

## **"THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL RELIGION"**

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Call to Gather: Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg

As a minister means I'm always on the look-out for icebreaker activities and check-in questions that I can inflict on meetings and small groups. One of my old standbys is to ask, "What superpower you would pick if you could have any magical ability?" Well, I asked myself this question while Roger was telling me about our service today. And the answer came to me immediately. I would want be able to imbue a person—or, ok, a whole Fellowship of people—with any quality of my choosing. So with a sprinkle of fairy dust I want to offer each of you individually and us collectively the gift of confidence.

Here's why I think we need it: Today Roger's preaching about what it means to be liberally religious in an increasingly secular culture. And he's going to say that Unitarian Universalism has some hard work ahead. But let's listen with confidence because, as he'll also tell us, we have a lot to offer to ourselves, each other and the world.

In this spirit of confidence and listening and with gratitude for being together, let us gather.

Reading: from "The Religious Counterculture: An Open Letter to Religious Liberals" by Ana Levy-Lyons

A high school teacher of mine used to entertain his classes by rattling off lists of oxymorons: pretty ugly, jumbo shrimp, constant variable. Sometimes he would take the opportunity to editorialize a little: military intelligence, airplane food, liberal religion. Everybody would smirk and the class would go on. The joke, of course, was that liberal religion couldn't really exist because liberals are not religious and religious people are definitely not liberal. We religious liberals have erroneously forged this correlation and, beyond just making us the butt of jokes, this has really cost us. It has cost us in spiritual integrity, it has cost us in political power, and it has cost us in the number of butts in our pews...

What if we could restore the radical edge and dynamic energy of religious liberalism? What would the world look like if, instead of advertising religion lite, religious liberals became the most observant people around? What if those of us who consider ourselves theologically liberal began joining liberal religious communities in droves? What if we began tithing to those institutions? What if we observed a Sabbath together and radically disengaged from social and economic structures every week? What if we engaged in serious study of our spiritual texts and

heritage and applied their lessons to the issues of today? What if we began lobbying on religious grounds for environmental stewardship?

The sky is the limit in reimagining how our faiths call us to practice in the modern world. Maybe those of us who have high-paying jobs will refuse to accept a salary that's more than seven times what the lowest-paid worker makes in our organizations—and explain, "It's because I'm really religious." Maybe we will only eat food that's sustainably grown, humanely raised, and for which the farm workers were paid a living wage, even if that rules out most of the food we currently eat—and explain to our outraged children, "It's because in this family, we're really religious." Maybe straight couples refuse to get married until there is marriage equality for everyone—and explain to their disappointed parents, "It's because we are really religious."<sup>1</sup>

This is not a call for moral or spiritual perfection, but rather for us all to restore religion as central to our lives. We don't need to retreat from modern life as much as live in counterpoint to it. There will be tension as we negotiate our desire to simply participate as normal people in this society. ... The struggle is a holy struggle. The important thing is not that we be perfect, but that we engage with the tension [so that, eventually,] my old high school teacher will just have to find a new oxymoron for his list because "liberal religion" will no longer be a joke.

### **Part 1: The problem**

The most astonishing religious trend in the United States over the last couple decades is the rise of the "nones." The "nones" are folks who not only say "none of the above" when they're asked for their religious affiliation; more to the point, they say "none at all." They are not affiliated with any religion, and aren't looking to affiliate. They simply don't believe—in Religion (with a capital R), in any particular religion (small r). Mainline Christians, evangelical Christians, Jews, Unitarian Universalists: these faiths have all gone down—either precipitously (Presbyterians for example) or a bit (Unitarian Universalists). Catholics have stayed about the same, thanks to an influx of migrants replacing the droves of Catholics who have abandoned the faith. Meanwhile, just in the past five years, "nones" have grown from fifteen to nearly twenty percent of the U.S. population. One third of young adults under thirty are "nones."<sup>2</sup>

What we're witnessing is an extraordinary secularization of American culture. I think some Unitarian Universalists have been salivating at this prospect for years. With our lack of dogma and our emphasis on freedom, Unitarian Universalism is just the place for the Nones to turn. Right?

I used to think this was true: the dawning of a secular age would usher in a glorious period for Unitarian Universalism. But then I spent my sabbatical in the UK. I saw what a secularized future might look like, and it was not a pretty picture. The Unitarian Church is doing just as badly in the UK as everyone else. Nationwide there's something like 3000 Unitarians—or about as many as there in our Fellowship and the two largest congregations in Madison and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-ana-levylyons/religious-counterculture-religious-liberals\\_b\\_4637073.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-ana-levylyons/religious-counterculture-religious-liberals_b_4637073.html).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

Milwaukee. 3000 in the whole country! There are 160 congregations, many or most of which draw under ten people to their weekly services. One person high up in the church leadership told me there will be well under 100 congregations ten years from now--and the hemorrhaging won't stop there. If there was an official list of "endangered" faith communities, the Unitarian Church in the UK would surely be on that list.

