

“50 Years after the Merger, the Time is Vow (#594)” by Rev. M. Lara Hoke
a homily preached at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover October 24, 2010

Well, friends, I know you think you came here this morning for a Child Dedication ceremony and an Association Sunday sermon, but actually, there’s a surprise... This is actually a surprise vow renewal ceremony! We Unitarians and the Universalists want to renew our vows today in honor of our 50th Anniversary. We didn’t want ourselves to worry about buying gifts or how to dress and so on, so we just decided to spring it on ourselves today. So, let our surprise vow renewal ceremony begin.

Family and friends, dearly beloved, I welcome you to this day of celebration. The Universalists and the Unitarians (that’s us) have invited ourselves here to this place to share in our re-declaration of commitment to each other. I am honored to preside as we Unitarians and the Universalists renew our vows after 50 years of partnership in faith. We have been called together to re-affirm our commitment to co-create a beautiful world together.

Every united partnership, of course, has a story of how they met, and how they came together. For some couples, it’s love at first sight, an irresistible attraction. For other couples, the connection grows more slowly. That’s how it was for us, Unitarians and Universalists. As a matter of fact, we met and merged over a period of about a hundred years! We noticed each other way back in the mid-1800s, kind of found ourselves eyeing each other. But we weren’t ready to make a move. We certainly weren’t ready yet for a permanent commitment.

Some weren’t so sure that a permanent commitment between us was a good idea at all. The Rev. Thomas Starr King, our old friend who, as you know, was raised Universalist but eventually became a Unitarian minister, had concerns that perhaps we were too closely related to get married. But in reality, not everyone felt that we were too much alike; some skeptics feared that we Unitarians and Universalists were too different to get hitched. It’s true, those critics said, that we shared many values – an emphasis on tolerance for different beliefs, an emphasis on social justice and so on. But these critics were concerned that we came from such different backgrounds. Some thought the warm and fuzzy homespun ways of the Universalist family would never mesh with the earnest nature and staunch rationalism of the Unitarian family. Some said that the Universalists were the country mice, while the Unitarians were the city mice; the Universalists were “a little bit country” while the Unitarians were, perhaps, “a little bit rock ‘n’ roll”. Some were afraid that the Universalists were the kind of folks who prayed every night, while the Unitarians were the kind of people who read about prayer, and whether it has any scientific validity. And there were those who worried about the differing worldviews; for instance (paraphrasing Starr King) the Universalist worldview was that God was too good to damn people, while the Unitarian worldview was that they were too good to be damned.ⁱ

And then there were those who thought that the Unitarians were marrying the Universalists for the money. Some thought the Universalists were marrying the Unitarians for the progeny – for all those extra members the Unitarians had to do the work of the faith. As our friend the Rev. Leon Hopper said, “The Universalists would not have survived” [without merger since their numbers were getting so small while it is also true that] “the money from various Universalist conventions sustained [our union] through some very difficult periods.”ⁱⁱ

In spite of the dissimilarities and challenges, mutual attraction and fate did slowly bring the Universalists and Unitarians together. Finally, one hundred years after we first noticed each other, things got serious. We sat down together in 1959 and created a “Plan to Consolidate” – it was all terribly romantic. We Unitarians and Universalists got together in Syracuse, New York and talked and talked about the plan. We discussed and voted on 57 different proposed changes to the Plan to Consolidate. It took days of hard work, but in the end, we were engaged! Then it was time to vote, congregation by congregation. Then more than 90% of all Universalist and Unitarian congregations held a vote on whether to merge – and of those, nearly 90% of them said “yes”! So we went ahead and tied the knot for keeps in 1961. We went from being the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association to becoming the Unitarian Universalist Association.

And here we are, 50 years later. Congratulations to us! Our common values and our love have kept us Unitarians and Universalists together, in spite of our differences. In many ways, the marriage was much more successful than anyone dared to dream. We have become, truly, one faith tradition.

But before we renew our vows, it must be said, we have had some disappointments, some areas that we still want to work on in our holy union. When we joined together in 1961, we had, together, 152,000 adult members.ⁱⁱⁱ Many had high hopes that by this time, 50 years later, our union would have produced close to a million members! But, this has not happened. In fact, we have about the same number of members as we approach 2011: 158,000 official adult members, a modest increase of 6,000 members in 50 years. This has not kept up, percentage wise, with the growth in the population nationally, of course.

But according to a recent study, “675,000 adults in America broadly identify as Unitarian [Universalist]”^{iv} – that is, 675,000 adults in this country describe themselves as UUs – but something like 511,000 of them (by the math) have not signed a UU membership book and probably do not attend UU services regularly, if at all. Where are these half a million Unitarian Universalists? It matters here in this congregation – on the books the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover has 54 adult members. If the same proportions hold, we should have something like 230 members! Where are these 176 UUs hiding?

