

ON BECOMING A PUBLIC NUISANCE: JUSTICE-MAKING IN THE AGE OF OBAMA
Richard S. Gilbert – UU Fellowship of Centre County, PA – 5/3/2009

One of the most poignant events surrounding the inauguration of Barack Obama occurred at the Lincoln Memorial two days before. The Obama family was studying Lincoln's inaugural words. While they discussed Obama's upcoming speech, his 10-year-old daughter, Malia, turned to him and blurted out: "First African-American president. Better be good."¹

Most of us have long since moved from Post Election to Post Inauguration Withdrawal Syndrome, still a little bit incredulous at what happened November 4, the memory of January 20 now fading from consciousness. Ah, those were the good old days. Now we are in a deep funk over the state of the economy and our depleting assets. We live at the convergence of euphoria and catastrophe, living in a tsunami of our own making. The humor magazine, *The Onion*, cleverly captured the irony of the situation in its post-election headline: "Black Man Given Worst Job in America." We have amazingly elected an African-American president who projects the "audacity of hope" to an eager population cheering wildly while plunging into an economic abyss. We are in crisis mode.

The Chinese ideogram for crisis has two figures – one for danger and the other for opportunity. We live uneasily on the cusp between these two worlds – one defined by hope born of a better vision and the other a not very brave new world of economic free fall. Our greatest danger is to depend too much on one talented 47-year-old president with an engaging smile and a good jump shot. Now for the hard part. Instead of looking to Barack Obama to save us, every morning we need to look in the mirror, and move from experiencing the Obama charisma to experiencing personal responsibility to save our community, our nation, our world, our planet. We are quick to grade President Obama on his first hundred days. But what about our grade as citizens, as religious activists? There is no one but us. That's the way it is in a democracy.

What is our response? What is the role of the Unitarian Universalist faith in the face of this perfect storm we have created? How should this congregation be involved in building the Beloved Community?

These are hard times. Things are not going all that well with building the Beloved Community of Love and Justice to which we aspire. Many of us experience "compassion fatigue." Some say, "No matter how cynical I get, I can't keep up."²

The excitement of being up to our steeples in electoral politics is – mercifully – behind us for a while, but the hum-drum work of democracy goes on every day as we rightly refuse to separate our religion from our politics. And, lest we forget, democracy, the capacity of people to participate in those decisions that affect them, is one of our religious values. "We affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."³

Social action is not the central function of the church. It is one vital function that flows from a religious community which also serves the functions of worship, mutual ministry, and religious education all supported by a stewardship of time, treasure and talent. The church teaches not only by what it says, but also by what it does. And what it tries to do is create a beloved community within the congregation which reaches out to infuse the world with the same values of love and justice. My vision is that the liberal church is a "spiritual center with a civic circumference."⁴

In such confusing and contradictory times we are easily discouraged. Unitarian Universalists, a tiny slice of progressive religion, wonder about our role in the great scheme of things. The social landscape is daunting. How do we get a handle on what what has to be done to build a Beloved Community of peace, justice and sustainability? I suggest one of our primary missions, and perhaps our unique mission as a religion, is to be a gadfly on the body politic and religious. We need to have what poet Robert Frost called, a “lover’s quarrel” with our world.

Bill Moyers, Baptist minister, media guru and social prophet, coined a phrase that suggests our marching orders. He once said the role of the media is to be a “public nuisance.” For example, he wrote, “A few weeks ago my colleague Charlie Rose put a question to the new president of CNN, Jonathan Klein. He asked: ‘Could there ever be a successful progressive version of Fox News Channel?’ Klein didn’t think so. He said Fox appeals to ‘mostly angry white men’ while liberals – ‘you know, they don’t get too worked up about anything.’”⁵

I believe that Unitarian Universalists need to get “worked up” about the brokenness of this world. I believe the liberal church should become a “public nuisance,” questioning the conventional wisdom, challenging the status quo, and trying to live out the spirit of the prophets of old. I see its political role as prophetic – with Amos, dropping a plumb line of righteousness over the nation; with Isaiah loosing the bonds of injustice, with Micah doing justice, with Jesus blessing the poor and the imprisoned. Each of these prophets was a troublemaker in his time.

