

SONG OF MYSELF, SONG OF OURSELVES

a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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SERMON

Unitarian Universalism is often referred to as a “dissenting tradition,” having been born in heresy and persecution. As a leading sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, told us at our 1998 General Assembly, all American religions have this same genealogy of dissent. As Chesterton once observed, in America even the Catholics are Protestant.

Bellah rightly sees this history as inflecting American religions sharply toward individualism rather than communitarianism. He cited polling data showing that 8 in 10 Americans believe that “an individual should arrive at his or her own beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.” This may surprise you. Think of all those people reciting the Nicene Creed or some other collective declaration of belief on Sunday morning. But the breadth of the variance between what people publicly profess and what is in their hearts is great.

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of this radical individualism. Like any generalization, of course, it has its degrees of truth and its exceptions. So when I talk this morning about “our” individualism and try to say how “we” seem to be this way or that way, these first person plurals may not be fully descriptive of all Americans, or all Unitarian Universalists, and certainly not all Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists. The strong tendency toward individualism, though, is everywhere and affects everyone.

Our individualism has political and literary antecedents too -- like John Stuart Mill, whose extraordinary allergy to community is evident in the quotation in your order of service; like the attitude depicted in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”; and like Walt Whitman’s epic individualist poem, “Song of Myself,” which opens with the line “I celebrate myself” and closes with lines like “I understand God not in the least, nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself. . . . “I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”

For UUs, our individualistic heritage is expressed most dramatically by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian minister and father of American transcendentalism. Listen to a few samples from his famous essay entitled “Self-Reliance.”

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. [We won’t detour into the glaring, archaic irony of the words “manhood” and “every” in that sentence. He continues . . .] Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better of securing his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and

culture of the eater. The virtue most in request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.

Whenever a mind is simple, and receives divine wisdom, old things pass away – teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour. . . . If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not.

Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . .

When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures of old rubbish.

Emerson's paean to individualism is ironic: his thinking remains in our social DNA today. He is now part of our hoarded treasure, and we don't consider him rubbish at all. In his 1998 General Assembly lecture, Robert Bellah demonstrated this very convincingly, using the abundance of available survey data about Unitarian Universalists. We are undoubtedly the most self-surveyed denomination in the history of religion. Time after time, our answers to such surveys reflect a valorizing of individualism over communitarianism.

America's intense individualism, in which many UUs participate enthusiastically, has many effects on our social and spiritual lives. Among these, three strike me as particularly profound. First, individualism affects how we do social justice, in both positive and negative ways. We are highly attuned to the unfairness of judging an individual on the basis of nonindividual attributes such as race, gender, or sexual orientation. But we tend to see the remedies for such injustices mainly in individualistic terms, such as civil rights legislation.

On the whole, we have not cultivated the social skill of using the power of deeper community to heal the wounds and divisions caused by the long historical persistence of such injustices. Once individual rights have been secured – once the shallower forms of justice-making known as tolerance have become the official doctrine -- our passion for eradicating racism, sexism, and other such patterns seems to lose steam. It is as if to go more deeply into these ills would require a communal intimacy that poses too much of a threat to our individualism.

Once again, Emerson is the polestar example. On the one hand, he passionately eulogized John Brown, the abolitionist insurrectionist. On the other hand, he could say without hesitation "do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong."

A second profound effect of our individualism is as an incubator of runaway materialism. The sociologist Max Weber demonstrated this over a century ago in his famous book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber and those who taught him showed that modern individualism is a child of the Protestant Reformation. The ascension of individualistic

rights of conscience in matters of religious and political belief led inexorably to a related glorification of “the right to pursue one’s own economic interests, which includes the inviolability of individual property, the freedom of contract, and vocational choice.” Protestantism – and specifically, Calvinism -- was the parent of capitalism.

Weber saw the exaltations of work and thrift in the writings of Benjamin Franklin and others as “an ethically slanted maxim for the conduct of life.” This way of conceiving of work saw generating material wealth as a religious value. Calvinist capitalism thus could glorify the piling up of wealth and yet condemn greed.