Some of them might be attending other religious services in other places, for whatever reason. And some of them might work on Sundays or have other firm commitments. But I suspect that most of them are in fact attending a very specific congregation: it’s “The Church of the Holy Pajamas” as my colleagues have named it.^v Now, I have attended the Church of the Holy Pajamas frequently in my lifetime; I confess I go there often during the summer months. It is truly lovely. You can worship in the comfort of your own home with your favorite book or newspaper, or your favorite TV program or video, or you can surf the Internet and pat your dog or cat on the head. Best of all, yes, you can worship with your pajamas on, drinking coffee or whatever your favorite breakfast beverage might be, at the hour of your choice.

Now, don’t misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that we start wearing pajamas to church. I am not suggesting that reading a book or watching a video is better than coming here. But I am

suggesting that the Church of the Holy Pajamas has a might powerful appeal, and it is our biggest competition. What can we do to let people know that, once you get hooked, coming here on a Sunday morning is better than the Church of the Holy Pajamas? How can we fill them in that being part of a caring, healing community in real time – live, with real people! – is better? (Especially in this era when so much of our communication and “connection” happens through email, text, voicemail, Facebook and Twitter...) How will we get all those missing UUs to come and join over the course of our next 50 years together – and sooner, rather than later?

We have talked about spicing things up in our marriage. During last year’s Association Sunday we talked about growing in diversity, and we talked about starting to sing more lively music that would create a spark. We have talked about spicing things up with new styles of worship altogether, to attract more people. But how will we do this, without disturbing our current members? We’ve done a lot of talking about these things at the denominational level. That’s one of the things we Universalists and Unitarians always had – our common love of the talk. But how can we stop “talking about talking about” (as Winona LaDuke says)^{vi} and start walking our talk, becoming more vibrant instead of *talking about* becoming more vibrant?

Our merger in 1961 was a promising start. If we are to make it to our 100th anniversary, we have some work to do. There are no quick fixes. It will demand that we take risks, try new things, consistently stand on the side of love rather than fear, and have fun together. Actually, that sounds pretty good!

Now, I agreed to do this vow renewal ceremony, even though we don’t have all the answers, because I believe we share a commitment to finding a way; I believe us now when we say that we want to be “the faith of our times”, as our mutual friend UUA President Peter Morales has put it. We have something wonderful here – let’s make it even better the next 50 years!

With that shared commitment, let us move to our renewal of vows.

Vow Renewal

Universalists, Unitarians, 50 years ago we promised ourselves to one another. At this time, I invite us to share our renewed vows.

[Congregation reads *Principles and Purposes for All of Us (#594)* in “*Singing the Living Tradition*”, UUA Hymnal, © 1993 Beacon Press.]

“Pronouncement”

Unitarians, Universalists, having witnessed our vows and affirmations with all who are assembled here, and by the authority of Love and Justice, I do affirm that we have expressed our desire to continue as partners... and I pronounce our vows “renewed!”^{vii} I would say that we should kiss now, but I thought better of it. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present to you, renewed as faith partners: The Unitarian Universalists!

Now, as I said before, we didn't ask for gifts for this vow renewal ceremony. But this morning, if you wish to show your appreciation for the Unitarian Universalist tradition and if you wish to express your faith in its future, you may make a donation for Association Sunday in lieu of a gift. Proceeds from this collection will go to ensuring that our religion thrives for generations to come, particularly by supporting the *Leap of Faith* growth initiative, which will establish mentoring relationships among congregations [specifically, congregations that have had tremendous growth and success will mentor other congregations through this plan]; funds will also support the celebration of the 50th anniversary.^{viii}

So at this time, with our ceremony concluded, we will take the morning's special offering. Thank you for your generosity and for caring about the future of our faith.

ⁱ This is actually a "mistranslation" of a quotation by Thomas Starr King, who is credited with stating, "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, and the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned by God."

ⁱⁱ Warren R. Ross, *The Promise and the Premise*, Skinner House, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.uua.org/documents/coa/75_unitarianuniversalistmerger.pdf

^{iv} <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/108007.shtml>

^v This was a "seminary joke" at Andover Newton Theological School, started by the Rev. Lisa Kemper and the Rev. Carol Allman-Morton.

^{vi} I heard Winona LaDuke share this term during the Ware Lecture at the 2010 UU General Assembly in Minneapolis, MN.

^{vii} Paraphrasing pronouncement from wedding vow renewal ceremony of Rev. Wendy L. Bell.

^{viii} http://www.uua.org/documents/stew-dev/assnsunday/2010/talking_points.pdf