One of the most important of these troublemakers of old was Jeremiah, a 6th-7th century BCE Hebrew prophet who spoke truth to the powers of his age. He upset the establishment with dire warnings about governmental policy. For his diatribes against wealth – the root of the term “jeremiads” - he was in constant trouble and even jailed for a time. Quite a public nuisance.

Without question Jeremiah Wright, one-time minister of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago and pastor to the Obama family, was named for this towering biblical figure. U-Tube sermon snippets finally compelled Barack Obama to ultimately repudiate the messenger. I think Jeremiah Wright got a bad rap. His long ministry at Trinity was marked by constant prophetic witness to the Chicago community and beyond.

Ministers who have not been critiqued by their congregation for trying to speak truth to power are not honoring their calling - something about “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” These days mixing politics and religion is a full body contact sport.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his 1967 sermon against the War in Vietnam, he was roundly criticized, even by some civil rights leaders. He said in response: “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will be come an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.” King was clearly a public nuisance.

Any objective survey of Unitarian Universalist history will reveal that we can boast of a whole host of “public nuisances.”

The British Unitarian scientist and minister Joseph Priestley upset the political and religious establishment when he supported not only the French and American revolutions, but also rejected the trinity and eternal damnation.

Charles Darwin, the “agnostic in the Abby,” raised a Unitarian, reluctantly but powerfully challenged the Church of England establishment with his 1859 bombshell book on *The Origin of Species*. This year we celebrate the 150th anniversary of that book and the 200th anniversary of his birth.

The Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker openly violated the Fugitive Slave Law and would have been jailed but for his enthusiastic and overpowering courtroom defense which led the judge to dismiss the trial.

The Universalist minister Adin Ballou ruffled many feathers with his book on Christian non-resistance, which inspired Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Thomas Starr King, Unitarian and Universalist minister, agitated slaveholders with his rhetoric and saved California for the Union. Only recently has his statue in the Capitol rotunda in Washington, DC, been replaced with a bust of Ronald Reagan.

Susan B. Anthony, long time member of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY agitated people near and far with her laser-like focus on women’s suffrage. She lived as a heretic, but died as a heroine. She once said, “Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform.”

In 1917 the pacifist preacher John Haynes Holmes debated former president William Howard Taft as the latter, moderator of the American Unitarian Association, tried successfully to urge Unitarian support of the First World War. Holmes and his church left the Unitarian movement as a result.

James Reeb unsettled many a conservative soul when he went to Selma, Alabama, to work with Martin Luther King, Jr. on a voting rights drive. He paid with his life on the hate-filled streets of Selma. I was there for his memorial service and Martin Luther King’s stirring eulogy.

I remember the summer of 1965 when my wife Joyce and I and a black social worker from Chicago led a team of 8 teen-agers in a program at Jordan Neighborhood House in Suffolk, Virginia, for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Harassed by police, sheriff and business people, we helped launch the Head Start Program. I remember testifying before a committee of the U. S. Congress for UUSC advocating a prison moratorium. My reception was as chilly as Arlen Specter’s from the Republicans when he defected. I also remember a UUSC-sponsored trip to the Philippines where we met with human rights and environmental activists. Our group was detained for 16-hours by the military, who suspected us of being – as we were – public nuisances.

A few weeks ago I met Martha Sharp, daughter of Waitstill and Martha Sharp, who went as ambassadors for the Unitarian Service Committee to rescue refugees from Nazi persecution. The Sharps were honored as “Righteous Among the Nations” in a ceremony at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Artemis Joukowsky, their grandson, wrote: “As we celebrate our grandparents’ faith and courage today, we must all ask ourselves, how will our grandchildren celebrate ours tomorrow? Let the recognition of their heroism stand as a call to action. Let us ask ourselves, Who are the righteous among the nations today? Who will take risks on behalf of unknown others now? We cannot all take physical risks, but who will take the risk of speaking out? Who will take the risk of bearing witness to the inhumanity of this era?”⁶

My point is that in bearing witness, we run risks. To speak truth to power in this turbulent world is to make a “costing commitment,” to be a public nuisance. For most of us that cost is measured in time and energy. For some it is a matter of life and death.

We can and ought to be a “public nuisance.” Bill Moyers once concluded a speech with the story of an Irishman who came upon a brawl in the street and asked, “Is this a private fight or can anyone get in it?” He waded right in – as must we.

