



## **A Simple Way to Save My Sanity**

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I have been delivering sermons now for forty-four years. One of the definitions of mental illness is doing the same thing over and over again even though it has no measurable effect. Phyllis Diller stayed married for twenty-six years but she said she should have known early on the marriage was doomed. “For our first wedding anniversary,” Phyllis said, “my husband, Fang, gave me luggage. It was packed. My mother damn near suffocated.” But even though it took her twenty-six years, Phyllis finally got wise it wasn’t working. Me? Forty-four years of preaching against violence and greed and injustice and what do I have to show for it?

Now I know that it’s difficult for us Unitarian Universalists to measure success. Evangelical preachers can count the number of people who give themselves to Jesus. Hindu wise men can measure the power of their preaching by how many of their followers reincarnate as amoebas and how many as cattle. But it’s tougher for us, as it is in all things religious. I love the story of the young Unitarian Universalist boy who was engaged to be married to a British girl who had grown up in high church Anglicanism. In order to acquaint her fiancé with the intricacies of an Anglican service, the young woman took her boyfriend one Sunday to Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford and throughout the service the young man was kneeling, leaping up, chanting, reading from the Book of Common Prayer until finally, sweating and exhausted, he took out his handkerchief, wiped his brow and laid the cloth over

his lap to dry. Upon seeing this, the young woman leaned over to him and whispered, “Darling is your fly open?” to which the startled young man replied, “No, no, should it be?”

So it’s much harder for us but I am going to try one more time this morning to have a measurable impact on the world; I am very grateful to Sharon for providing me one last opportunity to prove my sanity. When I ended my term as UUA President in 1993, I vowed that I would never preach in the pulpit of any minister who had not been kind to me when I was President. That automatically eliminated about 50% of our congregations. But not this one because Sharon was not even in our ministry when I was President so she had no occasion to offend me!

So I want to begin my mental rehabilitation by telling you a little a bit about Roger Williams—you know, the guy who founded Rhode Island. Roger Williams was a nutcase—a sweet, generous-hearted nutcase but a nutcase nonetheless—and the colony that he founded, Rhode Island, became the refuge for every flower child and ne’er-do-well in the New World. There weren’t really any identifiable Unitarians or Universalists in the colonies back then but, if there had been, they’d have been shackled up in Rhode Island eating quahogs, johnnycakes and Rhode Island’s greatest contribution to culinary glory, the chow mein sandwich—a scoop of chow mein between two pieces of Wonder Bread. “Mm-mm Good!” The Puritans used to call Rhode Island the “sewer of New England” and that was before the chow mein sandwich was even invented!

What is interesting to me about Roger Williams is this. Roger Williams referred to the Native Americans as “barbarians.” That doesn’t sound too enlightened but in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century *all* Europeans called the Native Americans “barbarians.” But Roger Williams believed that, despite the fact that the Native Americans were “barbarians,” they had rights; they shouldn’t be coerced into abandoning their own religious beliefs, for example; and they should be—get this!— paid for the land the Puritans stole from them. This last point was particularly offensive to the other Puritans and was a major reason they banished Williams to the wilderness that became Rhode Island.

And why did Williams believe, contrary to virtually everyone else at the time, that even “barbarians” had rights? The obvious answer was that he believed them to be “children of God” and that is no doubt true. But Williams believed something else: he believed that only God could say who was or was not His child, and that our job as humans was to create a civil order

fit for all, whether at the end of the day some of us were judged children of God or not. In other words, he believed that all it took to make somebody eligible to be treated decently was they be a human being. They didn't have to be Puritans. They didn't have to be saved. They didn't have to be rich. They didn't have to be white. They didn't have to have a pretty face. They could even be "barbarians" and yet we still had to extend them basic human kindness.

Do you have any idea how radical a thought that was in 1682? Do you have any idea how radical a thought that is in 2012? If Unitarian Universalism stands anything today, it stands for the notion that the names that we apply to human beings—"Muslim," "illegal immigrant," "foreigner," "criminal," "disabled," "disfigured," "barbarian"—that names do not wipe out a person's claim to be treated with fundamental decency. This is a very important point, the heart of our theological conviction: for unlike the mainstream Puritans of Roger Williams' day; unlike the Wahhabi Muslims today or Ultra Orthodox Jews or Christian Identity fundamentalists, Unitarian Universalism finds virtue not in some special group to which we belong; not in some special faith only the initiated can claim; not even in our identity as children of God, but in our common frailty, in the fact that every single one of us laughs and breathes and defecates and bleeds. "A man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist;' he is visibly a fellow creature and you don't feel like shooting at him."

