

If We Can't Be Snarky, What Can We Be? – 8/25/2013, By: Tim Hamlin

Given the title I suppose I need to deal with snarkiness which is not the main theme of this talk. I might have called it: “A few simple ideas for making our church even better” but that would, certainly, be less catchy.

Also, for visitors or newcomers; We are no more snarky, I would guess, than the average church. We can be a bit snarky toward other faiths, particularly evangelicals or fundamentalists. We tend to be quite liberal on average and can be a bit smug about conservatives. Although I don't believe we are any worse than the average church – perhaps, we're well above average? – However; I believe we have a special need for and a calling from our principals to be especially mindful in regard to any snarkiness.

More than a couple of you might be thinking; “What the heck is this guy doing talking about being snarky? If there was a contest to see who was the most snarky around here, I would be a contender. I am guilty of this myself and I know it. I don't want to come off as self righteous or preachy. Some of my critical comments may be my projections onto the congregation from my own, flawed character.

I hope I'm like Mark Twain who was such a wonderful writer because he looked deep into himself and saw the weakness and human frailties there and was brave enough to recognize them and insightful enough to know that those flaws were common to all of us. That he could write about them with compassion and humor was his genius. I know I can't write that well but, please, take my meaning as intending to convey that I am of this congregation and I am with you.

So, to deal with this 'snarkiness' thing; Snarky is a dismissal of the validity of a whole person or their group. It is an attack as opposed to a positive statement of who we are; of what we believe. It is a caricaturization of someone or their beliefs or their group. It is the difference between, on the one hand, making a smart allecky comment about evangelicals or conservatives, for example, and, on the other hand, proclaiming what we believe in; what we stand FOR. We know being snarky is wrong.

We know how we feel when our views are summarily dismissed with an attitude that we don't deserve to be treated with respect. It's so quick and easy to do and it feels good. We don't have to make ourselves vulnerable like we do when we say what we believe in. It can be easily justified with the idea that we are being 'humorous'. It IS a form of humor. Comedians use it all the time. We do it because we can distance ourselves from views that make us uncomfortable or threaten us (sometimes for very good reason) by making them 'the other'. But to the extent that we are not welcoming to newcomers, or that it undermines our church being a safe place that supports spiritual growth for ALL I hope you agree it should be eliminated. Because we are a unique faith community.

We are a church for all faiths even if your faith is in reason alone.

We cannot succeed in eliminating that bit of snarkiness by just saying; "Lets not be snarky". We have to have something to do in it's place. That thing is to proclaim how and why our church is something to celebrate.

About 20 years ago, I didn't know about Unitarian Universalism, I happened to picked up on of those little red cards with the elaborate version of our principles written by David Rankin. Wait! There's a church that allows me to have freedom of conscience and that values reason? I thought; "Wow! How cool is THAT!" A place where I can believe or not believe what my conscience tells me and not fear rejection or negative consequences.

One of the many really great things about Unitarian Universalism is that we acknowledge the reality that there are as many religions as there are people in the world. No two people are completely in agreement on matters of faith. It's just too personal and the choices, big and small, are too infinite. As far as I know, we are the only church that allows for this by not having a credo, a dogma or an orthodoxy that we are expected to pledge ourselves to, except for our 7 principals.

But this presents a special challenge to us UU's. When we are asked by others what we believe. I expect that most of us have had that deer in the headlights feeling or at least, can easily imagine it, when or if we are asked by someone in a more traditional church; "What do you people believe in?"

What DO we believe in? And, what's so great about it?

From 'Who's In Charge Here?', the report of the UU Association's Commission on Appraisal that Nana Kratovich was involved in; "We are a people bound together by common promises, not common beliefs. Our Unitarian Universalist Principals are a covenant, a set of promises that our congregations have made to each other. We lift up our Principals as a resource to respond to theological conflicts in our congregations."

I'm not going to read them off. But, check them out with some questions in mind; Could I measure up to that principal 100%? What, exactly, does it require of me? I think a very important question to ask is; "What does it say not about our responsibilities but about the various benefits we receive when we know we can trust that those around us are trying to live up to them?" For me, the more I think about them and try to internalize them, the more I feel how deep they run and broad their relevance to a just society and a welcoming and safe environment within our churches. To the freedom we all cherish to, fully, be ourselves here. The seven principals ARE our faith.

I need to say a few things about what we have inherited from our UU history. Going way back UU's have been skeptical of authority and we have stood up to orthodoxy. This is a core value. This is at the core of what many of our founders accomplished in terms of being in the forefront of

challenging issues such as slavery and woman's rights and GLBTQ rights and on and on. This legacy is, still, with us. We, still, value, individuality and are deeply skeptical of authority.

