

CONFLICTED  
Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, March 17, 2019  
All Souls Church, New York City

I spend a surprising amount of time trying to figure out what exactly it is I think I'm doing. I mean that literally – what am I doing, here, in this ministry. The locations have changed over the years... California, North Carolina, Virginia or New York City, what doesn't change is the question: what am I doing, what are *we* doing, what is it we're trying to make or be or become?

One of the most distinguished religious educators of any time, Maria Harris, offered forth a framework for what the life of a congregation should include. In her view, all the people are called to what she calls "a pastoral vocation," – a view certainly shared, historically, by the primary articulators of our own Unitarian Universalist heritage. Inside this pastoral vocation, there are three key functions: the **priestly**, the **prophetic**, and the **political**. In her work, *Fashion Me a People*, she puts it this way:

As a priestly people, we are called to hallowing, blessing, and remembering, and to the works of teaching, prayer, and preserving traditions. As a prophetic people, we are called to speak the word of justice and to embody God's pathos...as a political people, we are called first to shape and design our own polity, our ways of being together...[and then] we are called to bring the institutions and systems of our world into account so they, too, are enabling and empowering for life on this planet.

I have found, through the years, that when I feel lost in the minutiae of church administration, or pulled into some daily drama, Harris' priestly, prophetic, and political charge calls me back home. I live, love, and serve in congregations because it's where we are trying to love one another, create a community where we take care of one another, and build structures that are more just today than yesterday, and then we go out into the world and try to offer some healing. Some days it's more about the teaching and remembering. Others, it's more about embodying that great compassionate spirit some call God. A lot of the time, it's about calling the institutions of power to account, inviting them to serve life rather than death.

You have to understand, I don't meditate on these things quietly, or all on my own. For example, I am subscribed to perhaps 700 or so church leadership and growth and fitness blogs and communities and organizations – or so my email inbox would suggest. But one of the better ones, Shawn Lovejoy's Courage to Lead coaching group, sent out a video not too long ago that really stuck with me. It was called "Creating a Drama Free Culture." If you have ever belonged to an organization made up of human beings, you might appreciate Lovejoy's insights here. He began by pointing out that seminaries - and most educational organizations of all kinds - don't really teach about how to handle conflict. Conflict is a fact of life. Among humans working or living together, conflict is inevitable – but drama is not. Then he got colorful and noted that, when it comes to conflict, most of us are either skunks or possums – we either spray assault, or play dead. Now most organizational psychologists would like to argue that there are a few more basic responses to conflict than these two, but leave that aside for the moment. What we need to remember is just that, conflict is inevitable. Drama around conflict is not.

Another thing Lovejoy points out is that in any institution or group of people, culture happens either by design or by default. That's it. If we are not working together, actively, forthrightly, and intentionally on our culture, then it will be determined by default – by the loudest voices, or the most persistent, or the most powerful, or by something that happened years and years ago.

A church is a sacred trust, a place of possibility like no other in our culture. One of my favorite Unitarian forefathers, James Luther Adams wrote in his *A Faith of the Free*:

The free person's faith is not merely a faith in oneself: It is a faith in the capacity of sincere persons to find freely together that which is worthy of confidence. [...] [One tenet] of the free person's faith is that the achievement of freedom in community requires the power of organization and the organization of power. The free person will be unfree...if [their] faith does not assume *form*, in both word and deed. The commanding, transforming reality is shaping power...when it works through persons it shapes a community of justice and love.

My colleague the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, has been writing about this as well. She says, in “Nothing We Do Will Be Perfect:”

If God's name is love, then God compels us to ...[push] back with muscular resolve against the social structures that confine our capacity to care. A universalist God for a tragic era is not a gauzy, hymn-singing force of personal devotion that draws us endlessly toward itself, but a fierce and compelling power that grips us by the collar...and calls us to choose the *will to mutuality* [emphasis mine, AF] all over again, even when that choice is so risky that it could utterly remake us. <sup>1</sup>

Again and again, with Harris and Adams, with McDonald Ladd or so many others, it is made clear that we are on an important journey together. We crawl or stumble, are born into or simply find our quiet way into a community like this, like All Souls, where we hope to be seen, cared for, encouraged – but where we also are called to make the world anew, beginning here, in this place, with these people. And *how we do that matters*. As Coach Lovejoy says, culture happens by design or default. Conflict is inevitable, but drama is a choice. In this place, people bring their vulnerable hearts, their children, their hunger to know God or to know peace. How can we create a place of authenticity and hope, a place where kindness and respect – for ourselves, for each other, for different insights and experience – where these are our hallmark?

