

READING from *Out of Walden, the Service of Living Tradition*
sermon in 2005 by Rev. Dr. Patrick O'Neil *The SLT is a service to recognize new ministers, honor those who are retiring and remember those who have died in the past year.*

It is said by some critics that Liberal religion has seemed to lose much of its volume, if not its voice altogether, if not its way altogether, if not its righteous indignation in the face of social and moral causes that once would have lit up our pulpits in moral outrage. The charge has been leveled that Liberal religion has gone all but mute, in far too many places, in behalf of causes that once (at least we like to think) would have pulled our people out of the pews, put their feet in motion, and put their hands to work reclaiming the proper contours of that ancient city on the hill, the one we once imagined, that dreamt-of society where racism, economic injustice, and warmongering are named for the blights that they are upon the human soul.

Dare we hope to find again, in this newest generation of ministers, preachers who burn with unapologetic indignation in behalf of equal opportunity, equal education, equal health care, decent housing for everyone, the equal right of every person to marry whomever they love, and the right of every woman to be the sole decider of what happens to her body? Dare we look to you newest ministers of our Living Tradition for preaching and teaching that will pour concrete foundations under the moral arguments for a just society, for a world at peace?

For these are moral human issues before ever they are social policies, no matter what party is in power, no matter who happens to be sitting in the White House, or sitting in Congress, or sitting on the Supreme Court. Our ministry has no moral right *not* to speak to these issues, no matter whom we might offend or make uncomfortable in our pews! Whether such preaching grows our membership or not, whether it is effective institutional strategy for our Association or not, these are the issues that will always determine the health and integrity of Liberal religion, or *what's a pulpit for?*

The Free Pulpit
By Rev. Don Southworth
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Patrick O'Neil asks, what's a pulpit for, the words of the author and pastor

Frederick Buechner provide one answer:

“So the hymn comes to a close with an unsteady amen, and the organist gestures the choir to sit down. Fresh from breakfast with his wife and children and a quick run through of the Sunday papers, the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in hand. He hikes his black robe at the knee so he will not trip over it on the way up. His mouth is a little dry. He has cut himself shaving. He feels as if he has swallowed an anchor. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon be somewhere else.

In the front pews the old ladies turn up their hearing aids, and a young lady slips her six-year old a Lifesaver and a Magic Marker. A college sophomore home from vacation, who is there because he was dragged there, slumps forward with his chin in his hand. The vice-president of a bank who twice this week has seriously contemplated suicide places his hymnal in the rack. A pregnant girl feels the life stir inside her. A high-school math teacher, who for twenty years has managed to keep his homosexuality a secret for the most part, even from himself, creases his order of service with his thumbnail and tucks it under his knee.

The preacher pulls a little chord that turns the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand. The silence in the shabby church is deafening because everybody is listening to it. Everybody is listening including even himself. Everybody knows the kind of things he has told them before and not told them, but who knows what this time, out of the silence he will tell them?”

When you think about it, it is pretty amazing. People have predicted its demise many times over the years but here we are in the mass media crazed early days of the 21st century, a time of instantaneous global communication, I pods, hundreds of channels of television, and the internet and it is going as strong today, maybe even stronger, than it was over 2,000 years ago. What is the *it* I am talking about? Preaching.

This morning we are exploring one of the foundations of Unitarian Universalism and the free-church tradition from which it was born. A foundation that is one of the most important aspects of the covenant a minister and congregation enter into.

This foundation, this covenant we are speaking about today is the free pulpit. A covenant, an agreement, a promise between a congregation and its ministers that a minister can speak whatever his or her conscience, heart, mind and/or soul cries out to speak. The words in our Fellowship's bylaws are fairly simple: "The Lead Minister, and other called Ministers shall enjoy a free pulpit in accordance with the tradition of Unitarian Universalism, and shall be accorded the freedom to voice his/her opinion in the congregation and in the community." The words may be simple but the commitment and responsibility we share because of them are not simple at all.

The historical roots of the free pulpit can be traced back to the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Numbers 30:1-2 Moses tells the leaders of the tribes of the Israelites: "This is what the Lord has commanded. When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."

We know that Jesus came on to the scene a long time after Moses, and although he did not have a pulpit of his own, he spoke his truth wherever he went. Once Christianity began, or to be more accurate, the bureaucracy and dogmatic creeds that men and government imposed on Christianity, the freedom to preach became much more restricted.

The Protestant Reformation began, which is when our Unitarian and Universalist traditions were really born, and the need and desire for clergy to speak their truth, without fear of reprisal from bishops, kings, or perhaps most of all, the congregations they served, started to have life as well. When the men and women came to this country seeking out freedom of religious expression, one of their first acts was to write the Cambridge Platform in 1648. This covenant gave birth to the idea of congregational polity, meaning that congregations could govern themselves without interference from the state or an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The Cambridge Platform holds that "there is no greater Church than a Congregation," which consists of visible saints in voluntary agreement and

covenant with each other to "worship, edify and have fellowship." Each congregation is autonomous, because there is no higher authority than the congregation.

