

Faith Development and Faith in Action

By Pat Smith

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Presented by Rita Chamblin

How many Unitarian Universalists can you get on the front page, above the fold, of the Charlotte Observer?

As many as will fit in this picture!!

(Show picture. Maybe have a mock up of the front page. We have some paper that might work. It is on a big roll in the kitchen supply closet by the bathrooms.)



As part of the UUA General Assembly a couple of weeks ago, Pat Smith and I and other UUs from all over the country participated in a public witness. Now for those who grew up in the 60's, "public witness" is the new terminology for "public demonstration". The purpose was to support the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community by protesting a proposed

North Carolina constitutional amendment that would define marriage as the union of a man and a woman. In other words, it would ban gay marriage.

Most of us wore t-shirts that said “Standing on the Side of Love”. *Show shirt and pics of Rita and Pat.* Thousands attended that public witness. After all, there were over 4000 registered attendees at the conference.

This is from the Charlotte Observer, June 25, 2011, just 2 weeks ago. Here is the headline.

Liberal denomination stands up for its causes

Is that a neat headline or what?!

By Tim Funk

First, they honored the imam who's in the middle of plans to build an Islamic center near ground zero. Then they rallied in uptown Charlotte to support gays, lesbians and same-sex marriage.

And that was just in the first 48 hours or so after they got to town.

Now that is faith in action!

Our first principle is to “affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” That’s what we were doing. Supporting the worth and

dignity of every person. The worth of every person. The dignity of every person. Every person.

Our faith development led us to act on our faith.

Faith development and faith in action.

The “faith development” part is continuing to deepen our understanding of our principles and purposes. We must have open minds to develop our faith. To act on our faith, we must have loving hearts and helping hands. *(Gesture, in anticipation of song later on.)*

Open minds. Loving hearts. Helping hands. *(Gesture, in anticipation of song later on.)*

Minds. Hearts. Helping hands. *(Gesture, in anticipation of song later on.)*

Remember all this. There will be a test later! Seriously. There will be a test.

Faith development and faith in action.

At the General Assembly we wore our registration badges and collected a lot of ribbons. *(Show registration badges.)* We collected 3 from the Southwest District alone. We got another because we are a fair share congregation. And because we are a welcoming congregation, we got yet another. Of course,

that one had the sticky stuff in a different place than the others. So we could not just add it to the bottom of the last one we had. Pat found out that was done on purpose, challenging people to realize there are different orientations and perspectives in life. So I put mine on top of my name badge. Pat attached hers to the side. Now that is really outside the box!

But you know, gay rights is a controversial topic. Not everyone has the same perspective. And we see many different perspectives of other matters all the time. Often I hear someone say, “I’d like to hear the other side.” But there isn’t just one other side. There are lots of other sides.

Let me give you an example. It’s excerpted from a book by Demetri Martin entitled “This is a Book”. This particular story is called “Bee Sting”, and you’ll see why.

To set the stage, Brenda and Maureen were on picnic. Here are the various descriptions of the unfortunate incident that happened.

***Brenda:** I was on my phone when Maureen got stung by a bee. I felt bad for her. But I think she overreacted a little bit if you ask me, especially when she started to scream and wildly swing her arms around [*need to gesture here*]. It was really pretty embarrassing.*

***Maureen:** I was in the park, having a picnic with some friends. All of a sudden, a bee started to circle around my head. Then the bee*

attacked me. I calmly attempted to shoo it away, but the agitated bee followed me. Hoping to stop its assault, I attempted to gently swat it away with a magazine. I missed, and, sure enough, the bee stung me. I'd never been stung by a bee before. It hurt, but I did my best to grin and bear it. I put some ointment on the bee sting, and after that I felt fine.

So here we have two very different versions of the same incident. But it doesn't stop there. Here are a few more perspectives.

