

Evangelism in a Liberal Key
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Beacon UU Congregation

If you've read the searing Sinclair Lewis novel, written in 1926, or seen the melodramatic Burt Lancaster film from 1960, then you've met *Elmer Gantry*, the engaging, but scandalous Midwestern shoe salesman turned charismatic preacher.

The quintessential revivalist showman, Brother Gantry, with his rolled-up shirt sleeves, preaches hellfire and brimstone, thumps his Bible, performs alleged miracles, and leads repentant sinners to conversion through his touring tent ministry in the 1920's.

With mesmerizing eloquence, Gantry exhorts one crowd: "Sin, sin, sin. You're all sinners. You're doomed to perdition. You're all going to the painful, stinkin', scaldin', everlastin' tortures of a fiery hell, created by God for sinners... unless, unless, unless... you repent."

Is it any wonder, then, that the word "Evangelism," which means literally "preaching of the gospel," (or good news) has an uncomfortable ring to many religious liberals? Gantry sure makes me squirm as he manipulates the crowd with his zealous message of fear and fundamentalism.

For many reasons, some valid and some stereotypic, we tend to associate evangelism with religious bullying and intolerance, with corruption and hucksterism, with rigid creeds and finger-pointing. With the Elmer Gantrys of so-called prosperity gospels and twisted, enraptured prophecies.

In some cases, this portrayal is accurate. Yet, at its best, evangelism is about proclaiming good news, sharing a vision, helping others to heal and grow, and giving voice to a dream. In this very best sense, we, too can become evangelists under a billowing, open-air, distinctly liberal UU tent.

And that's what I'm endeavoring to do this morning – bringing our own brand of "revival" to Beacon– singing, shouting, testifying to the very good news about this congregation and our religion. Say "Amen" somebody!

In the strictest sense, a revival is defined as a spiritual awakening – a stirring of repentance amongst God's people to a fresh obedience to God. However, in a more causal sense (our sense), a revival is an upbeat church meeting conducted by a persuasive preacher, hoping to arouse renewed spiritual fervor.

The whole idea of revivalism emerged during the Great Awakening of the early to mid 1700's, with such famed conservative Christian preachers as John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, and Jonathan Edwards.

History shows that the great revivals of times past turned the tide of the nation's morality, reversed religious apathy, and rekindled the spiritual zeal of churchgoers.

If this all sounds utterly alien to our own faith tradition, let me assure you that the term "UU evangelism" is not an oxymoron or an aberration. Our Universalist ancestors were evangelists who held tent meetings and revivals where

they joyfully sang and proclaimed their spiritual fervor, and their unique (and to some, heretical) belief in a loving God and the availability of universal salvation.

The itinerant minister Quillen Shinn was one of them. He traveled 25,000 to 30,000 miles a year during the 1890's, debating conservative colleagues and founding Universalist churches and Sunday schools.

He held grove meetings and evangelical revivals each summer. In fact, one of these annual summer meetings became Ferry Beach, where UUs relax on the porch of a building on the Maine sea coast named for this evangelizing pioneer.

Especially in New England (the UU Motherland), the legacy of reserved Unitarian intellectualism has trumped the spiritual zeal that characterized our evangelizing Universalist forebears. Yet, we claim both legacies and must protect them.

Us modern-day UUs are stewards of an important and unique message and we need to get out there and share it with the world, if only from our own gratitude for what we found ourselves when we found Beacon and now cherish.

In order to do that, we'll need to overcome an association of *any* form of evangelism with vulgar exhibitionism or opportunistic hucksterism. This limited definition of evangelism has kept our radiant light under a bushel for far too long already and we need to let it shine.

Evangelism in a liberal key is about reaching out, reaching in, and reaching down. It's about welcoming rather than converting those who are in need of our communities of faith.

Yet before we can be an inviting church that attracts and keeps members, we have to develop a fuller awareness about who we are, what we stand for, and what we can offer. Say "Amen," somebody!

Liberal evangelism arises from a deep personal exploration of what is sacred and valuable, and what it means to live religiously as a Unitarian Universalist. In an article on this topic, former UUA President, Rev. Peter Morales argues that in order for our churches to shift comfortably towards a culture that embraces evangelism, our members will need to touch again the source of their connection to this faith.

Morales observes that "when each of us can answer why we are Unitarian Universalists and why we love being a member of our church and what we appreciate about our congregation, then we are on the way to being effective evangelists. We can't help it. Good news wants and needs to be shared. But - we can't share our good news until we know what it is!"