One outcome of the Cambridge Platform was that congregations ordained and called their own ministers, and part of the agreement, the covenant that congregations entered into with their ministers was to grant the minister a free pulpit. Today Unitarian Universalists, as well as Baptists, Jews, Congregationalists and a few other religious traditions practice congregational polity and give their ministers a free pulpit without worries of reprisals or rebukes from Bishops, Cardinals or any other powers from above – and, theoretically, from their congregations as well.

In the early days of our faith traditions a minister would be installed as the minister before he, and until the late 1800's ministers were all hes, was ever allowed to preach in the congregation's pulpit. Installing a minister meant not only entering into a covenant with him but also giving him the pulpit to use as he saw fit until he left the congregation. Today we usually wait a few months until we install our ministers, as you did me in December, but the covenant we enter into, and the pulpit you have given me, and Mary, to respect, protect and take care of, is just as strong.

When this congregation installed me you said to me, “We offer you a pulpit free of restrictions save those of love and your own conscience.” Every Sunday when I step into this pulpit I do my best to honor that promise. Each time I open my mouth I remember not only the awesome and humble task you have honored me with by calling me to serve you as your minister, and that my calling as a Unitarian Universalist minister demands, I also remember Frederick Buechner’s words and most importantly the lives that my words might touch. And I remember that this simple, wooden pulpit, is a symbol for the blood, sweat and tears – and lives - that our ancestors, both clergy and laity, have sacrificed fighting for the right and responsibility of religious freedom. A freedom that we too often take for granted.

Freedom of the pulpit means that Mary and I have the right and responsibility to speak our truth, in love. It means that when I invite someone into this pulpit, I pass that right and responsibility on and ask them to speak their truth as well. I take that responsibility very seriously. And I do my best to heed the words that Ralph Waldo Emerson passed on to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1836. Emerson had grown tired of being a Unitarian minister, in large part because he did not see and hear enough passion from his colleagues. His words are taught to every person preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry today, and they both inspire and haunt preachers. “If he had ever lived and acted,”

Emerson said of a colleague, “we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely to convert life into truth, he had not learned. The true preachers can be known by this, that they deal out to people their lives – lives passed through the fire of thought.”

Lives passed through the fire of thought. That is what the freedom of the pulpit and preaching demands of me and anyone who steps into a pulpit. This can be a daunting task and is one of the main reasons we preachers have fits of insecurity wondering what we were thinking while writing a sermon, or leaves some of my colleagues shaking before they step into the pulpit or kneeling in the bathroom throwing up from nerves and anxiety as one of our greatest preachers, Thomas Starr King, once did.

When I preach I am called to speak the truth, at least the pieces of truth that the fire of thought - and prayer and study and reflection - leaves me. When I preached my first sermon on Father’s Day 1988 with my seven-month old son in my arms I did not know about Unitarian Universalism, or freedom of the pulpit or even preaching. But I said something I still say today. “Dear God – Please speak through me words that someone needs to hear.”

Sometimes those words offer, hopefully, comfort and inspiration. Sometimes those words, hopefully, offer challenge and discomfort. For the job of preacher, as you have heard me say before and you will hear me say again, is to

comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Sometimes the comfortable do not like to be afflicted. Usually it is at those times that preachers have to remind their congregations about freedom of the pulpit.

While it is true that I have the right to speak just about anything I wish to speak about, there is another right that you have that is just as important as the free pulpit. That right, that responsibility is called, the free pew. We come from the free church tradition. I get a free pulpit and you get a free pew. While I have the responsibility to speak the truth in love, you have the responsibility to take – or leave - what I say. You can applaud, you can disagree, you can get angry, you can even leave if you wish. While I have the authority to speak from this pulpit based on my education, credentials, my life, my faith and most importantly your call, you have the authority to accept what I say or reject based on your own conscience and the fire of thought that comes from your own life.

Nothing reminds me of what the free pew and free pulpit is all about more than the outcome of a sermon I preached a few years ago on our seventh principle. In my sermon I challenged the last congregation I served to walk their talk about the environment and become a green sanctuary. To illustrate a point I quoted both Chief Seattle and Ann Coulter, two people with very different perspectives on how to treat the earth, and wondered which path the congregation would take. One woman, who had only been a member for a couple of weeks emailed me after the

sermon telling me that she did not like what I had to say and she did not like the way I said it. She immediately resigned her membership. We did not have a chance to talk about what she thought about freedom of the pulpit, but she clearly understood freedom of the pew.