Bee: *I was in the middle of another busy workday, flying my usual route. I was on my way back to the hive, minding my own business, when an enormous, fleshy monster began to scream, and then it spastically lunged at me. At first I thought I might have flown into the middle of a medical emergency or some sort of tribal dance that the monster was performing. But then it quickly became clear that the monster was trying to kill me. I turned around and started to fly away. But the monster became even more enraged and began to chase me. I could not escape it. I flew faster, but the wailing beast pursued me and kept swinging its rolled-up paper weapon at me. As much as I didn't want to, I had no choice but to sting the monster. It was the only thing I could do to stop it from following me home and threatening the well-being of the hive or worse, the safety of my family. I hoped that if I stung the monster I could thwart its assault enough to save my kids. I knew that I would die soon after administering the sting, but I really had no other option. What a*

tragedy it is to be forced by a senseless, hysterical beast to take one's own life.

Magazine: *I'm not sure what happened. I was being held and slowly read by some woman when all of a sudden she rolled me up and started to choke me and violently whip me around. After having my face smashed into the arm of the lawn chair a couple of times and then into the surface of a picnic table, I was tossed to the ground. It was a terrible and demeaning experience that I'll never forget.*

Lawn Chair: *I don't know what his problem was, but the magazine I was hanging out with abruptly got up and smacked me twice for no reason.*

Brenda's Phone: *Brenda was talking into me when the incident happened. I didn't get to see or hear anything because Brenda is such a loud and obnoxious phone talker. Whenever she uses me it's like I'm cut off from the world. If I had enough power in my lithium battery to electrocute her face, I would. Seriously, I would do it. She is that annoying.*

Squirrel in Nearby Tree: *I am still too upset to talk about what happened. I was good friends with Chris. I can't believe what that woman did to him. He was a hardworking, God-fearing bee, who had a family and a good job. What that woman had against him, I'll never know. To tell you the truth, I don't think she even knew him. I'm going to find out where she lives, go to her yard and act crazy on her fence.*

***Tree:** No comment*

***Supreme Being:** Forcing a bee to commit suicide is one of my biggest pet peeves. This is not good for this Maureen person.*

Now were these descriptions really about the same incident? Whatever “same” means. Sure doesn’t sound like it. Is there one truth? Or many truths?

Something happened. How different participants viewed the event dictated their immediate reaction and what they planned to do next, their action.

Brenda Dispassionate view. It’s not that big of a deal. Of course, she wasn’t the one being chased by a bee!

Maureen Driven by fear. The threat of a bee sting activated her animal instinct to protect herself. I had a friend who was allergic to bees, so Maureen’s reaction did not seem too extraordinary.

Bee Sacrificing for community and family. We are driven by animal instincts to protect our own.

Magazine Being used. An innocent bystander who got caught up in the ruckus and got hurt.

Lawn Chair Victimized. All the lawn chair knew was that it had been hit. No idea of the cause or the big picture.

Brenda's Phone Personal anger. Didn't really care what happened to Maureen or why. Couldn't judge the incident because of dislike for someone. Got the message mixed up with the messenger.

Squirrel Takes the bee's side, and so will try to get back at Maureen.

Tree Not getting involved.

Supreme Being Is going to make Maureen PAY! Big time!!

From this little example, it's not too hard to see how the whole world gets tangled up. Remember the line from the 60's movie "Cool Hand Luke"? "What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

The bee story is a really good metaphor for talking about compassion. Dr. Karen Armstrong had the idea several years ago to develop a Charter for Compassion. And she got lots of people to help her. It's only one page long. It's based on the Golden Rule. Her most recent book is titled "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life". She spoke about this at the General Assembly. And I'll come back to it later.

People have different perspectives, and that helps explain their different motivations. Just like in the bee story. And Armstrong holds that it is often religion that determines our perspectives and actions. People develop a faith, and then they act on that faith. Faith development and then faith in action. Many horrible actions have been carried out in the name of religion or faith.

You know, I had not really thought about it before, but Armstrong points out that no version of the Golden Rule mentions God. Not one. And all religions and religious traditions have some version of the Golden Rule in their teachings.

There is a “prohibitive” form and a “positive” form. Both address compassion, though that word is not used.

Here is the prohibitive form: One should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated.

Here is the positive form: One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself.

The first is cautioning us against doing something. Not to act. The second is encouraging us to do something. To act.

