spurred on by a letter written by this congregation's Board of Trustees in 1955, congregations and fellowships, ministers and lay members subsequently engaged in a process that led to the creation of the Canadian Unitarian Council in 1961, a process of building a voluntary association of congregations that culminated just six years ago in the formation of an autonomous, national organisation. It's all still so new and evolving to this day; and I wonder: how dedicated are we to extend our reach beyond our local congregations to create and sustain a vibrant national movement that can represent and speak clearly, forthrightly, and effectively on behalf of Unitarians across Canada, and to Canada? What have we done to support the Canadian Unitarian Council and to ensure that its work and vision thrives?

The second challenge, or weakness, abides in the very strengths of congregational polity. Remember: congregational polity means that each Unitarian congregation is self-defining, self-governing and self-financing. Each of those features of the Unitarian way depends upon our willingness to explore and think about what we value and why; it depends on our willingness to participate and serve in the work of this community; it depends upon our willingness to give generously to our congregation's annual pledge drive.

Would you have someone else define your faith and impose it upon you? Would you give up the rights and duties of democratic self-government and allow some top-down authority to govern in your place? Would you relinquish and give up the privilege and challenge of debating, deciding, and agreeing openly about how your money and resources are spent here?

Each congregation stands alone, we thrive or wither depending on how we respond and act upon these vital matters. We are weak if we do not share our ideas, spirit, and aspirations with one another; weak if we don't show up, think, discuss and vote in our business meetings; weak if we do not give, and give generously, to support the programs, the buildings and grounds, the professional staff, and the internal and external communications of this congregation. There is no else out there to save us; may we be courageous, active, giving members and friends to this congregation so that we will thrive next year and in the years to come.

I want to end with a few observations. I've told you before that for me, the experience of entering a classroom and standing before a group of students, where together we are going to embark on the journey of learning and discovery, is like standing before the burning bush; I want to take my shoes off because it's like entering sacred time and space; because learning something new, becoming more than what we were, is a miracle. I have seen students transformed by learning. That's why we value and express our support for our kids and youth here, our "students and scholars." It's the reason why we should be generative, generous, and kind to them. They may think they're "only" going to school; *what they're doing is growing up and learning to become skilled, whole human beings*. And to me that's a sacred endeavor.

We may think, in turn, that in coming here on Sunday mornings, we're "only" attending a worship service—we do it fairly often after all; and that when we attend, speak, and vote in one of our committees here, or at one of our Annual, or Extraordinary General Meetings, when we elect a new Board, when we reckon our needs and then devise and approve an annual budget, we may think or feel that we're "only" doing church—you know, that thing we do year-in-year-out.

It's far more than that; *you are more than that*, I think. I watch you and listen and feel. I stand occasionally before you; I sit next to you and participate with you in this place. And this is what I see and feel: that what we do here and what we are resonates deeply with time, with centuries of Unitarian endeavor, and hope, and achievement. It is history and faith brought to life—living history, living faith. When we think and feel and encourage each other in spiritual and ethical growth, when we serve on committees and the Board, when we vote for an annual budget and then give financially to support the work of this congregation we join an epic, nearly five hundred year old story, and we take our place along side and stand in solidarity with a cast of beloved, flawed, amazing characters stretching out and back beyond Canada and the States to the British Isles and the Continent, to our founding mothers and fathers in Italy, Poland, and Transylvania. They are here with us, *and* we carry them and us forward into the next year and the next, adding what measure of insight, innovation, wisdom, and gratitude it is our blessing to possess and share to future generations.

May we give generously to this year's pledge drive so that our story and this congregation will thrive!

I extend to you my sincere thanks, and leave with you my blessing until we meet again.