Another woman told me that the same sermon made her uncomfortable and challenged her to change some things in her life and was the inspiration for her becoming a member of the congregation. She wrote me: “You did not tell me what I wanted to hear that day, you told me what I needed to hear. I am grateful to be part of a spiritual tradition that offers that freedom to its clergy. You are called to speak the truth, even when it’s a truth that some of us would rather not hear.”

Anytime I preach on a historical aspect of our religious tradition like I am this morning, a little voice whispers to me, “so how does this matter in their lives today?” I know this voice well. I first heard it during a boring history talk by one of my elementary school teachers 35 or 40 years ago. History can sometimes be dusty and seemingly irrelevant, and two things most of us preachers do not want to be are dusty and irrelevant. But freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew is as relevant and important to our lives today as it ever has been – and I hope you agree.

Or do I? Forrest Church tells the story of one of our colleagues telling him that if he ever gets through an entire sermon without offending someone in the

congregation he has failed in that week's job. I don't really want to offend you but I do want you to disagree with me – or whoever is speaking from this pulpit - at times, even get mad at me at times, I want you to go home and talk about what you hear with someone, if need be, argue about it, and hopefully come and argue with me. And I want you to come back and do it again.

Because the 18th century English philosopher, religious agnostic and skeptic David Hume, who attended church every week, understood what a free pulpit and a free pew was all about. When asked why he attended church on a regular basis, he replied, “I go for one reason. Because one time each week I need to hear one person who speaks freely from his deepest convictions; as profound or stupid as he might sound.”

The free pulpit guarantees one thing. That you have given me the opportunity to speak freely from my deepest convictions and sound as profound or as stupid as I can. But is anything really free? Patrick O'Neil's sermon at General Assembly in 2005 challenged ministers to preach more often and more powerfully to their congregations on the moral and political outrages of our times and he asked the members of those congregations to let them do so.

At my installation service in December the moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Gini Courter, charged this congregation to “Speak the truth to each other, (and) be people so bold that you demand deep truth from each

other not just here in the sanctuary, but in all your rooms of worship. Ministers are supposed to call us to our best selves. Sometimes ministers get in trouble for doing so, and when they do it is the job of the laity, not the ministry, to defend the freedom of this pulpit so that raw truth may be spoken here using whatever words, whatever languages are required to bring it into being.” Gini’s words were met with enthusiastic applause and affirmation but not all were that night, or will they be any morning – nor should they be.

My colleague Davidson Loehr recently spoke about freedom of the pulpit and the cost that comes with it. A cost that is really the biggest question any congregation – or any minister – has to be ready to pay.

I leave you this morning with his sobering and challenging words for preachers and congregations alike:

“Lately, some people with long histories of love and support for religion have spoken against the state of the churches and the clergy. Bill Moyers has railed against the silence of the pulpits in America. And I recently heard retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong tell an audience of 1,300 people in Berkeley, Calif., that America's preachers had become wimps, lacking the courage or the conviction to speak out about the sins of an illegal war, a rapacious economy or the hijacking of religion by fundamentalists.

But as a preacher, I wonder: Do you really want the truth?

If religion is about reconnection with our highest and most life-giving ideals, and if preachers are expected to speak about the gods that are really running our culture, then religion and its ministers have indeed become both irrelevant and cowardly.

But do you really want honest religion?

What if your preacher says our economy is rapacious and unfair, that it has stolen money from the earners and given it to the owners through tax cuts bought to reward only the very rich? Will you cut your pledge to get him or her back in line?

I'm one of the lucky ministers who serves a church that knows a "free pulpit" can cost thousands of dollars in reduced or canceled pledges when you really think religion is commanded to serve only the highest sorts of truth: the challenging kind, the often uncomfortable kind, the kind you seldom hear from the media or from politicians.

All great religions teach that this path is narrow, and few want it. But these teachings, as all honest religions know, are sometimes troubling. They can even feel impolite or downright rude. And so these disturbing truths that can set you free are available in any religion. Still, I wonder, and know that many other preachers also wonder: Do you really want honest religion?"

So, I ask you, do you really want honest religion? Do you really want your ministers to speak openly and honestly about whatever truth he or she is called to speak even when that truth may be 180 degrees different than your own.

If your answer is yes, welcome to Unitarian Universalism. I promise to remember the suicidal banker, the pregnant girl, the gay teacher and the reluctant youth among us and speak my truth in love. You have already told me that is what you want me to do. If you promise to listen with an open heart and an open mind and pass my words through the fire of your thought and the wisdom of your conscience we can do sacred work together.

What is a pulpit for? To speak the truth, in love. Do we really want the truth? It is the only thing that will set us free. May it be so. Amen.