The UK is a hard place to do church. I had no idea how hard it was before I went there. Going to church in the UK is positively counter-cultural. It takes courage. Most non-church people I encountered in the UK seem to view going to church as anywhere between quaint or irrelevant tradition and ridiculous or maybe even downright evil. Most people in the little Unitarian church I worked with were embarrassed to tell family and friends they went to church. They mostly were closeted. Seriously!

I've seen estimates that six percent of the British population goes to church regularly. I'd guess in London it's even lower. Six percent! While I was there, the former Archbishop of Canterbury declared that attendance in Anglican churches is a generation from extinction. The one exception is the handful of Anglican churches lucky enough to be connected to a good school. These churches are booming because the only way to get your kids into these schools—and enjoy the taxpayer-subsidized education—is to attend and volunteer at the church affiliated with the school. There's a points system for parents whose kids apply to the school. You get points for regular attendance and for volunteering at the church. One point for regular church cleaning. One point for offering IT support to the church. One point for regularly sweeping the leaves. The result: parents fake religious belief in order to get their kids into school. The pews in this handful of churches are full of fakes.<sup>3</sup> Somehow this makes the whole collapse of church seem even worse. The Unitarians are in the same sinking boat as the Anglicans, only there aren't any parents faking beliefs so they can get their kids into a Unitarian school.

While I was there, I asked a lot of people why they think the UK is such a secular society. I learned that the decline of religion has its roots primarily in the early twentieth century. Two things happened that doomed religion. The first was the fracture that developed between religion and science, with too many churches taking ridiculous stands against scientific principles like Darwin's theory of evolution. The second, probably more important development was the First World War. It wasn't just millions of men who died on those fields of poppies, but the idea that there is some sort of God calling the shots, directly or indirectly. How could a God preside over such meaningless slaughter?

We had the science/religion fracture in the United States, too, but we didn't experience nearly the degree of death and destruction in World War One. That's why we didn't have the free-fall of religion. One out of fifty people in the UK were killed in World War One. In the U.S., we lost one out of a thousand people. Most everyone in the UK knew several soldiers who died in the war; in the U.S., most people didn't know anyone personally who was killed. Maybe it's not surprising that World War One is all but forgotten in the U.S. today. Our tribute to our military veterans—Veterans Day—takes place on November 11th, the same day as Remembrance Day in

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/schools/article3926287.ece>.

the UK. This day commemorates the armistice that ended World War One. If you asked, most Americans would have no idea why Veterans Day is observed on that day. In the UK, the searing collective memory of World War One is viscerally right under the surface. It comes above the surface in a grand scale on Remembrance Day. The UK got hammered in World War Two, but it's World War One that is most talked about. The carnage of World War Two was kind of an afterthought, the exclamation point to the traumatic slaughter of World War One.

So why has secularism risen at such a shocking rate in the United States these last couple of decades--especially since 2001? Many sociologists of religion believe the roots of this change may lie in the American reaction to 9/11. While it's presumptuous to compare the American experience of 9/11 to the British experience of World War One—a few thousand dead versus nearly a million--for whatever reason the impact of these events on religion seems comparable.

We are feeling the impact of this spike in secularism even here, in our small, conservative region in America's heartland. Many of the humanists and atheists who twenty years ago would have checked the Fellowship out now won't consider crossing our doorway. We're part of the problem, they seem to think. The problem is religion. Catholics, evangelicals, Muslims, Hindus, Unitarian Universalists: what's the difference? It's all religion, and it's all bad.

So I think we would be foolhardy to assume secularism is going to be good for Unitarian Universalism and for the Fellowship. The UK example says that secularism might well be just as bad for our faith as for all the others. If we go on our merry way thinking this is all going to magically work out for Unitarian Universalism, we may find ourselves on the endangered list, too. What's clear to me from the UK example is that business as usual is not going to cut it.

## **Part 2: Possible Solutions**

So what might work? How can we keep our congregation and our faith viable in an increasingly secular society? These are questions Unitarian Universalism and the Fellowship would be wise to ponder—sooner than later.

One key, I think, is to be spiritual without looking traditionally religious. It seems to me that we have to remain focused on things like nurturing community, creating meaning and purpose in life, and building a better world. These are spiritual pursuits. But if the package looks like your grandmother's and grandfather's or your great-grandmother's or great-grandfather's church, it's not going to fly in an increasingly secular society.

The church I served in England was built in the late 1800s and looked the part of a heavy, Victorian, gothic church. If "church" is a bad, scary brand, then just opening the heavy old door and walking into the church has to be a very daunting experience. And once you walk in to that church, you are greeted with traditional organ music. I personally like organ music—my dad was a church organist and it was an important part of my upbringing. But nothing says this is your grandparents' church like the organ. Most of the hymns are dirge-like. Though the content of the service is decidedly different, the format is more like than unlike a traditional Protestant service. This is a lot to swim against in a secular society. It's not shocking that the church I served in the UK drew between a dozen and thirty people, and that newcomers rarely returned.

