

**THIS IS MY BOX: U-VANGELISM**  
**LAKEHEAD UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP**  
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I couldn't resist sharing this bit of news. Newsweek recently quoted Jerry Falwell as referring to "assault ministry," but later corrected that quote, saying that, in fact Falwell was talking about "a salt ministry", a reference to Jesus' words, Ye are the salt of the earth. A salt ministry, not assault ministry.

Many of us might view an evangelical ministry as one of 'assault'. We've had terrible experiences with it, and it touches a nerve that causes our rational UU persona to completely dissipate.<sup>1</sup> In the presence of evangelism, we seem to lose our penchant for intelligent critique and our ability to reason, let alone to be able to express our own beliefs in response. All claim to evangelism has been appropriated by the Religious Right, and we've willingly surrendered it. We have hidden our beliefs, closing ourselves off from the public debate. With little exception, there have been no liberal evangelists since Martin Luther King Jr....that's nearly forty years without a strong and positive role model to show us another way. More and more, I am coming to believe that we abandon evangelism at our peril. More and more I'm beginning to see a mandate for a customized version of evangelism....U-vangelism.

The title of today's message "This is My Box" was inspired by a conversation with a colleague. Mark was telling me about a new format he's using for the Children's Time at his church. Each week, one child is asked to bring something in a box, and during the Children's Time, Mark opens the box and is challenged to relate whatever he finds therein either to a UU Principle or to the topic of the day. This got me thinking about what we keep in boxes... our secrets, our treasures, our most vulnerable things. Sadly, our religious beliefs, Unitarian Universalism is one of the things that many have put in a box under a closed lid.

We UU's are not known for our willingness or ability to share what we believe. In fact, Webster's Dictionary makes a point of distinguishing evangelism from Unitarians and Universalists.<sup>2</sup> To talk about evangelism is a stretch for us, and while honoring that, I ask that you take a deep breath and allow me to explore it with you in the safety of this hall.

As Hanusia shared earlier, if we can return to the root meaning of the word, we might understand evangelism as a sharing of good news, an actual act of good will and compassion, the

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<sup>1</sup> Salted with Fire, "Out of the Sideline", Peers, Lawrence X., 64.

<sup>2</sup> Cavicchio, Laura, "CLF", [www.uua.org/clf/history/01introduction.html](http://www.uua.org/clf/history/01introduction.html)

practice of sharing with others that which we have found life-giving and life-sustaining. But unfortunately, beyond the root meaning, evangelism has come to be associated with the act of converting and coercing, not just open-hearted sharing. Often, evangelizing is used synonymously with proselytizing, which has a more negative connotation, and by definition is a method of inducing or coercing with force. It was impressed upon me as a child, even in a family of evangelical Baptists, that one should never proselytize, or essentially try to pull someone away from their “home team.” To do so is bad form; I venture to say that many Canadians (along with my ‘homie’ Midwesterners) feel that it is not proper etiquette to impose. We don’t want to force our beliefs on anyone else.

We’re so hyper-sensitive to evangelism, that we might even respond as Ezra Pound once did, saying that even the act of bell-ringing on the part of churches is an act of proselytizing, as it interferes with the quiet of others. Carrying Pound’s notion to its logical conclusion, there should then be no interaction or ‘noise’ between us at all...no relationships, no connections, no conversations, no way to learn from one another... we should take down our bell towers, keep ourselves, our thoughts and our beliefs locked up in boxes, and never share the contents with each other. This would make for a very quiet world, and although I know that sometimes we crave such quiet, ultimately, I can’t quite imagine our interdependent web in complete silence. We interact in order to have effect, for our lives to have purpose. To show others what’s in our box is to share our most precious and vulnerable uniqueness with one another.

In the Christmas opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Kaspar, the dotty old king holding his magic box full of gems and licorice, sings the comic aria, “This is My Box, this is my box, I never go anywhere without my box.” It’s my favorite part of this opera because it’s just plain goofy. He wanders around, showing everyone his box, singing that he never goes anywhere without it, implying that the box is much important to him than its contents. And so it sometimes seems with us. Perhaps, like Kaspar, we get attached to our boxes, and preserve the box at to the detriment of its contents.