Kind of like: Sometimes we should keep our mouth shut. Sometimes we should speak up.

So. How does all this fit together? The Golden Rule. Compassion. Faith Development. Faith in Action.

To really apply the Golden Rule, Armstrong says that we need to get over our ego. As another speaker said, “Get outside your piggish self.” Or, if you are familiar with Sesame Street, don’t be Miss Piggy. She is very self centered, focusing on, as she puts it, “moi”.

So what’s the connection to religion? Self-serving emotions are given religious justification. We do horrendous things in the name of religion. But Armstrong says, that’s just ego.

Armstrong says she titled her book “The Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life” deliberately thinking about the number of steps, 12, that is used in Alcoholics Anonymous. Just as alcoholics have an addiction, so do we. We are addicted to our egotism. After all, what would we do without our pet hatreds and prejudices??!! We get a buzz, a glow, similar to the first drink of an alcoholic. We need to wean ourselves from this addiction. This addiction to ourselves. Our self-centered selves.

So Armstrong believes that applying the Golden Rule is all about compassion. What does it mean to be compassionate? She says it’s not pity or feeling sorry for someone. It’s not touchy-feely, a kumbaya moment. It’s taking responsibility for the pain of others. It’s dethroning ourselves and putting another there.

Just as the two versions of the Golden Rule say. Think about what would hurt me, and do not do that to another. Or think about what I want, then give that to another.

It's being our best. Putting aside our own frustrations. We may be disappointed in the other person, but we don't give up.

Now, a more daunting challenge that Armstrong put forth is the following. The religious task of our time is to apply the Golden Rule to nations. To nations. To try to understand their motivations for war or economic actions. Can we be compassionate toward them? Wow! I can't quite get my arms around that. We'll have to wait for her to explain it more. In the meantime, let's all give it consideration. Can we be compassionate towards entire nations?

Last fall, Jennifer Nichols visited our church and gave a couple of workshops. Jennifer is the Director of Lifespan Faith Development for the Southwest District of the UUA. By the way, we may be familiar with having DRE's, which means Director of Religious Education. Now we have DLRE's, Director of Lifespan Religious Education (or Exploration). Jennifer wrote the following on a flip chart, which is still posted in the Abernethy Room, where Intersections meets.

All we do is faith development.

All we teach is Unitarian Universalism.

The congregation is the curriculum.

Now, she did not explain this. And Pat's been pondering these words since she heard her say them. She still doesn't have a real depth of understanding, at least not enough to explain them easily. But she'd like to give you a sense of their meaning, based on our topic today.

All we do is faith development. The idea is that everything I encounter is an opportunity to develop my faith. To learn more. To figure things out. It's not just at church. It's everywhere in my life. **All we do is faith development.**

All we teach is Unitarian Universalism. Our UU principles are a guide for our lives. So that's what we teach in living our lives. **All we teach is Unitarian Universalism**

The congregation is the curriculum. Curriculum is broadly defined is a set of courses and their content. And it's something we learn from. So a UU congregation is the curriculum, meaning the content, for others to learn from. We set the example. We model the behavior we want to see in others. **The congregation is the curriculum.**

Cool, huh?

You may have heard the expression about UU churches, “You don’t have to leave your brain at the door.” But neither should you leave your pain at the door. We not only use our brain, but we also have a heart. We all have brains, and we all have pain. We all have a mind, and we all have a heart. AND, we all have helping hands.

Faith Development: Get into your mind, your head. Find your better self.

Faith in Action: Get into your heart. Take it out into the world by offering your helping hands.

Now for the test I promised.

First, let’s sing a song that might help us remember all this. It’s based on a children’s song. I’ll sing the children’s song first, so you’ll have the melody. There are also motions. It’s a fun song. So now, when to take your turn to teach religious education to our children, you can teach the song and motions or sing along if they already know it.

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

Eyes and ears and mouth and nose.

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

So now I’ll sing an adaptation.

Mind and heart and helping hands, helping hands.

Mind and heart and helping hands, helping hands.

You and I, oh YES WE CAN!

Mind and heart and helping hands, helping hands.

So please stand in body or spirit and let's sing it together.