So how do we Unitarian Universalists bring this conviction home, make these values live, make our faith shine? Well, in a thousand different ways but I think the best way is we do it is through the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. UUSC has been around for 72 years, ever since we started rescuing Jewish victims, the "barbarians" of their day, from the Nazis. Today we work in 22 foreign countries and all around the United States in partnership with those whom their societies consider "barbarians." We do four things: we fight for the human right to water; we work for economic justice; we protect civil liberties and, whenever there's a major humanitarian crisis around the world, we're there—reaching out to the forgotten people who have been overlooked by the larger aid agencies, finding the most innovative partners doing the most cutting edge work and doing it all for a very modest amount of money. Here are just a few examples of what we do:

For many years a big mining company called Goldcorps was allowing toxins from its mine in Guatemala to seep into the water supply of eighteen communities of the Sipakapa Indians. Now Mayan Indians have virtually no power in Guatemala—they're "barbarians" in the eyes of the Guatemalan

elite—so UUSC sent a couple Unitarian Universalist mining engineers from Boulder, CO, to Guatemala to document the damage and then we took the case to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. And guess what? A few weeks ago Goldcorps agreed to pay \$27 million to make us go away, agreeing to clean up its mess and install clean water systems in all eighteen villages. You did that. You and UUSC.

I was in Burma this past May—what’s now called Myanmar. Until recently Myanmar was one of the most repressive countries on earth, inaccessible to the rest of the world, consumed in ethnic wars. But about three years ago UUSC managed to make a connection with a network of Buddhist monasteries there and asked them how we could help. “What our people need,” they said, “is a credit system.” There are no banks in Burma, no Internet. If folks needed a loan for clothing for their kids or to buy a new plow, they had to go a middle man who charged 25% interest. So UUSC helped set up a series of credit unions in a remote part of the country called Shan State—so remote that one of the villages we visited in May had never before seen a foreigner. We chose Shan State because until a few months ago the Shan people had been at war with the central government—seen as outcasts, “barbarians,” if you will, in Myanmar. We started with twelve villages and today there are credit unions in over 300 and every week the women of the village come to the monastery, deposit their \$1.00 or \$1.50 and earn 4% on it—some of you may want to consider transferring your accounts. You did all that. You and UUSC.

One more example, this one from Northwest Arkansas. That’s a center of the poultry industry. Because poultry factories are some of the most unpleasant places to work you can imagine, most of the workers are undocumented—today’s American “barbarians.” Now immigration is a complicated issue but I think most of us would agree that, whether you are documented or not, if a company hires you to do a job, they ought to pay you for it. But far too often the big poultry companies just withhold the workers’ wages—“steal” them would be a better word-- because they know the workers will be too frightened to report the crime to the authorities. UUSC is not letting them get away with that. So far we have retrieved \$75,000 in back wages. You are doing that. You and UUSC.

There’s much more I don’t have time to tell you about—our work to stop domestic violence in Sudan; our work to raise the voices of progressive Muslim women in Egypt; our work to bring tadpole-free water to California—you heard me, water taps in Central California sometimes spew tadpoles into

the kitchen sink; our work to empower women restaurant workers in Georgia--workers who earn \$2.13 cents an hour. You are doing all this. You and UUSC. You are, as the late great evangelical preacher, Rev. Ike, used to say--you are "tangibilitating" your Unitarian Universalist values and now you can tangibilitate them even more directly as well by going with us on a service learning trip with the UU College of Social Justice, a joint UUA-UUSC venture through which Unitarian Universalists can do hands-on social justice-- building Eco-Villages with us in Haiti; planting crops in Central America; teaching computer science in Africa or English in Southeast Asia. Within a few years more than 1000 UUs, young people, congregations—will be participating in these service-learning opportunities every year.