The asceticism of Calvinism went far beyond abstention from self-indulgence and luxurious living. It was a veritable starvation diet for the soul. Noting “the pathos” of Calvinism’s “inhumanity,” and particularly its harsh prohibitions against confession or even reliance on ordinary friendship, Weber describes the life of the Calvinist entrepreneur as one of “tremendous inner loneliness.”

Given these conditions, it should not be surprising that the piling up of material wealth as a form of glory to God eventually devolved into addictive materialist grandiosity. As Weber pointedly observed, “Where capitalism is at its most unbridled, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, divested of its metaphysical significance, today tends to be associated with purely elemental passions, which at times virtually turn it into a sporting contest.” It has only gotten worse since Weber wrote his classic in 1905. What would poor Max think of us today?

For those of us in modern liberal religion who consider ourselves critics of the excesses of global capitalism, this is an embarrassing piece of social archeology. The embarrassment is magnified by the ratification of Weber’s analysis by contemporary liberal sociologists like our good friend Robert Bellah, who declared to us in his 1998 lecture, “Freedom of conscience and freedom of enterprise are more closely, even genealogically, linked than many of us would like to believe.”

Our relationships with social justice and materialism seem to me to be closely connected to a third profound effect of our radical individualism. To a great extent, we do church essentially as a loose confederation of individuals. The voice of truth is personal and is heard as speaking in the first person singular.

Emerson’s declaration that nothing is sacred but the integrity of each individual’s own mind is very much with us. Whitman’s rhapsodic description of himself – and thus of each of us – as untamed and untranslatable would seem to leave very little universal truth about the human condition to be pursued through communal worship, comparison of notes about our shared spiritual predicaments, or collective study or spiritual practice – in short, all of the things that make church church. Sometimes it seems as though the main universal truth we recognize is the universality of our intense and unalloyed individuality.

I actually see WUU as rowing against this current, and I am hopeful it will row that way ever more resolutely; but the cultural current is very strong.

I think of religious seekers as people looking for answers to questions about the spiritual aspects of the human condition. These questions assume a universal element in human life that makes individual experiences translatable, comparable, and amenable to fruitful discussion. To say, as do radical individualists, that each individual's mind is the final arbiter of such questions is essentially to deny this universal element and to treat religious experience as purely personal.

If you have any doubt about whether Unitarian Universalism is still enthralled with the radical individualism of Emerson, take a look at the UUA's recent Time Magazine ads. One of them describes UU congregations as places "where no one's idea of God is better than another's." The phrasing reminds me of the old story of the Jeffersonian farmer whose son was heading off to the city, and the farmer said to him, "remember my son, you're as good as any man . . . and no better." The ad text has a nice ring to it – a kind of equal dignity for everyone's religious convictions. But the ad is not about the legal right of free exercise of religion – something no one can seriously dispute.

Rather, it is saying that without knowing anything about the particular religious ideas or answers entertained by any given group of people in any given UU church on any given Sunday, we can with confidence pronounce them all of equal value. Now, if these ideas and answers were addressing a question about something universal in human experience, then mightn't some of them might be better than others in capturing that universal something – helping all of us to understand it better? Unlike people, all ideas are not created equal!

And as to this kind of universal question, if I really thought no one at a church had any ideas or answers that could possibly be any better than the ones I myself already had come up with, I can't imagine why I would go. The whole point of going, after all, would be hoping to improve upon my own best thinking, which, in all humility, has not yet caused a life of perfect fulfillment to open before me. I would entertain some hope that at least the minister would be able to offer some such improvement. And if he didn't, I surely wouldn't join the congregants there in paying him the fancy sums you generous and discerning people pay me to preach -- just have him tell me things no better than what I already know.

Do you see the meaning sitting underneath the ad? It is that religious experience is in fact purely personal – really is a matter of individual taste, rather than a quest for truths of universal relevance. It is the reduction of God to an ice cream flavor.

If the American Cancer Society ran an ad declaring "we are committed to the principle that no one's ideas about curing cancer are better than anyone else's," would that make you want to contribute money? You may say that's different, because curing cancer is a matter of science, and religion certainly isn't a science. Indeed, but religion is still a pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and healing, and a far cry from a matter of personal taste -- like chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry.