We are not lobbyists, which by self-definition indicates self-interest. We are religious advocates for a just community on behalf of those who cannot advocate for themselves. When Jeremiah Wright told Barack Obama that if he is elected “I will be coming for you,” he meant he will be part of that loyal opposition which will drop a plumb line of justice over each and every policy undertaken by the new president and the new Congress. We need to be that prophetic minority unafraid to ask the hard questions – even of Barack Obama. That is to have a “lover’s quarrel” with our government.

Moyers said he once heard Lyndon Johnson urge Martin Luther King – after some preacherly persuasion – to, in his words, “Martin, you go out there now and make it possible for me to do the right thing.”⁷

It is we who must ask the hard questions, like how much do we deserve – economically – morally while 37 million people live in poverty, 47 million have no health insurance? How much is enough? And in a competitive society, what do we do with the losers?

Are we hopelessly addicted to a wasteful and profligate life style? Are we the victims of our own prosperity? Do we have the heart to challenge our own profligate life style that is wasteful of natural resources, pollutes the planet and corrupts our moral and spiritual lives at the same time?

Will an admirable but ancient scripture dictate how we live our lives in the 21st century? Are we to be trapped by a narrow biblical literalism on matters of human sexuality, or are we liberated by a broader vision of what it is to be human? I have in mind here marriage equality for same sex couples and reproductive freedom for women.

Is government really the problem, or is it part of the solution? Does the market have an ethic, or is the late economist John Maynard Keynes right when he said capitalism “is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men for the nastiest of motives will somehow work for the benefit of us all.” Is it true that our Masters of the Universe – those all-wise financial wizards - have managed to privatize gain, but socialize risk?

Are we willing to contribute our fair share for the common good? If you take all the taxes paid by Americans – income, sales, property, FICA and the rest, the richest fifth of the population pays about 18% of their income, just 1% more than the poorest fifth pay.⁸ Who will declare that this is unjust, that “good fortune obligates,” that those of us fortunate enough to do well ought to put more into the public coffers? Who will remind us that taxes are our down payment on the common good, the price we pay for civilization?

How do we become public nuisances? By sermons like this, through discussion groups here and in the community, through letters to the editor and op-ed pieces, through participation in political parties, through community forums, through conversations with friends and neighbors and fellow workers and other voters, through organizing advocacy groups, and, of course through supporting this congregation’s social responsibility program. Justice is always unfinished business. This is a teachable moment. This is a crisis that presents both danger and opportunity. This may be one of those hinges of history in which we ask the most basic questions, discover the most fundamental answers and effect the most transformative changes. We are in process of giving a

grade to our president after 100 days. How do we grade ourselves today and what we will earn tomorrow?

Unitarian Universalist folk singer Peter Seeger, who turned 90 today, has been a public nuisance for a long time. He has sung and strummed and spoken for peace and justice. He once built a schooner called the *Clearwater* to take people on Hudson River excursions and enlist their support for cleaning up the river. Although it was a small endeavor, Seeger likened it to a seesaw with one end anchored to the ground by a basket of rocks, while activists were at the other end using teaspoons to slowly fill a basket with sand. Some day the balance will tip and the rocks will be sent flying into the air. People will ask: "How did that happen so quickly?" It was because of "us and our damned little teaspoons."⁹ So, let's get busy with our "damned little teaspoons."

As Malia Obama said, we "better be good." We better be good. Amen.

¹ *NY Times* 1/18/09.

² Lily Tomlin.

³ By-Laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

⁴ James Luther Adams.

⁵ Bill Moyers, "The Mugging of the American Dream." *Take Back America Conference*. Altnet June 6, 9, 2005. For text of speech as delivered go to www.ourfuture.org.

⁶ *UU World*, Summer 2006, p. 43.

⁷ Quoted by Terry Robinson. "Holes in the Safety Net." *Universalist Herald*. May/June 2008, p. 12.

⁸ David Cay Johnston. *Perfectly Legal*. New York: Portfolio, p. 308.

⁹ Interview in Studs Terkel's *Hope Dies Last* as reported in *Trinity Seminary Review*, Fall, 2005, via *Xn Century* 11/15/05, p. 7.