In too many homes, insult and injury are how parents try to control or manage their children or relationships, not knowing another way. In many businesses, being cutthroat or aggressive is celebrated, and it's expected that people will be tough, grow a thicker skin, suck it up and forge on – even as we have all evidence that workplaces where respect, collaboration and transparency are core values have much higher success and lower turnover. And over the years, churches have been notorious for allowing bullies to wreak havoc, as leaders and congregations struggle to set clear boundaries and insist that all are called to be accountable to each other in a community of love and respect.

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<sup>1</sup> “Nothing We Do Will Be Perfect,” by Nancy McDonald Ladd, *UUWorld*, Spring 2019.

Unitarian Universalists are, like the founding ideas of the United States, engaged in a bold project: we believe that we can create diverse, multigenerational, multiethnic, trans and queer-inclusive communities where people from all different economic and cultural backgrounds can become beloved community – bound together not by common religious or spiritual belief, but by their commitments to living together in covenant and create a community of justice and love. That’s a pretty radical idea. And I will tell you plainly that although I have seen some UU communities do it better than others, I have never yet seen one do it perfectly. And as McDonald Ladd puts it plainly, “Nothing we do will be perfect.” Being imperfect at it should not stop us from taking the project very seriously. Every time we gather, we need to set our hearts on being people who love more, who are a little better equipped to handle conflict with patience, temperance, respect, and even compassion.

Becoming better equipped to do anything at all takes practice. You have to know better to do better, and then you must practice. Malcolm Gladwell will tell you that to become expert in anything – and “anything” would include being a person who can handle conflict – you need to practice for 10,000 hours. That is 20 hours a week for 10 years. All Souls is coming up on the big 2-0-0, so that means we’ve had plenty of time to practice various things together. What do we want to practice together, in our next 10 years? At a gathering of our church leaders this past week, we talked a lot about how to be more welcoming. Part of that conversation included being friendly, being proactive about reaching out to newcomers or old friends. We talked about how we welcome people, welcome them in, or welcome them home if they have been away.

I have a slightly different question. Over the next ten, twenty-five, fifty years, what do we want to be known for? What do we want our legacy to be? If a reporter stopped someone on the streets of New York fifteen years from now and asked them about All Souls, what answer would we want that person to give? “Oh, that’s the church where they...” Love boldly? Save lives? Empower people to change the world? Where they help people live with authenticity and courage? Where you never feel alone? Where they’ve learned how to thrive with change, and have raised up a new generation of leaders from all walks of life? Oh, yes, those are the people we look to when we need to learn how to push past our fear and find a new way?

You know, we can learn together how to handle conflict well. In any living system, conflict is a necessary element – a living system without conflict dies. The opposite of conflict is not peace, it’s “artificial harmony,” and it never lasts. A healthy community doesn’t avoid conflict, it learns how to handle it maturely. It teaches people how to listen well, to respect the person even when there are differing ideas or understandings. It helps people learn how to avoid blaming and shaming, and the difference between what we prefer and what we need. It equips us to better determine how to believe we are right without being righteous, how to begin with a willingness to learn something new that changes our minds, and how to apologize when we’ve made a mistake, as we all do from time to time. All of these are skills, things we can practice for 10,000 hours together, until we become adept. But what we need before that is long conversation and a growing commitment to a common story – who we want to become, together. Culture happens by design, or by default. As we look ahead to our next century, we need both a star to guide us, and a covenant to bind us on our way. We need to decide how we will journey together and where we are going.

In that same article, Nancy McDonald Ladd reminds us, “Flawed people can be afraid; they can fail, and try again. People of privilege aren’t broken irreversibly by that privilege. The will to

personal power doesn't negate the will to mutuality. There is always another chance and a different story to tell about who we think we're meant to be in this beautiful and tragic world."<sup>2</sup>

May the coming days and weeks bring new vitality to our conversations about who we think we're meant to be, to our practices of love, and to the way we place our hands in one another's as we go forward.

*Amen, ashe, blessed be.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*