I know all of us have a hundred different causes we are asked to contribute to. But there's only one that has all the following characteristics: it bears our Unitarian Universalist name and reflects our values. It spends 87 cents of every dollar on helping people and only thirteen cents on overhead. It finds the most groundbreaking solutions to the world's problems that can be implemented cheaply—none of our projects cost more than about \$40,000. It makes sure women and women's interests are included in every program. And it's run by Bill Schulz!

I know it is very difficult for any of us to get beyond thinking of other people in terms of categories to which they belong: Kenyan; lesbian; street person; Wall Streeter; barbarian. Indeed, this is not something to feel guilty about. The reason we think of people in categories is because of evolution. If our early ancestors hadn't been able to distinguish between friendly tribes and hostile ones, we probably wouldn't be here today.

But at the heart of our religious faith is the conviction that a person's value comes not from a category to which she or belongs but from our common frailty, from the fact that every single one of us laughs and breathes and defecates and bleeds. That is what George Orwell recognized about that soldier pulling up his trousers. And it's what another soldier in a very different war did too. Here is the testimony of a truck driver who witnessed a massacre at Srebrenica in 1995 by Bosnian Serb soldiers of hundreds of Muslim men. The Muslims were bound and gagged and blindfolded and then all of them were machine-gunned to death. "There was silence after that," the truck driver said. "And then out of that pile of dead bodies—not bodies really—just bits of flesh—out of that pile of flesh came a human being. I say a human being but it was actually a boy of some five or six years."

It is unbelievable really. A human being came out and started walking toward the men with machine guns. All of these soldiers had had no trouble shooting people. They had just done it. And the commanding officer said, "Shoot him! Shoot the boy!" But the soldiers just froze and the boy kept walking. "Shoot him, God damn you!" cried the officer. But they had all lowered their rifles and the boy kept walking. And finally he got to the soldiers who were just standing there and one of the soldiers—maybe the one who had just killed the boy's father, who knows?—one of the soldiers just took his hand and brought him to my truck and said, "Take him away!" and I brought him to the hospital.

UUSC represents the best chance we have to see the human faces behind the labels and to turn our common frailty into a common commitment to the common good.

And now here's your chance to save my sanity. UUSC gets no financial support from the UUA; we are supported entirely by you. First Church reported this year to the UUA that you have 303 members. Of that number, however, only 65 are current members of the UUSC. That's 21.4%. I think you can do better than that, don't you? Our goal this morning is to sign up 25 new members so that you can say that almost one-third of your congregation supports UUSC's work for justice. The suggested contribution is \$40. If you give us \$100 or more, it will be matched dollar for dollar by our congregation in Shelter Rock, NY. And if you can't afford \$40, we'll take any amount you can give and consider you a member. It's a special deal in the interest of my mental health because, remember the definition of mental illness: doing the same thing over and over again even though it has no measurable impact. But today I'm not asking you to do something as esoteric as bringing justice to the world. I am asking you to do one simple, measurable thing so that I have a reason to keep on preaching. And by the way: study after study have shown that when people give to others, it improves their own mental outlook too so what I'm offering you this morning is a two-fer. Save both your own sanity and mine at the same time. Just go to our table in the coffee hour and deposit the envelope you have in the Order of service—well, fill it out first and then deposit it. Maurice Sendak, the author of the great children's book, *Where the*

*Wild Things Are*, said that the favorite letter he received from a child was this one: “Dear Mr. Sendak: How much does it cost to get where the wild things are. If it is not too expensive, my sister and I would like to spend the summer there.” So join me where the wild things are. It’s not too expensive. Why, I was in a congregation about one-quarter the size of this one in Texas a couple months ago and they signed up 43 new members. Now surely you Coloradans, living as you do in the healthiest state in the country, are not going to allow a bunch of barbecue-slurping, bourbon-swiggling, pot-bellied Texans to show you up, are you? (Now what I can say about you at the next place?)

Because, you see, in the battle against anguish and despair, it’s not enough to wish. Not enough to talk. Not enough to worship. Not enough to hope. Not enough to pray. They’re all good but they’re not enough. In the face of tyranny and repression and greed and fear, what is required is to join hands, to use our power, to make our voices count, to join our brothers and sisters, to make our values live, to make our faith shine. So give me your hands, give me your feet, give me your hearts and give me your money and together let’s hear it for the barbarians, let’s embrace the barbarians, let’s stand with the barbarians, here, there and wherever they are found.