This is the Canadian Unitarian Council’s “Sharing our Faith Sunday,” which in its very conception is indicative of Unitarian Universalism’s oft times parochial view of itself. One might, on hearing of “Sharing Our Faith Sunday” think this it is about sharing our faith, outside of our walls. But in fact, the “Sharing Our Faith” program goes on inside of our box...the focus is on shared

ministry and on the communion of our resources and gifts. Certainly a necessary and admirable thing, one that deserves our support, but it's not evangelism, not by any definition. That said, I am also aware that the projects supported are those that help us all to become more visible and to grow.

One huge prerequisite to sharing our faith, outside of these walls, is conviction. It is pretty hard to share your faith if you aren't committed to it and can't articulate it. We're not very good at this. Embedded in our very theology is a refusal to articulate institutional beliefs lest they be seen as dogma. I'm supportive of this theology, I believe it is part of our good news, but its strength is also its shortcoming - it doesn't allow for written catechisms or creeds that can be easily memorized and repeated. We place our faith in each person's ability to craft his own theology, but frankly, as individuals, we are ill equipped to do this in a systematic or effective manner. In other words, our commitment to the individual search for truth and meaning potentially leaves each person feeling exposed and vulnerable, standing alone in the culture wars where the huge machine of the Religious Right seems to be gaining a foothold. No wonder we're afraid to speak up!

I offer several responses to this fear. First of all, look around. We are not, not one of us, alone. There is a community here and in our movement that can stand together as a voice for liberal religion. Second, we should never discount the small voice of one person. As Kahlil Gibran said, "if you reveal your secrets to the wind you should not blame the wind for revealing them to the trees." One voice can have a huge effect.

We also do well to remember Scott Alexander's words in the introduction to "Salted with Fire." He says, (quote) "we remain silent and hidden about what we believe and dream at our own peril. If we are not bold and caring enough to stand up in the public square and affirm what it is we believe, then by default it will be the beliefs and dreams of others that will influence and instruct the shape of society." (unquote) I hope that I am more fearful of this potential outcome than I am of speaking up. And actually, when I honestly examine 'speaking up', it doesn't seem so scary.

U-vangelism is, at its core, a relational enterprise. It exists at the intersection of two lives, one on one. Like you, many times, I have been at the intersection called evangelism, with a person who is in my face, practicing that variety of coercive persuasion that has wounded me. At such an intersection, I have very little interest in being in relationship with that other person...I just want to run! And often I do. And then, with the support of this faith, I remind myself that my personal

theology is one of connection and relationship. If I am to live that theology, I want to learn to meet 'the other' at the intersection and actually make a connection.

This u-vangelistic connection could be what Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker calls a "threshold moment." It is the moment when someone crosses a threshold into our world or we into theirs, whether literally entering the doors of this church, or by random meeting. It is a time to hold that other person in blessing, to greet them with warmth, and to show them, by deed and speech, what it is that we hold in our box, and hopefully also to openly see what's in theirs.

This past week, I got an email from a cousin who I rarely see, a cousin who has worked for years with Campus Crusade for Christ, and whose parents are among the most fundamentalist of my family. She told me that she is going to seminary, perhaps to become a chaplain, and is taking a class on women in ministry (this is huge!) She asked if she could interview me for a paper she's writing...I readily agreed and we set up a phone appointment. The day before our appointed call, I began to get cold feet...I worried that this might be some kind of an ambush, a family intervention, perhaps, where I would be both chastised and condemned for the work that I am doing. But in a moment of surprising calm, I decided not to listen that voice, the voice of my internal victim, and decided to instead see this as an opportunity to share what I believe, openly. As it turns out, my cousin was anything but condemning; she was genuinely interested in me, and we made a quality connection. Later, I got an email from her thanking me for the conversation, and telling me that she had spent the morning on the websites of the UUA and of LUF, and had even enjoyed reading my sermons! Suddenly I felt like a missionary for Unitarian Universalism, and I was pleasantly surprised to feel proud of that! What I had whispered to the wind had been revealed to the trees.