One genuine, but avoidable, impediment to widespread UU evangelism is the difficulty we do seem to have defining our religion for ourselves and to other people. In order to share our liberal good news confidently, we'll need to practice explaining ourselves.

When you have a small chunk of time, draft a brief description of UUism that you might share on the sidelines of the soccer field or at a dinner party, and then keep reshaping and refining it. Take home the pamphlet in the pews this morning called "To The Point" for some inspiration. Or better still, bring the pamphlet to the multi-purpose room at 11:30 for a one-hour interactive workshop

on Articulating Our Faith. We'll review the Principles as Pillars and craft some elevator speeches of our own.

If you plan to try it at home, e-mail your best efforts to me and we'll publish them in the newsletter. Role-play with someone in your family or with a UU friend. Challenge one another with all the classic slights, such as: "Aren't you the people who can believe anything you want? How is *that* a religion?" Sign up for adult ed programs here that enable you to go deeper and broader and gain confidence. Just, don't be intimidated by naysayers and critics.

Years ago, I enrolled in a marketing course at Boston University and one of the biggest takeaways was the need to define your niche and implement effective branding. Yes, branding. When I used this word in my last Interim Ministry in Meadville, PA, a member of the Board nearly broke out in hives. But, it could not have been more needed, The imposing building, sitting in an enviably prominent position on the town square, looked like a bank. Sure, it said "Unitarian Universalist" on the white wayside pulpit, but what the heck is that?

So, we created a branding tagline – "A Beacon for Freethinkers since 1825," placed it everywhere – the website, the order of service, Facebook, and we emblazoned it on a banner that faced the square. First, they were nervous and then they were proud. Say "Amen," somebody!

What is our niche? Have you noticed the Beacon branding statement on the OOS, the newsletter, the website, Facebook? It's new but it says who we are – "Spiritually open, intentionally inclusive since 1958." Let's put that on a sign so folks can understand us better and find a faith home here with us when they drive down N. Leroux St.

Our message to the world is worth shouting, singing, proclaiming - loud and clear for all to hear. Every listener may not ultimately agree with our perspective. Our religion can push a lot of hot and tender buttons for people, and it can threaten folks who adhere faithfully to a less free-form creed or dogma. But, let's, at least, give others a chance to decide for themselves, ok?

My colleague , the Rev. Richard Davis, recalls watching two street corner evangelists form a coffee shop window in Salem, OR as they proselytized pedestrians. "No surprises here," he remarks, – basically it was "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved; and the unanimous response of passersby was to ignore them and walk by as quickly as possible." Like most folks, I daresay, I wished that these two bothersome characters would stop disturbing the peace and clear out. Yes, I confess it—I looked down upon them with an air of theological condescension and intellectual superiority."

Davis continues: "A month or so later, I heard a radio program about how contagious faith can be, and I saw the two street corner preachers in a new light. They hadn't been hanging out haranguing passersby just to be irritating. They were out there on the street corner, enduring the scorn and rejection of practically everyone in the hopes that they might save at least one soul. And realizing this, I felt chastened. I may not agree with their belief system or their techniques for spreading their faith, but those two were out there trying to do what they honestly felt called to do. Give them credit for that. And I had to ask

myself, “Why am I not doing something like this myself? Don’t I take my own religion seriously enough to want to share its message with others?” And so I began to imagine how I would go about being a street corner Unitarian Universalist evangelist.

Ask yourself please – If I am willing to recommend a yoga studio or a meditation group, why do I not talk more openly, more persuasively about Beacon and the Unitarian Universalism? Because its unsophisticated? Because it’s religious?

At times, our evangelism yields quiet (seemingly invisible) results we didn’t expect. Some years ago, in 2002 most likely, when I was the minister at our church in Reading, MA, a woman I had never met came to the door and asked to speak to me. When I approached her, she smiled broadly and thrust forward her hand to shake mine. “I’m a closeted lesbian at one of the other churches in town,” she told me. “I needed to come by and tell you how grateful I am that your church has put that rainbow strip on your sign and proclaimed to the whole community that you welcome gay and lesbian people.” (this type of thing was not as normative back then) She went on to say that there were many more gay and lesbian people in Reading than folks realize, that many of them have noticed the rainbow stripe and that they are very appreciative.”