But with all this skepticism about authority and especially our valuing individuality and, thus, diversity; how do we create and maintain a place where everyone can feel safe. A place that is supportive of a person's 'spiritual' growth or in more secular language if you prefer; in support of deeper forms of 'self improvement'? How else can diversity itself survive but with mutual respect, kindness and dignity for all of us? It can not.

This is why our principals are so important. They are all we have; a set of ground rules for how we treat, each other, and, ultimately, how we treat all of the people of this planet.

To expand on what this environment looks like I take this, again, from 'Who's In Charge Here?'; [The skills needed are] "The ability to begin with an assumption of good will, the commitment to be clear and honest about one's motivations, the commitment to use respectful communication, the ability to express gratitude for one another's gifts, an ability to come to times of disagreement with an attitude of curiosity, and an ability to differentiate from others in a clear and kind way." ... "attending to each other with compassion and love."

These are some pretty high standards but in many significant ways, we, already, have this going on in our church. We do not fail in creating a space that everyone feels safe in and that their spiritual growth is nurtured but, in my assessment, we don't, yet, get an A. Our Committee on Ministry survey found that a quarter of the respondents were neutral and almost 20% did not agree with; "Our congregation provides an opportunity for an individual's spiritual journey and growth" Clearly, we can do better than we do now.

Imagine someone coming in to check us out. If we ratchet up those skills noted in the report I just mentioned, how could they not help but be attracted to coming back?

I believe we are, also, experiencing various stresses at this time:

We seem to have a more diverse congregation, which is something that some of us (again, me included) have felt a little uncomfortable about at times even though our principals call us to celebrate that same diversity. There is a paradox here. We tend to claim we celebrate diversity but many of us, (I'm one) can get quite comfortable with all the like minded people we have here and a little uncomfortable with change or increased diversity within the congregation.

We have other tensions. The kinds of tensions that exist in most churches. Sometimes we are not even aware that our behavior in the church is causing stress. Even those stresses that are under the table they can be picked up by newcomers antenna and they won't come back. I'm not, at all, saying we have a great degree of tension or conflict but we do have our issues and some healthy resolution of tensions and of the issues we face can go a long way to creating a space that feels more

deeply safe and supportive to all.

The UU Association's Committee on Appraisal report offers a list of things that can get in the way of resolving inevitable conflicts in a healthy way. You may recognize some as things in other people.

Maybe some, you will recognize in yourself. I know I see myself in at least some. They are:

1. Working from hidden agendas
2. Poor boundaries (this might mean unclear boundaries and/or expectations)
3. Turning personal conflicts into church-wide conflict.
4. Acting disrespectfully
5. Not 'staying at the table' (people or groups who carp about things but don't express their concerns when it is appropriate and important that they do so).
6. Holding onto power. Power is not a zero sum thing. Think of us as being a team. From 'Who's In Charge...'; "We are all more powerful in the world when we see ourselves as on the same team and celebrate each other's strengths."
7. Coercion (for example withholding rewards as a way of getting one's way – large donors or committee chairs may, sometimes do this)

To this list I would add: 'Gossip', which is addressed in our Congregational Covenant. By the way, the The Committee on Assessment report suggests that covenants are an essential component to creating an excellent congregation.

The HUUC Covenant of Congregational Communication [states]: To assure that all who come here feel valued and heard, we covenant:

- To let kindness and respect guide our communications,
- To address problems directly and honestly with those concerned;
- And, to void gossip, knowing it can wound.

I really, really, like this church. I want it to, still, be here, and strong long after I'm departed from this world. I know I'm not the only one who feels this way.

I do not know the path forward. But I think I know about a lantern that will light the way; That lantern is our principals.

I believe that even a small added effort; one that is by all of us and is earnest can do wonders for our having an even safer, more welcoming harbor that can grow. That difference between a 'B' and an 'A'.

One cool thing about the principals is that no matter how poorly or how well we, currently practice them, we can, always, do better.

A couple of simple ideas to improve our adherence to the principals:

First; Let us think that, not just when we walk into this sacred space, this sanctuary, or when we light the chalice that we are in a sacred space, but when we walk through the doors into the church building itself and put on our name tags we are entering a space that requires extra attention

to our sacred principals. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of EVERYONE. Especially those who push our buttons the most. I have thought that I might, for myself, place a word or two on the back of my name tag to remind me of a couple of the values I especially want to be mindful of, at least, while I'm in this building.

A second idea is that of trying to, simply, be better listeners. I know I can be pretty awful at listening. I'd rather listen to myself talk too much of the time. I, also, know I have the ability to talk far less and listen much more and more deeply.