There are a lot of good reasons to open our boxes and to whisper their contents to the wind. We want to spread our good news, to grow our faith, and in so doing, to change the world. Once upon a time, about 200 years ago, our message, particularly that of Universalism, was very cutting edge. It offered a message of hope and love as an alternative to the dominant message of hell and damnation. With this saving message, Universalism grew until it was the 6<sup>th</sup> largest denomination in the United States. Then slowly, and largely due to our evangelism, other Protestant churches began to preach a similar message of love. This was a great victory, but it also meant that Universalism lost its particular 'saltiness' and membership fell off.

Well I believe that we once again have a radical message to share. As the dominant cultural and religious messages gain momentum and volume, our message of peace, respect and

responsibility becomes more and more counter-cultural. Unfortunately, our own theology trips us up. We believe that everyone has the right to their own search for truth and meaning, so shouldn't we just let them alone to find it? Again, I return to Alexander's thoughts...if we do this, it is at our own peril. By default it will be the signposts offered by others that will give direction. We have a responsibility to at least let people know that there are other options...and that this particular option, Unitarian Universalism, is one that we each have found to offer a kind of salvation.

I'd like to see us develop a true u-vangelism that teaches us to articulate the UU Good News, helps us to understand why we should engage in it, and then shows us how to do it. I'll make a humble start toward this by offering the following:

The Good News of Unitarian Universalism is that in a world of increasing exposure to diversity, we offer a religion that believes it is possible to make real connections across our differences. In a world of inequality and degradation, we believe that the very fate of the earth depends on asking the right questions, and we dare to explore those questions.<sup>3</sup> We believe, grounded in an examined faith, that what we do matters...that we must pay close attention to the present and to act with moral conviction. We believe that a religious community is vital, in that it provides a network of support to validate and critically examine our personal experience. We believe that the guiding principle in human relationships is love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.<sup>4</sup> We believe that at a time of so much fear, dogma, oppression, and uncertainty, the world needs a religion such as ours, one that teaches our hearts to hope and our hands to serve.<sup>5</sup>

This is very big box of good news. Certainly, not everything that we offer is unique to us, but it's the combination of things that makes our faith radical...it's the exploration of values and beliefs in a container of affirmation and support...it's the profound understanding that everything we do matters in the interconnected web that makes up this planet we're riding on. I daresay that our good news is the news of salvation...salvation from the crushing banality of consumerism, salvation from instrumental relationships and superficiality, salvation from alienation and isolation.<sup>6</sup>

U-vangelism asks us to recognize and embrace this good news and to believe that there is value in sharing it. If indeed this is a saving message, then it is irresponsible, perhaps even morally

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<sup>3</sup> Buehrens, John A., "Deeds Speak Louder" in *Salted with Fire*, 161

<sup>4</sup> Rankin, David O., "What Do Unitarian Universalists Believe?"

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, Scott W., "Affirmation" in *Salted with Fire*

<sup>6</sup> [www.uua.org/cde/midsize2000/1c.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/midsize2000/1c.html)

reprehensible, for us to keep quiet. We should share this message because it is important to our neighbors and to the health of our communities, and because what we believe requires it of us. Sure, one possible byproduct of sharing our message would be the growth of our congregations, but this is not the reason we should tell our story. Telling our story is simply the natural result of a deep belief that we have something precious to share.

Boxes make me think of jack-in-the-boxes. I don't believe I ever had one of my own as a child, but whenever I discovered one amidst the toys of others, I would play it over and over again...close and re-close the lid, and then wind it and wind it, going faster and faster, singing the song louder and louder, until that wonderful and shocking clown popped out. Perhaps this is where we are as a movement today... we've been holding a precious box, winding it and winding it, creating the necessary momentum for our message to literally explode out of our walls. I can envision that explosion. I can envision a day when the media and civic institutions recognize the power and the presence of the religious left...a strong, articulate, caring voice that speaks in support of acceptance of one another and for loving responsibility in our actions and relationships. Can you hear that voice? It's inside this box. It's inside this faith. It's inside this community of people. It's inside of you. You are the salt of the earth. You are the element that can make a difference.

What we have is precious and well-worth sharing. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. May we all be salted with the fire of our convictions, and go out into the world with boxes wide open.

So be it.