While I was in the UK, I met with Sanderson Jones, a professional comedian who co-founded the Sunday Assembly a year ago. The Sunday Assembly—also (ingeniously) known as the Atheist Church—took off in London and in other places in the UK. Some branches have opened in the U.S., so far with more mixed results here. When I attended a Sunday Assembly service, or "show" as Sanderson Jones calls it, the difference from services in the Unitarian church I served was plain to see. For starters, instead of a dozen or two people, there was by my estimate 350 enthusiastic folks jammed into the auditorium. The place was abuzz with excitement and expectation. This in a country where six percent of the population go to church!

I observed that the Sunday Assembly has a concise, clearcut mission. They focus on it like a laser. Their mission is: "Wonder more/Live better/Help often." They sing contemporary songs people know like "Lean on Me." There's no organ. A kid did the reading. They showed a clip from a TV show that was both funny and poignant. A singer/songwriter performed an original song. The collection was taken in coffee cans, and I had the impression that a fair amount of bills, not just change, went into the cans. They were skipping the service the following Sunday and doing a community action day providing winter coats to the vulnerable instead. All of this leads quickly to the conclusion that this isn't my grandparents' church. So does the informal name, the "Atheist Church." Heck, you might even be able to tell your friends that you are attending the Atheist Church without feeling embarrassed.

I'm guessing that some of this sounds more like the Fellowship than a traditional church. We've worked to make this place spiritual without feeling so traditionally religious. I suspect this is part of the reason we've grown while Unitarian Universalism as a whole has been flat or slightly declining. Too many Unitarian Universalist congregations have missed the mark one way or the other: they've lost any semblance of spirituality, or they've stayed too traditional in their liturgy. Maybe a better way to say all this is to lift up the need for a balance point. We're never going to be all things to all people all the time, but I think it works here to have a big tent. Someone leaving the service yesterday shared that his two favorite services through the year are Christmas Eve and the Flower Communion. One, he noted, is very traditional in its feel. The other is unlike anything he ever experienced in the church of his childhood. It's fresh and uniquely ours. I like that balance.

Before moving on from the Sunday Assembly, it's important to note that the main difference from the Sunday Assembly is that here you're free to talk about God if you want to, or not talk about God if you don't want to. God talk is strictly forbidden in the Sunday Assembly. Here it is neither mandatory—like a traditional church—nor out-of-bounds.

The second thing we need to do to help our faith and Fellowship thrive in a secular environment is walk our talk—internally and externally. Religion got a mostly well-deserved rap as being hypocritical: a lot of hot air on Sunday mornings that didn't actually translate to people behaving well during the rest of the week. People pre-disposed to secularism are hyper-vigilant in their search for the slightest sign of hypocrisy in congregations. So we, in turn, need to be hyper-vigilant about living in accordance with our principles in our dealings with each other and in our efforts to build a better world beyond our walls. This isn't to say we need to be perfect—no one is—but we need to live in accordance with our principles at least most of the time. A

dysfunctional and unhealthy dynamic within these walls and/or a disconnect from the world beyond these walls will not draw people in.

Third, I think we need to be willing to talk about the Fellowship and our Unitarian Universalist faith with family, friends, neighbors and coworkers—even as it becomes more embarrassing to belong to a congregation. "I'm not going to take ten times the salary of the lowest-paid worker in my company because I'm Unitarian Universalist" or "I'm working for marriage equality because I'm Unitarian Universalist" causes the same kind of cognitive dissonance in folks as saying "I belong to the Atheist Church." It causes people to take a second look. If you're someone who's secular and has all but given up on religion, can you imagine the impact of continually meeting Fellowship members in the trenches working for a living wage or marriage equality or sustainable food? After awhile you just might have to check out this Fellowship you keep hearing about.

Fourth, we've got to keep a focus on community. Disconnection is the main spiritual disease of this age. It's wounding and even killing too many Americans. At the Fellowship we offer the most powerful inoculation against disconnection there is: spiritual community. Creating a life-giving community thoroughly underlies our mission: it's a reason why we strive to welcome everyone, it helps us grow in mind and spirit, and we believe that with others in community, we can be leaders in social justice.

Fifth, we need to continue with a spirit of experimentation. Instead of business as usual, let's never be afraid to try some new things. Some won't work, but some will. What I know for sure is that things which worked for a few centuries are no longer working. We need to be daring!

So let's be bold! Let's be confident! Let's keep dreaming big! Let's be proudly counter-cultural! In a land of increasing disconnection and loneliness, we are striving to live a life characterized by connection and compassion and justice. Others in the Fox Valley need this place. Our world needs this place. *We need this place.*

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