Nana Kratovich recommended a very interesting book to me once called; 'True Love, A Practical Guide to Awakening the Heart' by Thich Nhat Hanh. It is a very concise book about mindfulness. First by being, fully, in the moment. The second thing is being fully present to those who we care about or even those who we are with. The techniques he offers are astonishingly simple. To be present in the moment just breath and say; "I'm breathing in. I'm breathing out." It really works. To be fully present to someone else just say this mantra to them and/or to yourself; "Dear one, I am here for you." The simple intention to shift our attitude to one of being fully present for someone else brings about instant changes in us.

I have a little story about my participation in speed dating several years ago. For me, it was fun and energizing. I'm a very social person. I went to about a half dozen of these things where there are about 15 men and a like number of women and you get 5 minutes at each table. I, of course, tended to talk a lot. Not obnoxiously, I hope. But, certainly, when there was a lull. I wanted to fill the spaces up thinking I was doing the other person a favor by avoiding awkwardness and I thought part of the idea was to let them know what I liked to do and about my bio a bit; for their sake, of course. I did not get a lot of 'hits' which was when someone checked on their card that they wanted to follow up with more contact. On the last time I did it I thought I'd try a different attitude. I'll "be there for each one of them" became my attitude. Instead of filling them in on my bio and what I like to do I was, simply, there for them. I recall that it was exhilarating to be free of the need to 'fill in' the blanks'. It was more interesting because I was receiving more; learning more about who these women really were. I bet I don't even need to tell you that I got a ton of 'hits' that night for a change.

I really, really like this church. Think of all there is to like;

Our freedom to think and pursue our spiritual path according to our consciences.

This exceptionally beautiful building

Our inclusiveness

The diversity; our fantastic and wonderful diversity, not, just, of beliefs (Pagans, Christians, agnostics,

Quaker, and others I'm missing, I'm sure – well, now that I think of it there is a faith for each and every one of us here!) but, also, diversity of ethnicity and politics and social class and of sexual orientation. (How many churches can claim that to the degree we can?)

I like Our fantastic young adults and the children that are our hope for the future of this church.

Our choir, and our wonderful music that we don't advertise enough to the community, I think.

Our RE program

Our minister that is brave enough to get arrested for a social justice cause

The coffee house

Our social justice work

The City of the Dead

and much more with apologies to any number of shining stars I've failed to mention;

One last treasure we have may be last but it is not only 'not least'; it is the most important, in fact; Our Selves. Each other.

We are diverse but we have each other and, most of the time, feel safe in spite of our differences. I'm not one to express affection much but I do feel that, in many ways, we hold each other in a warm and affectionate way. I cannot imagine standing up here and sharing these thoughts with all of you except for the safety we, already, create here. Lets do more of that.

Some of the energy to write this talk came to me from a part of a sermon Bill Freeman gave near Easter in which a fictional conservative minister says; "We celebrate that Christ died for our sins and that we will live in heaven with God for eternity when we die. I suppose you people are celebrating that flowers are blooming."

(Pause)

How's THAT for snarkiness!

That scenario really got me fired up about 'What would I say?'

One response might be; "Many of us celebrate their Christian faith as you do. Those of us whose conscience leads them to. But we, also, celebrate the rich religious traditions from around this big world. We celebrate that we are, each, free to seek our own spiritual paths. We celebrate our

profound interconnection with the universe and with each other. We celebrate our deep commitment to social justice here on earth. We celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of everyone. We celebrate our 7 sacred principals that do not dictate a spiritual path but light the way for each of us to freely find our own paths. We recognize that the terrain of spiritual enlightenment is mysterious and complex and that many paths to enlightenment are available to us; that each one of us must be free to find our own path.”

Our 7 principals are, in fact, deep and broad. They give us the kind of challenge to improve ourselves over the course of a whole lifetime. We will never achieve perfection with them but we can achieve excellence and to whatever extent we internalize them and practice them, we are growing spiritually.

I, recently, listened to a religious scholar who wrote about the historical Christ even though he is Muslim. He was criticized for doing so and responded to the criticism by pointing out that he’d been studying many religious faiths for decades and had a deep interest in the subject. I know that it is common for scholars of religion to be from all over the spectrum of beliefs and that their faith starting point is considered to be a trivial matter compared to the quality of their scholarship. I’d thought for a minute that there are two kinds of religious scholars; those who study from a faith perspective and those who don’t. Then I realized that they are all the same.

There is one kind of religious scholar;

Those who have a perspective from their own personal faith, no matter what that faith is. We are, all, religious scholars in a sense. We are here because we care about growing spiritually; growing in our faith; whatever it is. We can celebrate the diversity of faiths among us while joyfully exploring our different perspectives BECAUSE we have the 7 principals which are a guide to maintaining that safe haven we all want.

Let us work harder together to create that miracle of having both tremendous diversity and, yet, this place where we know deeply, we are safe and nurtured.

Surely, this work involves all of us. And, all of us together.