

WHAT COUNTS?

A sermon given for the 2019 Stewardship Launch

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, February 24th, 2019

Last month, the Co-Chairs of the UU Wellesley Hills Sesquicentennial Committee held its inaugural planning session with members of this congregations to plan for our upcoming 150th anniversary. The Unitarian Society of Grantville was incorporated by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in February 1871, so that will be the the date we commemorate at our Sesquicentennial, but the good Unitarian folk of Grantville — as the Town of Wellesley was once called — began to gather a couple of years earlier. In 1869, sixty-seven residents formed a committee to found a Unitarian church here. What *doesn't* start in committee?

Really, we could already be celebrating 150 years of existence right now, but we are instead exercising some commendable restraint. What fiddling with these numbers reminds me, apart from just how long I have been a history nerd, is that things are begun before they actually begin. By the time something is hatched, it has already incubated.

The locals here had been dissatisfied with religious landscape for a while. They undertook the process of separating themselves out from

the congregational church nearby before they began to consider hiring a minister away from Needham. They were carried along by social currents that were gaining strength in the wake of the American Civil War, and they had held out a vision for a progressive faith community of their own. They were imagining new possibilities for themselves.

After that inaugural meeting of the the Sesquicentennial Committee, the Co-Chairs and I stood for a photo in front of plaque in the Sharp Room, bearing the names of “Ministers of This Congregation”. The first name of course belonged to that minister who was successfully lured away from Needham; further down on that list was the Rev. Dr. James Luther Adams, whose words we read this morning. Although he served at UU Wellesley Hills only briefly, Adams time here was momentous; this was the last church settlement he had before entering academia and becoming one of the leading social ethicists and liberal theologians of the Twentieth Century.

In his writing, Dr. Adams extolled the “sustaining and transforming power” of congregations such as ours, in the free church tradition, to “bind... together families and generations” in working for the greater good. It binds us, he maintains, by bringing different “individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship”. It work to “protect... and nourish... their integrity and spiritual freedom” and to keep their hearts and minds “open to insight and conscience from every source”, including the testimony and example of one another.

This is “a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit,” Dr. Adams maintains, and stakes a novel claim to a “new and

broader fellowship”, one that “yearns to belong to the... universal” rather than the particular. It manages to “find unity in diversity”, among believers of every kind.

According to religion writer Chris Walton, an idea that appears time and again and again in Dr. Adams’ work is this: “Faith is not fundamentally about one's beliefs but about one's commitments. Find out what someone values the most and you will have found the object of her faith, whether she considers herself religious or not. Is it success? ...Is it comfort?” In your own life, what do you understand it to be? As Dr. Adams often told people, “An unexamined faith is not worth having.”

For Dr. Adams, Walton notes, an “[a]uthentic faith is an examined, self-critical faith” that bears up under scrutiny, whether it is our own or another’s. It recognizes “how our commitments are ultimately related: It is rooted in a person's awareness that she is not God, that her perception is always limited, that her commitments will always need correction and redirection”, no matter how well-intentioned a person she is.

Recasting that well known saying of Jesus from the Gospels, Dr. Adams maintained: “By their groups you shall know them”. He underscored the important role voluntary associations played in shaping people’s character. Walton notes that Dr. Adams often emphasized “that our ethics are revealed not in our intentions or even in our individual actions but in the relationships and institutions we commit ourselves to” over the long term. So when “we sacrifice great things in life to small things, we are living out a perverted faith,”

Walton observes. When we are living for ourselves alone, we are spiritually diminished.

Make no mistake: the church that Dr. Adams calls free has its costs. It asks the people in it to make certain sacrifices. It requires them to attend worship services, to provide financial support, to volunteer their time and talent, to participate in its governance, to deliberate on major decisions, to call and elect its leaders. It expects people to be contributing members of the community to the fullest extent that they are able.

In Dr. Adams' estimation, this kind of community is especially valuable because it welcomes people from all walks of life, at varying stages. It can intentionally draw together those with different means and interests and aim to remain inclusive of dissenting opinions, provided it challenges everyone to examine their essential commitments and stay in covenantal relationship with one another. Dr. Adams sometimes joked, "People can die from hardening of the categories." He wanted congregations to remain lively places of encounter, where we can break through our usual isolation and division.

The Rev. John Saxon explains that as members and friends of Unitarian Universalist "religious community, we share our... energy, our creativity, imagination, and vision, our... skills, and gifts, and the streams of our individual lives to create a river that is both deep and broad," one that both "sustains life and refreshes the land through which it flows", even as it bends and turns on its way.