So the ways in which our individualism affects how we relate to social justice, materialism, and church are of great importance. But sitting beneath these, there is an effect even more profound. Our individualism is our lived declaration of what is permanent versus what is transient, natural versus fabricated, primary versus secondary. We tend to see our

individual presences in a community as a matter of social contract, rather than an organic development.

Thus it is not surprising that Emerson would describe community as a kind of joint stock company. To him, community certainly would not be the context for creating or shaping human identity. It would be more like a marketplace to be visited from time to time for purposes of mutually advantageous, but arms-length, exchange.

Our radical individualism represents our view of reality with a capital R. From time to time we therefore must ask ourselves whether this view is a valid rendering of our human condition or instead a damaging distortion.

It is very difficult to find anyone who is against community. We often talk about building it, with all of the sentimentality that the building metaphor seems to bring on. Underneath all of this Hallmark greeting card rhetoric lies an assumption that community is like any other valuable possession: if we don't have it, we had better build it or get it.

What sociologists and theologians have been trying to tell us for quite awhile, though, is that community has us as much as we have it; that without community there is no us, just as without water, there are no fish. The only open question is, what's the water quality? Does our community nurture us, heal us, and foster the nobility and individual creativity in each of us; or does it isolate us, damage us, and pull us down from our nobility?

In America and in Unitarian Universalism, we have a community. It's just that, if you'll permit the oxymoron, it's a radically individualistic one that seriously limits how deep we can go in human relating. And this form of community is profoundly shaping the life of every individual in it.

Among political and religious leaders "out in the field," so to speak, I know of no one who understood the power of community to shape individual identity better than Malcolm X. He saw integration as a toxic environment for African-Americans, who had been damaged in their sense of self-worth by centuries of chattel slavery and racial vilification. As James Cone, a leading African-American theologian has observed,

"If blacks were going to achieve the unity necessary for the attainment of their freedom, then self-hate – according to Malcolm the number one problem in the black community – had to be replaced with a love of themselves. . . . In Malcolm's perspective, black people should not even think about uniting with or loving any other people until they first learn how to come together with love and respect for each other."

Malcolm knew that no individual can generate self-love and self-esteem in isolation – particularly against a long history of social, political, and cultural hostility to that self-esteem. His objective was the decolonization of the black mind, so as to transform his people from "negroes" into "proud black African people." He surely was about that work when he gave a speech about black identity at the Corn Hill Methodist Church in Rochester, New York on February 16, 1965:

“Because [whites] were so successful in projecting [a] negative image of Africa,” he said, “those of us here in the West of African ancestry, the Afro-Americans, we looked upon Africa as a hateful place. We looked upon the African as a hateful person. . . . And what was the result? [Whites] ended up with 22 million Black people here in America who hated everything about us that was African. We hated the African characteristics. . . . When you teach a man to hate his lips, the lips that God gave him, the shape of the nose that God gave him, the texture of the hair that God gave him, the color of the skin that God gave him, you’ve committed the worst crime that a race of people can commit. And this is the crime that you’ve committed.”

Five days later, speaking at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City, Malcolm was gunned down by a team of assassins. Next Thursday is the 43rd anniversary of his untimely death. The wisdom he came to concerning the relationship between community and individual identity remains highly relevant today, as we ask whether the way we conceive of our religious community can be made to serve our best aspirations better.

Robert Bellah was reflecting that wisdom ten years ago when he told us that American radical individualism is a mistake with “enormous cultural consequences.” Only by embracing a more social understanding of human nature, he concluded, can we “divert American culture from the destructive course upon which it seems to be set.” For our part in it as Unitarian Universalists, Bellah suggested that such a social understanding would mean making “the interdependent web of all existence” our first principle instead of our last one.

I am all for it. And even as I say that, I feel America’s radical individualism in my bones. I’m a wild duck who has trouble flying in formation, even in a flock as loosely connected as the UUA. To believe in the value of community does not make one, temperamentally, a communitarian universalist. It will be hard work, but it is THE work. It is the spiritual growth for which, in our hearts, all of us and each of us long -- every last duck.

AMEN.