

SAFE OR ALIVE
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"Faith of the Larger Liberty" made it into the present gray hymnbook of 1993 out of the old blue hymnal, as we called it back then, *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, first published in 1964, three years after the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. The Reverend Vincent Silliman wrote it in 1944 for a gathering of ministers in Maine.

"Heroes of faith in every age, far-seeing, self denying, wrought an increasing heritage, monarch and priest defying. Faith of the free! In thy dear name the costly heritage we claim: their living and their dying."

One of the hymns that didn't make it into *Singing the Living Tradition* was #238, "O God of Earth and Altar," Words by GK Chesterton.

"O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry, our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die; the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide, take not thy thunder from us, but take away our pride. From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen, from all the easy speeches, that comfort cruel men, from sale and profanation, of honor and the sword, from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord."

The Winter Issue of *Congregations*, the endlessly interesting and amazingly useful magazine sent to individual and congregational members of The Alban Institute in Herndon, Virginia, is full of big questions. In his opening column, Jim Wind, Alban's President, writes:

"At the heart of American congregations are traditions that raise big questions. Sometimes those questions are pointed at the status quo, the powers that be, those who govern, those who possess great wealth. At other times, they target our religious communities themselves -- and their leaders -- for failures to ask the big questions of themselves, for conniving with the powers that be, for trimming their sails in order to coast with the prevailing cultural and political winds.

So what about the big questions? Are we questioning the pervasive individualism and self-idolatry of our consumer cultures? Do we challenge the hegemony of marketplace fundamentalism in our lives? What about the role of the U.S. in the 21st century world? The death penalty? The obscene gap between the world's rich and poor?

Preemptive war? Are we asking these questions in our congregations? Or do we avoid them at all costs? In most congregations that I know, the answers are mixed. Sometimes the big questions are raised, but at other times -- too many times -- they are tabled or ignored for fear that they may be more than we can handle, that they may cost us more than we can pay, that they may do us in."

Jim Wind is a featured speaker at the upcoming GA in Saint Louis. If you are going, don't miss him on Thursday at 1 o'clock.

The Reverend Marcia Bailey, an American Baptist who teaches at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, has a very thoughtful piece in the same issue of *Congregations* titled, "Border Crossings: Churches Living Boldly Into the Future," in which she raises some spot-on questions if, like me, you worry a lot about the future of Unitarian Universalism.

- Are we taking risks and experiencing joy as we live daringly into the future or are we circling the wagons, holding the fort, protecting ourselves with all that is reassuring, comforting and safe?

- Are we safe or alive? Who are we as a community of faith? We find ourselves living in a borderland, somewhere between what has been and what is yet to be. What we know, while safe, may also be restrictive. What we envision, while enlivening, is also risky. What will we need to take with us for this journey?

"The road that stretches before our feet", wrote Thomas Aquinas.

The road that stretches before our feet
is a challenge to the heart
long before it tests the strength of our legs.
Our destiny is to run to the edge of the world
and beyond,
off into the darkness;
sure, for all our blindness;
secure, for all our helplessness;
strong, for all our weakness;
gaily in love, for all the pressure on our hearts.

Yes, you did hear me say that I worry a lot about the future of Unitarian Universalism? Our pathetic growth compared to the rise in the general population suggests an increasing numerical irrelevance. We are essentially white in a society that is more and more non-white. We are liberal in a religious environment that values and practices orthodoxy. We are chintzy about money while others, more fervent about their faith, practice generosity to an extreme.

Last September, *The New Yorker* published a piece about Rick Warren, the legendary founder and senior pastor of Saddleback Church in Southern California, written by Malcolm Gladwell of *Tipping Point* fame. Saddleback has 22,000 members who find community and support in small groups of up to, but no more than, ten people. About supporting the enterprise, Gladwell reported Warren commenting: "Last Sunday, we took a special offering called Extend the Vision, for people to give over and above their normal offering," . . . We decided we would not use any financial consultants, no high-powered gimmicks, no thermometer on the wall. It was just 'Folks, you know you need to give.'"