Suffice it to say, I was brimming with pride for my community for truly “living our beliefs,” and I was touched by this woman’s effort to come by to share the effect of our action on her life. We fly a rainbow peace flag in Sundays – that is evangelism.

I presume there are any number of stories like this one floating around in the ether of this church. People we have touched or affected in quiet ways. My colleague Bruce Marshall recalls picking up an order for his church at a store. When the clerk handed the bag to Bruce, she smiled and said, “Keep up the good work.”

He was delighted, but bewildered. So, why stop at quiet persuasion? We UUs have a valuable niche in the market and we can claim our evangelical legacy by spreading it around. Perhaps, not Elmer Gantry style, but above a timid or halting whisper. The recent article in the Daily Sun is a good example of what’s possible. As is, our participation in the Activate Social Justice event on March 15th. This T-shirt is UU evangelism. Say “Amen,” somebody!

I wonder: Have you ever noticed that Bible-thumping evangelists like Elmer Gantry and Jim Baker aren’t the least bit timid or halting when it comes to talking about money and its connection to faith. Often, they offend us with a blunt and crass approach to fundraising, especially when it smacks of coercion and reeks of the threat of hellfire for the stingy.

Once, while channel surfing, I paused to listen to one televangelist browbeat the audience into believing that if they contributed to his ministry he would pray so skillfully for them that they would becoming prosperous enough to buy a Mercedes and a Rolex....oh, and they’d be “saved” too!

More recently, the spiritual advisor to our current President exhorted her followers with the pitch that it was more important to support her ministry than to pay the mortgage.

We are in the midst of our Stewardship campaign and we are talking about money, too. Yet, pledging to Beacon is not about salvation in either the crass or the classic sense. Yet, serving as good financial steward of this community is *absolutely* about the salvation of this church and our liberal religion.

Stewardship is linked to right relationship to both your communal religious home and your individual spiritual growth. Yes, we live in a society saturated by consumerism. But, be clear about one thing -- church is not a *product* you purchase with your pledge.

No, it goes much deeper than that, or, at least, it should. When you ponder the amount of your pledge to this year's Stewardship campaign you are, in effect, *evangelizing* yourself, by reminding yourself why this place and this faith tradition are essential to your life, and why you should share the good news with others. Say "Amen," somebody!

Take some time to reflect on this and let a revival of zeal and gratitude rise up in your heart and your soul. In turn, I believe you'll experience a conversion to a stronger Unitarian Universalism and a deeper involvement here. And you'll testify to that with your generosity of time, talent, and treasury.

You will say "Amen" to all we are and all we hope to be; "Amen" to the myriad ways this church supports you, your families, the disenfranchised, our greater society, this besieged planet.

The world is listening and the world is hungry for community and for guidance and for revival of spirit. My colleague Fred Muir points out, quite astutely, that "Christian fundamentalist supporters just assume that people want to hear and be part of their transforming message and movement. It's in this light that religious liberals make a monumental blunder. Adults as well as children will hear about religion from someone-- about salvation and sin, grace and blessing, atonement and healing, Unitarianism and Trinitarianism, evil and goodness. They can hear these messages proclaimed by exclusivist and divisive voices or they can hear them from us." Why not from us? Say "Amen," somebody!

If we raise our voices together above a polite and timid whisper, our message should be loud enough and clear enough for the whole world to hear, and this church should be strong enough to support this flock, as well as any newcomers who may yearn to join us under our billowing and welcoming tent of freedom, reason, and tolerance. Then, they will experience a love beyond belief.

I see lots of nodding heads out there. I know how much many of you truly love this church. Let's hear you say "Amen." (Say "Amen") Are you grateful for Unitarian Universalism? (Say "Amen") Will you testify to that by matching your zeal with your financial support of this church? (Say "Amen") Will you raise your voice proudly as part of a revival of this church community? (Say "Amen")

Say "Amen" Say "Amen" everybody -- we have heard the good news and we have testified to its power. It's time to transform this community and the world by reaching out to share and support the inclusive gospel of our free faith. It's time

to evangelize in a liberal key! It's time for revival! It's time to reach out, in, and down.

It's time to heed to altar call of John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, whose words are as fresh and pertinent today as they were in the late 1700's: "Go out into the highways and byways," he preached, " Give the people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding into the hearts and minds of others.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach kindness and everlasting love."

Say: "Amen," say, "Amen," say "Amen."

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