Of course, most of us arrive here midstream. We're merging with others who have entered midstream and we cannot know what kind of mix will result. With the notable exception of a couple of you who were raised in this congregation, we came at a certain point in our adult lives, bringing with us our personal backgrounds and spiritual histories, entering into a place that had a religious culture and institutional memory of its own. I first set foot in UU Wellesley Hills one year ago this month, as both a virtual unknown and your prospective minister. I only settled here this past August, since then have had the privilege of hearing several of your accounts - happy and tragic - about what first brought you through our church doors.

But whether this is your third Sunday with us or third decade coming here, something gave you the sense that you belonged in this space. Beyond that - something give you a sense that UU Wellesley Hills belongs to you. Indeed, in our free church tradition, it does. As soon as you signed the membership book, made a financial pledge of support, or cast a vote at an annual meeting, congregational membership became "responsibility and joy" alike, as Dr. Adams wrote. Sooner or later, you are beholden to your fellow congregants, much as they are beholden to you.

A shared faith has a unique "community-forming power", Dr. Adams observed, and we witness that in this church he once served as settled minister. It brings us the satisfaction of collective accomplishment - of doing and being more together than we could individually, whether that's our supporting a special-needs organization like Camp Starfish, our housing the homeless through Family Promise, our feeding the hungry through Bristol Lodge, our funding youth programs at our

partner church overseas, or our gathering folks from the local Queer community at our Pride Movie Nights or PFLAG meetings. We know we have made a difference in this area and helped grow the good in our world.

In our Time for All Ages today, we heard the children's story of two rival rivers that did not recognize that they were both headed to the sea. The cloud overhead has to remind them of how foolishness they are in light of that. His liberal theology led Dr. Adams to believe that "the pull of the future" - the divine will - was toward ultimate fulfillment, toward our becoming something greater than what we have yet been. Isn't that always our highest hope?

This Sunday, we are launching our 2019 Stewardship Drive, and over the coming few weeks, we'll be talking about the future of UU Wellesley Hills and the directions it might take us. There has been tremendous curiosity about where we are headed and also considerable trepidation about how we will make our way through uncharted territory. Both are entirely understandable emotions. Yet we will forge ahead together because turning back is not an option.

As we begin to commemorate our 150th anniversary, we are celebrating the fact that some brave souls struck out on a new venture with no guarantees, just some shared determination. A crucial decision made by the founders of the Unitarian Society of Grantville was to keep its membership open. At the time, many congregations charged rental fees for pews. That has never been the custom in this free church, which welcomed people regardless of their economic status. It has always been a voluntary association funded entirely by

voluntary contributions. Anyone could step in at any time they liked. When this congregation was give the choice of being safe and conventional, it opted to be bold and generous. We are following their lead today.

The idea behind our upcoming Sesquicentennial is not that we fortunate inheritors of a storied past, although we are indeed that; instead, it's that we can be bold forebears of a future that is taking shape now. Yet it is a distinct privilege to follow a long line of the faithful. I stand in this sturdy pulpit because of the continuous service and generous support of members and friends of this congregation in the Nineteenth Century, through the Twentieth, and on into the Twenty-First.

So shouldn't we let ourselves get a little carried away? People are transformed by their participation in faith communities such as ours. "Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human," Dr. Adams famously maintained. Being human is hard. I know that UU Wellesley Hills had been life-giving for people. In some cases, it might even have been life-saving.

In the Middle East, there is a touching wisdom story about helping. It begins with a man who cannot swim falling into a river. He flails in the water and seems to be in drowning. A crowd gathers, scared that he might not survive. People stand near the water's edge and try to save him. They lean toward him, shouting, "Give us your hand! Give us your hand!" When he doesn't, a single person takes action. This man wades out in the water a bit and tells the one who is drowning,

“Take my hand.” When he finally does, they both make their way to back to safety.

In this story, the people on the riverbank are mystified. They wanted to know why the drowning man listened to a single voice but not all of theirs. They were told: “You all asked him for his hand. I offered him mine. Remember, a drowning person in no position to give you anything.” Our congregation offers people something spiritually significant. Never forget that. As Dr. Adams stated, we provide them not a “rigid tradition” but rather a “living language” of religious commitments. We have done this for some time now.

So what counts as our starting point here at UU Wellesley Hills? It doesn’t much matter if the year was 1869 or 1871. What counts are those people who banded together, and the people who joined them later, and then the people who followed them in the decades afterwards. Many of you have serious, sincere concern for the people on their way to us now, and additionally, for the people in generations to come. One of the points Dr. Adams insisted upon was that religion “takes time seriously”, and clearly connects past to present to future, dwelling squarely in human history, reminding us that our individual choices and unique contributions matter, perhaps a great deal more than we suspect.

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