"Sunday's offering was seven million dollars in cash and fifty-three million dollars in commitments. That's one Sunday. The average commitment was fifteen thousand dollars a family. That's in addition to their tithe. When people say megachurches are shallow, I say you have no idea. These people are committed."

Did you give up on my quoting something written by a Unitarian Universalist? Fear not. I have just finished reading Paul Razor's wonderful new book, *Faith Without Fear*, published by our own UUA Skinner House. Paul received his Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School and holds a doctorate in theology from Harvard University as well as law and music degrees from the University of Michigan. He is presently the director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom and professor of interdisciplinary studies at Virginia Wesleyan College. Paul Razor is hot and so is this book, which you can order from the [UUA Bookstore](#).

I want to read you a passage in which Paul Razor defines one of our major problems, the solution of which could help us turn the tide in our quest for growth:

"For several years now, religious liberals have expressed a sense of unease in various ways. They are increasingly confronted with the tensions inherent in their chosen tradition, tensions which are often just below the surface. Sometimes these tensions emerge as people become aware of competing liberal values, which if not exactly contradictory, often pull us in more than one direction at once. A recurring example is the deep commitment to individual freedom, which can easily run up against a longing for a greater sense of community, perhaps even a desire for more guidance from or even accountability to a larger group.

"Tensions often play out in the way religious liberals seek substantive truth. Liberals remain committed to such

principles as free religious inquiry, autonomous judgment about truth claims, and openness to divergent views. At the same time, many also yearn for more shared content, for a common understanding about their faith that is more specific than what they have now. They don't want creeds. They remain committed to the principle of the individual search for truth and meaning, but they also want the search to lead somewhere.

"This tension can especially afflict newcomers. Many people come to liberal congregations to free themselves from what they often describe as the suffocating conformity of doctrine in other traditions. Yet once there, they sometimes find that the absence of a prescriptive belief system leaves them feeling adrift in the religious sea. Like others, they want to be able to respond with joy and conviction to the perennial question, 'What do you liberals believe anyway?' And they want to be able to do this without resorting to the tired liberal litany of things they *don't* believe."

I'd lay a bet that this dilemma Paul Razor describes is familiar to every one in this room who has governance responsibility in the congregation, everyone who serves on this congregation's membership committee, everyone who has held or holds responsibility for the annual canvass. How do we grow in substantial numbers without changing our core culture, without trading our comfort with what and who we are for the challenge and possible discomfort of considering who and what we might become?

Are we safe or alive,
Wake up, wake up,

The poet Judith Gass exhorts us:

Why are you waiting to begin your life?
Listen to the knocking at the door of your own heart
It is only faint because you have not answered
You have fooled yourself with preparations.
Time left laughing while you considered possibilities
Wake up
You have slept long enough
Wake up
Tomorrow may be too late

In just about an hour from now, our congregation in Westport, CT. will vote to call a new Associate Minister, Margie Allen. Jerry and I met with Margie at a potluck supper last Sunday. Everyone present had worked on Vision 2028, our 25 year hence look at what our church might yet become. Margie told us how the packet she received from the search committee impressed her. Nice people, good program, lovely building, yada, yada, yada. It mentioned but

did not include the Vision 2028 report. So she asked the search committee chair to send it to her. "When I read about your dreams", she told us, "I knew I wanted to come here and help you make them real".

What is your dream? And is it big enough? What is your call, my friends? What is your call here in State College? Here in the Joseph Priestly District of the UUA? Are you committed to and planning for more members to worship with you on Sunday? Are you offering visitors radical hospitality? Are you staffed to educate more children in the ways of liberal religion? Are you equipped to train more youth to be our lay leaders of tomorrow? More allies with smarts and energy to do community outreach? Does your vision and your strategic plan include growth in members, in generosity, in spiritual depth and, most important, in the every day, gritty, relational, conflictual, disciplined need to survive and prosper?

"Faith of the free! What e'er our plight, thy law, thy liberty, thy light shall be our blessed possession."

Safe or alive? L'chayim. To life!
May it be so. Amen. Shalom. Peace